

PAUSE

THE SECRET TO A BETTER LIFE ONE WORD AT A TIME



CHRIS MAXWELL

Here it is, my friends: a great book to be read one word at a time.

My major mistake while reading Pause was that I did so too quickly. I must read it again...and again until I slow down and let it change me.

Read it at the right pace and you will see it is a lexicon of life, a glossary for goodness, a dictionary for the disciplines of an inner journey. And, it is just the kind of book to be read a page a day, for to read it any faster is to miss Chris Maxwell's intent, which is the development of Christlikeness in your every exchange with the world.

— **CALVIN MILLER** / Author

Who would have thought that such ordinary moments could produce such expansive insights: hauling luggage on a plane trip, chatting with a waitress, coping with a paralyzing ice storm, singing along while a pop song plays? Anyone might see these as mundane situations. But not with Chris Maxwell's Spirit-sharpened perception. His "collection of words" speak with power and poignancy. He seeks great graces hidden in the most seemingly random encounters. They are not random, Chris reminds us, and they can usher us into an encounter of wonder.

— **TIMOTHY JONES** / Dean of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Columbia, South Carolina / Author, *The Art of Prayer: A Simple Guide to Conversation with God*

Chris carries on a constant conversation with the Lord, and he has learned to expect to see God's hand in the most commonplace moments of life. And Chris shares what he's discovered as encouragement to everyone he knows. The words in this book will draw you deeper into your own daily dialogue with God.

— **J. LEE GRADY** / Author, Speaker /
Founder of The Mordecai Project

Chris Maxwell has done it again! His creative insights about life, God, situations, and hope come through in this collection designed to take us through fifty-two weeks of the year.

— **DR. A.D. BEACHAM** / General Superintendent, International Pentecostal Holiness Church

Chris Maxwell shows us—through real-life encounters, conversations, and observations—that good stories are everywhere, and every story is good if we let it be. These pocket-sized metaphors are skillfully combined into life-sized narratives that, combined, make a Story so magnificent that only God could tell it. I'm glad that Chris listened and wrote for us what he heard.

— **BOB KILPATRICK** / Musician, Author

Chris Maxwell's wonderful new book, Pause, is the perfect gift for the new year—fifty-two stories for fifty-two weeks. Christian discussion groups, Sunday school classes, or book clubs will find stories that are relatable, readable, and oh so relevant.

— **HOLLY MILLER** / Contributing Editor to *The Saturday Evening Post*, Consulting Editor to *In Trust* magazine, Co-Author of "Feature & Magazine Writing" (Wiley 2012)

Pause is an extension of Chris and it will put a little piece of him into your heart as well. Just as I have learned to drink in every minute I get to share with Chris, I encourage you to drink in these words. Just like me, your life will be changed.

— **TOM ROBERTS** / Managing Director, UCB Korea

As a child psychologist, I have a front row seat at a great drama of how the Presence of God enters and shapes human lives. Chris understands the backdrop of the drama. He brilliantly uses the

verbs of our daily lives and spins them into deep spiritual insights. Do yourself a great favor and step into his insight on this profound mystery.

— **BEVERLY J. OXLEY, PH.D.** / Licensed Child Psychologist

This book is for anyone who seeks to alter the pace of life in order to see the beauty and the challenge that awaits us in each day. It is not a read to simply finish, but to relish and reflect, then follow the steps provided to respond. Chris creates a rhythm that will enable the reader to deepen his soul while remaining connected to the world around him, and it is truly remarkable.

— **CHARLIE DAWES** / Director of First Year Experience / Adjunct Professor, College of Christian Ministries and Religion, Southeastern University, Lakeland, Florida

Chris Maxwell is a gifted wordsmith whose love of language is evident in his new book, Pause: The Secret to a Better Life One Word at a Time. Maxwell asks us to “pause” and contemplate the vast spiritual life that is all around us. I suspect that after a few weeks of reflecting, receiving, and responding to his wonderful words, we will find ourselves experiencing other words—such as peace, serenity, and compassion—with a new sense of personal meaning.

— **BRIGID ELSKEN GALLOWAY** / Writer and Freelance Journalist, NPR contributor

Chris Maxwell is one of the warmest, wisest people I know. He doesn't know how to give bad advice. These Bible-based thoughts provide valuable guidance and life lessons. Take it from a Jew who loves evangelical Christians.

— **MARK I. PINSKY** / Author, *Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion* and *A Jew Among the Evangelicals*

Once again my friend Chris inspires us with stories about real life and God's ever-present love. Pause brings everyday life into a new light. Some of God's bigger works are easy to see, but Chris brings God's greatness out in our everyday life stories.

— **T.J. ROSENE** / Men's basketball coach, Emmanuel College
Director of PGC Basketball / Better Basketball Clinician

Chris Maxwell discusses the deep water of everyday life and how to walk it out in very practical ways. He writes from the experience of a man who has had to walk out of the darkness of very serious brain trauma and once again find the light of living. In the book he lets some of this light shine on us, the readers.

— **DR. HAROLD RHOADES** / Psychologist in private practice and
Director of Healing Springs Retreat Ministries

Chris Maxwell calls us to action. Not the busy, harried, frenzied action so common to our society and our own existence. He coaxes us to a gentle kind of action that results when we pause to take in the deeper things of life and "actively" appreciate the simple yet profound moments we often miss.

I have never seen Chris speak to an audience he didn't hold captive in the palm of his hand. I can only imagine that same thing occurs as his reading audience consumes his written words. I know it does with me.

— **DOREE RICE** / Associate Director, Career Development,
Full Sail University

People crave stories that make sense of their life. Chris Maxwell's Pause: The Secret to a Better Life One Word at a Time is a wonderful book of words that satisfies those cravings and makes sense of not only our daily lives but also our spiritual lives with

a rich and practical coherence. This is a book full of wisdom and delightful insights that is worth reading and living.

— **ROBERT A. FRYLING** / Author, *The Leadership Ellipse: Shaping How We Lead by Who We Are*

*Chris Maxwell's writing style is analogous to the way he addresses an audience. His writing style captivates the reader from the onset. The book, *Pause*, causes you to focus on every detail, every word, and penetrates your mind. His use of simple, everyday colloquy causes you to re-evaluate your daily routines and encounters in such a way as to realize that every moment is important. Each encounter is an opportunity to make a spiritual impact on the world around us.*

— **SHERRY V. STORY, PH.D.** / Professor, Author

With clarity, compassion, and insight, Chris Maxwell highlights everyday words that cause us to pause for response. Chris has a wonderful gift for embracing the moment and encouraging the reader to savor it with a heartfelt mindfulness. This is a wonderful tool to supplement your encounter time with God and in reflection with yourself.

— **DENNIS WELLS** / Counselor, Author

*The words in *Pause*, and the stories behind them, challenge us to live intentionally, authentically, purposefully, and full of hope. They challenge us to change others' lives, extend the Kingdom of God, and be more like our heavenly Father. Isn't that the call? Thank you, Chris, for another life-changing book!*

— **CINDY GAULTNEY** / MA LAPC, Emmanuel College
Counselor, Co-Pastor of Athens Link Fellowship

Almost four years ago God orchestrated a coming together of Chris Maxwell's path and mine. In that time we have both laughed and cried together; we pray together often—weekly, in fact. I am delighted to endorse Chris Maxwell as both a writer and a person—there is congruency between what he writes and what he lives.

— **RICK WOMACK** / Conference Missions Director,
LifePoint Ministries

Chris Maxwell allows us to slow our pace and focus on words in a way that encourages us to have lives shape these words. Each word has a purpose to complement our lives of purpose and the way this book is presented allows us to hone in on the importance of the action we can give to these already impacting words.

— **TAYLOR MAXWELL** / Singer/Songwriter

*Once again, Chris Maxwell provides the world with a masterpiece in *Pause: The Secret to a Better Life One Word at a Time*. In Chris' customary style of writing based on personal experience and insight, readers will benefit greatly from this new work. In fact, I believe they are destined for a better life...one word at a time!*

— **SHELL OSBON** / Lead Pastor, LIFE CHURCH,
Smyrna, Georgia

Today we live in a world that promotes quick, fast, instant, carryout, drive-through. The ability to scramble through life at warp speed has become the benchmark. Chris Maxwell, in his

book Pause: The Secret to a Better Life One Word at a Time, challenges us to slow the pace of our lives: a brief pause to inhale the splendor of God's voice illuminating the moment and meaning through experience, through words. Chris has carefully chosen these words that shape all of us on a daily basis. Take this journey that will make you aware of each moment that has meaning, words that will become the bedrock of how you interpret the simple things God desires to share with you.

— **CHIP B. FURR** / Founder & President, The CLIMB INC.
Author, *Thin Places*

One word can make a huge difference. One word, heard by our ears or heard in our hearts, can encourage or defeat, lift up or beat down. Chris knows this well, and he is a good steward of the power of a word. Not only is this collection of words a good reminder to each of us to choose words carefully, it is also a window into Chris' daily walk as he does the same on his own journey. He's a blessing on our campus to students and colleagues, and I appreciate his insight and example in word and deed.

— **PAULA DIXON** / believer. wife. mom. sister. friend. fan of fun.
Director of Communication at Emmanuel College

PAUSE

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ONE WORD AT A TIME*

CHRIS MAXWELL



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PAUSE: The Secret to a Better Life One Word at a Time

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Words of Appreciation

I thank our Creator: Your Divine Romance is the greatest wonder of all.

I thank my family: so many times you've wished I could have limited the conversations to only one word, but you've loved me anyway.

I thank my accountability partners, friends, staff members, congregations, and college students: you've helped me experience a better life.

I thank Meredith Legg-Grady: you helped in the selection and direction of the stories and the words.

I thank my editor, Paul Smith: you helped keep my thoughts and words living and breathing.

I thank Steve Spillman: let's enjoy the journey as we enter new territory in today's culture of words.

I thank the audiences that hear and read my words: you've helped me feel at home wherever I travel.

I thank the writers, poets, singers, and artists: your stories and rhythm and images bring words to life.

I thank those who have suffered brain injury, and those who live with epilepsy: you appreciate the magnificence of life—one word at a time.

Words for Readers

Pause is designed for both personal and team reading. Each chapter offers a one-word theme; each theme offers opportunities for individual reflection and group discussion. On the singular setting, readers can calmly reflect on each story, answer the questions, read and meditate on the Scriptures, and seek to apply the *word* in a unique, personal, authentic way. Similarly, groups can engage in discussions related to every story. The *word* is an action, a reminder, a contemplative inspection.

Experiencing a “better life” by pausing doesn’t mean a life where everything goes just how we want it to go. It doesn’t mean big money and great jobs and happy feelings. The *word* helps us gain a greater and deeper understanding of the true meaning of “better.”

These three words conclude each chapter: Reflect, Receive, Respond. When practiced alone or among family, friends, and small groups, those exercises can guide each of us in our journeys.

— Chris Maxwell

Words to Prepare Us:

Foreword

Words. Common words, but not just any old words. Well-chosen words. Action words. Like a skilled surgeon selecting just the right tool for the critical operational procedure, Chris Maxwell has chosen fifty-two words to ponder, dissect, amplify, and savor. Saying yes to just fifty-two words means saying no to hundreds more, yet each word seems destined for this work and critical to some aspect of the surgical procedure it is to perform.

Who would have guessed that adding “-ing” to our words can convey a sense of motion, process, and an “already, but not yet” anticipation of recognizing ourselves, while catching a glimpse of where we are currently, but wooing us into next steps in anticipation of a brighter tomorrow? While reading *Pause*, I felt as if it were reading me. I found myself reverberating with each word and seeing myself in the stories. Each word was captivating, as I longed to park a while on each page. But I also felt compelled to turn the page and discover what was coming next, yet fearful that it would eventually end. *Pause: The Secret to a Better Life One Word at a Time* is illuminating—as if someone flipped the light switch and truth appeared a bit more clearly than I had understood

before. The words are inspiring, oxidizing, and they foster a renewed hope somewhere deep within. But it does not stop at simple inspiration or wonderment. Chris Maxwell's words lift me from inspiring to aspiration. Aspiring. Far from simply causing me to pause and to wonder, Chris Maxwell's well-chosen, expertly crafted stories and words beckon me to a higher level of living, a deeper sensing of daily reality, and a passionate pursuit of a grander vision for living a life worthy of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

I have read all of Chris' books, but this one is my favorite. Don't just pause and wonder—read it yourself!

By C. Tracy Reynolds
Dean, School of Christian Ministries
Emmanuel College

Introduction: Our Desire

Welcome to a collection of words. Words of confession, of hope, of longing, of dreams. Words we often ignore. Words we rush past rather than invite to the table. Words we need to notice, to experience, to ponder.

In our hurry to seek a quick completion of putting our life puzzles together, we often neglect the beauty of each piece of the puzzle. The splendor of each part. The wonder of each taste. The glory of each breath. The tone in each voice. By pausing and reflecting on one word, we can be still. By letting stories and Scripture and contemplative thoughts teach us to hit pause, we can relax amid the rapid pace. By placing ourselves in the stories, we can refuse to rush the stories of life to their conclusions. Each scene can be seen. Each voice heard. Each question pondered, considered, respected.

Don't you want—and need—a better life? I do.

Don't you want—and need—a regular pause? I do.

And I hope these stories help us pause long enough to visit still waters, to learn of peace, to see our Creator nearby in each segment of life's seasons.

But we—at least I—struggle to structure an unstructured

moment. Choosing to be *still*, to *be* still, to be *very* still, has been and is an ongoing journey. It is, though, a journey of joy. A journey toward glory. A journey finding grace and transformation in the normal.

I know about hurry. I am an early bird who despises being late. But through learning and living the wonder of God in life's common scenes, we can learn to pause and contemplate one word at a time. I hope this collection of words and stories and meditations contributes to your attempt to slow down, to see, to breathe, to think, to pray.

In our efforts to reach our desires we often miss what we desire the most. Let's change that.

Let's pause.

Let's read the words.

Let's experience a better life in the normal, in the usual, in the hurt, in the questions.

Let's see the wonder. One word at a time.

Accepting

“There’s not really much here. Not very much up here, at all.”

The nice lady at the convenience store had good intentions. Hearing about my departure from Orlando and my arrival in north Georgia, she sensed a need to apologize for smallness, for nothingness, for not “really much.”

She wondered if I would be okay around a place not as crowded, at a pace not as rushed, in a community not as modern or large or busy. She wasn’t sure how I would handle the change. She assumed I was disappointed because of departing so much and moving into not much at all.

But I’d reached different conclusions about my new home. I saw much. Very much.

When my wife and I moved in 2006, it didn’t go the way we wished. There were a few health concerns, missing many friends, a house not selling, a vehicle crashing, and the adjustment to new positions. Everything had not been easy. But when I accepted that this location was God’s best for my

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life, I could see all of the unappreciated beauty. I wanted to edit the lady's behind-the-counter comment. Let her keep the southern drawl while changing the words:

"There's much here. Very much up here."

I saw life in the people of this small rural town. Sad, happy, young, old, confident, fearful. People. Real people. And I liked them. Sharp turns and small hills, barking dogs and smelly chickens, lightning bugs and friendly people: I saw life here.

I see life here.

For each of us, let us accept and experience much life—"really much"—wherever we live. Do not let these days rush past us and leave us missing out on the "much" that is available.

REFLECT:

1. What is near you that is often ignored?

2. What are several portions of your life that have been hard to accept?

RECEIVE:

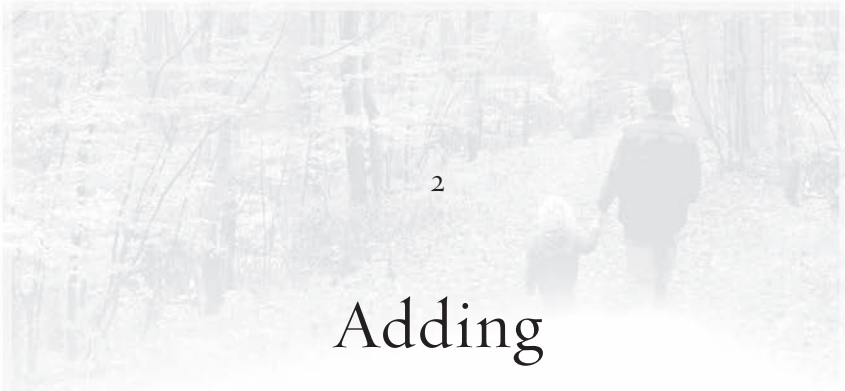
"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Romans 15:7).

Accepting

“You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you” (Nehemiah 9:6).

RESPOND:

Today would be a great time to begin the habit of acceptance. Look in the mirror and accept the person looking back. Look through your neighborhood and accept the people nearby. Glance at an image of earth and think of acceptance of everyone.



Adding

Did you meet a friend this week?

I don't mean just scheduling time with an already existing friend. Did you meet someone this week who will now become your new friend? Are you willing to “make” a friend this week?

I know. It isn't easy. Adding another relationship, another duty, another task, another anything to an already-too-busy-life never is. We live in a fast-paced world with hardly any available minutes to enjoy the friendships we already have. So meeting people for the first time and choosing to invest ourselves—time, energy, conversation, care—is difficult because we have little energy left in our account.

But it's worth the effort.

I arrived early at a breakfast meeting on the day this story starts. He was there, eating with a friend. Later, after the scrambled eggs were all gone and I headed out the door, I voiced a few comments to the stranger I had not yet met. We smiled, introduced ourselves to each other, and went separate ways.

PAUSE

Not for long, though. The stranger returned; he realized he had heard of me after all.

So, while I didn't ask for the details about what he had heard, we talked again. I wanted to become his friend. After our conversation, we drove different directions.

We've continued the dialogue since then, using various methods of communication. We've learned about the past; we've laughed; we've prayed. It reminded me of how our Maker makes connections. When we are willing to notice, to care, to listen, we might be adding a key piece to our life's puzzle: a new friend.

Let each of us choose to meet a new friend this week. Smile and say hello. Grab a moment. Give a little time, a little kindness, a little eye contact.

Someone just might be kind toward you one day when you need it most.

REFLECT:

1. What hinders or prevents you from making new friends and adding new activities to your life?

2. Is there anything you need to subtract from your life in order to make room for more positive experiences?

Adding

RECEIVE:

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity” (Proverbs 17:17).

“Do not forsake your friend or a friend of your family, and do not go to your relative’s house when disaster strikes you—better a neighbor nearby than a relative far away” (Proverbs 27:10).

RESPOND:

Consider having breakfast or lunch with a co-worker or classmate whom you normally pass by. Notice people you normally ignore. Choose to initiate a conversation.

Balancing

The experts inform us about the importance of a balanced diet. Various food groups in correct amounts work well with the people who also choose to exercise and get enough rest.

I'll be honest. I don't eat as healthy as I should.

