

GODLY GRIT

Prepared to Stand

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Fractured Resilience

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the special people
God placed on earth who refer to my wife, Judie
and I as Nana and Papa.

Morgan, James, Rebecca, Dennis, Lily, Leila, Leo,
Ridge and Emery.

May seek and find God early,
Find your voice and have a wonderful life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	11
Chapter 1 – How It All Began	17
Chapter 2 – Resilience	21
Chapter 3 – Fractured Resilience	31
Chapter 4 – Grit	39
Chapter 5 – Grit For Needs and Desires	47
Chapter 6 – Grit For Community Service	57
Chapter 7 – Godly Grit	65
Chapter 8 – Your Voice	79
Chapter 9 – The Press	91
Chapter 10 - Tearing Down Strongholds	95
Chapter 11 – Existential Strongholds	103
Chapter 12 – Stronghold 1 – Isolation	113
Chapter 13– Stronghold 2 – Meaninglessness	127
Chapter 14– Stronghold 3 – Free Choice and Responsibility	141
Chapter 15– Stronghold 4 – Mortality	153
Chapter 16– Stronghold – 5 – Spiritual Emptiness	165
Chapter 17 – Stress Strongholds	177
Chapter 18– Stronghold – 6 – Imminent Danger	183
Chapter 19– Stronghold - 7 – Strained Identity	193

Chapter 20– Stronghold – 8 – Uncertainty	203
Chapter 21– Stronghold – 9 – Covering Responsibility.....	211
Chapter 22 - - Stronghold – 10 – Transgressions	219
Chapter 23 – Relational Strongholds	225
Chapter 24– Stronghold – 11 – Bitterness	229
Chapter 25– Stronghold – 12 – Greed	235
Chapter 26– Stronghold – 13 – Shame	241
Chapter 27– Stronghold – 14 – Grief	251
Chapter 28– Stronghold – 15 – Legalism	261
Chapter 29– Stronghold – 16 – Agony	269
Chapter 30– Stronghold – 17 – Addiction	277
Chapter 31– Stronghold – 18 – Entitlement	289
Chapter 32– Stronghold – 19 – Narcissism	295
Chapter 33– Stronghold – 20 – Adoration	303
Chapter 34 – Fortress of Shalom	317
Chapter 35 – The Enemy’s Playbook	329
Chapter 36 – Building a Storehouse	339
Chapter 37 – Storehouse – 1 – Honesty	347
Chapter 38 – Storehouse - 2 – Evaluation	357
Chapter 39 – Storehouse – 3 – Confession	367
Chapter 40 – Storehouse – 4 – Surrender	381
Chapter 41 – Storehouse – 5 – Redemption	391
Chapter 42 – Storehouse – 6 – Restoration	399

Chapter 43 – Storehouse – 7 – Service	413
Chapter 44 – Storehouse – 8 – Faith	427
Chapter 45 – Storehouse – 9 – Sanctification	437
Chapter 46 – Storehouse – 10 – The Holy Spirit	455
Chapter 47 – Stand!	471
Other Books by Author	493

INTRODUCTION

I have been a student of human resilience for over fifty years. I first became interested while reading Dr. Hans Selye's book "The Stress of Life" while still a high school student in 1968. I went on to seminary and then medical school with many lingering questions regarding why some people do well amid distress while others fall apart with minimal pressure. My four decades of medical practice in primary care and addiction medicine have brought me face to face with thousands of different individuals. Some of these people were very resilient, but most were not. I have learned valuable life lessons on resilience from each of these individuals.

Unfortunately, being a resiliency student did not translate to being more bulletproof when it came to walking the personal path of life's seemingly impossible struggles. I have felt many times like I was walking in the valley of the shadow of death. I can honestly look back at those times and difficulties and see

God's hand of protection and guidance. This book is a record of what I have learned from God's word, my life experience, and what I have witnessed in the lives of others. Hopefully, this accumulation of life and distress can help us all become more resilient.

In the first part of the book, we will look at what resilience is and understand the concept of Godly grit. Part of this will be to consider why Godly grit is essential.

God has called us to Himself. He has given us all a purpose and a voice. Sadly, most Christians have never found their God-given voice. The enemy has effectively used multiple strongholds to frustrate their growth, kill their purpose, and silence their voice.

The second part of the book will be a close examination of those strongholds. A stronghold is a perceived offense that causes us to become self-focused. They are beliefs that weaken or destroy grit. I have divided the various strongholds into the categories of existential strongholds, environmental strongholds, and personal strongholds to aid in understanding. This list addresses most of the strongholds used by the enemy to steal, kill, and destroy. The enemy cannot physically put a brick on your path to stub your toe but can whisper a thought that can cause you to fall off a cliff.

Existential strongholds are the result of the fall of man as

recorded in Genesis 3. When God breathed life into the first man, God also gave man His image. This image of God was part of humanity's DNA. In the original design, humankind was to experience intimacy with God and other humans. We were to have purpose and power as co-creators with God. We were not designed to experience death but to live for eternity in a relationship with God. We were made with the capacity for intimacy, meaning, purpose, ability, immortality, and wholeness. Our God-given image was damaged with the fall of man. We are now offended by experiences we were never designed or equipped to handle. We now wrestle with the existential strongholds of isolation, meaninglessness, powerlessness, mortality, and spiritual emptiness. We feel disconnected because we are disconnected. The enemy uses these strongholds to drown you in the sea of "if only." If only I had more friends; if only I had more money; if only I was smarter; if only I had a new house; if only I had better opportunities; if only I had a better education; if only; if only; if only... Struggling with these issues is a constant drain on our resilience and grit. We are now more vulnerable to stress and environmental pressures. I have come to view grit like a bucket full of goo. You are the bucket, and the goo is the necessary substance needed to attain a goal or pursue a dream. None of us are perfect buckets; we all ooze goo, some more than others. If we end up with insufficient goo, we will not move towards a chosen goal. When our dreams become

blocked or out of reach, we become sad and discouraged. Our grit bucket is no longer filled with the life-giving substance of vitality; it is now filled with misery and frustration. Your bucket that contains the grit you need for your day has several holes in it because of these existential strongholds. The good news is that Christ died for you to bring you back into a relationship with God and provide a path where these grit-bucket holes can be patched. God, through Christ, has provided a way for restoration.

Environmental strongholds are the result of stress-producing events in our lives and the way we approach those events. We face daily events that are threatening, require change, cause confusion, strain our sense of responsibility, or cause shame. The enemy uses the strongholds of fear with worry, confusion about self, uncertainty, misplaced responsibility, and angst about past transgressions to steal, kill, and destroy. These environmental stressors face us daily; we feel their pain and have to deal with them. They cause us to focus on the immediate and urgent and set aside the important and the eternal.

Personal strongholds are those that directly affect our world view. Some of these strongholds are how we choose to interact and interpret the world, and others are situations that leave us feeling hopelessly stuck. All these personal strongholds are a response to a real or perceived offense and

encourage us to become powerless victims. If the offense is perceived injustice, the result is bitterness. If the offense is a perceived lack of something necessary, the product is greed. If the offense is a perceived unbearable loss, the result is grief. If the offense is a perceived loss of control, the result is legalism. If the offense is experienced as physical pain, the product is agony. If the offense is a perceived craving for a substance or activity, the result is an addiction. If the offense is perceived as deep insecurity, the result is self-love or narcissism.

The third part of this book looks at how we can develop a storehouse of faith-sustaining qualities and characteristics. These qualities are essential for building resilience and Godly grit. If we were able to live without threat or adversity, we would not require a storehouse. The problem is, you cannot avoid all hardship, and much of it, you will not be able to handle without reliance on the Holy Spirit and a fully stocked storehouse. If you expect to remain healthy and viable in God's kingdom, your storehouse will need to be stocked with some essential qualities. You will need a shelf for honesty, one for faith, another for surrender, and yet another for an ongoing honest self-evaluation. You will need a room for confession, redemption, restoration, reconciliation, and ongoing sanctification. If you set up your storehouse correctly, you will also have a large space for service and

generosity.

We will also look at how to find your voice in God's kingdom choir. We all have a God-given purpose. Many people live their entire lives with no idea where they fit. If you know your place, it will give your grit strength, and substance.

I invite you to join me on this adventure and find your place in God's choir, the place you were made to fill. It is not too late; you do not have to live a life of meaningless complacency. The change will require courage and a lot of Godly grit.

CHAPTER 1 – THE BEGINNING

This book started as a study of human resilience. Resilience is the necessary quality that allows us to get back up and move forward with our lives after experiencing a setback. It is the grit that makes it possible to stick to a difficult task until completion. In other words, resilience is necessary to stay on your chosen path in life and help you find your way back to that path if you have happened to wander. An extra amount of resilience is essential when living with a chronic illness or fighting an addiction. In times of confusion and despair, we need strength to live a full, content life - a life of purpose and meaning. We could all use a lot more resilience.

This project started with a question about a grin and a twinkle. Sitting before me was a 96-year-old patient who presented for a follow-up office visit after a recent hospitalization. She was recovering from an episode of

pneumonia that nearly took her life, and her health was declining rapidly. As I reviewed her medical record, it all made sense – the lab work, X-rays, heart studies all confirmed that I was working with an elderly patient near the end of her life. As we sat and visited about the recent time in the hospital and how she was doing now, there was something that puzzled me. She had a quiet, contented grin and a lively twinkle in her eye. Something seemed out of place! Am I sitting with a 96-year-old at death's door or in the presence of a mischievous 9-year-old?

I had seen this look on many elderly patients' faces in the past but was not impacted by it as I was that day. Maybe it was because I was now in my 60s and was pondering contentment issues in my life, or perhaps it was just the quality of the twinkle.

I have thought a lot about that encounter since. What was the source of this contentment in this challenging season of life? What was clear right away was what it was not. It was not financial security as she was not wealthy. It was not a stress-free life, for she had suffered multiple losses in her life – losing her spouse, losing health, and now losing independence. It was not physical strength or beauty that had long ago faded away. It was not fame or notoriety, for she was not famous or even known outside her small community of family and friends. So, what was it that gave her the ability

to smile contently? What was it that gave this woman of humble faith her strength? Why was she resilient?

This experience is what started the quest regarding resilience and grit. What is resilience? Is it possible to become more resilient? What can destroy or fracture your resilience?

One of the most difficult, if not the most difficult, encounters in life is aging. If we want to learn about grit, we should look at the elderly. In the Old Testament, we are encouraged to honor our father and mother. In the original language, this meant to pause quietly and lean in to hear, for understanding. We have a lot to learn from our mothers, fathers, and elders, so let us pause and lean in with our eyes and ears open. The elderly can teach us a lot about priorities, what is worth fussing about, and what matters in the long run. Unfortunately, many fathers and mothers have not been good examples; they have lead lives of bitterness and desperation; we can learn from them as well – from them, we can determine what to avoid.

For this project, I will try to focus on the grin and the twinkle – there was something exceptional about it, something that made me want to be like that, that made me want to be a better man, a better husband, a better person despite the circumstances. I would like to possess that type of Godly grit.

This book contains many helpful little nuggets that have

worked in the lives of others. Hopefully, this will help along life's unpredictable road so that we can all be more physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually resilient.

Resilience is like goo in a leaky bucket. If you want to maintain enough goo in your bucket, you need to patch as many holes as possible and then replace the goo as you can.

I will start by defining resilience, then looking at how it breaks down. Then I will address the holes in the bucket like stress, bitterness, addiction, and discontent. I will then discuss some of the areas where you can move to fill your bucket – personal and spiritual growth areas.

Thank you for joining me on this journey – we could all use more resilience. By the way, I did find the source of the twinkle.

CHAPTER 2 - RESILIENCE

The word resilience comes from the Latin word resilientm, which means "inclined to leap or spring back."

Resilience is the ability to get knocked down and then get back up again; it is the power of recovery from adversity.

For an elastic band, resilience is the ability for that object to be stretched and then return to its original length.

For human beings, resilience is the power and ability to get back to a predefined normal state – unless stretched too often. At that point, you establish a new norm, or you continue to live in despair.

When this ability is functioning well, all seems okay; you have attained a status quo and feel at peace.

Resilience is necessary because you cannot avoid getting

knocked down regularly.

Studies have shown that life achievements may be more the result of grit than talent. We all know extraordinarily talented people who are frustrated with their life because they lack the necessary resilience or determination to allow their talent to flourish. We also know people who have succeeded with minimal skill or ability through resilience and grit alone.

The study of resilience is a study of adversity management. Adversity is a common, often a daily characteristic of human life. Some trouble you will be prepared for, but for much of it, you will not be ready. Adversity will not destroy those who are resilient, but those who are not resilient will become overwhelmed.

Resilience is more of a path than a destination. How you walk the course will significantly impact your life experience, especially your experience of life's challenges.

Where should we look for reliable guidance on resilience? My study of resilience comes from four primary sources. Firstly, my personal experience with adversity, for much of which I was unprepared. Secondly, I have had the privilege to observe thousands of patients over the years, some of whom demonstrated resilience amid significant adversity. Thirdly, from a critical review of the current literature on resilience from the world of psychology, philosophy, and theology. Fourthly,

from the Bible, God's reliable guidebook as to how we should live our lives – a life of Godly grit.

In the book of James in the New Testament, we are encouraged by the following words. James 1: 3-4 *"when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."*

This verse encourages us not to run from the many adversities in life but to embrace them to be more robust and complete. This shift in our worldview would significantly reduce unnecessary stress and free up the energy spent trying to avoid inevitable adversity. The expectation that you can live an adversity-free life will weaken your resilience and increase your despair.

We can get a better understanding of psychological resilience by comparing it to physical fitness.

Resilience is to the soul what physical fitness is to the body.

We all came into this world with an individual capacity for both resilience and physical fitness. Some of us were gifted to be weightlifters and others, marathon runners.

With both physical fitness and resilience, we are all born with

a different capacity, the fullness of which often goes unrealized. We could all be more physically fit, and we could all be a lot more resilient.

How do we improve our physical fitness? We get physically fit by breaking down our body with specific physical demands, and then with proper rest and nutrition, you slowly but gradually get stronger and fitter.

Exercise does not make you stronger; it tears you down; you get stronger when you rest. Once this process has occurred over and over many times, you are now more prepared to perform better physically. You can now lift a heavier weight or run faster.

Through stress and recovery, resilience also has a chance to grow and develop, but unfortunately, it is not as simple as physical fitness with its defined and proven exercise programs. It is impossible to go to the "soul gym" and bench press 10% of a divorce, 5% of the loss of a spouse or child, and 50% of the unknown disaster around the next corner. With a physical fitness program, you can prepare to run a faster mile by training to run a faster mile, but it is not so simple when it comes to resilience. If, however, you only sit there and contemplate what disasters may occur to you tomorrow, you will, in the process, drain your current resilience tank and be much worse off. Just like getting

physically stronger, rest and proper "soul nutrition" are necessary to get stronger. The other complicating factor with resilience is that it is impossible to know what to prepare for or when you will need to be ready.

Being more resilient has many benefits. If we are more resilient, we will be less likely to get caught in the trap of chronic stress with its consequences of increased heart disease, diabetes, cancer, obesity, and addiction. With increased resilience, there is less sense of being overwhelmed by adversity and an improved ability to cope, and a significant reduction in stress-induced inflammation, thus, improving overall immune response.

During times of stress, we will also be less likely to be tempted by diversionary activities with severe life consequences like addictions, gambling, or dangerous risk-taking behavior.

With a low level of resilience, there is an increased awareness and impact of chronic daily stress. A low level of resilience causes chronic anxiety, an altered immune system, and the release of white blood cells from the bone marrow, causing increased inflammation which increases diabetes cancer, heart disease, and Alzheimer's.