But, moving away from dietary tendencies, let's think about the spiritual aspects of our lives. Do we know about healthy spiritual balance? How can we truly experience better growth, development, and transformation? How can we choose more than a Sunday snack we call "church," and move into a life of proper spiritual diet? Is it possible to do the things that move us closer to our Leader, while not forcing the spiritual diet as legalistic regulations and requirements?

In a culture where church folks seem to be no different in behavior than non-church folks, many people answer each of those questions with anger, "No."

I don't. I say, "Yes, we can move into a relational spiritual encounter that invites us to the table of fellowship, of biblical nourishment, of genuine change."

PAUSE

James Bryan Smith has been quoted frequently in my word world of Twitter and Facebook. With words going deeply into my mind and my spirit, Smith reminds me how a true relationship with our heavenly Father is what we crave most in life.

In his *Apprentice Series*, Smith began with *The Good and Beautiful God*—a book that deals with our thoughts about God. He then invited readers to take a look in the mirror and examine their own souls in the second book, *The Good and Beautiful Life*. The series ends with *The Good and Beautiful Community*.

This final book takes us where genuine faith should take us. Providing the final portion of the spiritual balance diet, Smith addresses and corrects unhealthy ideas of church and relationships. He tells stories of a healthy life among others, offering practical steps toward applying what his thoughts declare. I like the way Smith summarizes the theme of *The Good and Beautiful Community*: “loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Is this book, this series, for you? Yes, if you want to venture into a new place of health with yourself and God. Yes, if you realize that past hurts and present fears should not control you. Yes, if you comprehend that relational pain should not push you toward isolation. Yes, if you want to enter a community of others where your life is described by words like these: reconciliation, forgiveness, encouragement, collaboration, companionship.

Balancing

Smith challenges us—dares us—to live in such a spiritual family. A gathering of the forgiven choosing to forgive. Of those who've been hurt refusing to remain angry. Of the abused becoming healed. Of the bitter becoming nice.

“The success of a church is not in its size but in its service to the people and the community,” Smith writes. How can it really happen? By choosing “to shift our focus away from ourselves and onto others” (James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community* [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010], 71-73).

All three books reminded me how we are called to a new place of balanced spiritual development. And we aren't called to be there alone.

REFLECT:

1. What tendencies rob you of a healthy and balanced life?
2. Is a healthy physical diet easier for you than a healthy spiritual diet? How are they both the same?
3. How is it healthy to shift our focus from ourselves to others?

PAUSE

RECEIVE:

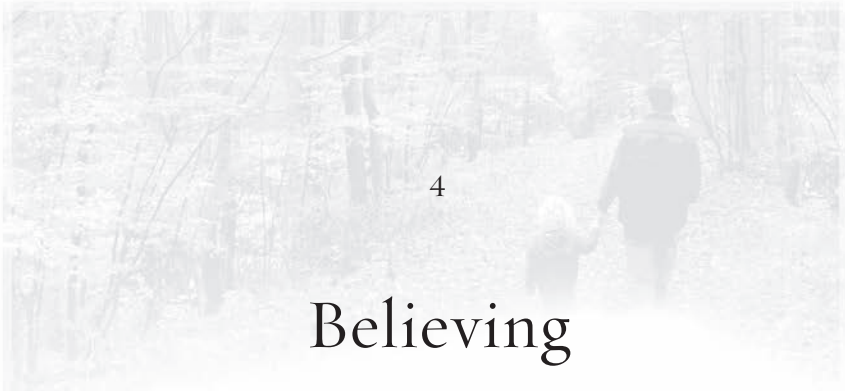
“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:10).

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7).

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8).

RESPOND:

Look through your typical schedule diet. See how much time you are spending for just yourself. Set goals to find a balanced schedule including God, yourself, and others.



Believing

I usually eat a healthy cereal very early each morning. But, this time, I arrived early for breakfast at a restaurant. While reading and waiting for a friend, the waitress brought me my orange juice. I asked, “How has your life changed since we talked?”

She said, “Not much has really changed. I’m still working two jobs and going to school. It is wearing me out.”

“What do you really want to do and what can you do to make it happen?” I asked.

Her response was not only what she needed to say. It was what I needed to learn.

“Like most people, I worry too much about being safe instead of doing what I really want to do,” she said. “As a nurse I could help so many people. But I would have to quit a job where I know what to expect and how to stay safe. That scares me. One day I plan to take a step of faith and really trust God. Not just say I trust Him, but really trust Him and step out of my other places of comfort. One day.”

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My friend arrived. We ate breakfast, talked, listened, thought, prayed, and left for busy days in our busy worlds. While eating, I thanked my waitress for her honesty. She spoke again, giving a short summary of her feelings. I told my friend her words were for us.

Worry. Being safe. Most of us live lives controlled by those words.

Take a step. Trust God. Most of us live with desires to do that.

Today, how can we defeat our worries and take steps? How can we believe? How can we trust God rather than our own assumptions of being safe?

The key is in that word: *trust*. True trust does something. It doesn't just suppose or feel or contend. It acts.

Someone might soon ask me this question: "How has your life changed since we talked?" I pray I have something of eternal value to say.

REFLECT:

1. How would you describe what you believe?
2. How do those beliefs influence your everyday decisions?

Believing

RECEIVE:

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

“I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him” (Psalm 40:1-3).

“Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:24)

RESPOND:

Spend time reviewing what you believe. Reflect on how those beliefs can, and should, influence your every thought, word, and action. Set a few small goals to make that a reality this week.

Breathing

So much can occur in a short amount of time. Here then there. Writing and speaking. Praying and hoping. Believing and doubting. Listening and learning and living. While observing the doing, this thought came to mind: In the mix of duties and tasks, we almost run out of time for life.

I frequently encourage students—and myself—to hit pause. But how? How do we rest for a moment, relax for a portion of time, and receive a sip of a fresh spiritual encounter? While typing, riding, calling, watching, wanting, and paying, how can we find time to live?

We can choose to pause. A glance out the window instead of rushing to the computer. A walk in the neighborhood instead of texting a neighbor. Staring at a bird. Staring at a star. Staring at a cloud. Staring at artwork. Thinking about adding these words to life: slow, wait, rest. And these: not in a hurry, not so fast, not right now.

Inhaling and exhaling properly is good for our health. But not just physical health. All portions of life merge. My

PAUSE

thinking can influence my praying. My sleeping can influence my forgiveness. And, my pausing can help me to notice what I normally ignore.

Give it a try. Glance at your upcoming schedule. What plans own you? What events thrill you? What experiences draw you closer to God? Do any lure you away from Him?

Let us be still. Breathing in the air, let us inhale and exhale fully aware of what matters most. Let us make changes if too much *stuff* is taking out too much of our lives.

And remember. So much can occur in a short amount of time.

REFLECT:

1. Look through your schedule for a day, a week, a month. Why do you do what you do?

2. What activities can be removed?

3. How can you find healthy breathing in the midst of your typical schedule?

Breathing

RECEIVE:

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10).

“Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, LORD, my faithful God” (Psalm 31:5).

“So Eli told Samuel, ‘Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.”’ So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ Then Samuel said, ‘Speak, for your servant is listening’” (1 Samuel 3:9-10).

RESPOND:

Inhale. Pause. Exhale. Pause. Walk slowly. Read slowly. Type slowly. Stare for a long time. Enjoy this season of your life—one breath at a time.

Carrying

My arm stayed sore longer than I expected. Carrying luggage and boxes on a trip used a few muscles I rarely use. The luggage didn't remain—the pain did.

Sometimes we carry *luggage* in our life experiences. The weight often robs us of joy while walking, while holding, while carrying. *Luggage* like bitterness, unforgiveness, resentment, greed, low self-esteem, self-hate, gossip, control, and demanding to always be right? Their heavy weights hold us back. Their resistance to be removed robs us of the freedom to travel into new land. We need to lose such luggage. Though not always simple, we can let it go. Admitting our tendencies to hold the damaging bags tightly, confessing to a friend the presence of our common companions, and requesting help from a trusted counselor or accountability partner, we can toss the gear goodbye. Those belongings do not belong.

Although such luggage of life needs to be tossed aside, other companions are healthy. And needed. And elements of our development of life. Those pieces, unlike the damaging

PAUSE

bags, are parts we should value. View them as carry-on luggage. They belong with us.

Think about it. Much of our experiences bring boxes—healthy boxes—with them. Instead of ignoring them, forgetting them, or seeking ways to drop them off, what if we enjoyed the weight?

I often write or say this phrase: “enjoy the journey.” With those same three words I seek to find what keeps so many of us from enjoying our life journeys.

What previous experiences have inhibited our efforts, damaged our dreams, scarred our inner selves, and allowed bitterness to find a dwelling place within us? What mistakes of ourselves or others continue happening—lack of forgiveness, placing blame, and refusal to accept responsibility? Why do hurts lure us toward methods of hurting others? Who controls what we do?

Yes, heavy questions. But needed. If we want to pursue new relational and emotional territory, shouldn't we identify how former worlds have frightened us and defeated us, or inspired us and accepted us? Shouldn't we gain a better understanding of why we do what we do, and why we want to become the people we seek to become?

Take a moment to think. To rethink. To revisit your past. To refuse to let previous pains control your present moods and future goals. To forgive and move on. To visit a person or place

Carrying

you've avoided. To be nice to a person who has never been nice to you—and, to do that wanting and expecting nothing in return.

Think of what you can do to make your attitude and your community better. What new goals can you set? What old hurts can you release so their throbbing doesn't control your mood any longer? What healthy companions should you welcome and accept? What emotional and relational foods don't taste great but bring better health to you if you digest them instead of avoiding them?

And, as we enjoy the journey, I pray none of us continue carrying loads of unnecessary material that can rob us of truly living this thing called life.

REFLECT:

1. What unanswered prayers can you pray again and again, each time with an attitude of “not my will, but Your will”?
2. What is your normal tendency: to attack when hurt or to retreat?
3. Describe how you separate luggage you should keep and luggage you should lose.

PAUSE

RECEIVE:

“Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes” (Psalm 37:7).

“For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:5).

“Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

RESPOND:

Rather than following tendencies of fight or flight, choose to face life this week. What needs to be released? Toss it aside though journaling, counseling, praying. What is best to keep in your life? Find ways to learn through endurance. Choose to carry on.

Celebrating

I originally wrote this story as a blog from inside our north Georgia home. We had a white Christmas—arriving home from a family occasion in Florida just in time for snow almost to stop us on the road. I thought that might be the final snowfall for the season. It wasn't.

Sunday night, January 9, the snow fell again. The H₂O landed as more ice than snow. Yards became dressed in a new outfit for the season. Houses, roads, trees, and skies all matched the mood: the atmosphere was “dreaming of a white January.”

School days canceled? A rare occurrence for colleges. So we stayed inside—except when short trips outside caused us to watch, to feel the freeze, to play in the snow, to slip on the ice, or to clean off the driveway.

The winter weather limited our opportunities. Roads were too dangerous for traveling. I had hoped to fly out of town to lead a friend's funeral service, but flights were canceled. I was excited about classes and convocation and chapel for the week, but all had been canceled.

PAUSE

So, what could we do? We could choose to complain about the interruption of our routine. Or, what about this option? What about choosing to enjoy the moment? To celebrate! To rejoice and be glad! Not a bad idea, is it? Enjoying the snow, the ice, the stay-in-the-house-all-day-for-several-days, the wonder, the cold, the fireplace, the scenes, the conversations, the books to read, the notes to write, the breaths to breathe.

When our schedules are interrupted or delayed or completely stopped, we can choose to enjoy every moment.

As we face our personal issues of disability, sickness, or weakness, can't we choose to celebrate and enjoy the moments? Maybe we feel locked, unable, iced in. Even then, we can select attitudes of noticing the often ignored, enjoying the moments of each breath, reflecting on the drops of God's grace that have fallen on our land and chosen to remain. We can sense that we are covered by a true hope.

I looked out the window as I typed this original draft. Then, I prayed. I prayed that I would become better at noticing the scenes of glory, better at celebrating, better at choosing joy no matter the forecast of my future.

REFLECT:

1. When do you celebrate the most? The least?

Celebrating

2. What suggestions would you offer yourself about finding ways to celebrate amidst uncomfortable situations?

RECEIVE:

“Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn—shout for joy before the LORD, the King.

“Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity” (Psalm 98).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

Stare at the scenes this week. Journal a psalmistic confession of thankfulness. Don't fake an attempt at appearing happy when you aren't. Instead, choose to rejoice and celebrate instead of staying locked in the house of hurt and negativity.

Crying

My friend texted me this message: “I just watched a mother with two small children say goodbye to her Army husband. She was crying. Now I am too.”

Saying goodbye isn't easy. Especially when those we hug are leaving for a long distance and a long time. Especially when we aren't sure when—or if—they'll return.

I could discuss more about war and injuries and death. I hurt for the wounded soldiers and their families. But, I would say too much. So, for now, I want to focus on that one family as they waved goodbye. I want us to learn about our own families and friends, our crying and their crying, our own goodbyes.

Did that man have a friend? Who cared enough for him to build a relationship, to invite him to a meal, to write a brief note of kindness? Does his wife have a group of caregivers? Who will ask her questions and listen to her answers? Who will be there for moments of sadness, tears, prayers? Who will help by spending time with those two small children?

PAUSE

My friend said, “She was crying. Now I am too.”

Let’s add this: “God cries for that family. Do we?”

We can. Though we don’t know them, we know so many in similar seasons of life. A friend or family member has departed—to war, to work, to sickness, to death, to a choice of leaving, to seek happiness in various ways. Or, a friend or family member has departed mentally while still living nearby—he works hard but never engages in conversations, care, compassion.

We can care. We can cry. We can invest time by interrupting our own addictive behavior and routines. We can enter the stories of others and offer a few minutes, a few meals, a few words.

They are crying. Are we noticing?

God is caring. Are we?

REFLECT:

1. Do you view crying as a sign of weakness?

2. Why do you think society finds it acceptable for a man to show anger but not vulnerability? How can you challenge the norm?

Crying

RECEIVE:

“He answered, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, “Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live”’” (2 Samuel 12:22).

“Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ And he went outside and wept bitterly” (Matthew 26:75).

“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it” (Luke 19:41).

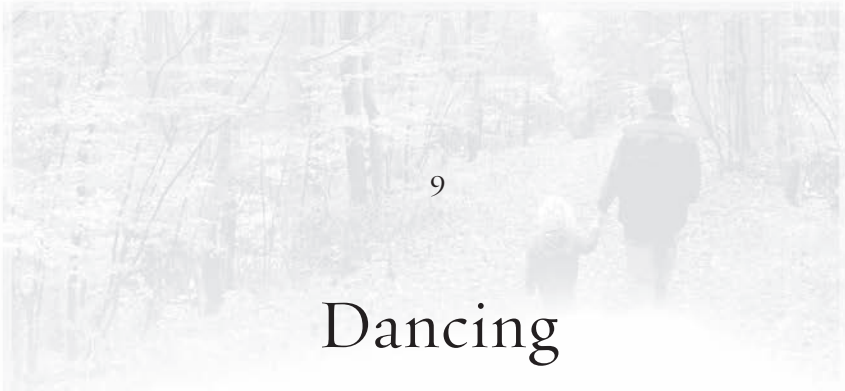
“And he [Peter] went outside and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62).

“Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

“Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy” (2 Timothy 1:4).

RESPOND:

When you read a heartbreaking article, watch a sad movie, and feel deep hurt in real life, don't be afraid to cry. Realize your feelings, your hurt. Find a friend and talk about the painful experiences of life.



Dancing

Do you crave a dance? Do you desire an invitation from a Lover as music begins playing?

I've seen dads dance with their daughters at weddings. I've also seen dads distance themselves from their daughters.

David, a poetic author and my biblical hero who killed a giant and wrote songs and led a nation and did wrong, got into a little trouble when he danced. Maybe it was his clothing—or lack of such needed material. But, sometimes, the best way to respond to joy is to dance.

I know. Some churches still condemn dancing. Some people drink and dance their way to temporary happiness in their method of denial. Some places welcome dances that are not healthy or appropriate. Some types of dancing aren't right. I know.

I also know the wonder of this thought: the One who loves us most has invited us to a dance. We can't afford the price to get in—He's already paid it. We aren't sure of the music,

PAUSE

the alignment, the sequence, the movement, the space, the timing—He'll gladly guide us. We worry about performance, score, ranking—He's joyful just seeing our willingness to receive His invitation.

Let's receive the invitation to dance. Let's step up from our couches of complacency, our tables of fear, our chairs of doubt, our seats of unfamiliarity.

Hear the music. See the welcome. Respond to the invitation.

Stand up. Step forward. Walk toward the One who has invited you here. Begin to let music of grace guide your steps. Begin to let rhythm of redemption lead your motion. Begin to rejoice a while—not longer obsessed by the pain and hurts you've carried for so long.

Dancing isn't denial. It is choosing to be glad no matter what's staring back, choosing to celebrate in a world of wounds, choosing to let a moment not pass by without a segment of festival.

Let us dance.

REFLECT:

1. How can we live a life of dancing internally—no matter our painful situations?

Dancing

2. What are ways a “willingness to dance” is inhibited?

RECEIVE:

“Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the LORD with all his might” (2 Samuel 6:14).

“You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. LORD my God, I will praise you forever” (Psalm 30:11-12).

“Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp” (Psalm 149:3).

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing” (Luke 15:25).

RESPOND:

Think about your internal music. Consider what is hindering your willingness to believe Jesus has invited you to dance. Set aside a little time this week to accept His invitation. Dance with Him. And see His smile.

Doubting

The lady sat across the table from me. Our laughter, stories, and food brought smiles and honesty. We prayed. We thought. We listened. She wonders about her future and her dreams. She enjoys life but feels like she's staring into a world of the unknown.

The man walked beside me as he talked. A few of his dreams have been fulfilled. So many haven't. Yet. Will the dreams come true? When? How? Should they come true? Is the lack of accomplishment his fault? God's will? Whatever the reason, he feels he's living—more than ever before—with questions during this journey of the unknown.

The lady stood near me. She explained her vocation, her experience, her future goals. We talked business. We learned from each other's stories. We talked beliefs and family and spiritual development. And the weather. In her cities, my cities, and the city where our conversation occurred. But there was more. She, like so many, is seeking change during a season of uncertainty. So much is so unknown to her.

PAUSE

The student texted. He needed to talk. Quickly. About his present status, his long-term goals, and his sense of so many unknowns shaping both his present and his future. He felt the need for change. Now. Too much is too unknown.

News. Finances. Emotions. Doubts and fears. Expectations and disappointments. Desires motivated to bring change face giants of uncertainty, regrets, disillusionment, and potential mistakes.

The fear of failure can lead toward not trying at all—which can be a failure. And, the stress of an unknown future can rob us of a joyful, peaceful assurance in the now.