Resilience is a function of activity in our brains. Resilience is the ability to continue moving towards a pre-determined goal, despite obstacles or setbacks. Our brain can gather a

massive amount of data and filter it so that we can smell a rose and say that it is a good thing, or we can step in the pile of stuff our dog left for us on the lawn and said that it is not a good thing. So somehow, our brains can gather all this data and filter it into pathways that move us either closer to our goals and rewards or place us in a frustrating holding pattern. Experts call these pathways the Behavioral Approach Pathway and the Behavioral Inhibition Pathway.

The Behavioral Approach Pathway is the focus of this chapter, and the Behavioral Inhibition Pathway will be the focus of the chapter that looks at how resilience gets fractured or destroyed.

The Behavioral Approach Pathway begins in the cortex, the part of our brain that makes evaluations, decisions, and sets our goals. This pathway focuses on attaining a goal and receiving a reward. What often makes us different individuals are our goals and anticipated rewards.

The Behavioral Approach Pathway consists of two brain circuits, the immediate reward circuit, and the delayed reward circuit. There is constant communication between the cortex and the part of our brain that informs us if we have achieved the goal. The purpose of these two circuits is the same "reach the goal and get the reward."

If the desired goal is within reach and nothing is standing in

the way, the immediate reward circuit is activated. Nerve messages pass to the medial forebrain bundle made up of the ventral tegmental area, the nucleus accumbens, parts of the thalamus, the septum of the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. This message then passes to the hypothalamus and cortex with the information that the goal is within reach. Reward without effort should be appreciated when it comes your way, but it should never be allowed to become an expectation. Rewards of most significant value take effort. A life lived demanding immediate gratification will lead to either frustration, despair, or addiction.

If the path towards the desired goal is blocked or frustrated, then the "delayed reward circuit" kicks into gear. In this case, reaching the goal is going to take considerably more effort. When the delayed reward circuit is activated, messages get sent to the periventricular system made up of the hypothalamus, thalamus, the central gray substance surrounding Sylvius's aqueduct, the amygdala, and the hippocampus. The neurotransmitter involved in this circuit is acetylcholine that increases the release of adrenal corticotrophic hormone that acts on the adrenal glands causing a release of adrenaline. We are now ready for fight or flight. Flight does not mean running from the goal or the obstacle that stands in the way of reaching the goal. Flight means we either step around the block, avoid the obstacle,

wait for a better time to move forward towards our desired goal, or back up and recalculate the path to achieving the goal. Fight does not mean that we are about to use violence to remove or overpower the obstacle standing in our way. Fight means we may have to work a little harder, work a little smarter, alter our path a little or take another run at the obstacle after we have taken time for planning and better preparation. This delayed reward circuit is where our resilience is challenged and strengthened.

The immediate reward circuit and the delayed reward circuit both move us closer to our desired goal; the one is direct; the other takes more effort. As we get closer to the desired destination and reward, messages are triggered as the delayed reward circuit's efforts move us back into the flow of the immediate reward circuit. At this point, the neurotransmitters GABA, glutamate, and dopamine become active in the ventral tegmental area that sends messages to the nucleus accumbens where the nerve endings from the ventral tegmental area release dopamine. Dopamine is not the pleasure or satisfaction neurotransmitter. Dopamine acts in the shell of the nucleus accumbens that sends messages to the hypothalamus and the prefrontal cortex to encode memories about the reward.

Dopamine messages in the shell of the nucleus accumbens tell our hypothalamus to remember every element of this

reward. We want to be able to get the reward again. Messages are also sent to the prefrontal cortex, increasing our level of alertness and communicating that this reward is to be remembered as an outstanding experience; messages to the pituitary gland cause a release of hormones to the rest of the body – the result is the sensation of satisfaction.

The immediate reward and the delayed reward circuits are both parts of the behavioral approach pathway, meaning they work together to foster momentum towards a desired goal and reward. Both circuits provide opportunities for felt satisfaction – the immediate reward path directly with the achievement of the reward and the delayed reward circuit both with the reward's attainment and any little victory along the way over frustration and obstacles. Overall satisfaction felt from a hard-fought battle to receive a goal is often the sweetest because there are more opportunities for a series of rewards.

This cycle of struggle, reevaluation, regrouping, and rest within the Behavioral Approach pathway is how our resilience develops, matures, and eventually gets stronger. In the next chapter, I will focus on resilience destruction by looking at the Behavioral Inhibition Pathway.

CHAPTER 3 - FRACTURED RESILIENCE

What causes a loss of resilience with a subsequent slide into a life of despair? Why are some people resilient while others are not? What can we do to get more resilient?

Trials and challenges are a fact of life. These trials and challenges can either make us stronger or gradually wear us down.

Adversity comes in many forms. It can appear as the loss of a loved one, relationship stress, injustice, uncertainty, fear, or growing responsibilities. It can also present because of transgressions (where you have wronged someone else), physical illness, mental illness, addiction, failure at work or school, or just the wear and tear of daily life.

Stress and strain over time can lead to depletion of resilience or a fractured resilience, where we end up in a state of despair. Like a metal wire that is bent repeatedly at the same

spot, our stability eventually breaks.

A passage from the book of Psalms reads: Psalm 69:20-21 (TPT), *"Their insults have broken my heart, and I am in despair. If only one would turn and comfort me. But instead, they give me poison for food; They offer me sour wine for my thirst."*

Heartbroken, isolated, and in despair – that is the picture of a fractured resilience.

When adversity strikes, there are three possible options to deal with it.

To retreat and regroup, a typical response is to explode in anger. Anger is isolating and can be used to gain some distance from people and issues.

Another response is to become overwhelmed by the event and end up consumed by negative emotions. This method is the most common option used to deal with adverse events.

It is also possible to become upset about the disruptive change but continue to move ahead with your life. This last option is the only approach that promotes well-being. It is employed by resilient people, who become upset about the disruptive state and thus change their current pattern to cope with the issue.

The first and second approaches lead people to adopt the victim role and blame others while rejecting any practical coping methods, even after the crisis is over. These people prefer to react instinctively rather than responding to the situation contemplatively. Those who respond to the adverse conditions by adapting themselves tend to cope, spring back, and halt the crisis. The negative emotions of fear, anger, anxiety, distress, helplessness, and hopelessness, which dominate the life of the overwhelmed, decrease a person's ability to solve the problems they face and weaken resiliency. Constant fears and worries also weaken the immune system and increase vulnerability to illness.

In a previous chapter, we looked at the Behavioral Approach Pathway used to overcome adversity and gradually moving towards a goal.

Suppose the movement towards the desired goal is repeatedly blocked or the reward for achieving the desired goal is continuously disappointing. In that case, we need a mechanism to put the whole process on hold – a so-called movement towards a goal pause button. This pause button is called the Behavioral Inhibition System, where movement towards the desired goal is blocked, and our efforts seem useless and frustrated. The behavioral inhibition system is active within the septohippocampal system, the amygdala, and the basal nuclei. This area receives messages from the

prefrontal cortex saying it is time to give up; it then sends norepinephrine stress messages to the rest of the body. This place of giving up is not a psychological vacation; it is a frustrated, smoldering, flight, and fight where there is no remaining energy for fight or flight. It is a smoldering, slow, wearing out of emotional energy and drive.

The result is chronically elevated levels of norepinephrine leading to chronic anxiety, an altered immune system, the release of white blood cells from the bone marrow, and a heightened level of inflammation, leading to increased risk of diabetes, cancer, and heart disease.

When the behavioral inhibition system is activated, the nervous system responds by releasing glutamate, norepinephrine, cortisol, and adrenocorticotrophic hormone. These are the chemical messengers of chronic stress. The constant, steady release of these neurotransmitters causes fatigue, inflammation, allergy, anxiety, poor sleep, and insulin resistance (leading to diabetes). It will also cause immune suppression (increasing the risk for illness and cancer), hyperactivity, increased blood pressure, increased sensation of pain, headaches, rapid heart rate, nausea, vomiting, distractibility, and mental confusion. This pond of chronic distress and anguish can become unbearable.

However, if we work on strengthening our resilience, we can

find our way out of this pit of despair. Improved resilience has many benefits. One benefit is an improved ability to make realistic plans and then being capable of taking the necessary steps to follow through with them. Other benefits are improved and more accurate confidence in one's strengths and abilities with improvement in communication and problem-solving skills and improved ability to manage strong impulses and feelings.

We should be doing what we can to become more resilient, and we should be training our children and grandchildren how to be more resilient.

The American Psychological Association has published a list of 10 things you can do to improve your resilience.

They advise maintaining good relationships with close family members, friends, and others.

Try to avoid seeing crises or stressful events as unbearable problems.

Learn to accept circumstances that cannot be changed.

Develop realistic goals and move towards them and take decisive actions in adverse situations.

They also advise looking for self-discovery opportunities after a struggle with loss; this can turn times of struggle into times

of personal growth.

Learn to develop self-confidence and keep a long-term perspective and consider the stressful event in a broader context.

Learn to maintain a hopeful outlook, expect good things, and visualize your goals and dreams. Take care of your mind and body, exercise regularly, and pay attention to your own needs and feelings.

These are good, helpful recommendations, but how do we do them? What stops us from moving in the direction of building resilience during times of trial and despair? What factors inhibit our growth?

Many factors impact our resilience and inhibit our growth; they include genetic, epigenetic, survival factors, philosophical and theological factors, core belief and values factors, cultural and familial factors, personality factors, and immediate factors like illness, stress, fatigue, or poverty.

It is essential to consider all these factors in developing a resilience model. I am proposing a philosophical, theological, psychological, environmental, and medical model of resilience. This model will help us uncover where and why our resilience is fracturing and the necessary steps to move forward with more resilience. If there is a major disruption in

any of these areas, it can lead to weakened resilience. Still, if these areas are explored and addressed, the result will significantly improve your resilience.

In the following chapters, we will look at some of the specific causes of life's significant anguish in more detail and how they destroy resilience. These resilience breakers are referred to in the Bible as strongholds used by Satan to steal, kill, and destroy. Resilience is the ability and strength to get up when knocked down. Resilience is a necessary quality if we expect to live our lives as God intended. Grit, as we will see in the next chapter, is a more expansive concept of resilience.

Chapter 4 – Grit

What is grit? Is grit different than resilience? Is grit important? All these questions are answered well in Angela Duckworth's book "Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance." She does a beautiful job of showing, through multiple scientific studies, that grit, a combination of passion and perseverance, when combined with talent, equals skill, and skill when combined with grit, equals accomplishment. In other words, if you apply your passion with perseverance, you will be more successful with what you are trying to accomplish. This concept raises the critical question of what is worth accomplishing? What goals are worth pursuing? How should I be spending my limited amount of energy? Is there value in being gritty just for the sake of being gritty?

What does the Bible say about grit? In Ecclesiastes 2:24 (NIV), we read: *“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,”* God made us for work or toil. Toil is toil; it is not easy. Our attitude towards our toil matters to God, and it should matter to us. A positive approach to struggle and work takes grit. Our reaction to our work may even be more important than the work itself. Where did we get the notion that life, even if we lived “correctly,” should be easy? Life is complicated and challenging. Toil is a significant component of our life experience, yet God desires that we find satisfaction in that toil. A large portion of grit is necessary to discover that satisfaction. Once you find that satisfaction, it will change your life. The approach to a task and your creative self’s application become more important than achieving a specific result.

In James 1: 2-4 (NLT), we read: *“Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.”* This fully developed endurance is grit, and that grit, through our reaction to trials, can grow. God desires that His people have grit, a Godly grit.

What is the substance of grit? Grit is a combination of many

elements and qualities. Grit is part talent, part skill, part recognized opportunity, part inspiration, part determination, part perseverance, part passion, part resilience, part hope, part faith, part patience, part reevaluation, and part adequate time. All these elements are the composition of grit. This grit is then applied to a direction and action to achieve a specific goal or dream.

A goal is what gives significance to grit. Grit is wasted energy without a goal. A goal offers your life meaning, direction, focus, and purpose. A plan passionately pursued will help to strengthen and grow your grit. Grit differs from resilience in that grit is goal-oriented and is dependent on the degree of passion for achieving the goal. God did not make us so we could sit in our cozy corner, waiting to be served. We are on this planet to serve the Lord and others with passion and perseverance, which takes grit.

The goals of most tremendous significance are service-centered. The quality and outcome of your life are determined by what you seek and who you serve. Yes, there will be many obstacles and distractions, but your service-goal will remain as your life compass. Your life will go in the direction of your service, and your life is as big as what you serve. Whether you realize it or not, you have a service-priority goal that gives your life direction, meaning, purpose, and focus. This life priority goal is how you measure and evaluate your definition

of “life success.” This goal guides you in what direction you go and in what you chose to ignore.

There are three possible classes of life service-directed goals. The three categories are personal service, community service, and spiritual service.

If your main priority in life is self-preservation, focusing on your needs and desires, your primary service-directed goal is personal or self-service. With this as your main life focus, your goals move you toward achieving what you feel you need for yourself right now. Human beings are tenacious self-preservers. We are all, to varying degrees, self-centered.

If your main priority is on others' needs like your family and community, your primary service-directed goal is community service. If this is your primary focus, your goals will be determined by your values and morals as you serve others. There will always be a degree of self-service in community service.

If your main priority is spiritual, meaning growing in a personal relationship with God, your primary service-directed goal is spiritual-service. If this is your primary focus, your goal will be the spiritual matters of knowing and serving God.

Our life is a combination of these various types of focus and service. Even if we claim we desire to serve the Lord, we are

often more consumed by self-service. We run into problems when we deceive ourselves, when our stated purpose is not our actual purpose. We often deceive ourselves, claiming, for example, that we are serving others when all we are doing is seeking affirmation.

If we desire our grit to grow and be productive, we must be aware of our goals and the purpose of our goals. We must be willing to pause and honestly look at our life. Awareness of your goals and dreams is fundamental.

A part of every goal is a hope, an expectation, and a consequence. Hope nourishes a developing goal. The hope is that somehow in achieving the goal, your life or others' lives will be better. In this case, the definition of "better" depends on what you chose as your priority service-goal. If your primary goal is self-service, then the hope is that you will achieve personal contentment and a greater sense of security by your actions. If your primary goal is the community, then the hope is that others will find their lives a little more bearable through your projected plan. If your primary goal is spiritual, then the hope is that as you pursue God, the rest of your life will fall in line, and you will be more aware of your God-given purpose.

Another part of goal pursuit is an expectation. You can expect, on the path to achieving a goal, that there will be many

obstacles. A goal worth going after will have a cost. The way to goal achievement is a constant weighing of cost versus benefit. It will take resilience, grit, and reevaluation to continue this path.

With every chosen goal and attempt to achieve that goal, there are consequences. There are consequences for achieving the goal, and there are consequences for failing to achieve the goal. It is essential to consider the consequences before you determine a goal and pursue that goal.

Whatever goals you chose, it will take grit to achieve the desired results. You do not have a limitless supply of grit. It is more like we have a partially filled bucket of grit-goo that we need to dip into to energize the directions and goals we pursue. Yes, there are things in our lives that will drain that goo more quickly, and there are things we can do to help replenish the spent supply, but the supply of grit-goo is not limitless. The issue is not the volume of your collection of grit. The problem is, how do you nurture the grit you have and harness it in a chosen meaningful direction.

The one thing you want to avoid at all costs is the needless wasting of your precious grit. Grit is easily lost in the pursuit of possessions, search for information, time-consuming distractions, impatience waiting for an expected result, or the need for ownership. Please do not give your grit away; it is

too valuable.