The unknown. It's staring at us all. Will it promote our risks or prohibit them? Five years from today, will we look back and remember how a season of the unknown strengthened us? Or will we pretend we're living with no questions at all?

Becoming aware of our dreams and our doubts provides honest views of ourselves. Doubt is okay as long as it doesn't control us. If it motivates us to seek proper counsel and invest time in preparation, then let's keep it. If doubt controls us and deprives us of adventures into wonder, then let's kiss it goodbye.

REFLECT:

1. Identify your doubts and write them down. How does the list look to you?

Doubting

2. Which doubts fall under the category of healthy? What ones are unneeded?

RECEIVE:

“Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my belief!’” (Mark 9:24)

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’” (Matthew 14:31)

“Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Then Jesus told him, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’” (John 20:28-29).

RESPOND:

This process can be step one of a victorious journey toward fulfillment. Find a close friend who will listen to your doubts and fears, and who will encourage you to endure the journey.

Dreaming

Sometimes prayers don't seem to be answered. Should that stop us from praying? For me, sometimes they do. But they shouldn't.

Even when we pray and pray and pray and pray, and those prayers go unanswered, we are better off to continue praying. And hoping. And dreaming.

Our prayers are often not answered the way we hoped. That doesn't mean they aren't answered. It might mean they are answered better than we can ask or imagine, better than we expected. It might mean they are answered in ways our limited vision can't see. It might mean they couldn't be answered the way we hoped because that would have prohibited other prayers from being answered. Or, maybe because the Listener of Our Prayers loves us too much to answer all our prayers the way we think He should.

Knowing that, I have this suggestion for myself. Keep dreaming big and praying big. What if we chose to pray, to ask, to hope, to dream—uninfluenced by the times dreams

PAUSE

haven't come true? What if it's true that God, in His sovereign knowledge and power and perspective, really does choose to sometimes wait until we ask?

I know friends who dream. I want to be more like them. I want to dream in the middle of my doubting. I want to dream even when I feel like a failure. I want to dream after a disappointment, a failure, a poor decision. I want to refuse to let the past prohibit me from dreaming more, dreaming bigger, dreaming on, and dreaming through.

Books like *The Dream Giver* and *The Circle Maker* and *Love Does* tell me to dream. Voices like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and John Wesley teach me how to dream. So many friends over so many years have let me know where dreams can take us. College students who have visions of transforming the world dare me to dream with them. Inner desires—sometimes hidden beneath the self-protection of a reluctance to face disappointment—won't leave me alone.

A sentence can become a story, a song, a book, a speech. A few dollars can become an investment. A smile can initiate a relationship. A failure can be forgiven and transformed. A dream can be fulfilled. A financial disaster can be a season of learning. A rejection can be protection from long-term tragedy. A person who refused to speak might one day become a friend.

Dream. Dream now. Dream big.

Dreaming

REFLECT:

1. What are your dreams? What is stopping you from acting on those dreams?

2. What can you do to make those dreams come true? What can only be done by God?

3. When will you take a step to turn those dreams into reality?

RECEIVE:

“Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more” (Genesis 37:5).

“His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind” (Genesis 37:11).

“The centurion replied, ‘Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go,” and he goes; and that one, “Come,” and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it.’ When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and

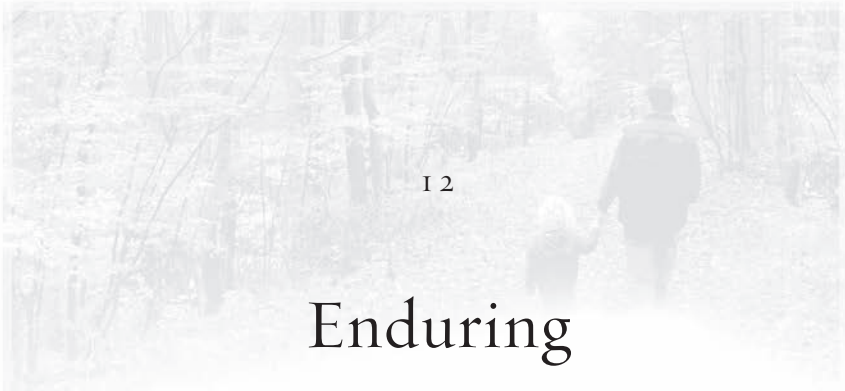
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said to those following him, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Matthew 8:8-10).

“For we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).

RESPOND:

Make a list of the people who have dreamed big dreams. Learn from their willingness to dream and how they acted on their dreams. Now include your name on that list.



Enduring

“I can’t take this anymore.”

His voice’s harsh tone matched his eyes. He didn’t look at me directly; he stared toward the wall hardly noticing a waitress walking by, an elderly man slowly stepping to the restroom, or the young lady picking up a few extra napkins.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

He told me the stories. Of months in a war he could hardly explain. Of pain from his own struggles of addiction and denial. Of rejection from a lady, a boss, a church. Of bad dreams about a war that never seems to go away. His words were like a movie screen—taking me almost to the realities of his life experiences. I felt like I could really hear the bombs, see the blood, smell the bodies. I felt like I could really read the email, the texts, the letters.

He risked his life. Now he feels rejected.

He remembers a long conversation with a friend. He didn’t know an unwelcome bomb’s visit the next morning would force that to be their final conversation.

PAUSE

He dreams of his friend's voice. Of bombs. Of strangers staring. Of kids just wishing they could be kids. Of his earlier days when he could begin a task and finish it well.

I had heard about smart bombs and cruise missiles on news reports. My friend was releasing frightening information as we sat to eat. I ate slowly, trying to enjoy the southern cooking while listening to stories too real to be pleasant. He talked, hardly eating at all. But, at least he was talking. That's what he needed to do.

If he continued holding on to his pain, his pain would continue holding him back. The young man was formerly known for strength, endurance, and courage. His monotonous tone of voice revealed that those components had left him—or were being held in hiding by the strength of deep disappointments and grief.

I asked, "Remember what you talked about with your counselor before? How you hope this pain makes you better instead of bitter? Tell me where you are with that now."

Over the next few months he continued telling me his story of many stories. We also continued seeking healing and dreaming of endurance instead of escaping. Recently, conversations offered different facial expressions, pleasant tones, and moments of laughter. He hadn't quit. He had chosen to be healed, to locate that hidden reality of hope, to endure.

Enduring

What about you? Is endurance a key component of your life? Have past hurts caused you to dream small and quit quickly?

Glance back at the words we've considered in the last few chapters: believing, celebrating, dancing, dreaming. It would be nice if we could live with those experiences continuing. Ending in "ing" indicates an ongoing reality of their existence.

Students and teachers finish a year of classes. Athletes complete their seasons. Writers type final words, speakers declare conclusions, and businesses close deals. Individuals eat their last meals of the day, or spend their last money by paying a bill, or drive the last miles to arrive home.

Sometimes we feel like quitting. Sometimes we think of other options. Sometimes our tendencies lure us in other directions. Desires for immediate pleasure cause us to fail. Rather than staying on course until our arrivals, we stray, we stop, we quit, we move on to other things.

By quitting too soon, we'll never know what's on the other side.

By finishing, we'll know the joy of completion.

REFLECT:

1. What dreams should be pursued?
2. What opportunities will we miss if we hit delay?

PAUSE

RECEIVE:

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

“You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Hebrews 10:36).

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

RESPOND:

Don't quit. Endure. Pursue. Read a book—all of it. Even if you don't like it, read it. Listen to everything a person says without rehearsing your response. Set a goal and complete it. Finish the race.



Engaging

You know the common phrases, don't you?

People say, “Yes,” when responding to a question with a positive answer, or when they are excited about a touchdown. People begin a sentence with “you know,” as if we already knew what was about to be spoken. People say “absolutely” and “sure,” or “maybe.”

In the area of special needs, we also hear common phrases. Some are very sad. Some are efforts to redefine and bring new meaning to titles or labels formerly misused and misunderstood. But there is a sentence, a release, a confession, that is often spoken. What is the most common phrase I hear from people after I tell my story at epilepsy meetings and disability gatherings?

“I thought I was alone.”

Those five words state so much. Patients feel alone. Parents, spouses, caregivers, friends—so many feel like no one else can understand or relate to their situations. A life of isolation frequently results from enduring years of disease, disappointment, or disability.

PAUSE

When hearing music or stories or laughter or honest confessions from a person who is also struggling, the aloneness moves toward togetherness.

As a person who felt so alone notices that various disabilities hit multitudes of people, the singular moves toward the plural. The “I” and “me” begins to become “we” and “us.” Instead of “No one understands,” we can say, “Thanks for being my friend.” Rather than “Can’t anyone help us through this?” we can ask, “How can I help others the way people have helped me?”

Do you feel alone today? Is your life in the singular? If so, find a support group. Be proactive and pursue help. Engage in the plural—a life no longer alone.

No, people won’t fully understand and relate to your struggle. Yes, there will always be issues only you can actually feel or sense. But pursuing community instead of isolation gives us a chance to live a life no longer alone.

As we doubt, let’s not doubt alone. As we feel isolated, let’s not allow that to remain a reality. Moving from singular to plural enlarges our family of support, promotes the importance of team effort, and reminds us that a new common phrase might be, “Thank you,” or, “I appreciate your friendship.”

That transformation is family, community, and trust. It moves us from the singular to the plural. And in the end, teamwork can bring many together as one.

Engaging

REFLECT:

1. What have you done recently to engage in deeper relationships with others?

2. How does that bring fear to you?

3. How does it bring hope?

4. What friends from your past have helped you instead of harming you?

RECEIVE:

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Romans 12:9-10).

“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22).

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity” (Proverbs 17:17).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

View yourself as a member of a large team. List a few goals for successfully playing your role on that team. Instead of being controlled by the team negatives, choose to see the positives. And choose to help make the positives possible.

Enjoying

Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow. It did. And it did.

I originally wrote that after snow came for a Georgia visit Sunday afternoon, Sunday evening, Sunday night, and Monday morning in the March of 2009. The snow came without my signing an agreement to let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

Did I have any role at all as a participant in the weather? In the precipitation, no. In my response of participation, yes.

The life of a spoiled American faced conflict when the power stayed off for twenty-four hours. Debbie and I did not enjoy the moments of being unable to drive up a small hill to return home and enjoy the snow. A techno-addict struggled during a day without email, a day when cell phones failed to stay awake and IMs went nowhere. A little heat would have been nice when coming back inside after tossing snowballs and walking through our own Narnian winter.

Instead of complaining about those issues, though, we chose to enjoy. Snow—not too much like my northern friends,

PAUSE

but just enough. Snow—a stranger during my many years in Florida, but now a surprising visitor. Snow—a reminder of our Creator’s creativity, a realization of power far beyond our control, a rest among beauty.

I giggled like a kid. I stared at a snowman and remembered Mama. I prayed a few Psalms while walking and feeling snow covering me as an outfit I could never purchase in a store. I enjoyed moments with family and friends. I ate the breakfast a friend brought our way. I loved a dinner with neighbors.

So many times we fail to let interruptions motivate us to notice what we frequently ignore. Letting it snow wasn’t my choice. Enjoying the snow and the people I would not have spoken to if the day had been normal—that was my choice.

Now think about people. In our hurry and our hustle, we fail to see them when they’re beside us. We should let some type of snow fall and stop our addiction to ignoring people. We must engage with the world around us. Let us enjoy life. Let us enjoy people. Today.

REFLECT:

1. What have you recently felt frustration toward that could have been seen as joyful?

2. How can you improve your response?

Enjoying

3. Do those who know you describe you as a person who enjoys life?

RECEIVE:

“A person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in their own toil. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?” (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25)

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

“Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17).

RESPOND:

Think again of this chapter's closing lines. Think about the people. Let some type of snow fall and help you engage in conversations with others. Find practical ways to engage with the world and enjoy life.



Forgetting

“Oh, just forget it.”

We’ve heard those words spoken. A voice really saying, “I don’t like what’s going on” and “I don’t like the way you are dealing with this” and “I’ve had enough of this.” Whatever the tone of voice and facial expression, those four words are indicating a personal dislike for how things are being handled. Or avoided.

It could be a misunderstanding. It could be tone of voice or eye contact misguided the one listening. It could be a situation where hurts from the past influence present relationships and lead to misinterpretations of dialogue. It could be a person in pain—in deep, lasting, never-go-away pain.

Often, the one saying “Oh, just forget it” is the one needing to forget something.

As a pastor and counselor, I’ve spent time with many people who need to forget. As a human, a husband, a father, and a maker-of-mistakes, I understand the crucial importance

PAUSE

of letting go, of waving goodbye, of forgetting what isn't worthy of remembering.

When I first think of forgetting, I remember that my left temporal lobe carries severe scar tissue. Things easy to remember before an illness caused that are now the things—the nouns, the names, the words, the scenes—I cannot recall. I still struggle to remember; forgetting is a common practice in my damaged brain.

I forget. Not by choice.

That forgetting, though, has reminded me of the wonder and beauty of forgetting. The wonder of my poor decisions being remembered no more. The beauty of my mistakes being recalled no longer. By God. By family. By those who loved—and love—me.

Choosing to forget. Not a normal tendency. But a needed one. A healing one. It is not avoidance or denial. Not pretending all is well when it isn't.

It is choosing to forget.

Even when we remember.

REFLECT:

1. If you could choose to forget five things from your past, what would they be?

Forgetting

2. If you could choose five of your past mistakes to be forgotten by others, what would those be?

RECEIVE:

“I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25).

“Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12).

RESPOND:

Reflect on each of those three Scripture passages. Think of ways to remember someone's sin no more, forgetting what is behind, and forgiving wickedness.

Forgiving

When we pray what we often call “The Lord’s Prayer,” it is easy to repeat the words mechanically without thinking about their meaning. Especially if we say this prayer often. And rapidly. Without pondering our words or meaning what we pray.

However, if we will allow it, the Lord’s Prayer can awaken us spiritually and give us an example of how to approach God.

“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

Ask yourself how you feel about that portion of the prayer. When you pray it, do you mean it? Most of us want God’s forgiveness, but are we fulfilling our end of the deal? Are we forgiving those who anger, offend, and hurt us? Are we forgiving those who’ve wounded the people we love?

God eagerly forgives us, and we have wronged Him much worse than any person could ever wrong us. He loves us as if we had never hurt Him. Because of God’s willingness to forgive us, we are to forgive others freely.

PAUSE

Do they owe us more than we owe God? If we think they do, perhaps we should begin naming the ways we have sinned against God. It will take only a few minutes of that process to recognize the depth of our corruption and the magnitude of God's grace.

REFLECT:

1. We talk about forgiving others, but we often hold unforgiveness in our hearts toward *ourselves*. Is there anything you need to forgive yourself for?

2. Is there anyone else you still harbor bitterness toward?

RECEIVE:

“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-16).

“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the

Forgiving

testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:15-18).

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

RESPOND:

This week, pray for the person you can't seem to forgive. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you let go.

Giving

The TV preachers have ruined a few excellent things. Yes, they've helped so many people hear so much good news. And, yes, they've offered hope to the hurting and prayers to the desperate.

But too often the presentations appear as a business deal with God. Negotiation? Placing bids? Gambling with God? Of course, it isn't stated that way. Scripture is quoted. Stories are told. Prayers are prayed. Tears are shed. A production is staged and produced—give to us and God will give to you. Give, give, give. Get, get, get.

The business deal is presented. Audiences fall for it. Money goes. And God, possibly, shakes His head and thinks: "Where did that come from?" or "What is that all about?" or "I thought this show was about Me."

Isn't there a better approach? Receiving offerings should reflect the reverence toward the Creator of All. Giving offerings should occur without expecting something, anything, in return.

PAUSE

Giving should be, uh...that: giving. Not investing. Just giving. Not waiting for a response. Just giving. Not to get back. To give, expecting nothing in return.

Let's give giving a try. When we need, let us give.

Holding too tightly on to what belongs to us can lure us toward the reality of those possessions holding too tightly on to us.

Great examples? People believing in God's love even when that belief might cost their lives. People giving gifts to others—without even putting their names on it. People realizing their “things” are just that: “things.” People sharing meals, money, food, clothes, and time. People loving people enough to give to them. Giving. Just giving. Expecting nothing in return.

That's not always easy. For me, it isn't.

But it is right.

Let us give.

REFLECT:

1. What inspires and hinders you to give?

2. How can you work through what hinders you and choose to live a life of giving?

Giving

3. How can you find a healthy balance of a financial budget, saving, refusing to fall for unneeded wants, and giving to others?

RECEIVE:

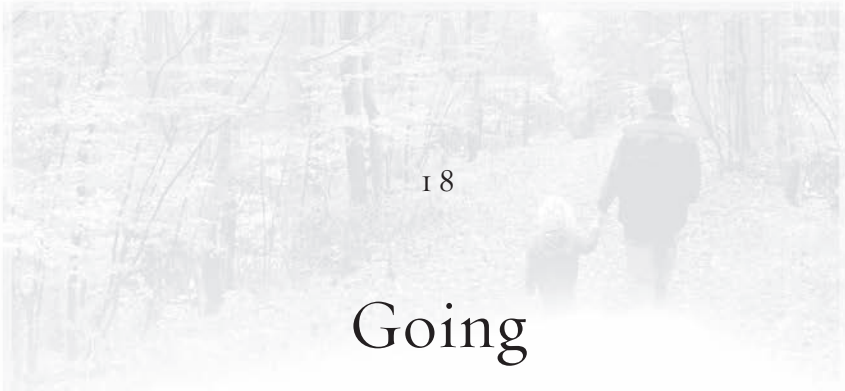
“One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty” (Proverbs 11:24).

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7).

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’” (Matthew 25:40).

RESPOND:

Think of people who have set good examples for you about caring for others and giving away. Think of ways you can show love and care in practical ways—financially, conversationally, relationally.



Going

The couple looked at me and smiled. We had enjoyed too much food, just enough laughter, and wonderful conversations. Our dialogue reminded us of days gone by—those days when Mama was living, when I had hair on my head, when north Georgia was the only home I knew. Church and ball games and favorite music and friends: The conversation took us back in time.

As we began to stand up and prepare to leave the restaurant, the lady said, “How does it feel to be home?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer her question. I smiled, saying nothing with words. Maybe the smile could do the talking.

But my thoughts continued processing her question and my internal response. “How does it feel to be home?”

The question raised more questions. Is the place of my childhood really home now? After living five hundred miles away for so many years, where is home? I left this area when I graduated from college and moved to Orlando, Florida. A wife,

PAUSE

three sons, many friends. An hour from the ocean, too close to hurricanes, pastoring a church of wonderful people, writing articles and books and columns. Weddings and funerals. Days of sadness and days of joy.

Our sons only knew Central Florida as home. North Georgia was the place to visit family, to experience holidays, to see pictures of a world long ago and far away.

Where is home? Can a man, his wife, and two of his three sons feel at home in a place much smaller than the home they'd all known? What would it take to make a town of the past feel like home in the present?