It is also important to realize that passion and goal-directed grit can have negative consequences. If you are laser-focused on achieving a specific goal, you will become oblivious to other areas of life. There is only so much grit-goo available. This limited grit supply explains why you can have the fortitude to accomplish an arduous task while not having sufficient determination to stay on a diet. For grit to remain for the long-haul, you need to be able to step back from your goal pursuit and take time to reevaluate. We should follow the advice of the psalmist before we sink our teeth into the goals of the day and pray Psalm 5:3 (TPT), *“At each and every sunrise you will hear my voice as I prepare my sacrifice of prayer to you. Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on the altar and wait for your fire to fall upon my heart.”* Take some time daily to consider your goals and be deliberate about the goals you pursue. You only get one life; live it with purpose and determination. You get to choose your goals; choose them very carefully. Why do you value what you value? Take time to consider what you love. Write a list of what you value and why it has significance to you.

In the next chapters, we will take a closer look at the main areas of service-goals and the grit required to achieve each

of those goals. As Christians, the most crucial part of the next few chapters is to learn what it means to develop Godly Grit.

Chapter 5 - Grit for Needs and Desires

Grit is an energizing force. It is a blend of passion and perseverance needed to achieve a specific goal. The goals, hopes, and dreams you are moving towards are vital in defining yourself. Your primary life goal will determine the type of grit you need to achieve those goals and objectives. In the next three chapters, we will look at grit in the context of three primary life-direction goals. We will look at grit for needs and desires, grit for values and morals, and lastly, what it means to have Godly grit.

If you define yourself by your needs and desires, your grit elements needed to achieve your dreams will be your intellect, wit, cunning, physical capacity, and ability.

Passion is being who you were made to be and doing what you were made to do.

We all have perceived needs and desires. These needs and wants will change over time, but you will always have demanding needs and desires. We live our lives with an awareness of what we believe we need to survive, and this promotes the development of a self-preservation form of grit. We think if we do not get what we feel we need, we will not survive.

This form of grit focuses on goals that are immediate, urgent, and self-centered. If your dominant values concentrate on your needs and desires, you will live a self-centered life in the pursuit of security and comfort. Your guiding light will be what you feel you need to feel secure and comfortable.

You will require resilience to succeed with these self-preservation goals, but you will not need much grit. The pursuit of self-centered goals requires some perseverance but little to no passion.

Are there needs and desires that are common to all humans? What are your needs and desires? To get a grip on human beings' everyday needs and wants, in 1942, Abraham Maslow published a paper titled "A Theory of Human Motivation." In this paper, Dr. Maslow attempted to classify needs that are common to all. This list became known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This hierarchy is often presented as a pyramid. The more basic needs at the base of the pyramid need to be

satisfied before higher-level needs can be achieved. The primary layer in the pyramid is the basic needs. These needs are the basic physiological needs like food, water, warmth, and rest that we all need to survive. Basic needs also include the necessity for security and safety. In other words, if we do not eat and are not safe, we will not survive. If we can adequately meet our basic needs, we can move on to our secondary needs. These are the psychological needs of belonging and love. We meet these needs in intimate relationships and friendships. If the psychological needs are met, we are free to pursue the next layer of needs: self-esteem. Through prestige and accomplishments, we can meet the self-esteem needs.

According to Maslow, only when these layers of need are adequately satisfied can we achieve our full potential by addressing our self-fulfillment and self-actualization needs.

This theory functions with the assumption that any significant deficit in a more primary need significantly impacts the ability to achieve a higher level.

Is this how you live your life? Do you define yourself by your unmet needs? Do you feel limited in your ability to grow and experience joy in your life because you do not feel safe and secure or do not have enough money or friends? Do perceived needs and desires drive you?

Do you see yourself as an unmet need? This self-definition is how most people live out their lives. They move from one felt unmet need to another; distracted, frustrated, and self-centered. Let us not be too quick to judge because if we are honest, this is how most of us, even Christians, live out our lives. The Bible defines this life path as being carnal, and we are all very carnal. We are born carnal and become more subtly carnal as we mature.

Pause to consider how you define yourself. Are you just a physical, emotional mammal? What energizes you? What are you seeking? It is essential to understand how you define yourself. Your self-definition will determine and limit your experience of life. Ask yourself honestly, what does it mean to be a human? What treasure are you seeking? Matthew 6:21 (AMP) reminds us that, *“for where your treasure is, there your heart [your wishes, your desires; that on which your life centers] will be also.”*

What is an honest self-appraisal? We are very skilled self-deceivers. Our spiritual aspirations are often nothing more than cloaked carnality. Look at your treasure and not what you claim is your treasure. What has value to you? How do you spend your time? What controls your anxious thoughts? Look at what you do and not what you intend. How do others close to you view you? Are they being honest or just trying to appease you? You do not want to be limited by your carnality.

This self-evaluation is vital. Look at what you claim, at what you do, and at what you do not do. This life of clean carnality is where most Christians live, but God has so much more for us. Be honest and authentic and avoid the trap of carnality.

If your primary lifegoal is the pursuit of needs and desires, you are demanding survival and comfort. The desire for survival is a demand for safety and security. The desire for comfort is a demand for belonging, affirmation, esteem, and accomplishment.

If you feel handcuffed to news apps or news shows on TV, you are most likely living bound to survival seeking goals. If your focus is on acquiring possessions, finances, affiliations, or “likes” on your favorite social media account, you are living demanding comfort.

The motivation behind survival-seeking behavior is fear. Fear, real or perceived, is a powerful motivator, often resulting in bursts of intense energy. If you live your life motivated by fear, you will eventually become exhausted, depressed, or anxious.

The avoidance of pain is the motivation behind comfort-seeking behavior. A life lived with the primary focus of pain elimination will eventually lead to dependency on the mechanism that relieves the discomfort. In other words, comfort-seeking leads to addiction. If your source of comfort

is affirmation from others, you will live a pretentious life. The deep insecurity caused by this lifestyle results in a loss of authenticity and hollow or shallow relationships.

If your security is in material possessions, you will end up disappointed. You will be sacrificing relationships for stuff and a life of greedy emptiness and self-centeredness. But isn't stuff great? It keeps us occupied and distracted and momentarily at peace.

If your primary goals are your needs and desires, you will focus on what feels urgent as you react to perceived threats. You will need some grit to attain your goals, but it will look more like weak resilience than real grit. As you reach for your goals, you will sometimes fail and need to pick yourself back up again. This may require determination and some patience but does not require grit or passion.

So far, I have painted a gloomy picture of goals focused on needs and desires. It is not that there is anything wrong with these goals; it is only a negative issue if these types of aspirations become our life's priority. Much of our day-to-day life involves efforts to achieve goals necessary for our survival and comfort. We need to eat, sleep, be sheltered, and interact with others. We need to be free from being distracted by fear and unmet basic physiological needs.

So, how do you achieve these needs and desires goals? You

will have to determine what you need and how much of it you need, then set a course to obtain what you feel you need. You look for the path of least resistance to secure safety and comfort.

For those necessary needs and desires, determine your goal, develop a plan, move toward achieving the goal, and be prepared to require resilience when failures occur. To accomplish these goals, you will have to rely on your patience, abilities, talents, and perseverance. Some occasional self-reflection may also be beneficial, but you will not need much passion. The grit required to achieve these goals is only a refined form of resilience.

You can evaluate your progress in accomplishing these needs and desire goals based on how you feel. Do you feel safe and comfortable? If you do, you are probably on track to meet your goals. The measurement of success with this type of goal is also very tangible. You can look at what you own and what you have in the bank and decide if you are successful or not.

If needs and desires are your life priority, you hope to accomplish a sense of self-generated and self-sustainable security and comfort. As time goes on, you may also wish to gain a sense of confidence and satisfaction. The ultimate long-term goal with this lifestyle is the attainment of peace by

your actions and abilities.

If this is your dominant life value system and you gain some success going in this direction, what can you expect? The best outcome you can expect is some safety and comfort for a short time. As you continue down this path, you will become distracted as you seek the next possession or mechanism that you can add to secure your safety and comfort.

The worst outcome on this goal path is pervasive fear and insecurity as you grow to realize you cannot possibly attain the safety you desire. If your primary goal is comfort at any cost, the result will be an addiction to the element or activity that provides that comfort.

The most likely outcome is that you will be distracted in the pursuit of gaining safety and comfort. You will busy yourself accumulating safety stuff and develop a growing dissatisfaction with life as you age. Life becomes the existence of growing insecurity, discomfort, and emptiness.

To varying degrees, we all live in this world of self-centeredness. We feel we must do something to eliminate our sense of insecurity and discomfort. The appeal of control, independence, and personal achievement pull us toward meeting our self-centered needs.

It is one thing to be carnally responsible; it is another to be

carnally minded. We need to take care of our physical needs without them controlling our minds. So, shower, brush your teeth, wash your socks, dress appropriately, comb your hair, earn and spend your money wisely, but do not forget that God has much more for you than these things.

The Bible makes it clear in Romans 8:6-7 (TPT), *“For the mind-set of the flesh is death, but the mind-set controlled by the Spirit finds life and peace. In fact, the mind-set focused on the flesh fights God’s plan and refuses to submit to his direction, because it cannot!”*

If you are looking for peace you will not find it in the pursuit of needs and desires. God’s plan is the only path to peace.

In the sermon on the mount in Matthew 6:19-24 (TPT), Jesus taught, *“Don’t keep hoarding for yourselves earthly treasures that can be stolen by thieves. Material wealth eventually rusts, decays, and loses its value. Instead, stockpile heavenly treasures for yourselves that cannot be stolen and will never rust, decay, or lose their value. For your heart will always pursue what you value as your treasure. The eyes of your spirit allow revelation-light to enter into your being. If your heart is unclouded, the light floods in! But if your eyes are focused on money, the light cannot penetrate and darkness takes its place. How profound will be the darkness within you if the light of truth cannot enter! How could you worship*

two gods at the same time? You will have to hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You can't worship the true God while enslaved to the god of money!"

Where is your treasure? Be honest with your appraisal.

Chapter 6 – Grit for Community Service

How we interact with our society is another area in our lives where we need grit. We all have a unique role in our community, an individual position of influence and responsibility. It takes grit to find your part and to maintain your function. Every role in our society has its rewards and its difficulties. There is no silver spoon. There is no easy path. God has a place and purpose for you, and it will come with many challenges and responsibilities. It will take grit to stand by your values and morals as you perform your service to your community. It will take an extra portion of grit when your values do not align with your society's values.

What is your role or responsibility in society? Who needs you? Is it your family, service group, or profession? What are the values of those you serve? Do those values align with

yours?

If your primary life-focus is still on the realm of meeting your needs and desires, then this service-focused discussion will have no meaning. To progress in your societal role, you will need to compromise for the best of the community you are serving and set aside some of your self-focused priorities. There is no service without some sacrifice. Your hierarchy of values will determine the degree and type of sacrifice. If your role is within a profession, you will have to operate within a professional code's shared values. If your part is in service to the family, you will be navigating a path between expectations and responsibilities, establishing boundaries, and determining rewards. This life-role is much more complicated than that of operating within a professional code. Professional code is usually written and does not change where family relational code is continuously evolving. Whatever your role, you will need grit to succeed. You will need grit to know where to compromise and where you should not compromise. A life focused on needs and desires looks at the present emotional needs. A service life-focus looks at the future where observation is valued more than a feeling.

So, how do you define yourself? What is your unique place in the world? What are your goals? What are your morals and values? Do you live focused on needs or values?

Do you have the grit necessary to succeed in your role? To advance, the grit required for service combines patient observation, resilience, and passion.

It is essential to pause and consider how you and your society define you. This role in society will consume most of your life and time. Consider it carefully. How would you label yourself? How do you introduce yourself? If you look at your place, purpose, and power, what is your space in society?

To uncover this role, you need to look at how you spend your time. How much effort and time do you spend attempting to achieve advancement in your position? What would the impact be if you lost your definition or role? Evaluate your thoughts, actions, and inactions. What does this tell you about how you see and value your role? This evaluation is necessary to prioritize your activities and time. If you do not see it, you will not change it where it needs to change. You need an accurate evaluation of how you view your role to live consistently with your stated values. Do not be fooled by your good intentions. It is possible to have the correct values but the wrong priorities. Your family will see your priorities and not necessarily your values.

It is time to look at what you value and how you prioritize those values. What are your overall goals? If your life-focus is on community service, your objectives could be community

wellbeing, affirmation, purpose, power, fame, or legacy. It would help if you asked what you value the most and make sure your actions confirm that value. When it comes to possible service values, the following are worth considering. How do your values line up? How much do you value improving yourself? How much do you value the wellbeing of your family? How much do you value your ability to contribute to your neighborhood, workplace, or school? How much do you value your ability to improve your state or nation? How much do you value your role in helping with the wellbeing of humanity? Do you value absolute values like absolute truth, absolute goodness, absolute beauty, or absolute holiness?

God placed you on earth, in a specific place, with a particular family, in a particular time in history, with specific, unique gifts and abilities to make a difference.

What is the grit necessary for achieving these value-based goals? The grit needed is the perseverance/passion type grit written about in Angela Duckworth's book, "Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance." You will need both passion and perseverance to be a successful parent, employee, or employer. You will get knocked down frequently in your pursuits. You will need some specific long-range goals to guide you and help you prioritize your short-term goals. It will be tempting to focus on performance-based recognition and appear better than you are, but you must fight that temptation.

Do not become complacent by just comparing yourself with your peers. Set the bar high and give it all you have got. You will likely succeed if you are responsible, resilient, perseverant, and passionate as you apply yourself with clearly defined goals and consistent hard work. So, apply your grit to your abilities, talents, education, training, and opportunities. Life is not a spectator sport; you get what you give.

It is vital to take the time to evaluate your progress along this path. You can determine your success by looking at your priority values and assessing where you are in meeting those goals. It will be necessary to make frequent adjustments to your goals and action plan. It will help to get feedback from others because it is easy to deceive yourself. How do others see you? Do they see your values or your priorities? What is your definition of success?

If this value-focus is your life priority, you are moving in a direction with the expectation of receiving affirmation and value from others. This direction can be motivated by the desire for security found in a position or purpose. The hope is that you will have a purposeful impact. The future hope is in gaining influence, value, respect, and possibly, a positive legacy.

What can you expect if this is your priority goal or focus? The best outcome would be to do well in your profession or role in

society. With this accomplishment, you can expect some respect for a job well done. This should also create a sense of accomplishment in comparison to your peers. It may even provide you with a better income and more stuff. At best, though, this is only a fleeting glory that quickly fades.

The worst outcome would be to spend all your energy and deplete your grit only to fail. You worked hard, sacrificed all you had, and ended up a burned-out failure with no respect.

The most likely outcome is neither of these extremes. The most likely product is that you will do better in your societal role than if you just lived your life focused on your own needs and desires. You will get further ahead by applying yourself and not giving up. You will most likely receive occasional fleeting affirmation on this path, but eventually, you will begin to question your purpose.

What does the Bible say about living this type of service/purpose-life? In Matthew 6: 1-4 (TPT), we are encouraged to *“Examine your motives to make sure you’re not showing off when you do your good deeds, only to be admired by others; otherwise, you will lose the reward of your heavenly Father. So when you give to the poor, don’t announce it and make a show of it just to be seen by people, like the hypocrites in the streets and in the marketplace. They’ve already received their reward! But when you demonstrate generosity,*

do it with pure motives and without drawing attention to yourself. Give secretly and your Father, who sees all you do, will reward you openly.”

Yes, we are here to live a life of service, but we must be careful not to let that service become a life of social distraction or a desperate search for meaningless accolades.

Even Christians live their life focused on their needs and desires or their role in society. These paths in life are often distracting and consuming. If this is all there is to your life, you will eventually cruise into an existential crisis where you begin to question your value and purpose. The good news is that God has a lot more for us if we humble ourselves and seek Him. In the next chapter, we will look at what it means to seek to know God and live our lives to the fullest.