I recently talked to my friend again and asked if she remembered her question. She did. This time, I had an answer. "We miss many friends and family members from Orlando. And we never planned to live in Georgia again. But people like you have made it feel good to be here. And, people like you make it feel like home."

Yes, people make a difference. Kind people. Friendly people. They can make the lonely feel not so alone. They can help the sad learn to smile. They can be there and preach the best sermon in town: no words, just ears listening and hearts caring. They can offer time in the middle of their busy schedules.

When Jesus came into town, religious leaders thought they knew all the answers. They had memorized commandments

Going

and kept their distance from those who were a little different. Jesus didn't follow their political perspectives or religious preferences. He followed Love. He spoke Love. He let Love be His life—and His death. He summarized Love's importance.

Christ didn't only declare the importance of Love for God and other people. He displayed that Love. The lonely ones, the rejected ones, the sinful ones, the hated ones, the dying ones.

Jesus had a way of inviting people to dinner and asking, "How does it feel to be home?"

REFLECT:

1. What makes us reluctant to be "going" into new places and meeting new friends?

2. What are ways we can help others who are "going" into new places?

RECEIVE:

"Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself"" (Matthew 22:37-39).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

These days and in these places, Jesus is inviting us to invite others to dinner. He is asking us to help others feel at home. Maybe it's up to us to help someone feel home again. Or, maybe home for the first time.

Ignoring

Common phrases frequently come our way. The repetition of commercials, songs, and familiar phrases slides through our ears and minds so often that we fail to respond. We fail to remember their importance. We fail to grasp their original purpose.

Songs, key lines from a movie, quotes from famous people. A commercial, a joke, a takeaway. Or, sometimes numbers become familiar: Numbers that once looked so large now become customary coverage of those injured in an accident, those killed at war, those hearing bad news from a doctor. Houses foreclosed. The amount of debt, the amount of diseases, the amount of deaths.

In a life of experiencing a disability, stats and summaries and studies and scenes are important. They inform our society about us. They provide recognizable data. They reveal the conditions of our society, of our world, of ourselves.

But we must never let the common become too common. Just becoming familiar with a friend's disability should not diminish the inner struggles of the one who seeks to endure

PAUSE

his status. Being around a family member's condition should not minimize the battle. We must choose to let familiarity bring even more compassion.

Knowing ourselves and our friends better can motivate us to treat ourselves and our friends better. Knowing our conditions or the conditions of others should offer us more means to help them endure, help them smile, help them experience wholeness.

When I lived in Florida, the seasons rarely changed. Now in Georgia, I see the beauty of four seasons. One hill can stay new, one tree can look different, one neighborhood can appear original—each new season brings a fresh glance at the familiar scene.

Can't life be like that? New every morning? With each breath, each giggle, each tear, can't life be new every morning?

I think so. I hope so.

REFLECT:

1. What are practical ways you would advise yourself to notice what you normally ignore?

2. What are practical ways you would advise yourself to ignore what you normally worry too much about?

Ignoring

3. How can God help you? How can others help you?

RECEIVE:

“Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

RESPOND:

Take a walk through your house. Slowly. Notice what you often ignore. Take similar walks through your neighborhood, your school, your workplace, your church campus. Look at recent, and ancient, pictures. Learn from what you see.



Investing

The chapter title “Investing” might bring the image of money to your mind. Good investments, poor investments, uncertain investments.

But let’s let the word *investing* accentuate more than money. In fact, we can focus on methods of investing that have a higher value than the gains and losses of material things.

Think about people. Investing time with people. Time and energy. Energy for conversations and service. People with personalities similar to ours and personalities very different. Talking with people, walking with people, riding with people, listening with people, cheering with people, crying with people, praying with people.

And, eating with people. I like friends and I like food—especially breakfast and lunch and dinner and snacks. Listening to each other, learning from each other, praying and talking while we eat—it’s all good stuff.

PAUSE

Each person can add so much to the lives of family members and friends. Why live in isolation? Why run from relationships? Hurt and disappointment come from friendships. Yes. But they are also identified, addressed, discussed, and often solved through friendships.

Yes, relationships are risky. And painful. And reminders of previous pains. But they are crucial to becoming who we should be. Let's not avoid relational risk. Let's invest in the lives of those around us.

I love reading the stories of Jesus spending time with His disciples. Not just in temples. Not just like our normal routine of church service rituals. They experienced conversations, illustrations, teaching and training. In homes. On ancient streets. In boats and storms and parties.

Jesus spent real time to really love people. He proclaimed truth, balancing joyful hope and interesting parables and angry rebukes.

Today, let us analyze ourselves. Are we investing in relationships? They are there, waiting. God is here, watching. Order a meal with a friend or two to bring more to your life and theirs.

REFLECT:

1. What keeps you from spending time with others?

Investing

2. How does pain from past relationships inhibit your willingness to pursue relationships?

3. What suggestions would you offer to yourself about becoming better at investing in relationships?

RECEIVE:

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-11)

“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity” (Proverbs 17:17).

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:44-46).

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

A friend loves at all time, the verse says. Think of the times when loving is difficult. And, remember, love isn't a feeling. It is an action. Respond this week by taking action—the action of love to others.



Journaling

Hosting a radio show about epilepsy was a joy. I interviewed people from around the world as they told their stories. I think about how their stories influenced the lives—the stories—of others.

A patient described her willingness to fight through fears. An epileptologist offered advice on asking doctors the right questions. A caregiver provided thoughts on how to not let stress rob her of joy in every moment. A child discussed knowing what to do when his mother has a seizure. A dad talked about the feeling when his son struggles adjusting to medication. A patient confessed his doubts while proclaiming her accomplishments in life. Those were, and are, stories. Stories of hope and doubt and questions and pain and a love that endures. Stories.

I love the stories.

Often, though, I prefer “their” stories. The stories of others. Those I write about. Those I interview. Those I counsel. Their stories reveal their realities.

PAUSE

What's not always easy is this: REALIZING and RECEIVING and RELEASING our own stories. Though I travel and tell my story of a life with epilepsy, I prefer telling the stories of others. But, I must be aware of my story. And you must be aware of your story. I should receive that story and release it to others. And so should you. By realizing our own ongoing life stories, by receiving the stories we now live, and by releasing those stories to others, we move from bondage to freedom. And we invite the audiences around us to enter with us into that world of freedom.

This month, this week, today: think of your story. Your conflict, your resolution. Your pain, your victory. Your dreams, your hopes. Your past, your future. Think of your story. Believe in a bright future.

Maybe your previous chapters did not finish well. Maybe your dreams did not come true. Maybe your questions found no answers.

But, today, turn the page. Open a new life chapter. Begin a new story. Guide the story with faith and hope and love. Receive the love of Christ: the Greatest Story of All. Release your story by telling yourself, your family, your friends, and the world that you will not give up. That, with God's help, your story moves toward a climax of triumph.

Let's hear them. Let's write them. Let's live them.

Journaling

REFLECT:

1. What scenes in your personal story frighten you?
2. Which ones thrill you?
3. What do you dream to be the next chapter in your story?

RECEIVE:

“Now write down this song and teach it to the Israelites and have them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them” (Deuteronomy 31:19).

“They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger” (John 8:6).

“Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

Think of these three acts: REALIZING, RECEIVING, RELEASING. Enter the drama. Realize and receive who you are. Release what is holding you back from becoming who you can be. Believe in the story. And believe the story will end well.

Laughing

It was Saturday. I was home alone. My plans were to finish an editorial assignment, pay a few bills, then take a quick nap before leaving with the team for a basketball game. I could get more work done on the bus ride. I could talk to the coaches and the players. So, as I usually do, I had the day scheduled.

But I walked into a storage room to locate some financial information before I worked on our bills. Unplanned, I stopped. I glanced at what was around me. Each scene reminded me of events, of seasons, of experiences, of people. The suitcases sent my mind back to trips taken. The Christmas decorations sent me back to previous holidays while, at the same time, sending me forward to a December only one month away. The boxes of record albums reminded me of my years of listening to, writing reviews of, and playing for a radio station music many people disliked. I held one album and started singing. It was good I was home alone.

My next interruption was a collection of photo albums. Just pictures taken from cameras. Pictures of days now hidden in distant regions of my mind. Days of being young, days of

PAUSE

growing up, days of having children, days of seeing them grow up. Baby boys before they became men. Decembers from my childhood; Decembers from theirs. Wedding pictures. A smile from my Mama—a smile I had missed for so long.

And, that picture—her picture of her smile—caused a smile on my face. Sometimes I think of her and feel sad. That day—that planned, scheduled, don't-interrupt-me day—I saw her picture and felt like I could hear her laugh. I responded like I would have if she was beside me and I was young. I laughed.

I kept laughing. Not just a few giggles. Not a casual laugh to avoid offending someone attempting to tell a joke. Not a response to an expected humorous scene. An unexpected, real, therapeutic, unplanned, not-wanting-to-stop laugh. In the storage room of our attic, I was laughing.

In the storage room of our attic, I was being healed.

Remembering that day and writing about that day makes—not force, but inspire; not demand, but lure—me to laugh again. Not as long and not as deep. But I smile typing these words. My eyes change shape a little. My body language isn't as planned, as structured, as scripted.

Laughter can take us from the planned. It can interrupt us with joy. It can rework our script, providing the editorial services of healing and hope. It can let deep wounds become segments of hope. It can help sad days become not-so-bad-after-all occasions.

Laughing

It can make an already planned day become better.

It did for me. Paying the bills during a difficult financial season didn't feel as stressful. Writing and editing were done with a little different rhythm. The bus ride and the game were more enjoyable than I thought they would be. And, I laughed more.

Would I have laughed that much later on the Saturday if the laugh had not initiated earlier in the day? I don't know. But I'm smiling about it still.

When was the last time you laughed? What caused it? How long did that giggle continue?

I recently remembered an event when we spent time with our family. Our grandson couldn't stop laughing. We all joined in. His laughter helped us all become young again.

I remembered scenes from the past when his father couldn't stop laughing. I remembered farther back in time when his grandfather, his great-grandfather, his great-great grandfather couldn't stop laughing.

These days we too often stop laughing.

These days we too often fail to begin laughing.

I pray our day will be interrupted and our schedules delayed. I pray today we will laugh.

PAUSE

REFLECT:

1. When is the last time you had one of those moments of not-wanting-to-stop laughter?

2. What caused it?

RECEIVE:

“Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound” (Psalm 4:7).

“Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them’” (Psalm 126:2).

“A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17:22).

RESPOND:

Spend time with a family member or a friend. Discuss experiences of life that remind you of joy. Find healthy, clean, appropriate ways to laugh together.

Learning

Classes and books and tests and assignments. Expectations, explanations, information, application. Exciting lessons, boring lessons, confusing lessons. The simple. The difficult. The profound. Repetition. Memorization.

If you're in school as a teacher or student, what thoughts come to mind? What positive and negative feelings? What goals do you seek to accomplish? What memories of classes from the past? What dreams for the future?

Often, we let our school seasons end. Final exams, grades, and diplomas indicate graduation. Degrees equal conclusions. But is that perspective healthy? Is it correct?

Whatever our learning skills, our ventures of education should never end. That journey should be a lifetime of learning. New ideas. Fresh perspectives. Unfamiliar words. Innovative views.

The brains we trust are electrical systems. Words and images teach us, guide us, redirect us. Our spirits seek to grow and develop no matter our age, our health, or our learning

PAUSE

disabilities. My personal experience with brain damage and epilepsy reinforce the importance of working hard to learn. That is much better than giving up and quitting. Having to work harder can motivate me more; and your own battles, disappointments, and struggles can trigger a desire to research and discover.

Instead of thinking about school seasons beginning and ending, rather than viewing graduation and degrees as times of conclusion, let us remain enrolled in the class of life. By reading a book and discussing an idea, we can continue pursuing diplomas of depth and understanding.

Jesus set a good example of learning. Physician and author Luke describes how Jesus—God in the flesh—grew in wisdom. Read Luke 2:40, 45-47, 49-52. He tells the story of Jesus staying busy learning while Joseph and Mary left town without Him. What can we learn from Christ's learning?

The goal is to be teachable. Teachability, according to Adele Ahlberg Calhoun in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, is “a propensity and openness to learn from God no matter who the teacher or what the experience may be.” She writes, “Jesus constantly looked for teachable people.... (He) was passionate about those with ears to hear. He was attracted to those who willingly admitted how much they didn't know” ([Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005], 82-83).

Learning

But how? How can we live as students in our hurried world? Calhoun suggests developing humility, listening more, talking less, refraining from snapped judgments based on appearances, curbing the know-it-all attitude, and choosing to be a lifelong learner.

Let's all join the journey of learning. Let's never leave it. Whatever the time of year or our age in life, let's be students. View every room as a classroom, every experience as a moment to learn. By sitting among teachers, listening to them and asking questions, we can continue growing in wisdom.

Like Jesus did.

REFLECT:

1. Could study and learning be considered an act of worship?

2. What prevents you from investing in more educational opportunities?

RECEIVE:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and

PAUSE

pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:1-2).

RESPOND:

This week, try to set aside some time each day to read a challenging book.

Leaving

The motorcycle's noise shocked the audience.

I had been preaching. The people weren't sure what sermon point I was making as I talked about the need to love God more than I loved them—while taking off my coat and throwing it to the stage floor. Grabbing a helmet wasn't an expected part of the order of service. Hearing the motorcycle surprised them even more.

What was going on? I had pastored that church for many years. We—that dear congregation of loved people—had endured much together. The weddings and the funerals. The pleasant church experiences and the relational conflicts. The questions about music and sermons and doctrine and events. The fun of picnics and ball games and fellowship and study groups. The sermons and stories of God's love applying to our everyday lives. The hospital visits, the early morning prayer meetings, the leadership retreats, the friendships: moving life from the singular to the plural.

I enjoyed those experiences, those relationships, those

PAUSE

responsibilities of my vocation. Even the pain, when suffered in a true community setting, can be a part of growth and development.

So, what was the problem? If you are a pastor loving to pastor, to lead, to preach, to *be there*, the possible tendency is to love what we *do* more than we love the One we are doing that for.

I needed to get away with God. Away from all I was trying to do for God. Away from the duties and tasks and role. Away from my schedule. I needed to get away with God, only. I had pastored for many years and endured a life-changing experience. I'm not an escapist and I'm not into avoidance. But I needed time away. Time with God. I needed to not teach about those three words; I needed to apply them. I thought of those words and said them slowly: "time...with...God."

So, I took a sabbatical.

The sabbatical was a leaving, a departure, an adventure into the world of *away-ness*. Returning to my First Love. Engaging in the Divine Romance. Being sure I loved my heavenly Father more than I loved what I was trying to do for Him.

Again, departing can be unhealthy when done as avoidance or escapism. But departing for correct reasons can be healing. Like a renewing of vows. Like a spiritual, emotional, and mental vacation.

It can also prepare us to step from one season into another.

It did for me.

Leaving

I recall another departure. Not for a sabbatical. For a career change. As I look back, I wonder if I would have been ready for that journey if I had not taken my sabbatical.

Away-ness can lead us toward a fresh awareness.

Saying goodbye correctly allows us to say hello to a new adventure.

REFLECT:

1. How would you describe the difference between unhealthy avoiding and escaping to a healthy sabbatical?

2. How can we take regular sabbaticals of calming ourselves and stepping aside each day? each week? each month?

RECEIVE:

“The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you’” (Genesis 12:1).

“He told them: ‘Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do

PAUSE

not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them” (Luke 9:3-5).

“By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:9-10).

RESPOND:

Step aside. Go away. Rethink. Renew. Rewind. Review. Revive. Take a sabbatical from your normal routine. A few minutes each day. A few hours each week. A few days each month. A week each year. And a long sabbatical when the time is right.

Listening

We talk to God. He listens. We read God's Word. He speaks. Call it a relationship, a renewal. Call it real life.

Most of us know we should pray. But most of us fail regularly to do so. When we hear stories of great prayer warriors, we feel worse. When we hear sermons about prayer's worth, we feel defeated. God does not want to punish us for our lack of prayer. He invites us to fall in awe of Him, to honor Him, to adore Him, and to listen to Him. Prayer, genuine and consistent, will flow from such beliefs.

Staying prayerful means more than going through the motions. Communication with God includes many types of episodes. A private place and time, a group joining together, a drive down the road. Confession, Scripture reading, singing, bowing, walking, talking, writing prayers, and listening, listening, listening.

Good habits are good if they are more than habits. Prayer surpasses putting in time or punching a clock. It must move from duty to delight.

PAUSE

Familiarity breeds contempt, so the saying says.

The Psalmist viewed things a little differently. He felt that as he learned more about God, he would have a greater desire to praise Him. More knowledge of God's law would lead to more freedom in worship.

Also, his praise would not be fake or ritualistic. It would not be "going through the motions." His praise would not be an attempt to cover up his sin. He would praise God and mean it. In Spirit and in truth. With an upright, honest, sincere, single-purpose heart he would praise God.

How can a person develop such a life of praise? By learning God's "righteous laws." A life dedicated to learning—from the heart as well as the head—God's righteous laws is a life that praises God, a life that praises the righteous God from a righteous heart.

And, if prayer is an ongoing relational conversation instead of just a duty or task, it can really be a lifestyle that never ends.

REFLECT:

1. Why is it easier to pray by talking to God instead of listening to God?

2. How can we "hear from God"?

Listening

3. What stops us from developing a conversational relationship with our Divine Lover?

RECEIVE:

“The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice” (Proverbs 12:15).

“If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear” (Mark 4:23).

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13).

RESPOND:

Think about this: two eyes, two ears, one mouth. Maybe we could spend more time this week looking and listening—and observing God all around us—instead of doing all the talking ourselves as we pray.

Memorizing

My brain damage makes it tough to remember.

I do remember when I could remember so much better. Names and numbers. Songs and passages of Scripture. But I've had to learn to live with my new self.

I recently heard a leader talking about the poor character quality of leaders who don't memorize the names of others. His tone and body language spoke with more power than his words. He meant it. Years ago, maybe I would have agreed. Now? Not much pride about my ability to remember. A lot of humility from forgetting what was just stated, a name I had already known, the sentence I was about to say.

Listening, I thought, "How would he feel if he had scar tissue in his left temporal lobe? Would he still be an expert?"

I processed my thoughts. I realized this: I don't need to memorize what he said; I need to just let it go.

So, what is the point of a chapter on memorization written by an author who can hardly remember? I could write in reference and emphasize a point from my previous paragraph:

PAUSE

just letting it go can be healthy forgetting and forgiving.

But those chapters are earlier in *Pause*. This chapter is about this word—a word that makes us wonder: memorizing.

My confession includes just this suggestion: Let's work our brains to memorize portions of the Psalms. The ancient prayers, the rhythm, the rhymes, the poetic motion, the images, the healthy release of anger, the private honesty, the national declaration. The Psalms fit just about any mood we find ourselves in. Some of them we quote as we sing in churches and cathedrals. Some of them are so honest we would be afraid to sing them.

I suggest this: Let's memorize as many or as few as we can. Let's repeat the ancient prayers in our own prayerful confessions.

From a song of praise to a confession of sin, we can relate to psalmistic prayer. From a release of anger to a rejoicing of celebration, we can sing along. From hiding in a cave escaping an enemy to marching into land we can again call home, we fit.

A word. Just one word. See if you can remember.

A line. Just one line. See if you can remember.

A verse. Just one verse. See if you can remember.

Planting words of biblical, historical prayers into the depths of a damaged brain is a good idea. Praying those words is, too.

Join the ancients. Memorize the Psalms. Say them, sing them, pray them.

Memorizing

Start today. The brain reading these words can visit those words. And remember.

REFLECT:

1. How did Jesus feel as He quoted Psalm 22 while hanging on the cross?

2. What have you memorized that helps you?

3. What should you begin to memorize?

RECEIVE:

“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads” (Deuteronomy 11:18).

“Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8).

“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

Realize the power of words. A few words can change us in big ways. So, begin working to memorize. A little bit at a time can influence us a lot each time.

Noticing

A friend once asked a question. The normal, culturally common, not-really-expecting-an-answer question. My friend asked, “How are you doing?” I answered in the typical response of deception: “I’m fine.”

I asked the next question, changing only one word. I asked, “What are you doing?” My friend’s response spoke of actions and duties, tasks and work. We moved on to a deeper discussion, truly answering those “how” and “what” questions.

Since our discussion, I’ve thought more about myself—my who and how and what, my when and where. I’ve thought about a why. I decided to reinforce meaning of each answer, of each question, of each action, of each experience. I decided to notice.

Noticing a smile on the face of a friend. Hearing the sound of birds choosing to joyfully begin my day with a musical wake-up call. Feeling cold air one more time before the spring colors and summer heat find a home. Searching for a missing piece in this puzzle of godliness and contentment and great

PAUSE

gain. Grabbing a moment in time; seeking to hold it and be held by it just a little longer.

Listening as a friend tells me his problems. Listening as he wishes he could cry his hurt away but the decades of denial locked the pain deep, deep, deep inside.

Listening to a child's voice. Listening to his laughter, his questions, his requests, his trust.

Noticing reluctance to trust. Noticing how past hurts suggest doubt. Noticing negativity. Noticing tendencies to pick sides instead of loving all—even in disagreement.

Listening to John Mayer and joining him as we're "Waiting on the World to Change." Noticing the mood, the reality, the familiarity. Sensing the awareness of how some of those changes are up to us. Remembering the fact that many changes will have little to do with us.

Realizing time refuses to slow down—the pauses depend on us to choose to rest a moment and notice life. Talking on the phone to a young man who is learning what life in ministry is really like. Texting a friend about the past and present as we speculate about the future.

I'm eager to see how the Listener will answer a few prayers. Hopeful of better news for a friend's health. Dreaming of better news for a friend's future. Grateful for that Listener who always listens—whether I detect any answer or not.

Noticing

Indebted for this moment, any moment. Living in the glory of a second, the marvel of standing still to remember and rejoice and realize what life's all about.

This hurried life in need of a moment of noticing what is often ignored. This rushed life so full of glory and wonder.

The trees I pass and the steps I take: I pray that I notice. The friends nearby and the friends far away: I pray that I notice. The brief notes and few words: I pray that I notice.

Well, those are my attempts at noticing. Maybe they'll encourage you to notice.

And not miss what is so close, so important, and so often ignored.

REFLECT:

1. How are you really doing?
2. What are you doing that you feel really matters?
3. How can you become better at noticing what is so close, so important, and so often ignored?

PAUSE

RECEIVE:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1).

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Psalm 139:13-14).

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

RESPOND:

Read my what-I’m-doing confessions. Identify your own. And, take time to find out more of yourself as your “doing” hides (or reveals) your “being.”

Pausing

Standing in line to order a sandwich, I watched the man before me hand the servers a piece of paper. I thought, “He’s ordering subs for a lot of people. I’ll be here forever.”

Yes, a selfish moment of self-talk. No, not a good grade in caring for others. It all changed suddenly when I heard his remarks to the cooks behind the counter. The page included only one order—an order just for him, all written in detail.

He said, “I can talk but can’t hear nothin’.”

I thought no longer about the length of time until an arrival of my six-inch-turkey-sub-on-wheat-with-lettuce-tomatoes-pickle-oil-and-oregano. I stopped feeling hungry. I ceased my concern about making it in time for an appointment. I thought about a man who could talk but could not hear.

The cooks worked to read his writing. They loudly tried to ask a few questions while I tried to help in the whole process of ordering, cooking, and receiving. My heartfelt love for a deaf man. My mind felt I had learned a lot about myself.

PAUSE

As I ate my turkey sub, I kept thinking about his comment.

I heard a Voice placing an “order” to me, saying, “Too many people can talk but refuse to listen.” I agreed. I know I can talk but often hear nothin’.

I’m hoping—and needing—that to change. As we stand in life’s line placing orders and offering requests, how is our hearing?

Revelation 13:9, from the New Living Translation, says it this way: “*Anyone with ears to hear should listen....*”

Let us listen. Let us be silent. And listen.

But how?

Noticing, as we considered in the previous chapter, is a start. Noticing our speed, our pace, our rapid rush. Noticing also what is near us. It takes a pause to notice.

Thinking about how spiritual disciplines are moments of wonder, of freedom, of sitting beside my Father at the true “living room” of life. Reading words of honesty throughout Scripture: history, psalmistic confessions, good news, promises of peace. Eager to see how the Listener will answer a few prayers.

Recalling the tranquility of a pause, my rapid pace might slow a little.

Rejoicing in a segment of time, my hope might surface again.

Pausing

Pausing and noticing aren't easy these days. At least, not for me! I write about it often because I'm trying to practice what I type. Even my moments of silence and solitude are strategically planned in my list of duties. But when I force myself to become un-forced, when I schedule a non-duty moment, I can breathe. I can hit pause, knowing the earth keeps spinning, the Creator keeps loving, and this heart keeps beating.

Pause.

The word means to wait, to stop. Pausing is an action and attitude that isn't easy for me. As humans, we often hurry too much, do too much, speak out our feelings too quickly, and plan schedules of non-stop duties and tasks. We desire, so we pursue. We crave, so we insist. We want, so we expect.

Even now, you want. You've been born into the human race—and we run a race. Rapidly, aggressively, and sometimes selfishly. The desires for needed milk turn into unhealthy cravings for self-centered nourishment. We insist on what isn't needed.

Choosing to pause can help us notice why we're behaving particular ways. We hit pause to think, to consider, to evaluate, to pray, to seek the views of a friend, to listen, to observe, to calm down before reacting. Hit pause often. To think, to learn, to obtain various options and views: hit pause.

As we fly through the years, I pray we pause.

PAUSE

REFLECT:

1. What are your thoughts about the man ordering a sandwich?

2. How is “pausing” difficult for you?

3. Are you willing to practice the disciplines of breathing and pausing?

RECEIVE:

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters” (Psalm 23:2).

“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Habakkuk 2:20).

“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed” (Mark 1:35).

Pausing

RESPOND:

Too often, familiar surroundings become unnoticed and common scenes seem invisible. By stopping to stare, we see. By slowing the hurry, we gaze. In such moments, the Maker gets a few seconds of our scheduled sprint. He enjoys the time. He invites us to sit, to see, to hear. To breathe.

Reading

How can I write a chapter about reading? Should I tell about my conversion from a non-reader to a book-addict in my last years of high school? Should I tell about having to learn the slow and frustrating process of reading again after my near-death experience and permanent brain damage? What about a visual tour of my former office in Orlando where the walls were covered with shelves of books, followed by an illustrative tour of my present office, which is very small but also clothed with books? Or, would it work to do a copy-and-paste summary of previous book reviews from my blog into this book? Or, what about Skyping a chat related to books on paper versus all of these other modern methods of holding words in various devices?

No, I don't like those ideas. I like this one. I imagine having dinner with my favorite authors. Not those who are my friends or those I speak or write to. But those who do not know me, yet whom I know so well through their words, their stories, their scenes, their books.

PAUSE

So, sit with us for a few moments at BarH. The restaurant in Franklin Springs, Georgia, is open Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. I enjoy the food, the moments with friends, the atmosphere of community. As we sit together on this day, we can listen and learn.

I place my order of a sandwich plate and a water. I pause and begin letting the authors provide their own *words of wonder*.

Annie Dillard makes me feel like I'm eating near the water as she tells me her stories again from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Calvin Miller gives me hope to live a life guided by his characters in the poetic trilogy of *The Singer/The Song/The Finale*. Philip Yancey helps me know my doubts and questions don't condemn me, and that my wounds just might be blessings after all. Brennan Manning sits and confesses; his honesty allows me to think it's okay to be honest. Walter Wangerin tells a brief story from the lengthy *The Book of God*, but that short account reveals a huge reality of history in the present. I sit for a moment beside Christopher deVink, and we nodded. I walked to a table of poets and songwriters, wishing I could sit with them each Thursday evening at BarH.

Think of all of these authors sitting and laughing and talking together at one large table: Francis Chan, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, A.W. Tozer, C.S. Lewis, Oswald Chambers, E.M. Bounds, Richard Foster, Henri J.M. Nouwen, John Ortberg, David G. Benner, Gary Thomas, Anne Lamott, Lee Strobel, Max Lucado, Leonard Sweet, Erwin McManus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Brother Lawrence, and Frederick Buechner.

Reading

I look out the windows, smiling as I notice more authors have parked and are walking in together. More faces. More words. More stories of truth. I see Bob Beaudine and Seth Godin. I see Karen Kingsbury and Ted Dekker. I see Frank Viola, Cecil Murphey, and Nate Larkin. I see Carolyn Arends and wonder, “Did she bring her guitar?”

I find a seat between Lewis and Buechner; I imagine them telling me a few more stories. Then a few more.

Stories. Stories told by authors. Stories revealed by authors. Stories still so alive as Mark Batterson explains *The Circle Maker*, Kathleen Norris reveals *Amazing Grace*, David Platt discusses *Radical*, William Young confesses *The Shack*, Keri Wyatt Kent teaches us to *Listen and Rest* and go *Deeper Into the Word*, and John Eldredge offers a challenge to be *Wild at Heart*. A variety of topics and tones from a variety of perspectives—all in one place at one time. Almost like the diversity is united, like their themes and stories are all related—one grace for all time.

I imagine giving in and not resisting my frequent temptation. I order some red velvet cake to finish off the night. I dream of the honor of sitting with two men whose books I’m reading during the time I’m writing a draft of *Pause*. Bob Goff sits beside me and lets his words take me to places of the impossible occurring, the defeated finally winning, the painful love being worth it all, and the dreams coming true. To Bob, *Love Does*. At the table with us is the major league pitcher

PAUSE

R.A. Dickey. He guides us again through his journey from the book—I felt for him as he heard bad news, as he confessed damage from his past, as he won the big game on the mound of life. To Dickey, I can find peace *Wherever I Wind Up*.

My original plan was to confess my love for words and to challenge you to fall in love with them also. But I'm glad those plans were changed. I'm glad I realized again that everywhere I eat and every thought I think and every conversation I experience—my life is influenced by words written, words spoken, words read.

Every time I visit BarH or Lake Hartwell or Stone Mountain or a ball game, whenever I stare at a highway or a group of friends or an airport or a television screen, Lewis and Manning and Nouwen and Yancey are there. They've served me so many meals over so many years.

I still order more from the huge menu of words. I plan to continue.

REFLECT:

1. What books have you enjoyed the most? Why?

2. Do you have suggestions for yourself about improving your reading?

Reading

3. What do you hope is the story others read from your lifestyle?

RECEIVE:

“Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8).

“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

RESPOND:

Our minds receive words through our reading, our watching, our listening. Keep up with how the stories you hear and read are influencing your life story. Make a list of your favorite songs—think of how the lyrics have spoken to you.

Receiving

Seeing and hearing allow us to notice and receive.

I've tried to become better at seeing, hearing, and receiving. I try to welcome what is there but rarely noticed. Throughout these pages we've highlighted one word at a time. The hope has been to notice the normally forgotten, to learn from the common occurrences, to see eternal value in earthly realities. To watch and observe and discern and experience. To see. To hear. To be. To stay.

But to do that, we need to become better at receiving.

I know—giving is better than receiving. In life, though, we have very little to give or to live if we fail in the area of receiving.

So, what can we receive? Notice the thoughts as I reflect on what I've been receiving recently.

Lessons about hurt and hope and heaven from various speakers and friends. College students have laughed with me, worshipped with me, cried with me, searched for God with me. Friends proved to be that—friends.

PAUSE

I saw a group of students pray. I heard the sound of a crowd cheering from the stands. I saw our team win. I read Paul's honesty in Colossians and hoped his words go through my eyes into a mind, a heart, a life. I looked at a man wanting me to give him hope to live with epilepsy and not give up. I listened to a lady wanting assurance that her husband would come back home from the war. Alive.

Food, basketball, music, books, friends, prayers, confessions, tears, laughter. Sadness, joy, kindness, depression. Dreams and doubts. Prayers and praise. Wind, breath, snow, rain, sunshine. Life.

What we see and what we hear come together into our world of edges. Noticing with our eyes. Noticing with our ears. Noticing the edges. And receiving the good that is there.

Calvin Miller, in his memoir *Life Is Mostly Edges*, invites readers to enter the world of his life. He opens our ears to hear conversations and sermons and tears. He opens our eyes to read beyond words on paper so we can observe his childhood and his aging through a journey of surprises, seasons, questions, romance, and confusion. His poetic motion keeps us with him—I feel like I'm swimming in a current of Miller's nouns and verbs. Pages open, allowing us to notice that his life, as ours, is mostly edges.

Receiving. A lifestyle of choice. Let's live it.

Receiving

REFLECT:

1. Why is receiving so difficult at times?
2. How can we become better at noticing and receiving the blessings all around us?
3. What are suggestions for improving our “receiving” without becoming selfish, self-centered people?

RECEIVE:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7).

“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).

“Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:21-22).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

Imagine your Creator walking your way with a wrapped present. Imagine receiving the gift, opening it, and smiling as you hold it in your hands. Think about what you would say to Him.

Releasing

As the months and days and weeks and minutes rapidly visit and depart, what have we accomplished during their time? What words have we spoken or chosen to not say? What dangerous habits have we broken? What resolutions have we turned into habits of health? What relationships have we renewed? What painful reminders have we finally released?

With each chapter, each word, each question, each action of reflection, what have we chosen to no longer carry?

Big questions. Major decisions made in brief moments of time. The answers and actions can bring long-term changes. They can finally release what has carried a weight and held us back. They can help us finally forgive, receive, rejoice, and be free.

Holding too much holds us back.

Keeping what should be let go keeps us from being let go.

I have a friend who recently teamed with a group to rescue children from slavery. He risked his life by entering a dangerous situation. He negotiated, persuaded, and offered to purchase those tiny, weak, starving, abused kids into freedom.

PAUSE

The pictures of the children before and after being rescued revealed their realities—from labor to love, from fear to joy, from slave to free, from a piece of material to a child living and breathing.

They were rescued. They were released.

The same should happen in our inner worlds. Our thoughts, our self-talk, our pains from the past, our fears of the future. It is time for a rescue mission. It is time for freedom from bondage.

So, let us wait no longer. Let us act appropriately. Let us decide to pursue the correct goals and toss away any luggage that doesn't belong.

Start today!

REFLECT:

1. Why do we sometimes hold on to those things that hurt us the most?
2. What are practical ways we can learn to release those hurts, worries, fears, etc., to God?
3. What does it really mean to not be anxious?

Releasing

RECEIVE:

“Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken” (Psalm 55:22).

“Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21).

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

RESPOND:

Spend time praying and repeating these words: “Cast your cares on the LORD.” Let those six words stay in our mind all day.

Remaining

A few years ago a pastor told me his disappointing story. His congregation had not accepted the new man an illness forced him to become. No caring. No true compassion. His lack of faith had caused it all, they assumed. Maybe, some thought, a hidden sin should be blamed for his illness.

He changed careers and later asked me, “How did your church walk with you through your struggle?”

I’m not sure how I answered because I’m not sure how they did it, but they did. Now I’m sure of this: Church should be a family affair, not a war zone or a power struggle. A family of unique but related team players who do what is best for one another and for the building of His Kingdom. Isn’t that it? Isn’t that what Jesus expects of His body?

For better and for worse. When rich or when poor. In sickness and in health. Until death shall part us. Debbie had stated similar vows when we were married. My boys hadn’t voiced such phrases, but their commitment was expected. They lived out unspoken vows, even during the *worse* and *poor*

PAUSE

and *sickness* seasons. They didn't receive advance notice about me becoming brain damaged, about me living with epilepsy, about me needing more rest than the husband and father they once knew.

Some in our congregation couldn't take the change. They left when we needed them the most. But I can't be angry. I could hardly take it myself.

Well, let's consider this question. How shall God show His love? Would He choose to take sinful, selfish people and buy them for His own? Would He then decide to allow them to display His love by caring for one another?

It doesn't sound like a successful tactic for taking over the world, but it is God's plan. Placing messed-up people all together and telling them to love one another; telling mistake-prone people like us to remain faithful to one another; telling the healthy to love the sick; informing the happy to hold the sad; instructing the wealthy to support the poor—what a strange strategy!

I don't think God would get elected for office. But we can select His way as our way. We can, with His help, remain. By avoiding a tendency to escape, we can endure.

REFLECT:

1. Can you think of a situation in which a friend remained by your side through difficulty?

Remaining

2. Have you been that type of friend to someone else?

RECEIVE:

“David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the LORD his God” (1 Samuel 30:6).

“Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12).

RESPOND:

Pray that the Holy Spirit empowers you to be faithful in your situation. Be willing to love those around you even when their situation or condition is difficult to love. And remember, that includes you. Accept yourself, whatever your weakness.



Remembering

The rain was falling hard, though beginning to slow. Wind, thunder, and lightning started my day.

Sounds and sights. Clouds covering the light. From a morning sun shining our way to birds singing as if they expected a nice day.

But the storm reminded me of dangers, of change, of wind blowing. Or winds blowing us away and away and away and away.

Redundancy of rituals might only serve as routine reminders of life stories from historical events and ancient traditions. Or they can help us revisit, help us remember and reflect. Inspire us to review their original occurrences. For more than knowing about or recalling. But to receive. To be renewed.

I contemplated, journaling a free verse version of verses of freedom that biblically, historically, and personally invade my stormy, rainy Friday. And remind me why we title the day of

PAUSE

crucifixion, of death, of blood Good Friday. Of why we call this Friday Good.