Chapter 7 – Godly Grit

It is time to take a meaningful and honest inventory. What does it mean to be a human? What is your ultimate purpose? What do your thoughts, words, actions, and inactions reveal about you? Where is God changing your life? Are you passionate about knowing God? It is evident that we exist for more than just meeting our emotionally felt needs and desires, and we are more than our role or profession. If you claim to be a child of God, then where is the evidence? We must strive to be authentic. Values are often nothing more than self-soothing affirmations. Your priorities are the accurate revelation of your life direction. Virtues are where your values and priorities consistently align. How do you demonstrate your priorities? How do you use your time? In the pursuit of meeting needs and fulfilling roles, do you have any time or passion left for pursuing God? If you expect to

move ahead in your walk with God, you need to be honest. If you could view your life played out in a movie, what would it tell us about your passion? Or have you fallen into the slump of having no passion? If you live your life with the primary purpose of meeting needs or exercising a role, it may give you brief moments of counterfeit passion. Eventually, it will drain your grit and dissolve your remaining passion. You will end up lukewarm or depressed.

You cannot catch passion by chasing it; you become passionate when you are being who you were meant to be and doing what you were meant to do. Your only hope of discovering who you are and what you were meant to do is when you passionately pursue knowing God. Man's purpose and calling are to know God. We need a clear number one priority to be the person God intends us to be. Our primary life-priority should be to know God.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus teaches us in Matthew 6:33-34 (TPT), *“So above all, constantly chase after the realm of God’s kingdom and the righteousness that proceeds from him. Then all these less important things will be given to you abundantly. Refuse to worry about tomorrow, but deal with each challenge that comes your way, one day at a time. Tomorrow will take care of itself.”* What are you chasing after? Jesus teaches us that if we chase after the kingdom of God, all the rest, that is, the needs, desires, purposes, roles,

responsibilities, and directions, will no longer need to be an overconsuming concern. Seek to know God, and the rest will fall into place. God is not hiding from us; He wants to reveal Himself to those who wholeheartedly seek Him as recorded in Jeremiah 29:13 (NKJV), *“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”*

So, what does it mean to know God? We can only know God through His revelation, not through our efforts or rituals. We do the seeking; He does the revealing.

We own a decent pair of walkie-talkies. Our grandchildren love to play with them when they play hide-n-seek. On occasion, I will take one of those walkie-talkies and join in the fun. Suppose I were to communicate to the grandkids through the walkie-talkies how much I love them and how precious they are and that they are safe and have no need to worry. The message would have no meaning to them if their walkie-talkies were tuned into the wrong channel. It is much like this with our relationship with God. God is always on the right channel, revealing Himself; we are often tuned into the wrong channel, hearing distracting static.

Do you live a God-conscious life? Do you pause to consider what you are learning about God and what He reveals about Himself? If you pause to look for God, you will have no problem finding Him. If you have ever gone shopping for a

car, say a white Toyota Camry, you will find as you drive down the road, there are many more white Toyota Camrys than you realized before you began your search. Now, you know those cars were there all the time, and the only thing that changed was the focus of your attention.

It is much the same when it comes to knowing God. If we humble ourselves, pause, and are tuned in, we will see God reveal Himself everywhere we look. I encourage you to start a “God-knowledge” journal; it will change your life. At some point in your day, pause, and write what you have learned about God today. It could be a list of what you have observed in nature, like the wonder in a vast landscape that reveals God as a God of wonder. It could be an observation that reflects God as a God of beauty. Consider Psalm 19:1-6 (TPT) *“God’s splendor is a tale that is told; his testament is written in the stars. Space itself speaks his story every day through the marvels of the heavens. His truth is on tour in the starry vault of the sky, showing his skill in creation’s craftsmanship. Each day gushes out its message to the next, night with night whispering its knowledge to all. Without a sound, without a word, without a voice being heard, Yet all the world can see its story. Everywhere its gospel is clearly read so all may know. What a heavenly home God has set for the sun, shining in the superdome of the sky! See how he leaves his celestial chamber each morning, radiant as a bridegroom ready for his*

wedding, like a day-breaking champion eager to run his course. He rises on one horizon, completing his circuit on the other, warming lives and lands with his heat.”

Open your Bible and ask the Holy Spirit to breathe life into the pages and prepare your heart to know God. Write about what you learn. Read some of the fabulous Christian books on knowing God, like “The Knowledge of the Holy” by A W Tozer, “The Power of Knowing God” by Tony Evans, or “The Attributes of God” by Arthur Pink. Practice God-conscious living; ask God to reveal Himself.

Because of Jesus, we have access to God the Father as recorded in Hebrews 10:19 (TPT), *“And now we are brothers and sisters in God’s family because of the blood of Jesus, and he welcomes us to come right into the most holy sanctuary in the heavenly realm—boldly and with no hesitation.”*

Pray as He has instructed us to pray in Matthew 6:9-13 (TPT), *“Pray like this: ‘Our Father, dwelling in the heavenly realms, may the glory of your name be the center on which our lives turn. Manifest your kingdom realm, and cause your every purpose to be fulfilled on earth, just as it is fulfilled in heaven. We acknowledge you as our Provider of all we need each day. Forgive us the wrongs we have done as we ourselves release forgiveness to those who have wronged us. Rescue us every time we face tribulation and set us free from evil. For you are*

the King who rules with power and glory forever. Amen.” Do not wait for a disaster to start praying; pray continually. God cares about your little stuff more than you care about your big stuff.

Spend time with other believers who are seeking to know God. Share with others what you are learning about God and learn from them about what God is revealing. We need to encourage one another in our walk of faith. In God’s economy, we get from God what we offer to others. As we just read in the Lord’s prayer, if we need God’s forgiveness, we need to provide it to others, so if you need God to encourage you, then do what you can to inspire others. You will not be disappointed. God will answer your prayers. 2 Chronicles 7: 14-15 (AMP), *“and My people, who are called by My Name, humble themselves, and pray and seek (crave, require as a necessity) My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear [them] from heaven, and forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer offered in this place.”*

We have reason to be thankful. We are living in a time of human history when the Holy Spirit is present and active, as recorded in John 16:13 (TPT), *“But when the truth-giving Spirit comes, he will unveil the reality of every truth within you. He won’t speak his own message, but only what he hears from the Father, and he will reveal prophetically to you what is to*

come.” God is not hiding, He wants to reveal Himself to you, and the Holy Spirit is present as a guide. Humble yourself, pray, open your eyes for God’s presence, and write your God-knowledge journal.

So, what is Godly Grit, and why is it necessary? Godly grit is Holy Spirit infused perseverance and passion for knowing God and making Him known. Well then, if the Holy Spirit is the guide, and God does the revealing, why do we need any grit at all? What is our role in getting to know God? Our role is the “humble yourself” part. To humble yourself takes Godly grit. In our walk to know God, we will experience multiple distractions and obstacles that interfere with our ability to humble ourselves. The enemy wants you to believe that this life is all about you. The rest of this book deals with those many areas where we become self-centered and blinded by our self-focus. You will need more than simple resilience, perseverance, and passion to push through these obstacles. You will need Holy Spirit inspired Godly grit.

If you desire to live life to its full, live the abundant life discussed in scripture, then pause and meditate on Romans 8:5-13 (TPT). *“Those who are motivated by the flesh only pursue what benefits themselves. But those who live by the impulses of the Holy Spirit are motivated to pursue spiritual realities. For the mind-set of the flesh is death, but the mind-set controlled by the Spirit finds life and peace.*

In fact, the mind-set focused on the flesh fights God's plan and refuses to submit to his direction, because it cannot! For no matter how hard they try, God finds no pleasure with those who are controlled by the flesh. But when the Spirit of Christ empowers your life, you are not dominated by the flesh but by the Spirit. And if you are not joined to the Spirit of the Anointed One, you are not of him.

Now Christ lives his life in you! And even though your body may be dead because of the effects of sin, his life-giving Spirit imparts life to you because you are fully accepted by God. Yes, God raised Jesus to life! And since God's Spirit of Resurrection lives in you, he will also raise your dying body to life by the same Spirit that breathes life into you!

So then, beloved ones, the flesh has no claims on us at all, and we have no further obligation to live in obedience to it. For when you live controlled by the flesh, you are about to die. But if the life of the Spirit puts to death the corrupt ways of the flesh, we then taste his abundant life." The Greek meaning of the word used for abundant means active, blessed, to have vital power, be fresh, be strong, and be efficient. The only way to know this abundant life is to grow in your knowledge of God.

If you press in to know God, there are multiple benefits. Firstly, God will reveal Himself to you. Knowing God is the

first step to loving God, obeying God, serving God, and serving others. God loves us so we can love others. God forgives us so we can forgive others.

To know God means you are living as God intended you to live. Living this way will ignite your passion. This passion will result in increased vitality, a reason to live, and a renewed freshness. This is the abundant life of John 10:10 in action. If you do not have passion, you do not know God. Focus on knowing God, and your passion will return.

If you know God, you will be more aware of God's voice. Romans 8:16 (TPT), *"For the Holy Spirit makes God's fatherhood real to us as he whispers into our innermost being, 'You are God's beloved child!'"* The whispers of the Holy Spirit will give you direction and comfort. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the best grit booster and builder.

If you are growing in your knowledge of God, you will be living a life of increasing gratitude in all things. Gratitude is an expression of faith. Gratitude is a statement that you believe God is in control, and you can rest in that reality. If you are not grateful, you do not know God.

You will know you are growing in your knowledge of God by how you see yourself changing. You should expect to see a progression in the development of the fruit of the spirit, as recorded in Galatians 5:22-23 (TPT), *"But the fruit produced*

by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.” Take an honest look at this fruit. If you are growing in your knowledge of God, there should be more fruit this year than last year. If you are not more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, etc., then you need to question if you know God.

If you are growing in your knowledge of God, you will become less consumed by your life-struggles and more aware of others' struggles. Are you aware of the hurt and oppression of your neighbor or coworker? Does your own experience of injustice blind you? Do you know God?

One of the most exciting benefits of knowing God is that as a child of God, you get to proclaim His magnificent wonders. What an unbelievable honor. You are a child of God, and you get to introduce your Father to your world. If you seek to know God, He will help you uncover your voice to proclaim His majesty. To each of us has been given a unique voice.

If we start with our primary life priority being to know God, the rest will fall into place. If you have the grit to seek and know God, you will have the necessary grit for the other areas of your life. We need Godly grit because of man's fallen nature,

the spirit of antichrist, and the battle with principalities and powers. The Holy Spirit will guide and comfort us, but we still need to put on Christ's armor and set aside the weights that limit us. Hebrews 12:1 (TPT), *"As for us, we have all of these great witnesses who encircle us like clouds. So we must let go of every wound that has pierced us and the sin we so easily fall into. Then we will be able to run life's marathon race with passion and determination, for the path has been already marked out before us."* We will have all the grit we need for fulfilling God's purpose when we let go of every wound and sin. The battle we face is in the "letting go." We need to set aside the weights as they are uncovered, identify and pull-down strongholds that keep us paralyzed, and wrestle against the principalities and powers. Remember 2 Chronicles 20:15 (AMP), *"The LORD says this to you: 'Be not afraid or dismayed at this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God's.'"*

In Philippians 3:12-19 (TPT), Paul tells us about his God-seeking walk where he states, *"I admit that I haven't yet acquired the absolute fullness that I'm pursuing, but I run with passion into his abundance so that I may reach the purpose that Jesus Christ has called me to fulfill and wants me to discover. I don't depend on my own strength to accomplish this; however I do have one compelling focus: I forget all of the past as I fasten my heart to the future instead. I run straight for the divine invitation of reaching the heavenly goal"*

and gaining the victory-prize through the anointing of Jesus. So let all who are fully mature have this same passion, and if anyone is not yet gripped by these desires, God will reveal it to them. And let us all advance together to reach this victory-prize, following one path with one passion.

My beloved friends, imitate my walk with God and follow all those who walk according to the way of life we modeled before you. For there are many who live by different standards. As I've warned you many times (I weep as I write these words), they are enemies of the cross of the Anointed One and doom awaits them. Their god has possessed them and made them mute. Their boast is in their shameful lifestyles and their minds are in the dirt."

God is calling you; He is calling you to know Him. If you are struggling with finding your calling or purpose in life, you will find it by seeking to know God. In knowing God, living your purpose, and exercising your God-given voice, you will find your Godly grit will grow. To be Christlike is to live our lives for the glory and honor of God as we demonstrate His love to others. It is living a legacy of love. Not a legacy of our love; if that were the case, we would be doomed. It is living a life that demonstrates God's legacy of love towards us all. Press towards the mark, set aside what is holding you back, exercise your Godly grit, find and use your voice, and live the abundant life that God has provided. You will have to stretch, but it is

within reach.

Chapter 8 – Your Voice

It was a sweltering, dry, and dusty afternoon in late June. We were in beautiful Sunriver, Oregon, with a couple of our children and grandchildren. The heat was getting the best of us as we sat in an Airbnb's unairconditioned living room. We were all tired, and the youngest granddaughter had reached her limit. She did not cry; she did not scream; she just grumbled. The high-pitched grumbling of a six-year-old when you are hot and exhausted is exceptionally annoying. When you are six and cute, you can usually get away with some irritating complaining but not on this day. In frustration, her uncle spoke up, “use your voice.” This situation got me thinking about how most people, devoid of voice, speak in grumblese. We mumble and complain as we live in constant frustration consumed with needless distraction. On the other hand, if we can find our voice, we find freedom from that frustration and distraction.

We all have a voice, but only a few will find it and use it for its intended purpose. Your voice is a gift from God; it is unique and is the expression of your purpose. Your voice is why you exist. If you find your voice, exercise it appropriately, and use it as intended, you will find that it comes equipped with an ample supply of sustaining grit.

Have you found your voice? Are you exercising your voice? Are you using your voice?

God made us all unique individuals. When I immigrated from Canada in 1992, my uniqueness was determined by a fingerprint. From the time I left Canada until I became a US citizen, I had my fingerprints recorded seven times. Your fingerprints are unique. When I travel back to see family in Canada, I stop at a kiosk that snaps a photo of my retina. I am identified as unique by the blood vessels on the back of my eye. I live in Oregon, where my driver's license is part of a database that identifies me as unique based on facial features. When I call my bank in Canada, I am recognized as unique by their voice recognition software without logging in or entering a password.

We are all unique, with unique DNA and a unique voice. We are all unique in the eyes of God, as recorded in Psalm 139:16 (TPT), "*You saw who you created me to be before I became me!*" Your voice has a theme, a form of expression, and a

message. God gave you your voice to bring glory to Him. Unique in presentation and composition, but united in purpose. Your voice is the expression of your life, a proclamation of everything God has given. It is your way of uniquely expressing God's glorious wonders. It is the living of 1 Corinthians 10:31 (TPT) "*Whether you eat or drink, live your life in a way that glorifies and honors God.*" Your voice is to demonstrate the attributes of God as the fruit of the Spirit recorded in Galatians 5:22-23. Your voice is your unique way of displaying and expressing God's love to the glory of God in the service of humanity. As disciples of Jesus, we all have a calling. Our calling is not unique; we are all called to Him. He has given us unique gifts, talents, interests, opportunities, and passions for His glory. Our calling is the same, but our voices are different. When you seek Him, you will find Him, and you will find your voice. You do not have to search for your voice or feel pressured if your voice is different than your neighbor's. The voices of all of God's children are needed as reported in 1 Peter 4:10 (TPT), "*Every believer has received grace gifts, so use them to serve one another as faithful stewards of the many-colored tapestry of God's grace.*" We are knit together as God's quilt of love to the world.