Fingers tap letters on a keyboard to provide words on a screen, to present a poetic meditation of remembering death as the payment for life.

Remembering—a task and mental function not always easy for us—is that thought process and motion of visiting again a past experience.

Elements can help us recall. Ingredients can assist in our attempt of grasping a glance back in time to view the present from a lens now cleansed. Bread plus wine to remember. Wind plus rain to notice. Nouns plus verbs to reveal. Thoughts plus prayers to confess. Ancient plus modern to merge history into the present, His Story into my mind, His Spirit into mine, His Love into me.

The rain appeared to be ending its fall. Wind paused; thunder and lightning departed as I remembered darkness from a former Friday becoming light.

The storm reminds me of myself. And my sins. Of darkness shifting into light. Of winds blowing away hate on this sad, painful, bloody Friday we call Good.

Remembering—as participants rather than observers—allows that honor of visiting again a past experience. In reverence, rejoicing. In silence, shouting. In death, coming alive.

Remembering

REFLECT:

1. What stories do you remember the most about the life of Jesus Christ?

2. Why is His death an act that we are given a practice to remember?

3. How can remembering His death help us remember real life?

RECEIVE:

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

Take time to participate in Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the Blessed Sacrament. Let the bread help you remember: a body given in your place. Let the drink help you remember: blood shed to bathe you clean. Taste. Drink. Swallow. Remember.



Returning

During a recent discussion with a friend, I emphasized the importance of revisiting. Revisiting past experiences we seek to deny or avoid, revisiting healthy life seasons, revisiting songs or days or events. Revisiting conversations or confrontations, sermons or stories, smiles or tears.

The reason for a healthy revisit or return isn't to dwell on past pain. We don't need to become obsessed by previous occurrences. Many of us fail by never moving beyond our past pain and mistakes. But the purpose of this return is to reinforce a willingness to move through, to endure, to forgive, to pursue new days in new ways. Or, to replay positives when love with God and others was more genuine, more pure, more real.

After that conversation with a friend, I decided to revisit words I wrote while studying how Jesus welcomed people around Him. In my busyness to lead and teach and write and mentor, I must never fail by forgetting what matters most. A revisit can help. It can reinforce. It can remind. And it can reinvite me to live as a recipient of the best invitation of all time.

PAUSE

Join me in revisiting words from my book *Beggars Can Be Chosen*:

He sees us as people, not as numbers. He knows each address, phone number, financial portfolio. The oil in our engines and the gas in our tanks. He knows our every thought. He even knows the hair on my head, how much has fallen out, how long it was during my preacher-can-still-find-ways-to-rebel days, how much my stylist cuts, and the rays of the suns reflection from my bald, bold head. What a view He has!

We are individuals in His eyes. We have potential. He believes in what He can do with us ([Maitland, Florida: Xulon Press, 2003], 47).

Well, I need to reread, remind, remember, receive, and reinforce my own words. I often fail to see myself through His glasses. My goal this week is to re-look.

I need to return.

Will you join me?

REFLECT:

1. What past hurts are you holding on to?

2. How can you revisit and heal without dwelling too much on the past?

Returning

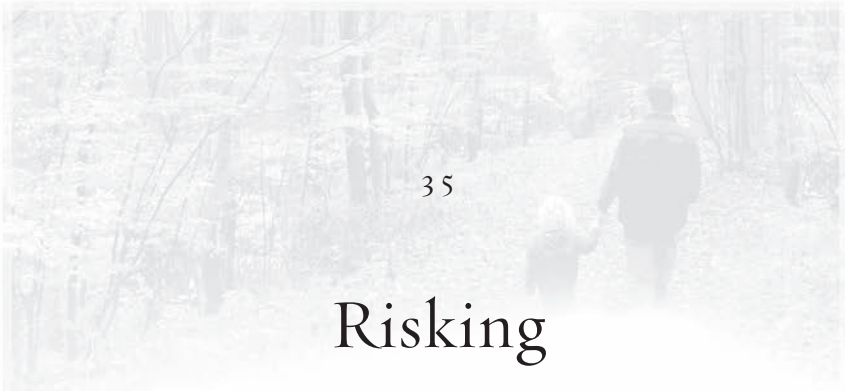
RECEIVE:

“Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Revelation 2:5).

Also read Luke 15:11-32.

RESPOND:

God invites us to return to our first love. Contemplate what that means for you. Also, be honest with yourself about previous issues that may still bother you. Try journaling your feelings or talking about them with a close friend.



Risking

Flying back home from Japan in 2010, I marveled at distance and speed, at time moving forward and returning, at an adventure in Japan, at the life of people with epilepsy.

I remember so much about my brief time there.

I could write several chapters about a variety of moments and experiences.

The ride to Atlanta. Time at airports. Prayer for the new friends I would meet. Scenes from above as we flew over our country. A flight to Japan lasting more than one half of a day. My friend Tom, who invited me to speak for the conference. Tokyo, a place of crowds and buildings and beauty. Sleep I needed. Silence at night, even in downtown Tokyo. Mountains, ocean, breakfasts, translations, an audience of listeners, kindness, attempts at understanding one another, bowing to greet and honor, calm acceptance, and small portions of food.

My journal entries were many; my lists were large. Each occurrence could be discussed. We could learn of the

PAUSE

Japanese culture—their crowds, their language, their streets, their weather. The common language of smiles. The universal element of fear. The typical mood of wounded hearts. Maybe I'll mention more incidents later about words interpreted, food eaten, questions asked, conversations engaged, and buildings being built. Maybe I'll talk about Disney or sports or towers or boats or apartments. Meals so different from Georgia food, or feeling safe downtown in a big city. But, though we could make them all fit with a chapter's theme, those are not the stories for now.

For now—as I recall the food and hear the sounds and notice the nods so many miles away—I remember the purpose of my journey to Japan: epilepsy.

Like in America, many people in Japan who live with epilepsy would rather not talk about it. It is labeled. It is not discussed. It is often ignored. And, in many countries, it is seen like a demon rather than a function in the brain's electrical system. People look down on the condition and its potential problems. The reluctance to discuss epilepsy is deep.

That type of silence is not healthy. It is dangerous. People are missing the opportunity to learn more and live better. It is time for the fearful to step out and risk a conversation. It is time for the silent to stand up and risk telling a story.

A resistance to accept new and less-threatening medications holds people with epilepsy back in time. As I stood before my new friends and told my old story, I trusted that my English

Risking

words would be correctly translated. The translators knew my language and they knew the language of their audience.

I know the consequences of older anti-epileptic medications. I also know the value of modern anti-epileptic drugs. I'm not a neurologist or epileptologist, but I know about the higher success rates and fewer long-term side effects. I hoped the audience would trust my story just as I trusted those translating. But it felt like a risk. A risk to discuss. A risk to confess. A risk to stand before a large audience and be honest about my own struggles.

I want the people of Japan and every nation to accept the possibilities that are available. I want to shout out in every language: "Let's not get stuck in the method of history. Let's risk and venture into modern methods of health and improvement." I believe that by taking the right approach to epilepsy, we are taking a good risk. Others might not like us speaking aloud and mentioning that curse word, *epilepsy*. But, I contend, it is a risk worth taking.

That's one story about taking a risk. That's my dare to stand in the face of a crowd and refuse to let political correctness and personal approval control us.

What's your story? What risk should you take?

What wounds do you hold deep inside that you are afraid if others saw, you would be hurt again? What wounds are hidden to avoid exposure in the daylight of deep relationships?

PAUSE

Really, what dream is inside you that will never emerge because of fear of failure, fear of being shunned or misunderstood?

What are you afraid to pursue? Isn't it best to stare danger in the face? Isn't it healthy to battle a threat—and choose to no longer be threatened by it?

When I flew back home from Japan, I arrived in Atlanta at the same time I departed from Tokyo. The miles apart, the difference in time, the length of time for the flight to cover the distance: my Japan time of departure and my American eastern time arrival were the same. I traveled so far but thirteen hours didn't. No time went by in one way, as so much time went by in another way.

Maybe we could choose to not dwell on the time we've wasted. Maybe we should decide to not focus only on the dreams that have died and the risks we've avoided. Today, let's think of risks we can still take. Time has gone by, but don't settle for that. Agree to believe that your time isn't up, that your dreams are still alive, and that a few more risks are worth taking.

Wise risks, confirmed by the counsel of friends, can help you step on a plane of adventure and enter a land of wonder. You might have not wasted as much time as you think.

Risking

REFLECT:

1. Think about risks from the Bible. Why did God call Moses to lead a nation? Why was David the one to defeat a giant? Why were the disciples selected by Jesus?

2. What is your “bucket list”—your dreams to accomplish before you die?

RECEIVE:

“Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, ‘Come, let’s go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few’” (1 Samuel 14:6).

“Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground” (Hebrews 11:35-38).

Also read Matthew 25:14-30.

PAUSE

RESPOND:

Don't wait any longer. Before reading another sentence, write a sentence of your own. A plan for action. Be a wise risk taker. And begin a new journey to see a dream come true.

Searching

You remember being told what to eat, don't you? And how much to sleep? Those fruits and vegetables. That warning of too many sweets. Food groups and right amounts, exercise and plenty of rest, laughter, and even a few tears. Though we frequently rebel, information is valuable.

These days modern technology provides all the information we need. Search the web and suddenly all our answers stare back from the screen. Often, what we've received is incorrect information about the value of a product, a food, a vitamin, a method of losing weight, and the side effects of our medication.

What else can we learn about living healthy lives? As we battle our own mental, physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual issues, what can we do differently to assist ourselves?

The previous chapter mentions my personal battle with epilepsy. That experience regularly reminds me of core ingredients in this healthy life meal. This book is like a collection of health suggestions. One word at a time, the

PAUSE

stories and thoughts seek to remind us of realities we often ignore. One chapter per week of the year, the *words of wonder* through the pages of *Pause* lure us toward experiencing a better life.

These actions are disciplines not meant to improve our worth and value. They are to guide our search for love, our search for ourselves, our search for God, our search for realities of life.

Here are specific ways to apply that search, summarizing a few of our chapters to revisit and reinforce them, and adding a few new *words of wonder*.

Journal—Instead of holding your feelings inside, release them. Instead of releasing those emotions in unhealthy ways, keep a journal. Write about your worry, your fear, your frustration, yourself. Write prayers, songs, and hopes. By releasing, you give yourself room for growth and development without the unneeded baggage.

Listen—Scripture tells us to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. We have one mouth but two eyes and ears. Let's hear more and say less. Let's listen, repeating what we have heard.

Rest—Good nights of sleep. Short naps during our hurried schedules. Hitting pause in our rushed lives. Deep breaths. Think of a Sabbath experience in various times each day. While we rush from duty to duty, let us pause. And be still.

Searching

Laugh—Scripture again provides us good instructions: Laughter does good like a medicine. So laugh. Enjoy moments too often rushed through or ignored. Laugh.

Cry—Not only should we laugh, but crying also is good for us. We try to resist any shedding of tears. Why? By crying we let the body do its job and help hurts be released. Crying is not a weakness. It is healing.

Work—Whatever our weakness or disability or struggle, work is our friend. Not just being busy for the sake of improving our self-view. Or for getting more money. But doing work to keep strong whatever portions of our bodies still function.

Confess—Like crying and journaling can release inner hurts, so can confessions. Sometimes, writing the confessions in the journal is enough. But, other times, we need a trusted pastor, priest, counselor, or accountability partner. We need to tell him our mistakes. Not defending ourselves. Just releasing what could hold us back, what could keep us from living with hope.

Forgive—We seek forgiveness from God and others, right? Do we choose to forgive? Let's not wait until the person who hurt us has apologized. Let's not expect that person to understand our deep wounds. Let's choose to let go—choose to forgive—no matter how we feel about it. Forgiveness no longer allows our hurts to control our moods, our decisions, or our opinions.

PAUSE

Learn—When does school end? Never. Life is an ongoing experience of learning. Ask questions. Read books. Listen to podcasts. Online. In bookstores. In libraries. With friends who understand some of your own struggles—learn together. School is our permanent home.

So, just a few tips to guide our search. Let's give each one a try.

REFLECT:

1. What chapter has helped you the most at this part of *Pause*? Why?

2. Which one has challenged you the most? Why?

3. How would you describe your search?

RECEIVE:

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Searching

“Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always”
(1 Chronicles 16:11).

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all
these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

RESPOND:

Imagine having the assistance of a GPS in your search for true life. Think about how you would define that destination. Use the spiritual practices mentioned in this chapter to guide your steps as you search for more.

Seeing

Trapped in cages of hurry, of performance, of ranking, of status, of wealth, and of success, we fail to enjoy the freedom of joy and calmness. We fail to observe what's nearby. We fail to notice God's wonder—looking out the window, looking around the office, looking at the face of a child. We are often too busy to see.

Even my moments of silence and solitude are strategically planned in my list of duties. When I force myself to become unforced, when I schedule a non-duty moment, I can breathe. As I said before, I can hit pause, knowing the earth keeps spinning, the Creator keeps loving, and this heart keeps beating.

Familiar surroundings become unnoticed. Common scenes seem invisible. By stopping to stare, we see. By slowing the hurry, we gaze. In such moments, the Maker enjoys the time. He invites us to sit, to see, to hear. To breathe.

Smiling at friends who visit. Realizing miles don't have the power to separate us relationally if we have the will to stay in touch. Hearing children laugh as they walk on water—with a little help from some rocks.

PAUSE

Learning from news reports about deaths of famous people, nations in conflict, political debates, market declines, draft picks, trades, and popularity contests labeled in religious terms. Do we remember there are lives and hearts and spirits beyond the numbers and stat sheets?

Saying hello to young men and women who will enter the world of college this fall. Do they realize the wonder of themselves and their Maker?

Letting the tastes thrill me, the calories fill me, and the discussions reveal the real me. Why do we often allow past hurts to hinder opportunities for future relational transparency?

Riding on canoes in a river as the water continues moving and guiding. Seeking to listen and nod and grasp an understanding of the deep wounds inside a friend. Capturing simple moments. Remembering the past. Praying the present. Dreaming the future. Reading words that dance and shake and lure and guide. Preparing sermons and articles and talks—slowly learning again to see one word at a time.

Visiting a hospital for the birth of a child. Editing a book that challenges our methods of doing what we do. Playing basketball with friends and realizing my age in every possession, every dribble, every step. Driving on a road I'd never been on before. Desiring to do right and wrong at the same time while realizing God gives us the freedom to choose. Confessing to the Listener about hurt and wounds that have

Seeing

hidden themselves in the cavernous cave of myself. Forgiving someone who has no clue how his behavior deeply hurt me. Smiling as a friend tells me good news.

Well, that's my attempt at trying this discipline. But, enough of my sighs and confessions. Take time for yourself. Let your Guide truly steer your thoughts. Be still. Notice. Observe.

See. Slow yourself and see what shows up. Celebrate the freedom of a moment, a sight, a face, a healing. By stopping, you can go places you've never been before.

REFLECT:

1. What sights, which once thrilled you, are now so common that you rarely notice them?

2. What are the most beautiful, thrilling sights you've seen in your life?

RECEIVE:

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

PAUSE

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

RESPOND:

Write a list of what you’ve seen the last few days. Take pictures of the normal scenes in your life experience. What lessons can you learn if you become better at noticing what you normally ignore?

Serving

We boarded a plane on May 15. As twenty students, faculty, and staff flew from Atlanta to London, time flew faster. Five hours came up missing. An eight-hour flight convinced the clock that we had been in the air for thirteen.

While in a land new to us, much more changed than just the time. Hoping to bring change through music, drama, testimonies, sermons, prayer, invitations, meals, visitations, interviews, discussions, church services, and acts of kindness, God chose to do more than allow us the honor of being among those bringing change. He picked us to be among those being changed.

Isn't that God's tricky plan when we seek to serve others? Away from home, out of our comfort zones, and desiring to encourage people as we meet them for the first time, we meet God. He informs us about true home. He teaches us how to let Him be our actual Comfort Zone. He encourages us to meet Him anew. Away from the home of ourselves and our addictions, we can do that—we can meet God.

PAUSE

Fifteen days with friends thrilled me. Building relationships with strangers fascinated me. Observing teamwork excited me. Staring at green land, mountains, water, rabbits, sheep, cities, towns, clouds, rain, trains, and streets amazed me. Communicating beliefs to those who seek to live without Truth motivated me. Realizing God chooses to show His truth through sinners humbled me.

Meeting God changed me.

Church services on the trip? Orthodox, traditional, contemporary, ancient, new, energetic, experiential, calm, exciting. Walks? Long, long, long walks. Rides? Into London, through London, from London to Scotland, in cars, on trains, through hills, on very small streets. Prayers? Walking, talking, whispering, confessing, requesting. Worship? Stillness, celebrations, awe. Friendships? Time together in a land so new, so fresh, so real.

We boarded a plane to return from Scotland on May 30. During that westward dance through clouds, time stopped. Five hours waited and waited and waited before time began again. I thought, “Haven’t we all wanted a little more time?”

The mission trip taught us about time. Not wasting it. Choosing to use it wisely and in new ways. Living through time for God. Not for ourselves.

So, whatever time and place, let us receive God’s grace. During long walks, rainy days, or flight delays. During lovely

Serving

sunlight, an early sunrise, or times when luggage feels too heavy to carry one more step, let us carry on. Let us experience God. The greatest way to do so is by serving others. At home, in the neighborhood, or five time zones away.

Don't we all need a little more time spent like that?

REFLECT:

1. What action of serving others have you participated in?
 2. How were you affected?
 3. In what ways can serving others become a common practice in your life?
-

RECEIVE:

“When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me “Teacher” and “Lord,” and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:12-14).

PAUSE

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:10-11).

RESPOND:

Think about these two words: *church service*. Organize a strategic plan to let “true church” be all about “serving others.”

Singing

I think often about songs we sing. About confessions we announce. About doctrines we state as beliefs.

Last Tuesday I could not stop thinking about what I confessed as I sang during our Convocational worship at Emmanuel College. It wasn't the frequent worship debates about ancient versus modern, time length and volume, personal preference or deep devotion. I hear of those; I think of those. But last Tuesday wasn't the time. My mind asked me a question: "Do you mean what you are singing?"

Singing about living for God's glory above all else, I wondered: "Do I live that way?"

Reading the Psalms gave me a little peace. David and other authors wrote volumes of hopeful confessions. Not all as doctrinal declaration. Not all as evangelism strategies. Many of their lyrics were prayers of release. They voiced anger and pain, poetically handing hurt over to the Listener.

Still, their statements about surrender appeared to have

PAUSE

meaning. They moved from releasing anger to revealing hope, from hurt to healing, from temper to truth. Do our songs of praise state what we hope to become true one day, or do they reveal what is true as we sing?

In other words, do we mean what we are singing?