1 Peter 2:9 (TPT), "*But you are God's chosen treasure - priests who are kings, a spiritual "nation" set apart as God's devoted ones. He called you out of darkness to experience*

his marvelous light, and now he claims you as his very own. He did this so that you would broadcast his glorious wonders throughout the world.” You are God’s treasure, and your voice is present to proclaim His wonders.

Your voice is the expression of the authentic you. The you that God fashioned and empowered.

The purpose of your voice is to glorify God as the unique, authentic individual that He created. There is a lot of room for a wide variety of voice themes and expressions. What is the authentic you? What are your interests, talents, gifts, and passions? How do you see yourself expressing the fruit of the spirit and the image of God?

The following is a list of possible voice themes. Pause and consider what may be your theme. You will find that several of these themes may describe you, but you will also find that one is more dominant. Be aware of what energizes you. In what section of God’s great choir do you sit?

Artistic theme – Do you have an eye for beauty in its many wondrous forms? Are you energized by creating art? Art takes many forms from painting, photography, film production, sculpture, music, poetry, architecture, design, and cooking. If you have a passion for the beauty you experience and a desire to share it with others, then your voice may have an artistic theme.

Encourager theme – Are you passionate about helping others? Do you see yourself as having the gift of “helps?” Are you keenly aware of the needs of others and where you may be encouraging? Encouragement takes many forms, from volunteering time, being generous with what God has provided, to speaking words of encouragement during a time of vulnerability. If you are passionate about praying for others and taking action to build them up, your voice theme may be that of the encourager.

Teacher theme – Do you have a passion for learning and an ability to explain in simple terms what may seem complicated? Do you enjoy researching a matter and looking for solutions? Do you love studying, reading, and evaluating? If you are passionate about becoming an expert in a field and sharing that knowledge with others, your voice theme may be that of the teacher.

Performer theme – Are you skilled at telling a story? Do you have the passion and ability to bring people together to build community? Do you experience joy in planning events and special occasions? If you are sensitive to the mood in a room and are passionate about improving that mood, your voice theme is that of the performer.

Nurturer theme – Do you have the same gifts and passions as the encourager but the patience and resilience to be present

for a long time? The nurturer is the encourager for a smaller number of people for a more extended period.

Boundary establishment theme – Do you have a passion for relational order? Do you have the ability to see both sides of an issue and evaluate unemotionally? Can you bring two disagreeing parties together and find a common purpose? Would you be a fair judge? If you have a passion for relational order, for balancing rewards and responsibilities while establishing consequences, your voice theme may be the theme of a boundary establisher.

Reporter theme – Would you be described as overly curious? Do you enjoy asking questions? If you are curious and ask lots of questions, and are passionate about sharing your findings with others, your voice theme may be a reporter's theme.

Prophetic theme - Do you feel driven to find the truth? Are you passionate about authenticity, even if rejected by others? Does your stand for the truth offend someone? If you are passionate about truth and authenticity and sharing with others for their benefit, your voice theme may be the prophet's theme.

Order establisher theme – Is it necessary to you that your possessions have a proper storage place? Do you put things back where they belong? Are you troubled by unnecessary

disorder? If you have a passion for efficient orderliness and enjoy sharing your discoveries with others, you may have the voice theme of order establisher.

Pause to consider what may be your voice theme. You may find you have several voice themes and that they have changed over the years. What is your dominant theme today? For each theme, there are limitless opportunities and mechanisms for expression. How will you express your voice today to bring glory to God and advance His kingdom?

It is impossible to list all the possible voice delivery mechanisms, so I will name just a few to give you an idea. It is up to you to consider and embrace your instrument. What are your God-given gifts and talents? Are you using them?

You can express your voice artistically. There are limitless modalities of creative artistic endeavor. God is a God of beauty and creativity, and His glory can be communicated to the world through art. The art activities could range from finger painting to marble sculpture. Do you have a passion for a form of art? Do you share your gifts, talents, and passions with others? What does your art tell your world about the God who loves them and you? You can express your voice through music. In 1 Samuel 16:23 (MSG), we read about the impact of music on the soul, *“After that, whenever the bad depression from God tormented Saul, David got out*

his harp and played. That would calm Saul down, and he would feel better as the moodiness lifted.” God’s created world is filled with soul-soothing music. As recorded in Colossians 3:16 (TPT), God desires music to be a part of our relationship with Him, *“Let the word of Christ live in you richly, flooding you with all wisdom. Apply the Scriptures as you teach and instruct one another with the Psalms, and with festive praises, and with prophetic songs given to you spontaneously by the Spirit, so sing to God with all your hearts!”* Music can be sung, played, or appreciated. Do you have a passion for music? Are you using your talents for music to bring glory to God? You can express your voice in writing. As difficult as it may be, do you enjoy crafting a sentence, lyric, or line that communicates clearly and effectively? Writing does not have to be a novel or theological masterpiece. Writing a card of encouragement or appreciation can go a long way in demonstrating God’s love. You can express your voice in actions or acts of service. An act of service could be the development of a company or improving your place of work. Do you enjoy enhancing your environment or the environments of others? Do you have a talent for creating order out of chaos? God is a God of order, and your actions to develop order can bring glory to His name. These productive actions can be an individual effort, a group effort, or support for others’ efforts. You can express your voice with your voice. Timely spoken words of

encouragement are potent. Spoken words are powerful. We need to be continuously reminded of Proverbs 18:21 (NKJV), *“Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”* Be conscientious about what you speak. If you want to eat good fruit, you will have to say life-giving words. You do not have to be a gifted orator to speak peace and life or share the love of God.

All the voice mechanisms need nurturing in prayer. If you claim you are a child of God, you should spend time talking to Him. Only as your intimacy with God is growing will you grow in awareness and expression of your voice. Intimate time with God is the womb for your developing voice. So, pause, and lean in on God for direction, comfort, and strength. His Holy Spirit will infuse your passion and perseverance.

Your voice is the expression of your unique purpose for demonstrating God’s love to the world. God gave you a unique voice, and you were made to find, exercise, and use your voice. If you develop an intimate relationship with God, you will find the voice He gave you. Exercising and utilizing this voice will generate its own grit. It is energizing and freeing to be the authentic you created to know God and glorify Him.

The purpose of your voice is to glorify God and advance His kingdom. You should not use your voice to gain attention or affirmation. 1 Peter 5:6 (TPT), *“If you bow low in God’s*

awesome presence, he will eventually exalt you as you leave the timing in his hands.” The relentless pursuit of affirmation will eventually leave you burnt out and empty. Living God’s way, you are free to pursue a passion without being focused on recognition or affirmation. You are free to look ahead and not around to determine direction and success based on God’s definition. Live by God’s standard.

Remember that the giftedness to express your God-given voice comes from God. God has given gifts to all, as recorded in Romans 11:29 (TPT), *“And when God chooses someone and graciously imparts gifts to him, they are never rescinded.”* Do not arrogantly believe your gifts come from you because you are somehow special. Yes, you are special in God’s eyes, and He gave you your gifts. You need to seek Him and apply your Godly grit to use the gifts He gave you.

If you use your voice in this way to glorify God, you will be partnering with Him. This is how we were intended to live, walking with God and not pleading God to walk with us. 2 Peter 1:2-4 (TPT), *“May grace and perfect peace cascade over you as you live in the rich knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. Everything we could ever need for life and complete devotion to God has already been deposited in us by his divine power. For all this was lavished upon us through the rich experience of knowing him who has called us by name and invited us to come to him through a glorious manifestation of*

his goodness. As a result of this, he has given you magnificent promises that are beyond all price, so that through the power of these tremendous promises you can experience partnership with the divine nature, by which you have escaped the corrupt desires that are of the world.”

Pause and consider your voice. Metaphorically speaking, God has given His children a place in a massive choir that has gathered to sing of His glory. You were given a ticket to this choir that identifies your seat. On that ticket, there is a place identifying the section (theme), row (a delivery mechanism), and seat number (your place today). Your task is to follow the information on that ticket, find your seat, and begin exercising your voice.

It is energizing and fulfilling to use your voice as it was intended. However, to live authentically, you will face many obstacles that will require Godly grit. The struggle is to find, exercise, and express your voice. No one can find or speak your voice for you, and no one can take it away.

You must press into God to find your voice. You will face many distractions from the urgency of life events and responsibilities. You will face discouragements along with ridicule, rejection, uncertainty, and insecurity. It is difficult to find your voice if your grit bucket is empty or you have insufficient grit or resilience. Much of the time, you will have

to dig deep to rely on the Holy Spirit's infused grit to "*press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*" Philippians 3:14 (KJV)

Chapter 9 – The Press

If we pause for a moment of contemplation, we must admit that life is complicated. We are often left struggling without the necessary answers to important questions. Even though we have the God of the universe on our side and all His resources at hand, we are still left feeling powerless and confused. The apostle Paul describes the life of stretching to become like Christ in Philippians 3:12-16 (AMP), *“Not that I have already obtained it [this goal of being Christlike] or have already been made perfect, but I actively press on so that I may take hold of that [perfection] for which Christ Jesus took hold of me and made me His own. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have made it my own yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the [heavenly] prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. All*

of us who are mature [pursuing spiritual perfection] should have this attitude. And if in any respect you have a different attitude, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us stay true to what we have already attained.”

We need to “actively press” because we have an enemy and obstacles that try to thwart our progress.

Part of being carnally minded is losing track of spiritual realities. Carnal problems are tangible, concrete, and definable. We believe that life’s difficulties are physical, and we downplay the reality that there is an enemy. The enemy’s purpose is described in John 10:10 (TPT), “*A thief has only one thing in mind—he wants to steal, slaughter, and destroy. But I have come to give you everything in abundance, more than you expect - life in its fullness until you overflow!*” The enemy knows you well and wants to steal, slaughter, and destroy your voice, your joy, your spiritual growth, your knowledge of God, and your peace. You are not able to defeat this enemy on your own.

Our real battles in life are not with our boss, our rebellious teenager, our nasty neighbor, or someone from an opposing political party. Our struggle is in the spiritual realm that controls our thoughts and emotions. 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 (TPT), “*For although we live in the natural realm, we don’t wage a military campaign employing human weapons, using*

manipulation to achieve our aims. Instead, our spiritual weapons are energized with divine power to effectively dismantle the defenses behind which people hide. We can demolish every deceptive fantasy that opposes God and break through every arrogant attitude that is raised up in defiance of the true knowledge of God. We capture, like prisoners of war, every thought and insist that it bow in obedience to the Anointed One. Since we are armed with such dynamic weaponry, we stand ready to punish any trace of rebellion, as soon as you choose complete obedience.”

Do you want to know God? Do you want to live with freedom and vitality in seeking and serving God? Do you want to be able to set aside the burdens that trip you up and slow you down? If you are going to be the unique person that God made you, you will need to renew your mind. Romans 12:2 (TPT), *“Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the culture around you, but be inwardly transformed by the Holy Spirit through a total reformation of how you think. This will empower you to discern God’s will as you live a beautiful life, satisfying and perfect in his eyes.”* This renewing of your mind needs to be a daily occurrence, a washing with His word as described in Ephesians 5:26 (TPT), *“to make us holy and pure, cleansing us through the showering of the pure water of the Word of God.”*

To live this life of seeking God, finding your voice, using your

voice, battling against principalities and powers, we will all need a healthy dose of Godly grit. The rest of this book will cover some of these battlegrounds with the hope that we will lessen our burdens and run the race set before us with spirit-infused power, passion, and perseverance. We have a God who wants to be known. We have a voice to use. We have strongholds to tear down. We have storehouses to build.

How full is your bucket of Godly grit? Would you like more? Would you like to know how to use that grit appropriately? Would you like to know what it is like to live a life where your “burdens are light?”

Chapter 10 – Tearing Down Strongholds

Life is like a long, long race. While living in northern California in the mid-90s, I determined to complete the “Death Ride.” The event’s name has recently been changed to the “Tour of the California Alps” to be politically correct. The Death Ride is a cycling event south of Lake Tahoe, where the goal is to cycle up and down five separate mountain passes in less than twelve hours. The course is 129 miles long, with a total climb of 15,000 feet. So, I bought a decent road bike on clearance and began to train. Cycling is a unique blend of fitness, skill, knowledge, and equipment. If you are cycling for fitness, the weight of your bike does not matter. If you are cycling for performance, every ounce counts, and you can spend a lot of money to make your bicycle weigh a few ounces less. What was surprising to me was what I witnessed during the Death Ride. The bikes were a collection of fantastic performance machines, but many of the riders were not.

Many of the riders who were unable to complete the arduous ride attempted to carry a weight that prevented their success. There is only minimal benefit for your bike to weigh a few ounces less when you, as the rider, need to shed twenty five excess pounds. This experience reminded me of Hebrews 12:1 (AMPC), where it states, *“Therefore then, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [who have borne testimony to the Truth], let us strip off and throw aside every encumbrance (unnecessary weight) and that sin which so readily (deftly and cleverly) clings to and entangles us, and let us run with patient endurance and steady and active persistence the appointed course of the race that is set before us.”* If we expect to move ahead in our lives, we need to set aside the unnecessary weight. The weight that we think hinders us is often not the weight slowing us. Felt shortcomings are used as excuses for advancement when they matter little. We believe the weight holding us back is our lack of finances, physical abilities, environment, heredity, or present-life situation. These excuses are the equivalent of spending hundreds of dollars, so your bicycle pedal weighs a few ounces less while you still carry an excess forty pounds. The weights we need to set aside that are holding us back are called strongholds, and God has provided the means to tear them down. 2 Corinthians 10:4 (NIV) *“The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.”*

What is a stronghold, and how do we tear them down? A stronghold is a barrier to experiencing God and His path and plan for your life. A stronghold is any and every system of belief, state of mind, or external circumstance that distracts from knowing God by turning your attention onto yourself. A stronghold is a distraction, a burden, or a stumbling block. If the enemy can cause you to focus on yourself, your situation, your turmoil, or your emotional pain, the stronghold will effectively block your progress. If you expect to move ahead successfully in your life, keep in mind the advice in Hebrews 12:1 (AMPC), and - *“let us strip off and throw aside every encumbrance (unnecessary weight) and that sin which so readily (deftly and cleverly) clings to and entangles us.”* The encumbrance is the stronghold, and the sin which so readily clings to and entangles us is the cry from the wounded, afflicted, offended heart proclaiming, “IT IS ALL ABOUT ME.” This “all about me” world view may be appropriate if you are three, but it is not warranted or productive if you are an adult. No, you may not speak those words, but instead, you will disguise your victim role in language and beliefs that ultimately steal, kill, and destroy your voice, dreams, and life. Please do not fool yourself; it is not all about you. It is all about Him. This human tendency to take an insult and embrace it is why it is essential to be aware of strongholds and the areas in our life that are stopping our growth.

We experience a stronghold as an ongoing self-focusing rumination. About what do you ruminate? Are you aware you are ruminating? Chances are good; you are either ruminating on an offense or meditating on the goodness of God.

So, what are these strongholds? To aid in understanding, I have divided the various strongholds into categories. The categories are existential strongholds, environmental strongholds, and personal strongholds. We will be looking at twenty specific strongholds. This list addresses most of the strongholds used by the enemy to steal, kill, and destroy. The enemy cannot physically put a brick on your path to stub your toe, but he can whisper a thought that can cause you to fall off a cliff.