For me, I needed a few days to meditate on what I live for. I had to write a list of nouns that might take God's place. People, places, and things that rank of higher importance in my life than God—call them idols. I needed to detect my true life purpose. I've done it before. I'll do it again. Why? I need to do more than sing a song. I needed to ask myself about myself.

Think about you. Your life, your time, your interest, your dreams. Your goals and reasons for doing what you do. Your deepest desires. Your future.

Where is God? Is He above all?

REFLECT:

1. How often do you analyze the words you sing in worship?

2. What are your thoughts about singing words that are not true to your life or your theology? Are you willing to sing even when your feelings or your preferred musical style do not match the song?

Singing

RECEIVE:

“Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song” (Psalm 95:1-2).

“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs” (Psalm 100:1-2).

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Colossians 3:16).

RESPOND:

Try singing to the Lord in a non-corporate setting as part of your private time with God. The Psalms are a great place to start.

Smelling

I remember those Saturday mornings at the baseball field. Sounds of baseballs landing in the leather of young men's hands; sounds of baseballs pummeled from bats; sounds of fans cheering and arguing and offering unneeded advice. Sights of dugouts and gloves, concession stands and friends, coaches and wanna-be-coaches.

But sights and sounds weren't all. I could smell those Saturdays. The aromas of Florida air, of hot dogs grilling, of grass, of sweat, of baseballs.

The sights and sounds of beaches have always felt good to me. The sun above matching its moving reflection on the water-in-motion. The laughter of kids. The waves coming and going, coming and going, coming and going. The music. The sand. The birds. The surfers.

But sights and sounds aren't all. I can smell a beach. The aromas of salty water, of sunscreen, of snack bars, of fish, of alcohol from the night before.

PAUSE

The sights and sounds of restaurants are usually okay. But the smells speak more loudly.

“Chris,” Olive Garden® says. “The garlic bread is waiting. Order your soup and salad. Eat your bread while waiting.”

“Chris,” Carrabba’s says. “Lasagna is waiting. Can’t you smell her?”

“Chris,” Red Lobster says. “You don’t like most of our wonderful food, but your wife does. Choose to enjoy it. And, remember, some of our meals would be just what your doctor has suggested for you.”

Think about the fragrance of flowers in spring, of an early breakfast, of a Christmas tree, of snow in the winter, of heat in the summer, of leaves in the fall. Think about the atrocious aromas of food-gone-bad, of tobacco preparing one for cancer, of chickens, of hospitals, of public restrooms, of the shoes that just stepped on the spot where the dog relieved himself.

Perfume. Cologne. Deodorant. Air fresheners. Candles. There is a market for the smell.

What smells do you enjoy? What smells do you despise? What smells do you ignore? I often discuss those questions and others when teaching about spiritual formation. We then take time to practice the wonder, the thrill, the experience of smelling. We seek to learn from an aroma. What is it telling us?

Smelling

I remember smells from Mexico, from Guatemala, from Scotland, from Japan. I remember smells from our babies, from meals together, from our walks, from our games. I also remember smells from emergency rooms and from a counselor's office.

Aromas exist around us. They dwell with us. When we become too familiar we might fail to notice. When smells remind us about a painful experience, we might seek avoidance. When smells remind us of positive encounters we want to relive, we might want to stay. A healthy approach is to be aware of the aromas and to realize the message we receive from them.

The red roses look nice. Smell them. How do you feel?

The new lawn looks better. Smell it. What does it remind you of?

The old book looks worn out and tired. Smell it. Where does it take you?

The building looks the same after so many years. Smell it. Do you miss that place?

Noticing the aromas can reveal things to us about ourselves and our world. I believe it is worth the visit to smell and learn.

PAUSE

REFLECT:

1. Several questions were included in this chapter. Go back to them. What are your answers?

2. What places bring back such painful memories that you never hope to see them or smell them again?

3. What places brings smiles so large you long to visit there again?

RECEIVE:

“The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: ‘Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done’” (Genesis 8:21).

“For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:15).

“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave

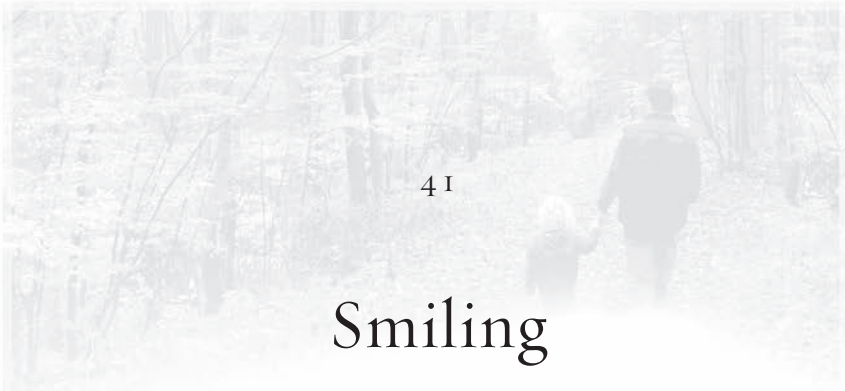
Smelling

himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2).

“I have received full payment and have more than enough; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18).

RESPOND:

Think about how you are using your senses. Think about the influence of aromas in your life. Slow down and smell. Find aromas of beauty in the routines of life.



Smiling

The picture said so much. Her facial expression indicated a mood.

She didn't have that fake smile, that they're-taking-a-picture smile, that make-the-face-look-like-it-never-really-looks smile. Her lips and eyes and chin all appeared to be on the same page. They indicated peaceful pleasure.

Don't you love seeing smiles like that? Not a fake smile. Just a smile. A genuine, unforced, from-the-heart smile. That's what she had. That's how she felt. That's who she was.

The picture—though ancient, though small, though black and white—almost had a voice. Her still smile added movement. Her hair was in place and her posture was proper, but the genuine smile gave the look of a dance, of motion, of rhythm.

I wanted to begin a conversation, hoping her motionless image would move in sequence with her smile. I wanted her eyes to move directly toward me, no longer slightly toward my

PAUSE

right. Couldn't she step out of the limited square and stand beside me? Couldn't she begin to raise the volume of her calm laughter and allow me the honor of joining in?

She never departed the black-and-white picture.

Her feelings did. I felt what I assume she was feeling.

You've been influenced by a smile, haven't you? A genuine, sincere smile? A humble, joyful smile? A fitting but surprising smile? A real but holy smile?

From a picture. From real life in real time. From a young child. From an elderly friend. From a waitress, a nurse, a counselor, a co-worker, a spouse, a child, a grandchild, a stranger in the audience, a driver in a traffic jam. Unexpected, unforced smile. Not political. Not demanding. Just a smile.

Smiles have the power to disrupt a mood. They have the potential to redirect a mind-set. They have the tendency to cause others to join in and smile along with the one initiating that mood.

Choosing to smile even when struggling to survive isn't a bad idea. Not a fake, they're-taking-my-picture smile. A true smile, even if a small smile—realizing life offers hope no matter what pain we're enduring. A smile with valid reasoning behind it—realizing there is more than evil all around us; there is good all around us.

Look at that person smile.

Smiling

Be that person who smiles.

When no one is looking, smile. Create an internal mindset like the picture of my Mama helped me create. Make this one in color, in the present tense, live and in person. I don't know who else will see your smile, but I believe you will influence yourself. And that's not a bad idea.

REFLECT:

1. What people have influenced you simply by their genuine smiles?

2. What events have caused you to smile?

3. What does your normal facial expression say about you?

RECEIVE:

“Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them’” (Psalm 126:2).

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his

PAUSE

own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1:3-4).

RESPOND:

Go look in the mirror and smile. Do that five times today.
Six times tomorrow.

Stopping

Do you ever feel like you always catch the red lights when driving through town? I recently realized life can feel that way. Something, or Someone, is causing us to caution, to pause, to slow, to stop.

Think about our life experiences of pausing as a journey to a local traffic light. Think about it this way.

Driving along Life Street, I'm usually in a hurry. I'm not totally sure the number of times "usually" reveals, but I'm probably in a hurry more often than usually. So I've asked my Creator to slow me down. Disappointing to my personality and my preferred preferences, He heard that prayer. And He is working to answer it.

The Listener finds various ways to turn on caution lights or stop lights in my journey of life. I desire green. I seek to go. Moving forward toward another intersection of life, a next turn, the final destination. A goal to accomplish. A purpose to fulfill. A plan to finalize. But when I rush through life, driving rapidly to that next duty, task, appointment, the Caution

PAUSE

Light on Life Street comes on. Slow down, it says. Don't be in such a hurry, it says. Be still, it says. Caution, it says.

Some of us want to rush on through that calm yellow before noticing the controlling red. In life, not on the streets, we speed up our pace when a pause is pending. We hurry through in our purpose-driven addiction.

Yesterday, I guided a group of students about hitting pause in life. About stopping for silence, for reverence, for meditation, for listening, for waiting, for staying. Instead of today's image of the Caution Light, in our class we've used the image of the Table. We think about Someone preparing a Table for us. Around enemies, around ourselves, amid our rush, among our friends, a Table is being prepared.

Will we take time to sit? To eat? To listen? Will we stop long enough to notice? Will we learn the wonder of a pause, a caution, a stop, a breath?

I'm trying. As I hurry to my next life street, I'm trying.

REFLECT:

1. How often do you pause just to think?
2. How do you express your gratitude for life?

Stopping

RECEIVE:

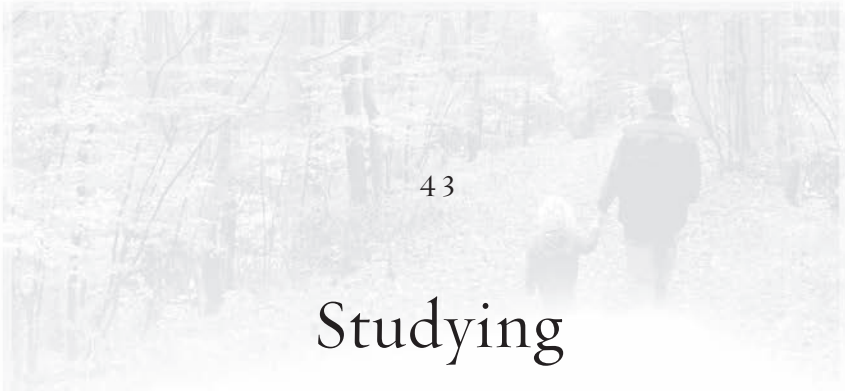
“This is what the LORD says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, “We will not walk in it”’” (Jeremiah 6:16).

“He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth’” (Psalm 46:10).

Also read Luke 10:38-42.

RESPOND:

Try to fit in five minutes of silence today. Be still. Listen. Breathe. Think about your life goals. Pray for the wisdom to accomplish them.



Studying

Studying doesn't always feel like pausing. It feels like hard work. It seems like a task we're rushing to complete. We think of an assignment, a duty, a test, a grade.

Let's take a moment to reflect and consider the wonder of studying. Let's think about seeing new words, about hearing fresh truth, about receiving a challenge to reflect deeper. Let's think about examining the profound questions of others. Let's think about researching for facts ourselves instead of letting a quick media-based proposal convince us. Let's think about what the song says, what the preacher says, what we say. Let's...well, let's think.

By studying we can pause in pursuit of information. By studying we can pause with a desire for truth. By studying we can pause from what's typical for us and enter a new realm or season or day of study.

As mentioned in Chapter 23 on Learning, Jesus ventured into the world of study when He was young, and was considered to be filled with wisdom:

PAUSE

“And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him....When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers....‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:40, 45-47, 49-52).

I would like to grow in wisdom. Even though my brain struggles to remember, I want to study. Deeply. Regularly.

I want to apply study as a spiritual discipline—pausing from my rapid pace long enough to learn something new or apply something ancient, long enough to realize a historical fact or assess a theological component.

I don’t know how it applies to you. You’re probably much more intelligent than I am. You probably remember better, read often, and learn deeply. But, let’s all—whatever our habits, our intelligence, our preferences, our tendencies, our weaknesses—decide to grow in wisdom by working our way there.

Studying

Not for status or value or worth. For life.

Not to impress or score points or change friends. To live.

I've experienced and endured a variety of methods and seasons related to study. I keep a few notes as reminders. Some might fit your situation:

Don't just hear about a good book. Read it.

Don't depend on what you already know. Learn more.

Don't expect your brain to remember everything. Take notes.

Don't believe you will respond correctly to all instructions. Evaluate them and set up a plan.

Don't let weeks go by without knowing what you've learned. Journal your experiences.

Don't assume you did well or poorly. Evaluate.

When thinking of the word *study*, don't see these words as synonyms: assignments, duties, tests, or grades. Pick these words instead: wonder, experiential, craft, joy, engaging.

And, let's not hear the voice of an angry instructor demanding hard work and sudden improvement. Let's imagine the voice of a loving father, a gentle mentor, a joyful coach, a true friend.

By believing in such a guide, the voice instructing us to study doesn't sound very harsh. His words sound inviting. His tone sounds full of mercy. His eyes stare our way, welcoming

PAUSE

us into a new world—a world of words, a world of wonder, a world of walking with Him into land we long to visit.

REFLECT:

1. How have you grown in wisdom during the past twelve months?

2. How would you like to grow in wisdom during the next twelve months?

3. What do you suggest to make that growth possible?

RECEIVE:

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

Studying

RESPOND:

Set a goal to grow in wisdom. See that as an opportunity awaiting you. Pursue that plan with calm excitement.

Subtracting

The topic didn't put an immediate smile on my face. I could almost hear my stomach growl while planning the presentation. I wanted to pause the study, forget the subject, and drive down the road to order a pork sandwich plate. With chips. And red velvet cake.

But, I stuck to the subject. A subject discussed in Scripture and practiced through the years. A subject often misunderstood and applied improperly. A subject we need to remember and receive:

Fasting.

Saying goodbye to food—or other things we normally depend upon—to invest time and dedication to prayer, intercession, petition, meditation, and devotion. Subtracting a portion of our normal routine in order to add more time with the Listener.

When hoping to help students learn, teachers have the honor of learning from their students. Our discussion

PAUSE

regarding fasting taught me. The decisions students made revealed their passion, their willingness to pursue time with God, their dedication to Him.

We talked about giving up food, about biblical references, about historical understanding, about impure motives, about books explaining fasting, about seeking medical permission and advice, about addition by subtraction. The students made valuable decisions as they dedicated a spiritual addition through a willing subtraction of common, habitual routines.

Any guesses? Music. Text messages. Facebook. Twitter. Video games. Movies. Time with friends. And, the biblical fast, food.

Adding time with God by subtracting our routine can be healthy. It isn't seeking to improve our ranking or score religious points or lure God into action. It shouldn't take the place of caring for others. Scripture rebukes the fake effort toward religious stat sheets. Fasting is to never be seen as a means toward improving our spiritual grade. Or losing weight. But proper fasting is needed. It moves us away from what we normally do; it moves us toward a new place with a new mind and a new perspective.

So, take a little time to investigate your use of time. Subtract a little of your routine to add an experience with God. Ask. Seek. Knock. Listen. Think. Learn. Meditate. In silence, in petition, in intercession, in reverence. Removing the normal and entering the spiritual. Noticing the spiritual in

Subtracting

the normal. Finding God in the nearby, the regular, the real.
And choosing to value the importance of Him.

REFLECT:

1. How are you controlled by your distractions?
 2. What are some of the things that distract you from God?
-

RECEIVE:

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14).

PAUSE

RESPOND:

Try fasting this week (after checking with your doctor). You do not have to give up food entirely—perhaps you can give up sweets or any other kind of unhealthy distraction. Use the extra time to pray.

Tasting

The lasagna. The salad. The chicken. The rice.

The breakfast food at dinner time. The sandwich for lunch. The ice cream or the cookie or the cake.

Some restaurants frequently lure us back. The food, the environment, the people: a variety of causes encourage a return. And me? I take few risks. I stick with my favorite foods in my favorite places, ordering by habit wherever I eat.

In passages of Scripture most of us have favorites. We read, reread, study, evaluate, and analyze, then—God hopes—we apply what we learn. Bible reading and study should not be clocked by limiting our devotion time to short verses we know so well. We must expand our palate and be willing to taste the unfamiliar. Favorites are nice, but much more is needed.

A good diet offers more than preferred desserts. One verse, chosen for a day, is not enough. A quote of positive confessional pleasure is not enough. We need more. We must swallow the depth of healthy study. God calls us to go deeper than what we already know.

PAUSE

Remember the time you resisted a certain food? Then, when you finally tasted it, you asked yourself, “Why did I wait so long to eat this?”

I’ve already confessed my picky dietary preferences. But I’m less picky these days than before. Don’t invite me to your seafood dinner, though my doctor wishes you would. Don’t dip a few onions on my burger or my salad, though you can offer Debbie the onions you hoped I would taste. Still, the anti-salad-Chris now eats salads very often. A new place, a new meal, a new risk—though minor from the perspective of aggressive risk takers—are more of a reality for me now than ever.

I suggest similar change in our spiritual diets. Tasting and digesting new spiritual diets can improve our spiritual health. Rather than a quick-fix-diet, we can choose to pursue ongoing expansion.

Music we normally ignore. A speaker we rarely hear. An author whose words are unfamiliar to us. A Scripture story, a history lesson, a narrative about life in another country, a language or tone or method: all new and fresh. What if we give it a try?

Today we can taste something new to us.

Tomorrow we might want a little more.

Soon we just might notice a healthy improvement from the dietary adjustment of listening to gourmet cooking of words.

Tasting

REFLECT:

1. What *tastes of life* have become habitual for you in unhealthy ways?
2. How can you step out and try to hear new voices?
3. What stands in the way to keep that from happening?

RECEIVE:

“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Psalm 119:103)

“Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’” (John 6:35).

RESPOND:

Set a goal. Plan to make changes this week. Design a chart indicating a strategy for ten ways of tasting new things in the *tastes of life*.

Touching

The sign informed me: “Employees must wash hands before returning to work.”

As someone who wasn’t an employee—as a mere hungry man awaiting food—I had a choice. The sign didn’t say “those eating here” or “those wanting a meal.” The instructions provided rules for employees, and I’m glad they did. Germs, of course, travel without our knowledge or permission. Like we were taught years ago, washing our hands as much as possible makes sense. I hoped the chef and the server were following the rules from the sign on the bathroom walls.

But, you know me. I washed my hands. Twice.

With clean hands I continued thinking about the instruction’s final five words: “before returning to work.”

The cooks and waitresses needed to become clean before returning to their roles of feeding hungry people like me. Why? They would be touching what I would be eating. They had possibly been touching things I would prefer to not include in my meal.

PAUSE

Isn't life like that? What we've touched in the past affects what we are now touching. The painful touch of past hurts can cause resistance to risk any more aches. The emotional and relational scars and bruises create reluctance to touch or be touched. Carrying unclean segments can cause damage for the future. Being afraid of that, though, can also cause a problem. Fear of potential emotional or relational infection can lead toward a reluctance to try at all.

Denial and avoidance aren't the best routes. Washing away the dirt from the past is.

Before trying to work in life, our hands and hearts and minds must be washed clean. Deep within, cleansing is offered from an Ultimate Source.

Think about it. Are our hands clean? Or are we trying to touch the lives of others before washing off the germs of resentment, anger, or fear? Have we let the filth of our world or our wounds dirty us? We must not leave a room of repentance without being cleaned deep inside.

Clean, we can touch and be touched. Clean, we can taste and enjoy.

The meals of life we cook and serve and eat will never taste better.

Touching

REFLECT:

1. What experiences from your life have caused you to fear touching or being touched?

2. What does it mean to you when people say they have been “touched by God”?

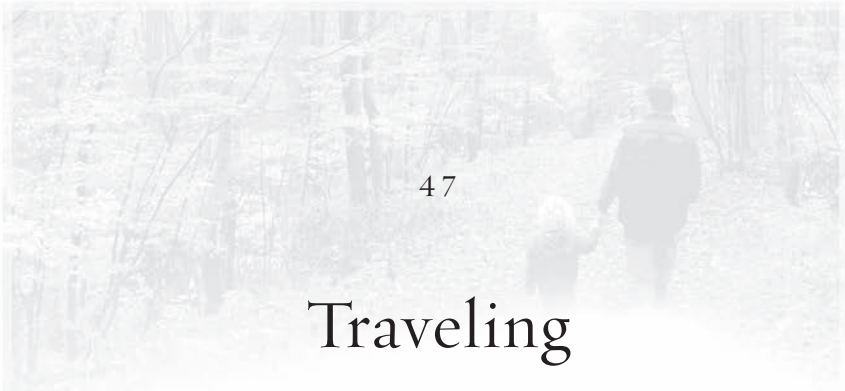
RECEIVE:

“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7).

“‘Come now, let us settle the matter,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’” (Isaiah 1:18).

RESPOND:

Before returning to “work”—any works of doing things to please God or help others—confess your need to be made clean. Ask God to wash you whiter than snow.



Traveling

On my birthday, an elderly lady laughed about my age.

“Chris, forty-nine is young. Look at me. You thought I was old many years ago when I was the age you are now. Just keep being you. Even next year when you hit fifty.”

I didn’t really feel old until she told me not to. And now? Let’s just say that was a few years ago.

But I drove away talking to myself about life, age, and how to keep “being me.”

My mind went back to her first comment before her psychological exhortation about dealing with the number of years I’ve lived on this planet. We had talked about her battle with cancer before she changed the subject back to me. She said, “I’m so glad you’ve moved back to Georgia. This is the right season for you to be here.”

Replaying her words, I wanted to ask her, “What did you mean, ‘right season?’”

PAUSE

For me, the word *season* highlights sports. Summer is a great time to live in Georgia. Watching the Braves at Turner Field brings smiles, cheers, and hope for victories. Fall? Fall rhymes with football. Isn't it required to love football in order to live in north Georgia? Friday night high school games, Saturday afternoon college games, and Sunday afternoons to root for the Falcons after attending a church gathering and enjoying lunch. Then, the move into winter for more football and basketball. And, the shift to spring for baseball.

But, there is more to "seasons" than sporting events.

Seasons can relate to weather changes while the planet continues her regular movement. Living in Orlando rarely demonstrated autumns like I experienced growing up in Georgia. Winter hardly paid a visit. I missed the seasons of leaves changing color, of snow dropping by for a visit, of heavy coats for walks outside.

Seasons can also mean our years. Childhood days of playing outdoors and never getting tired. Teenage years of falling in what we thought was love. College days of seeking answers to life's questions. Days of career demands. Days of family.

Seasons. Of laughter and tears, of pleasure and pain, of hope and disappointment, of a child's birth and a friend's death. Seasons.

Seasons of life change us. After deep wounds, we aren't the "me" we were before. Agonizing experiences bring more caution. Relational disappointments lure us toward becoming protective.

Traveling

Even if I can't keep being the me I used to be, can't I learn from what I see around me to remind me of life and joy and God whatever the season?

I can listen as the birds sing. I can notice the chipmunks frantically engaging in life. I can walk through Victoria Bryant State Park and choose to hit pause in this life of hurry. I can eat my chilli dawgs at the Varsity, my sandwich plates at BarH, and my breakfasts at the Roystonian and smile. I can pray for a friend. I can sing songs from my younger years, remembering every lyric while forgetting the name of a person I just met.

And, through it all, I can enjoy a traveling expedition through each season of life and learn to become a better me.

REFLECT:

1. What are your favorite seasons of the year?
2. What are your favorite life seasons?
3. How is this journey of traveling through life painful to you? How is it joyful?

PAUSE

RECEIVE:

“Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (Isaiah 40:4-5).

“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43:19).

RESPOND:

Some people travel to escape and avoid. Others face a natural journey of time and experience to grow. This week, take time to be aware of your spiritual, relational, and emotional tours. Realize you will never be right here right now again. Don't waste the moment.

Turning

Think of your favorite radio station. Your favorite television station. Or, your favorite podcast, webcast, or other forum in our modern hi-tech world.

What is your style of preference? Why do you like it so much? News reports? Sports? Jazz or rock, country or classical? A kids' station or a political station? Do you listen in the car, in the office, or at home? Are your television stations filled with news or drama or comedy or ball games? Do you watch too much TV or too many movies?

Whatever those external stations, we also have internal stations. Our thoughts and feelings become powerful "stations"—they guide our decisions. Thoughts of fear can inhibit our potential. Thoughts of doubt can rob us of pursuing dreams. Mental "music" from the past can hinder our pursuit of future goals. Emotional "reports" can delay our effort to believe in a better future.

The "song" of a painful experience from our past hits

PAUSE

replay way too often. We hear it and feel it and experience it over and over and over. An unrelated conversation reminds us—we mentally and emotionally replay that same song again. And again.

Words of condemnation. Feelings of isolation. Moods of desperation. As we become accustomed to those sounds, we feel numb. Like hearing a real song frequently allows us to sing along without being aware of our participation, the inner songs do the same. In deeper ways. In depressing ways.

If we let our disappointments and disabilities be the only “songs” we hear, what does that do to us? If we allow our weaknesses and pain be the only “reports” we hear, how can that influence our decisions?

Maybe we can choose to change channels. By listening to a mental “song” about David defeating Goliath. By watching a “movie” about Jesus walking on water. By staying on the mental “channel” of scriptural stories of the impossible actually occurring. By “tuning in” to the conversations of God and His people throughout the Bible. By repeating the “clip” about true friends and laughter, about walking together and smiling, about knowing and being known, about praying with a little faith we can muster.

Maybe such changing of mental stations can help our own songs and news reports become alive again.

What song would you hope to best describe your life? Sing it today. Live it today.

Turning

What news report provides the best description of your journey of overcoming the past and pursuing a bright future? Read it today. Live it today.

What movie reveals the drama of your experience to fulfilling a dream? Watch it today. Live it today.

What game offers the hope of victory for you even when you feel weak and defeated? Play it today. Live it today.

REFLECT:

1. How would you describe your mental station?
 2. What keeps you from changing channels?
 3. Are you willing to ask a friend, pastor, caregiver, mentor, or family member for help?
-

RECEIVE:

“Who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21).

PAUSE

“And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

“Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

RESPOND:

Turn off the mental, emotional, spiritual, and relational “stations” of defeat. Turn on that inner station of victory.



Unplugging

Many years ago, when our children were younger and still living at home, I read this note:

No TV

Rest & Study

Get work done.

Love, Mom

Those words covered our television screen. For a son who has been out of school because of an illness, Debbie hoped to help him by giving words. *Yes* words and *no* words. *Do* words and *don't* words. Words to influence and encourage, instruct and advise. Words to warm and warn.

What if our heavenly Father wrote such a note for us? What would we do?

Consider a brief text or tweet from Him. To me. To you. Think of Him writing “No.” Instead of TV being the issue, imagine Him writing “No” to whatever might be in the way,

PAUSE

keeping us from those more important experiences of life. “No Internet.” “No dessert.” “No bad words.” “No gossip.” “No busyness.” “No hate.” “No unneeded duties.” By giving up what we don’t need, by avoiding what isn’t healthy, by subtracting what is in the way, we can add room to do what is better, what is more important, what is best.

Think of Him writing those next lines. Instructing us to *rest and study*. Two near opposites that actually work very well together. In today’s world most of us avoid both. We rest very little. We study only in areas of interest when information comes quickly with little thought, research, debate, or reflection. Without enough rest and without enough study, we miss out on so much. If, however, we rest and study, we are more likely to do the next assignment on the short, important list: *Get work done*.

Most of us are too plugged in to the system of our days. I am.

Unplugging is a choice, not a requirement. It frees us from the bondage of busyness.

But it takes hard work to let go of work. The hard work of letting go, of refusing to continue our addictive behavior, of resisting what is habitual and fun and pleasant. The hard work of stepping out of our homes of familiarity. The hard work of disconnecting to technology for a moment...or a few moments...or a day...or a weekend.

Unplugging

Can we see the channel selector nearby and resist? Can we see the computer nearby and resist? Can we see the mobile device nearby and resist? The car? The headphones? The snack?

Maybe unplugging from a text message can help us notice the texts of life we often ignore. Maybe a few instructions between us and the screen can help us resist tendencies that rob us of realities.

Imagine a sign with brief instructions. Read it. Apply it. Get work done. Take time to glance at it before getting some needed rest:

No TV

Rest & Study

Get work done.

Love, God

REFLECT:

1. Why do we do what we do?
2. What hinders us from pursuing those two actions, rest and study?

PAUSE

3. What advice would you offer yourself to include those experiences more often?

RECEIVE:

“In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety” (Psalm 4:8).

“He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth’” (Psalm 46:10).

“Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken” (Psalm 55:22).

RESPOND:

Most of us have habits that rob us of healthy experiences. Investigate your time budget and see what might be in the way. Wave goodbye to it for a while. Put something of more value in its place. Even if it's rest.

Waiting

Billy Mann sings an honest request in his song, “(Tell Me) When God Will Speak.” His gentle jazz sounds good; his honest lyrics ask questions many of us hold within; his voice carries his confessions into the realm of meditative reality. Through pain, he sang. Through seasons of silence, he prayed in melody.

I can’t sing. But I can sing Billy Mann’s prayer. I ask, I quote, I pray, I confess. I wait, as I sing and pray along.

As circumstances of life shift from pleasure to pain, we long for assistance. We want certainty from a source we can trust. We suffer from ambiguity. We go about our business and carry the weight of uncertainty as we walk, climb, step, and stumble.

Theologically, I can understand God’s silence. I can rationalize by knowing the voices God speaks through: Scripture, experience, friends, circumstances, confirmation. Biblically, I can read stories of silent years, seasons of delay, unpleasant realities of distance, and the noisy realty of silent obedience.

PAUSE

Moses waited for a place of promise, Abraham and Sarah waited for a son, Jesus advised His disciples to wait for the Spirit. Paul wrote letters while he suffered. And rejoiced. And waited.

When will God speak? The heavy weight of waiting holds us down. We speculate when His instruction will arrive.

As we take our turn to wait and wonder, let us not wander. Veering while searching may ignore an existing answer. Do not stray. Stay. Our Teacher's instruction may visit in a way and on a day we do not expect.

A verse of Scripture.

An assurance from within.

A view of the sky.

The confirmation of a friend.

An ancient biblical story appearing alive in your heart.

The vast journey from Genesis to Revelation reveals God's discourse to us.

We need to obey. To endure. To risk. To experience. To believe. We need to live with those words alive in us—all while waiting and waiting and waiting.

When will God speak? He did, He does, He will.

No panic is needed for what we do not know. Let us be still while busy. Let us wait while taking action. Let us wait while enjoying the journey through unknown streets.

Waiting

REFLECT:

1. What are the most difficult parts of waiting?
2. How can you become better at waiting?
3. How do you become more aware of God's voice?

RECEIVE:

“Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer” (Psalm 61:1).

“Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him” (Psalm 62:1).

“I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1-2).

RESPOND:

Read Psalm 121:1-2 several times today. Slowly. Softly. Loudly. While sitting. While standing. Allow each word from that confession guide you to believe while waiting.

Wanting

We are nearing the final chapter in *Pause*. This word? “Wanting,” following a chapter of “Waiting.”

Let’s think of how those two words *wanting* and *waiting* fit well together. And, how they fit as we end our conversation with “Wishing.”

We are people who wait and wait and wait. For the money, for the answer, for the invitation, for the assurance. We wait for the call; we wait for the chance. We wait a long time for a prayer to be answered. We go through various feelings and thoughts while waiting.

Realize also that our waiting is more difficult because we want. We want chances, changes, answers. We want solutions and conclusions. We want love. We want life. Often, those wants become misinterpreted: we translate a desire for love as a need for pleasure; we assume a craving of security equals money in the bank.

Wanting, though, can mean more when we wait long enough to discern what we actually—and deeply—crave.

PAUSE

Momentary fulfillment of lust doesn't satisfy a need for love.

Temporary completion of financial fulfillment doesn't satisfy a need for security.

Feelings change. Finances change. So, what should we do?

It helps to never respond too quickly and never wait too long. To find a healthy balance and avoid either extreme, we can take time to know what we really want. Not what we initially think we want. We can take time to know what's best, what's needed, and what to do about it. And, if the want is legitimate and wise, we should not wait forever. We should take action and pursue it.

Acting too quickly might be a decision without wisdom.

Waiting too long might be avoidance controlled by fear.

Wait and want in balance. Wait and want with wisdom.

Think about it this way. If you were given any gift certificates today, what would you want them to be? Why?

Answers to those two questions reveal a lot about us. As we reach the end of *Pause* with a wish, we can prepare for that finish. Knowing more about us is good. How we respond to what we know can make everything better than good.

That's what I hope we want.

That's what I hope we want now, as we live this life one word at a time.

Wanting

REFLECT:

1. What do you want most in life? Why?
2. How do you respond to those desires? How should you?

RECEIVE:

“The **LORD** is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23).

RESPOND:

Read and pray Psalm 23 over and over. Slowly. Pause on a few words that capture your attention. Let those words fill you with wonder.

Wishing

Imagine a room with three windows. Walk toward one. As you open the blinds and glance through the window, you notice your past. You had expected to see a normal day: the birds outside, maybe a rabbit, a light drizzle, a picnic table in the back. But you saw faces, felt feelings, heard songs, and smelled the fragrance from years ago.

Imagine backing up and moving toward your next window. This one doesn't allow you to see outside. The screen reflects your face. You see yourself. You notice the now, the present. You're glancing at the countenance of who you are.

You take a few steps back and walk to window three. You slowly, slowly, slowly—unsure of what you might notice—open the window blinds. There you see what you assume is your future. You observe yourself older, walking with a few people you suppose are friends.

Think now about the three windows. Through which window would you prefer to continue glancing? Which scenes bring fear, pain, joy, anger, hope, healing? Which views convey caution or courage or compassion? Why?

PAUSE

A visit to the past can motivate us toward anger and resentment. Or joy and celebration. Or a mixture of each extreme. Or maybe very little—if we've chosen to hide our days of pain by living in denial.

The same for the now—we can celebrate the present or seek to deny the moments of now. And for the future we can fear entering new land or we can anticipate an adventure of wonder.

Take time to glance out the windows.

Remember the past. Forgive and be forgiven. Notice the pain and be healed. Smile.

Discern the present. Stare through incorrect assumptions and improper perceptions. See you. Believe in the Creator who made you, the Father who loves you. Accept the face looking back and make a choice. Smile at yourself.

Dream of the future. Good dreams. Big dreams. Impossible dreams. Dream with faith, anticipation, potential, and an eternal family. And, make the choice again: smile.

As you depart and leave the windows, remember what you noticed.

REFLECT:

1. Describe your thoughts about being invited to “dream big.”

2. Do you feel your wishes align with God's desires for you?

3. If you knew you could not fail, what would you try?

RECEIVE:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

RESPOND:

Write down a list of wishes or dreams that you have. Take time this week to pray over them. Do you sense God pushing you toward something? Or away from something?

Conclusion: Our Dream

He calls us here.

He meets us here.

Do we hear the calling? Do we notice the Presence?

If we come at all, let us come expecting and desperate, full of passion and anticipation. Let us come to pursue the One who pursues us. Seeking the Seeker. Greeting our Greeter. Let us hunt, hear, and engage. Let us rest. Let us run. Let us pause. Let us wait and wait and wait, while walking and running and racing. Let us go forward and toward—humble but hopeful, afraid but aggressive, reverent but relentless.

Name the ones we love. Label the pain we hate. Mention the darkness we despise. Discard the chains that choke us. Admit how hard this is, as we learn it can be done.

Our Father is here as we draw near.

We bow our heads. We bend our knees. We wait for a Power that rides the Breeze—the Breeze that blows into a room where questioning seekers become courageous saints. Still human, but more real. Still frail, but closer to fine. Still stumbling, but now standing. Standing up. Standing still.

Standing for Him. Standing forever.

We pause to pray.

Heavenly Father: Watch over me, us, them.

Divine Doctor: Ease this nagging pain.

Blessed Savior: Rescue me.

*Take this life, these friends, these years, these days, these words,
these weak ones and carry us all inside Your hand. Hold us in
Your palm of knowing. Keep us praying. Keep us growing.*

One day at a time. One word at a time.

Keep us, we pray.

“The **LORD** bless you and keep you;
the **LORD** make his face shine on you and
be gracious to you; the **LORD** turn his face
toward you and give you peace”
(Numbers 6:24-26).

About the Author

Chris Maxwell served as a local church pastor for twenty years in Orlando, Florida. He now serves as Campus Pastor and Director of Spiritual Life at Emmanuel College in Franklin Springs, Georgia. He is the author of *Beggars Can Be Chosen*, *Changing My Mind*, *Unwrapping His Presence*, and *Pause*. He has also written over a thousand articles for various magazines, and has written curriculum, poetry, speeches, and served as editor and ghostwriter for more than twenty books. He speaks in conventions, schools, churches, hospitals, retreat centers, and many other places—often telling his story of a near-death experience with encephalitis and now living with epilepsy. Chris and his wife, Debbie, have three sons, Taylor, Aaron, and Graham. Taylor and his wife, Brittany, have two sons. Aaron and his wife, Amber, live out of the country. For more information on Chris Maxwell, to read his blog or to order his books, visit his website www.chrismaxwellweb.com or find him on Facebook and Twitter.

Other Books by Chris Maxwell

- *Beggars Can Be Chosen: An Inspirational Journey Through the Invitations of Jesus*
- *Changing My Mind: A Journey of Disability and Joy*
- *Unwrapping His Presence: What We Really Need for Christmas*

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