Existential strongholds are the result of the fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3. When God breathed life into the first man, God also gave him His image. The intact image of God was part of humanity's DNA. In the original design, humankind was to experience intimacy with God and other humans. We had purpose and power as co-creators with God. We were not designed to experience death but to live for eternity in a relationship with God. We were made with the capacity for intimacy, meaning, purpose, ability, immortality, and wholeness. With the fall of man, our God-given image was damaged. We now wrestle with the existential strongholds of isolation, meaninglessness, powerlessness,

mortality, and spiritual emptiness. We feel disconnected because we are disconnected. The enemy uses these strongholds to drown you in the sea of “if only.” “If only I had more friends; if only I had more money; if only I was smarter; if only I had a new house; if only I had better opportunities; if only I had a better education; if only; if only; if only... Struggling with these issues drains a little bit of our grit daily. We are now more vulnerable to stress and environmental pressures. Your bucket that contains the grit you need for your day has several holes in it because of these existential strongholds. The good news is that Christ died for you to bring you back into a relationship with God and provide a path where these grit-bucket holes can be patched. God, through Christ, has provided a way for restoration.

Environmental strongholds are the result of stress-producing events in our lives and the way we approach those events. We face daily events that are threatening, require change, cause confusion, strain our sense of responsibility, or cause shame. The enemy uses the strongholds of fear with worry, confusion about self, uncertainty, misplaced responsibility, and angst about past transgressions to steal, kill, and destroy. These environmental stressors face us daily; we experience them and have to deal with them. They cause us to focus on the immediate and urgent and set aside the important and the eternal.

Personal strongholds are those that directly affect our world view. Some of these strongholds are how we choose to interact and interpret the world, and others are situations that leave us feeling hopelessly stuck. All these personal strongholds are a response to a real or perceived offense and encourage us to be powerless victims. If the offense is perceived injustice, the result is bitterness. If the offense is a perceived lack of something necessary, the result is greed. If the offense is a perceived unbearable loss, the product is grief. If the offense is a perceived loss of control, the result is legalism. If the offense is experienced as physical pain, the result is agony. If the offense is a perceived craving for a substance or activity, the product is an addiction. If the offense is deep insecurity, the result is self-love or narcissism.

The strongholds are what the enemy uses to cause disease in your soul; to get you to take your eyes off God and focus on yourself. It may be my many years of work as a physician, but if you struggle with life-altering symptoms, the right place to start is to diagnose the disease. Do you feel stuck? Are you growing? Strongholds will show up disguised as fatigue, discouragement, loss of energy, loss of joy, and peace, with a lessening of the fruit of the Spirit.

The first place to start tearing down strongholds is to pause and pray Psalm 139:23 (TPT), *“God, I invite your searching gaze into my heart. Examine me through and through; find*

out everything that may be hidden within me. Put me to the test and sift through all my anxious cares.” He is the Great Physician; He will show you the areas of your heart that require healing.

Once you identify the stronghold, you need to see it for what it is; a lie of the enemy leading to your destruction. Now you need to apply your Spirit infused Godly grit to tear down that stronghold. You do not need to go chasing after strongholds; tear them down as they show themselves.

Maintain your primary life focus. Seek to know God in all you do and all you experience. Keep exercising and utilizing your God-given voice.

Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30 (TPT), *“Are you weary, carrying a heavy burden? Then come to me. I will refresh your life, for I am your oasis. Simply join your life with mine. Learn my ways and you’ll discover that I’m gentle, humble, easy to please. You will find refreshment and rest in me. For all that I require of you will be pleasant and easy to bear.”* Tear down those strongholds, cast them aside; do not carry unnecessary weight.

Chapter 11 – Existential Strongholds

We live in an age of abundance. We have a wealth of food, distractions, entertainment, possessions, and an overabundance of information. We have all we could need, but we still want more. With all we have, you would think we would also have an abundance of contentment. Instead, we have a wealth of discontentment. It does not matter if you have a lot or have just enough to survive; we all struggle with the same significant issues. Suicide and addiction rates are climbing as we continue to anguish amid our affluence. We struggle with factors that have been the cause of turmoil since the first man, Adam. So, you may be wealthy, or you may be impoverished, you may be famous, or you may feel insignificant. Your status does not matter; we all struggle with the same issues. We all wrestle with the pain of feeling isolated and alone. We all struggle with our meaning and purpose. We are all crushed by an awareness of our weakness and how powerless we are where it matters. We

all walk under the dark cloud of our mortality as we work hard to deny our eventual demise.

We struggle under the weight of emptiness with a felt distance between ourselves and our creator. These are the burdens we all share. These burdens cause unbearable pain and cry out for relief. We now live our lives focused on personal comfort at any cost. We become self-centered and self-protective. Our actions only increase our awareness of our isolation, meaninglessness, powerlessness, frailty, and emptiness. So, we push and strive even harder. We treat obstacles as offenses and become bitter in our relentless striving for comfort. As we reach out for support, what we get in return is misery. This overwhelming misery is experienced emotionally and physically and does not have a successful psychological or medical cure. So, what is the answer to this plague of despair?

When God created Adam, He placed him in a world He defined as being very good. With the breath of God, Adam awoke with a body and a spirit. Adam was different from the rest of the animals. Adam possessed the image of God. Somewhere in the intricate sequencing of humanities' DNA is the original God-breathed image. This image has the capacity for intimate, meaningful relationships with God and fellow man. This image was made for beneficial work that has meaning and purpose. Work that would be fulfilling. The

image also has a capacity for creativity and power. It can accomplish a plan with a purpose. This image was made to be immortal with the full awareness and appreciation of eternity. The understanding of death was not part of this image. This image also fostered a thorough knowledge that man was more than a physical being. A man was also a spiritual being, and within that spiritual part is where access to contentment existed. Adam was complete, as God intended; his body and his spirit were alive and well. But, like all men since, Adam wanted more. He turned his back on God and, in the process, opened the door for humanity's ongoing struggles. Since that time, man has been living with a fractured image. The image was to be our glory but has become the source of our anguish.

In our anguish and turmoil, there is some good news. God has provided a path of reconciliation so we can live today as God originally intended. We do not have to remain stuck in the mud of relentless misery.

Henry David Thoreau said: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation and die with their song still inside them." Is that how you would like to live your life? A life of despair where you bury your potential, or would you like to live your life with creativity and enthusiasm? We have this overbearing weight in our chest, that communicates that something fundamental is not right. This weight has the power to hobble us and

prevent personal growth. This weight is experienced as intense boredom, the awful pain of loss or failure, the tension of irresolvable conflict, the anguish of inadequacy, the oppressive darkness of aloneness, the despair of hopelessness, the restlessness of meaninglessness, and the angst of perpetual uncertainty. The source of this angst is the existential strongholds.

These strongholds are existential in that they are present in all humans; they are realities that are part of our essence. They are burdens in that they are a load we must carry, no matter how oppressive or worrisome. No one else can take these burdens for you. Every moment of our lives is pregnant with the potential for an existential crisis when we become paralyzed by questions regarding our life: does our life have any meaning, purpose, or value? We are at some level deep within our being aware of this potential and the impact it could have. We do our best to keep a lid on this angst through distractions, actions, denial, and superstitions. We live in an age ripe with the potential for an existential crisis, where the man of quiet desperation is not so quiet anymore.

Suppose we are to have any hope of living a full and meaningful life. In that case, we need to address the following existential issues: the burden of isolation, the burden of meaninglessness, the burden of responsibility, the burden of mortality, and the weight of spiritual emptiness. We need to

recognize and tear down these strongholds. If we do not address these areas, we will be ensuring our place as one of the people Thoreau describes as living a life of quiet desperation. Yes, we may have fleeting moments of delight, but are more likely to have seasons of despair as our distractions show themselves to be inadequate.

These existential strongholds are a powerful force. If left unaddressed, they can lead to despair, greed, bitterness, anger, depleted resilience, and lost potential. If, on the other hand, you acknowledge these areas, and they are accepted and appropriately addressed, they can be a source of unbelievable energy, creativity, and spiritual awakening.

If we desire to be the vibrant, creative humans that God intended, then we need a plan for dealing with these profoundly troubling issues.

In Psalm 39:6 (TPT), we read: *“We live our lives like those living in shadows. All our activities and energies are spent on things that pass away. We gather, we hoard, we cling to our things, only to leave them all behind for who knows who.”*

Do you feel you are living in a shadow? Do you think that your life has passed? You work hard, consider others, act justly, are compassionate, and empathetic – yet it is all for what? You still feel alone and useless, with no apparent purpose.

We are all aware of this potential for an existential crisis and the impact it could have. Instead, we do our best to keep it caged and live our busy lives disconnected from each other, confused about our purpose, abandoning our potential, feeding our desires, and starving our soul.

So, what are these strongholds that affect all men?

Firstly, is the stronghold of isolation. Isolation and the reality that even though we live in a world of many others, we often feel, and are, very isolated and alone. You can experience isolation at different levels. There is interpersonal isolation – where you feel physically isolated from others. You can also experience isolation as intrapersonal isolation, where, in the presence of even loving, positive relationships, there are areas where secrets exist, and there is a felt distance in the relationship. There is also existential isolation where it is impossible ever to experience another human being's subjectivity. In other words, nobody knows me, and I do not really know anyone else. We live with a fear of rejection. We need to be aware of this reality, be willing to explore its significance, and accept it for what it is. It is also important to realize everyone else experiences this same sense of isolation. We live in a crowd of isolated individuals.

Another existential issue we struggle with is meaninglessness. Searching for meaning is a reality of

human life. What it boils down to is the question, “why are we here, or why do we exist?”

We can pursue meaning on three levels. We can seek false meaning, transitory meaning, or ultimate meaning.

False meaning is a type of meaning or purpose that is often just a pleasant or unpleasant diversion. It is the pursuit of activities for immediate pleasure that often are harmful. In the long run, the pursuit of food, drink, drugs, money, power, or any other action considered immediately pleasurable is not connected to any form of lasting meaning. These pursuits can be a useful diversion from the angst of these existential burdens for a season, but they will eventually be inadequate if they do not kill you first.

Transitory meaning is where the pursuit is not destructive, but neither does it give any lasting meaning or purpose. Developing skills, achieving success, receiving education, and pursuing beneficial interests may not harm us: they keep us busy and distracted but do not provide any ultimate or lasting meaning.

We find ultimate meaning through a relationship with something or someone greater than us. This ultimate meaning transcends the other issues of relationship, mortality, and choice and can put those other areas into a proper perspective. The question is: how do you find this meaning?

The burden of free choice is another existential stronghold. We are in the privileged and yet, the terrifying position of being able to create who we are through the choices we make. The frightening part is that it is our personal and individual responsibility to make those choices. If you abandon your responsibility through living as a victim, with bitterness, fear, or anger, you are also giving up your power and ability to create a new you. It is ultimately your choice, a choice that should be freedom and not a hindrance.

Another existential stronghold is the burden of mortality. Our eventual death is an issue all human beings face. For many people, the subconscious anxiety caused by a fear of death is behind their daily anguish. This fear is a reality we need to acknowledge and accept. It is not healthy to live oblivious to death or to live in constant fear of death. If you value and count your days, you are more likely to use them wisely.

Lastly is the stronghold of spiritual emptiness, a self-centered life, disconnected from God and the universe. Wrestling with how we fit in this complex universe is a significant burden. As individuals, we are our only experience of the world, and that experience is very inadequate. God's creation is a complex entity of which we are only a small part. No matter how much we study and investigate, much of it remains a mystery. How we fit into this grand design is a cause for anguish. We know there is a designer, and we know we are not that designer.

How should we relate to the designer?

These existential strongholds can either hold us in a pit of despair or direct us to a well of creative energy. Unresolved issues with the existential strongholds cause an undercurrent of unrest. This unrest is painful boredom that is unsettling, troubling, and at times feels like insanity. Even though we may not be able to identify it, we know something is wrong, and we need to do something, anything, to lessen the pain. This unrest drains our resilience, energy, vitality, and drive. It becomes a distraction from moving ahead with life. We are left carrying a heavy burden, and we are left drained and discouraged. We abandon our creativity and potential as we must use all our resources to carry the weight.

The discomfort caused by these existential strongholds demands a solution, some level of comfort that will allow us to continue living our lives and not remain stuck in an existential crisis. We are willing to gain this comfort with little regard for the cost – our motto becomes “comfort at any cost.” We are eager to spend whatever we must in the passionate pursuit of comfort through distractions like drugs, alcohol, hobbies, sports, entertainment, relationships, or work. But this feverish pursuit never brings us any substantial or lasting comfort. The relentless pursuit of pleasure leads to disaster. We are left drained, disappointed, and in despair.

The anguish caused by this life of quiet desperation can be consuming. It leaves us with no resilience and no desire to move ahead with our lives. At this point, we have lost our creativity, and options for our future seem nonexistent. It is no wonder people in this state bury themselves in drugs, alcohol, or self-destructive activities. It is not a big step from consuming anguish to terminal despair – a life of depression, chronic anxiety, psychosis, or suicide.

These issues are part of all our lives; they are part of what it means to be human.

Most often, these strongholds take us on a path of slow destruction. But as we shall see, if handled productively God's way, can have the power to transform us and awaken our creativity and potential.

I invite you to join me on this challenging journey to explore these strongholds and see if we can find that path of freedom and potential - the way leading us back to God and the restoration of our God-image.

Chapter 12 – Stronghold 1 – Isolation

Isolation is a deep, painful craving for connection. God created us with a longing for belonging. A yearning that is never fully met. God made humanity for intimacy, to love, and to know we are loved. The enemy uses every experience of rejection or isolation to plant the thought that we are not worthy of being loved. We are not worthy of being loved by other humans, and we are not worthy of being loved by God. We feel we must somehow change ourselves to become more lovable. We live with a fear that if identified for who we are, others will reject us. We are afraid of being authentic.

We live in an age of accessible communication but a growing sense of isolation and disconnectedness. We seem to crave and demand connection more than ever. We search for and, at times, require relationships that will lessen the pain of loneliness. We also demand that these relationships validate our need to feel complete, achieve some sense of immortality,

and confirm our life choices. We also request that these relationships confirm that our directions are worthwhile and that we are somehow spiritually intact and connected. Our current cultural connections have extraordinarily little to do with who we are and more to do with how we present ourselves. We superficially join around shared beliefs, political affiliations, sports teams, gangs, and music genres. We take less time to pause as a community to consider life and how we should live our lives. We attend church less frequently. We have fewer funerals. We have fewer small group discussions about how to live and more superficial discussions around the latest computer games, cars, or sports teams. We have more superficial connections but less meaningful relationships, and we are more willing to compromise or abandon our beliefs to feel like we belong. My grandparents grew up in a community that needed each other; they would not have survived without their family and neighbors' support. They worshiped together, they prayed together, and they spent time together. They did not go to sporting events or political rallies. They cried together at funerals and rejoiced together with the birth of a new family member. They were able to identify with a community, a community they needed, and a community that needed them. Unfortunately, we no longer need each other the way they needed each other. Our desire for connection has not changed in the last 100 years, but our need for each other has

vanished. Our affluence has brought us many advantages, but it has cost us the value of a connected community.

The erosion of connectedness has also significantly impacted our interpersonal relationships. We may have more interpersonal relationships, but they lack depth and meaning. We may have many people to talk to, but no one in which to confide. Our interpersonal connections are less face-to-face and more digital. Our thumbs fly over the little screen to maintain superficial connections. We follow our kids through Facebook and not conversations over dinner. As we race through life, we no longer pause to give meaningful relationships a priority.

Our need for connection drives us to bury our authentic self and madly work on a more presentable self, a person who will be more connected. In the process, we push away any real connection chance - connection with the true authentic self. We become nothing more than digital avatars. Our social media image becomes more important than our actual but terrified authentic self. If the isolation becomes too painful to consider, at least, we live in a time of limitless distractions. If we would like to avoid the pain of loneliness, we can always buy a new computer game, join a club, or drown our pain in drugs or alcohol. This life is the life of quiet desperation. If we want to have more meaningful connections and revive the authentic self – how do, we do that? We should

not be afraid of isolation. Your relationship with God develops and grows in that quiet place of isolation. To awaken the authentic self, we need a time of silence and solitude. We mature in isolation; we uncover genius in solitude. If we feel we are continually observed, amid the noise and daily demands of life, there is no room to create brilliance. You need that place of isolation to figure out who you are and what kind of person you want to be. We have become so used to the sound of our busy world it causes anxiety to be without it – try turning off all electronic devices and sitting in a quiet room in complete silence for ten minutes. The silence is extremely uncomfortable because it is foreign. We have become comfortable with superficial, meaningless connections. For a moment, pause.

Pause and consider the following: Do you feel alone and isolated? Do you have others with whom you can confide? Are you working hard to create an image of yourself to be more acceptable to others? Are you authentic? What do you use as distractions from the pain of disconnection?

We live in an age of growing isolation amid limitless distractions and superficial connections. We end up wasting a lot of our life trying to fight or change what we cannot change. You feel isolated and alone because you are isolated and alone. In other words, nobody knows you well, and you do not know anyone else very well. We do have connections,

but the relationships are never good enough to eliminate the pain of isolation. You may be more distracted in a group, but you feel just as isolated in a group as you do on a desert island, at times even more isolated. You are not going to change this reality of life. Yes, you can do things to feel and be more connected, but you will still feel isolated in the end.

Accept this reality for what it is: you may be the star quarterback in a stadium of 80,000 cheering fans, but who can you confide in - they care about how you perform or what you can do for them but do not care about you.

There will always be a distance in all relationships that will emphasize our awareness of felt isolation and aloneness. Isolation is a universal experience, so be aware; those closest to you also feel isolated. Take time to consider their pain.

When considering this stronghold of isolation, you have several choices. You can fight the sense of isolation and pour all your energies into seeking connection - chances are all this will do is push away those from whom you are demanding a relationship. This pursuit of a relationship will require that you compromise your authentic self to be more acceptable. The process of compromising your authentic self through pretense will only leave you more aware of your isolation and aloneness.

You could deny the reality and just live with a sense something is not right. You can then feverishly seek out more ways to distract yourself - buy a new car, try a new sport, join a new club - the choices are endless and will allow you to remain busy, distracted, and empty for several lifetimes. This path of distraction is the path chosen by most people.

On the other hand, you could accept the reality of felt isolation as a lie of the devil. The enemy wants you to believe you are all alone and should ruminate on the pain of isolation. The enemy seeks to subtly convince you that you are not worthy of being loved by others or by God. This belief is a lie! Meditate on Hebrews 13:5 (TPT), *“I will never leave you alone, never! And I will not loosen my grip on your life!”*

If we want to control the stronghold of isolation and the fear of being alone, we will have to learn to embrace it as a reality. By acknowledging it and seeing it as a lie, we allow ourselves to no longer be controlled by it; we can lessen its hold on us. We are beginning to tear down this stronghold. Denying this burden through distractions or drowning in drugs and alcohol will not help. Avoiding this reality or running from it in fear will not help. So, how do we do this?

First, we must pause to consider how isolation has been a burden in our lives and how that burden has impacted us and affected the crucial decisions we have made in the past. What

have you done to lessen the pain of isolation? What were the consequences of those decisions and the path they led you to follow? I can recall several abysmal life decisions I have made in the past as I attempted to lessen the burden of felt isolation.

Felt isolation is painful. Solitary confinement is still a form of severe punishment. Prison is separation from those you care about - from those who care about you. Isolation can hurt deeply! Subjectively felt pain is selfish and demands comfort. The enemy wants to be convinced that it is all about you. Drop a brick on your toe, and all you will be thinking about is your sore toe. Felt pain is a loud voice demanding all our focus and attention. The pain caused by felt isolation forces you to think about the isolation and the unfortunate state you are in - it makes you more self-centered and self-focused. The pain caused by perceived isolation, by making you more self-centered, increases the felt isolation. If, on the other hand, you see the lie, you embrace the truth that God loves you and recognize that all other humans share this burden, then it can be a point of connection and not a cause for separation. Shared pain is uniting; individual pain is isolating. The truth that God loves you, even when you experience rejection from others, will set you free.

The acceptance and appreciation of this isolation burden can free you to grow in two significant ways. It can improve

meaningful connections with others by recognizing we all share this burden, and it can strengthen authenticity by freeing you to embrace productive silence and solitude.

What you share with other humans can draw you together and not separate you. If you approach others looking for or demanding a connection from them, you will only increase your sense of isolation. If, on the other hand, you approach others, realizing they feel the pain of loneliness as much as you, and you are present to offer connection, then you are more likely to find a more meaningful relationship. Do not work to find others to connect to as a way of dismissing your felt isolation. God loves you so you can love others. You will experience more of God's love as you focus on loving others. Look at how you can offer a meaningful connection. Focus on being more trustworthy, hold confidences, be kind, be honest, be humble, and remain thankful. You are more likely to get what you offer than to get what you demand.

Put aside pretense. A manufactured, false image will only foster incorrect, meaningless, pressure-filled connections with others. If you want meaningful, genuine relationships, you need to be authentic. So, what does the path to authenticity look like in this crazy, fast-paced, noisy world? Only in silence and solitude will you find authenticity. In solitude is where isolation will make you stronger. Without silence and

solitude, you will be a faint reflection of those around you, not thinking or believing for yourself, a finger puppet of the masses. I mean an isolated, lonely, finger puppet of the masses.

We are superficially connected in so many ways these days it is hard to picture solitude with silence. Why do we never leave our houses without our cell phones, or when we do, we feel something vital is missing - our constant conduit to the world, a short leash tied tightly around our neck. We need silence and solitude more now than ever before.

Solitude is taking time in a specific place with a deliberate purpose and plan. It is time to ponder and ask questions; it is a place we set aside, intending to find what you believe and stand for, and a life path that is not forced or pressured. God will meet you in that quiet place.

For solitude to be productive, you need time free from observation and distraction. You will need to unplug your electronic connection with the world.

Solitude is a necessary break from the world, it is a setting aside from daily pressures, but you need to choose the form of solitude carefully.

There is a mind-numbing solitude, which is often more destructive than beneficial. We can find mind-numbing

activities like drugs, alcohol, gambling, computer games, and excessive observation of sporting events or television. Mind-numbing solitude is a break from the everyday world, but the result is less grit. Mind-numbing isolation is attractive because it provides a readily available separation from the world's pressures with little personal investment. Over time this type of solitude loses its effectiveness and can cost you everything.

There is recreational solitude found in going for a walk or run, playing a sport, hiking in the woods, or sitting in a tree stand. If approached with a positive attitude, routine apparent mundane tasks like lawn mowing, floor cleaning, washing dishes, or car washing could be considered this type of recreational solitude. This type of solitude can be a real break from daily stresses as you have an opportunity to think through life issues without distractions from others. Recreational isolation can help improve your physical fitness and restore or maintain your resilience to a certain degree.

Creative solitude is found in painting, photography, quilting, playing a musical instrument, or other creative activities. This type of solitude is another definite break from daily stressors and can also help restore your resilience.

The most valuable form of solitude is restorative solitude,

where you sit in silence with pen and paper with a purpose and focus. You will need a place where you can separate yourself from others and the world. This place needs to be easy to get to and free from interruption. If you find it exceedingly difficult to focus your thoughts because of distractions from your past, you may have to start with some therapeutic writing. Therapeutic writing is a way of setting aside past issues that weigh you down today. These could be past hurts, abuses, or injustices. To set aside these issues, take thirty minutes a day for four to five days, and write about the individual problem. This exercise will not eliminate the impact of past injustice, but, hopefully, it will help you live more deliberately and not continue to live as a victim. If you live as a victim, you will live a powerless and ultimately meaningless and very isolated life. You do not want to live as a victim.

The goal of this time of solitude is to become more authentic. God only made one you, and you are unique. No one else has your qualities, purpose, or voice. It would be a shame to neglect that uniqueness as you are working to gather appreciation from others, others who do not care. It is during these times of refreshing solitude that your relationship with God will grow, and you will discover your voice. It is a time of separation from the thoughts, actions, words, and opinions of others. It is time to honestly and humbly evaluate and reevaluate. What are your core beliefs? What do you

stand for? Who are you?

For restorative solitude to be productive, it needs to not turn into a time of fanciful daydreaming. It can be helpful to write your thoughts as a way of keeping your wandering mind in check. In an upcoming chapter, you will see a time for daydreaming, but this is not the time. The other sections in this book will give lots of review areas to consider in this time of solitude. It is time to find your purpose and meaning. A time to evaluate your choices and the consequences of those choices. A time to reflect on your mortality and the mortality of others. A time to ponder spiritual matters. A time to ask God to search your heart. What do you believe, and how is that evident in the way you live your life? It is a time to prayerfully consider passages in the Bible and how they apply to daily life.

Solitude time should be a time for reflection and contemplation and not a time for rumination over previous hurts and injustices. If you find these intrusive thoughts distracting you, then it may be time for more therapeutic writing.

It is not a race; take your time, remain focused but unpressured, and you will find, with God's guidance, that slowly, your resilience, creativity, and authenticity will grow.

A part of God's image in man is the capacity for an intimate

relationship with God and humanity. The image fractured with man's rebellion, leaving an opening for the enemy's lies. If you continue to live with a fractured God-image, isolation and loneliness will continue to be a stronghold. There is a better way; tear down that stronghold.

Chapter 13 – Stronghold 2 – Meaninglessness

In Ecclesiastes 6:7 (MSG), we read, “*We work to feed our appetites: meanwhile our souls go hungry.*” Hour after hour, day after day, we work our fingers to the bone to feed our hunger. A hunger that never seems to be satisfied. We end up exhausted and unfulfilled. We struggle to find meaning in who we are and what we do. We strive to find meaning, and in the process, lose contact with our value.

What is wrong? Why is there a disconnect between purposeful action and an expected result? The existential stronghold of meaninglessness often causes the disconnect. The enemy wants you to believe you have no value.

Searching for meaning is a reality of human life. It boils down to the question - Why are we here, or why do we exist? What will make me worthwhile?

We look for meaning in labels, badges, legends, fantasies, legacy, and heritage.

We strive for labels hoping they will give us increased meaning and value. Tags like; officer, president, doctor, teacher, pastor, or your highness bring with them an increased degree of worthwhileness. Unfortunately, a name does not give you more value; a name carries with it a specific responsibility and expectation. If you are on the path to get a name to increase your sense of meaning, you will find that it will be a disappointment when you do get that label.

You will also find all tags have qualifiers along with the label, and the qualifiers are much more important than the name. So, you may have gained the label of “the president,” and the associated responsibilities, now you must focus on the qualifier because worse than not getting the name would be to get the name and the qualifier of being a “Bad” President. You will have to work harder to be a good president than you did to get the name of “the president.” Labels may define specific roles in society and assigned responsibilities, and those responsibilities have degrees of meaning, but they do not provide any increased worth or value.

Badges are those external announcements to society that we have arrived. Badges are symbols not necessarily backed by any reality. If you drive a specific car, you are wealthy, even

though it is an old car, costing you everything you own. Badges are all around, from the clothes we wear to the car we drive to the way we comb our hair. Symbols make a statement of meaning but do not provide any meaningful increase in worth or value.

We look at legends to increase our worth. Legends are associations with others who we see as having more significant value. These associations may be with sports figures, celebrities, politicians, famous musicians, or people of power or wealth we see as being able to increase our sense of worth and value. Even just knowing a little secret about these individuals can increase my perceived sense of worth. Unfortunately, our legends have significant issues with value and worth themselves. They are not the people we thought they were - in the long run, association with an esteemed someone else will not bring you an increased sense of value.

A trendy place to turn for an increased sense of meaning and value is fantasies. The world of imagination is the field mastered by media and the advertising industry. If I can make you believe a fantasy, I can sell you anything. We cling to the "if only" statements as we struggle with a sense of meaninglessness. "If only" I had – well, you name it - a different house, another job, a more significant bank account, a vacation home on the beach, a new motor home – and because it is out of reach, you believe it would bring you the

sense of value you desire. If you do end up acquiring the fantasy, you will end up disappointed - the new car now has its first scratch, the new job has increased demands and expectations, the increased wealth does not bring the sense of security you had hoped. Fantasies are valuable for the economy and the sale of lottery tickets, they keep people buying, but they only disappoint.

Another area where we attempt to cling to meaning and value is in the field of legacy. We try to hang on to past images of glory and success, hoping the momentarily increased positive sensation will somehow last, but unfortunately, it does not last. Our trophies gather dust, and our medals and plaques get stored in a box we will never open. They are meaningless relics of a distant past.

Another area where we search for meaning is heritage. If I can find some ancestral hero, I will feel that I have greater worth. We search our family tree; we test our DNA; we cling to old family trinkets with the hope it will bring a greater sense of value. We search and search and find in every family tree; there is good fruit and rotten fruit. Our precious trinkets become clutter no one else wants, but we continue to reach to the past for a greater sense of worth in the present. Whether you are a descendant of Joan of Arc or Attila the Hun - it does not matter - your past heritage does not bring you higher or lesser worth today.

This sense of having no value weighs us down. Who we are or what we do lacks the kind of meaning that makes us feel worthwhile? Feeling meaningless is a heavy burden to bear. We either carry it or learn how to deal with it. The first step in learning how to deal with this stronghold of meaninglessness is acknowledging it exists and it is a problem. Through disappointments and failures, the enemy is trying to convince you that you have no value.

It is a part of our daily lives to ascribe meaning. Ascribing meaning is subjective; what I decide to have meaning may have no meaning to anyone else. Determination of meaning is also relative; what has meaning to me today may have no meaning tomorrow; it all depends on the circumstances. If I am dying of thirst, a cup of water has more value than a bar of gold. Value and meaning are determined by what something represents. If you have two copper coins that weigh the same, their value may be different because the image stamped on them is different. The value of each currency is the result of when and who minted the coins. We struggle to determine our meaning and how that meaning relates to our sense of value.

Our desires run deep and are a driving force in our lives. We desire for what we sense is lacking, some affirmation that our lives are achieving something of lasting value. Yet, our honest evaluation tells us all we do is meaningless and has no eternal

value. We keep chasing shadows. We reach for a future hope and, in the process, miss God's gifts that are available today. The enemy's lie is that your value comes from what you do and not based on who you are.

The struggle with meaning is ultimately a struggle for comfort and contentment with the belief that if I have a purpose, then I will feel less discomfort and more peace. We incorrectly assume what we determine to be meaningful will give us an increased sense of value.

There are three general categories of meaning we can pursue. We can seek false meaning, transitory meaning, or ultimate meaning.

False meaning is the pursuit of immediate self-comfort and contentment. It is a type of endeavor that is often just a pleasant diversion and not helpful for long – often, it is the pursuit of activities for immediate pleasure that are harmful. In the long run, the objective of food, drink, drugs, money, power, or any other action considered immediately pleasurable is not connected to any form of lasting meaning. This type of purpose is very superficial; it is a distraction from life's turmoil and troubles. It is a desperate attempt to cover the sensation and discomfort of feeling meaninglessness and worthless.

Transitory meaning is the pursuit of long-term self-comfort

and contentment. The quest is not destructive, but neither does it give any lasting meaning or purpose. Developing skills, achieving success, receiving an education, and pursuing health interests, may not cause harm: they keep us busy and distracted but do not provide any ultimate or lasting meaning. We falsely interpret the accolades received for accomplishment as attributing meaning and value. This positive sensation is fleeting. We devote all our time, energy, and emotion to achieving the most difficult of goals, with the belief the more out of reach an accomplishment is, the more it will give us a sense of value. Many people will spend their life trying to achieve the impossible, and if they realize their goal, they find they are disappointed because the achievement did not bring the desired result of a sense of lasting worth. In the end, this results in exhaustion and disappointment.

Ultimate meaning is where the pursuit of comfort and contentment is on behalf of others. You find ultimate purpose in a relationship with something or someone greater than us. This ultimate meaning transcends the other issues of relationship, mortality, and free choice and can put those other areas into a more realistic perspective. This ultimate type of meaning is rare because it requires faith.

We end up wasting a lot of our life trying to fight or change what we cannot change. We struggle with the stronghold of

meaninglessness because the enemy has done an excellent job convincing us that we have no eternal value. We all want to know we have value and what we do is not meaningless. We always compare and attribute different values and meanings throughout the day. We use this ability to evaluate and contrast when it comes to ourselves, what we possess, and the tasks we perform. It is excruciating when we realize our actions and accomplishments are meaningless, with no value or purpose, because that is most often the reality. This existential stronghold of meaninglessness drives us to deny the facts and distract us through meaningless, distracting activities. We are now back to that life of quiet desperation.

Our search for meaning and value is a search for some action, attribute, or quality within our control that could somehow lessen the pain and discomfort of isolation, minimize the terror of our mortality, alleviate the angst of free choice and spiritual emptiness.

We live with the belief there is something we can do or say that will give our felt meaningless lives some sense of value. So, we work hard to pursue positions, accomplishments, physical attributes, memberships in the best clubs, entertainment, or even personal sacrifice, to give ourselves a value boost. All to no avail, we still end up feeling meaningless. Pursuing meaning and value seems to push it further and further away.

When we pour all our energies into achieving a self-defined meaningful result to feel worthwhile, we only make the problem of meaninglessness worse. Goals are essential in life, they give our lives direction and purpose, but we must be cautious when we overvalue results. Results are not always within our control. To focus on results leads to a life of disappointment because it becomes a life of constant comparison - there will always be others with better results. Even if you only compare yourself with yourself, your ability to achieve a specified result will eventually become more difficult, if not impossible, as you age. Focusing on results to give you a greater sense of worth is also discouraging because, even if you achieve the desired effect, you will find that it can never bring you the sensation of value you so wish. Another problem with pursuing results to give you a greater sense of importance is when you focus too intently on a result, you have sacrificed today's benefit for an anticipated future occurrence. You lose track of the joys and creativity present today in the process – you achieve satisfaction based only on the next result, and then the pleasure only lasts for a short period. In other words, to give meaning to an expected result, to attain a sense of value or worth will only steal your joy and contentment, kill your creativity, and destroy your awareness of your true worth. Your song remains unsung.

Do not forget that the people you see as having meaning and

value look back at you with their feelings of meaninglessness, believing that you have achieved worth through your meaningless activities. We all want to feel significant, that who we are and what we do has some value. The harder we try to attain comfort, the more discomfort we experience.

Once we see this stronghold as a lie of the enemy, we can begin to tear down that stronghold. So, how do we do this?

Firstly, we must realize there is a difference between meaning and value. Meaning is subjective, while value is objective. Meaning is a focus on what you do, and value is a focus on who you are. Meaning is direction focused; it focuses on where you are going, where value is determined by where you are in the present. Meaning is what you know and believe; value is who you are. Meaning looks back to the past and forward to the future; value looks to the present. Meaning fosters pride, where value encourages humility. Meaning rests on what I create, but my value rests in the awareness that God created me. Meaning promotes status or social position where value fosters purpose. Meaning is data-based, where value is faith-based. Meaning focuses on the observable gain, where value focuses on enrichment and life direction more than specific achievements.

Once we realize we all carry this burden and no single individual act can bring us the meaning and value our soul

longs for, then we can be free from the pressure to find meaning where meaning does not exist. When we place the demand for meaning on any specific action or quality, we only increase our discomfort. This knowledge can free us from diminishing the feeling of meaninglessness through accomplishments, status, physical attributes, acquaintances, memberships, knowledge, wisdom, sacrifice, spiritual endeavors, or notoriety. The increased sense of value from all these endeavors is weak and fleeting. You are now free to approach your life and activities in a way that can bring real peace and contentment. Your value comes from your creator, God. When you struggle with your sense of meaning or value meditate on Luke 12:6-7 (TPT), *“What is the value of your soul to God? Could your worth be defined by an amount of money? God doesn’t abandon or forget even the small sparrow he has made. How then could he forget or abandon you? What about the seemingly minor issues of your life? Do they matter to God? Of course they do! So you never need to worry, for you are more valuable to God than anything else in this world.”*

No matter how meaningful you determine it to be, no activity, accomplishment, or possession will give you the value or sense of worth you so desperately desire. So, what are we to do?

Ecclesiastes 5: 19-20 (NLT) has some good advice regarding meaning and significance. It states: *“To enjoy your work and*

accept your lot in life – this is indeed a gift from God. God keeps such people so busy enjoying life that they take no time to brood over the past.”

This verse says that there is joy in today's work if we are willing to accept our lot - or current results.

Think back to the example of the coins of various value because of the image on the coin. Like the coin, our worth is not our substance; it is not our flesh and blood or what we can do with our flesh and blood; it is what God has stamped on our soul; the image of the creator. Our value comes from His image. We have an inherent value not based on who we are or what we do but on whose image we bear. An essential element of the image of our creator is creativity. The stronghold of meaninglessness will steal, destroy, and kill our God-given creativity. Our creative God-image is the part of us that is valuable and meaningful and a gift of God to all humanity. You are worthwhile; you have a song to be sung. You and your song are a gift to all of humanity. Find and use your voice. Do not throw this gift away, trying to achieve some warped sense of meaning. Take time to evaluate where you determine your real sense of worth. Suppose we focus our creative energies on the task before us today and not the results of completing that task. In that case, we will free ourselves to experience joy and contentment without having to place a value judgment on an accomplished job. God's gift

is the freedom and ability to enjoy your work and the fruits of your labor. The type of work you do is not as important as your freedom to apply your creative energies to enjoy that work.

My grandfather was a great example of living this kind of blessed life. He was not a wealthy or highly educated man. He grew up in a Russian-speaking community in Canada that immigrated because of religious persecution. He only managed to get to third grade in school and had to teach himself to read English. I had the privilege of building two homes with him. I learned a lot from him by observing how he lived his life. He never saw a challenge as impossible, nor did he try to avoid a task. He did not rejoice over the finished product – he just applied his creative self to every daily problem. His joy-filled but straightforward life had a positive impact on many people. His legacy was how he lived his life.

We will experience value, meaning, and contentment if we remember our value comes from God. We are then free to focus on the process and not the product, our attitude, and not our achievement, our creativity, and not our creation, our opportunities, and not our trials.

Take some time, find that place of solitude and ask yourself the following questions - be sure to write your answers.

To what are you looking to feel worthwhile? Where do you

find your value? What does it mean to be creative? Do you give too much meaning to results? Have you found joy in your work? How do you approach your day? Have you found your voice? Are you singing your song? What does it mean that God made you in His image?

Once we are free from the belief that an accomplishment will give us meaning, we can focus on what can provide us with joy – the creative process and living the image of God. As a community, if you are free to sing your song and exercise your voice, we will all be enriched.

Our actual value is in the reality that we are valuable to God, so valuable that He gave His Son to die for us to restore our relationship with Him and heal our fractured image.

Chapter 14 - Stronghold 3 - Free Choice and Responsibility

In Deuteronomy 30:19 (NLT), God instructed the people: *“Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live!”*

Our life is filled with daily choices – too numerous to count. We choose a path that eventually leads to a result. The result is the consequence of the decisions we have made. It is our choice – select the road leading to life or the road leading to death. The decision is your responsibility.

In this chapter, I will be dealing with the stronghold of free choice and personal responsibility. We are in the privileged and yet, the terrifying position of creating who we are through the choices we make. The frightening part is it is our personal and individual responsibility to make those choices. If you

abandon your responsibility by living as a victim, with bitterness, fear, or anger, you are giving up your power and the ability to create a new you. It is ultimately your choice, a choice that should be freedom and not a hindrance.

This chapter is not a philosophical debate on free will. Whether you are a determinist, a compatibilist, or a libertarian, you will still have to choose many times today. Your choices will make a difference in your life; they will affect your present and future life experience. You will make choices today, and you will have to be responsible for those choices' consequences and outcomes. The enemy wants to convince you that God is not good, and that God is not in control. If God is not good or in control, I do not need to be responsible for my choices. What will be, will be, after all, it is all about me.

The first step in learning how to deal with this stronghold of free choice and personal responsibility is acknowledging it exists and is a problem. Our life is the sum of the choices we make, and we make thousands of them every day. We face hundreds of immediate daily options, from what we will have for breakfast, to what clothes we will wear, to what we will do with our day. We make choices about our future, like what we will do for our education or work, to where we will go for vacation this year, that is, if we have chosen to set aside enough money throughout the year to afford a vacation. We

decide where we will live, what we will believe, who we will marry, and on and on. We even get to choose a lot of our emotional responses, whether we will be angry or bitter or decide just to let things go and be happy. Our life is a massive flow chart of decisions leading to where we are today. It boils down to this burden of free choice, and personal responsibility is a matter of what we choose to do with what we have. To get a better handle on this stronghold to make it work for us, we need to be aware of what we have and what options we have when choosing what to do with what we have.

So, what do we have? What we have can be broken down into the four categories of person, place, things, and time.

What do we have as a person? We have our personality, our core beliefs, and our physical body - this is our person. Within this category of "my person," there is room for limitless choice. What is your personality? How can you determine how your character will show itself? What components of your personality would you like to change? What are your core beliefs? You need to consider your core beliefs as they are the main factor in determining your life's direction. You have many choices regarding your physical body. Unfortunately, we all have limitations to our fitness potential. We cannot all be Olympic athletes or world-class swimmers, but as you sit here today, you are as fit and as fat as you have chosen to be. You are responsible for everything you put in your mouth

and accountable for what you do for exercise. Sorry, but it is not your thyroid or your bones' size; if you are fat, you have overeaten many times, which was your choice. Another part of our personality that often gets neglected is our dreams. Our imagination and dreams bring about new directions and inventions, often making the world a better place. We should choose to allow ourselves time to dream.

The next category is the category of place. What is our place? Our place is the space we occupy and our defining titles, which is the space we employ in others' lives. It is where we live, where we work, and how others define us. We live and work in an established community in a specific country at a time in history. We define ourselves by titles like a friend, neighbor, husband, wife, teacher, banker, sister, brother, son, or daughter. If you take the time to consider this list of titles, it will be extensive. What place do you want to occupy? What choices will you have to make to occupy that chosen space? What tags are used by others to define you? Options in this area will end up consuming most of your time, so be careful how and what you choose.

The category of things is also pervasive. It is the category of what we feel we own. It is our resources, our talents, our job, our family, and our immediate responsibilities. We face multiple daily choices as to what we are to do with what we own. This choice is where we are most aware of the

importance and demand of everyday choices and decisions. What resources do you have? How do you plan to use those resources? What do you plan to do with your talents?

The next category is the category of time. We all have an allotment of time; how we choose to spend it will be the most significant factor in the outcome of our life. We measure the quantity of our life by years when it would serve us better to measure the amount by days. We should approach each day as if it is a new year. What and how you choose today will have a more significant impact on your life than what you plan to do in the distant next year. If you choose wisely the path for your day, the year will take care of itself. Yes, long term plans are necessary, but what you decide to do with the day will determine if you achieve those plans. Today is my 24,265th day. We should live counting our days and not counting our years. This day is a gift – spend it wisely. We make a lot of wrong assumptions regarding time and how to spend it wisely. There needs to be a balance between work time and rest time, active time, and meditative time. We need time to push ahead and time to step back. We are wrong to assume it takes massive amounts of consecutive time to accomplish something of value. The reality is we can achieve a lot with the regular, daily utilization of small allotments of time.

It is best to view all these components of person, place, things,

and time as potential bearing seeds. For example, we all have a handful of time, where we choose to plant those “time seeds” will determine a lot of what happens in our life. It is a worthwhile exercise to spend some quiet time in solitude to consider and evaluate what you have, what seeds are in your pocket - write them down and ponder the best way to plant and care for those precious seeds.

What can we do with these seeds? What are your options? As an example, let us say you have just received an unexpected thousand-dollar check from the IRS for an overpayment of your last year's taxes. What can you do with that check? Firstly, you may decide to do nothing; after all, it was utterly unexpected, maybe it is a fake. So, you determine the best thing is to do nothing, leave it in the envelope. You have another option; you may decide to throw it away. This option may not be the wisest choice, but it is still an option. Another option would be to acknowledge it as legitimate but to treat it carelessly and just put it in a drawer with the plan to take it to the bank sometime in the future. Another choice would be to take it to the bank and then treat it casually, forgetting it is in your account. You may also decide to cash the check, take the money home, and just put it aside for future needs. You may choose to give it away to be used by others, or you may decide to invest it and patiently wait for it to grow. Whatever you end up deciding to do, it is your choice

and responsibility to make that choice. You have multiple options for what you choose to do with that IRS check, just like you have numerous options for all the other seeds you possess. What freedom and potential! I get to choose what to do, what direction my life will go. So, where is the problem?

These free choices do not feel very free much of the time, and we end up wasting a lot of our life trying to fight or change what we cannot change. The following are some of the factors that make a free choice feel like a burden.

Firstly, it puts you in the driver's seat; your choices are your responsibility. We may not have an issue with free choice, but we have problems with being personally responsible, especially when things do not go as planned. Yes, you do get to choose what direction you go, but what you do not get to choose is that choice's consequences. You must own the outcomes as well as the opportunity. You do not get to blame anything or anyone else if you are not happy with the consequence. If you cast blame or live as a victim, you have just given away the power in your ability to choose - you have given it to someone or something else. You are now powerless.

Free choice is also an issue because there can be too many possible choices, making it impossible to choose the best path. We can become paralyzed by a diversity of possible

right decisions and end up not choosing at all.

Another problem is that once we make some choices, they are extremely hard to undo, you are stuck with the selection, and it may not be possible without a lot of grief to undo that choice. Just try to undo a career choice, a marriage choice, having a child choice, selecting a housing choice, choosing to take an addictive substance, or getting into the driver's seat while intoxicated choice. You will find out quickly that to undo these choices will be very costly. Attempting to undo destructive decisions is an attorney's bread and butter. You will want to avoid as many of these choices as possible. Life is hard; do not make choices in the direction of making it even harder.

Another issue with all these free choices is we do not live on a deserted island, our choices affect others, and their decisions affect us. Somehow, we need agreeable common ground, or else our options will end up causing a war.

Another issue is that choices may also have significant limitations. We do not get to make some choices because of constraints in time, genetics, attributes, resources, legality, other obligations, and at times, just a limited number of options.

Considering these problems, suddenly, this free choice does not seem free, and at times it is a significant burden. You

have the privilege of free choice and the burden of being responsible for your choice. You do not get limitless “do-overs.” If, however, you are wise, you do get to look at and evaluate others' decisions and their resultant consequences. In this context, we have a lot to learn from our parents; whether they were good or evil, they were examples of choices and outcomes we observed closely.

When we understand that we can choose our path but not our consequences, we are then free to dream and imagine within realistic parameters. The desired outcome should guide today's choices. We are now living life in the zone of the “if-then.” If I dream of becoming a concert pianist, then I should get a piano, find a teacher, take lessons, and devote time to practice. If I desire to retire with an income for my retirement years, then I better start saving as early as possible. These are choices based on the desired consequence. It takes courage, perseverance, and grit to live deliberately, not caving to the urgent demands of the moment.

You are free to dream and imagine. Take time to ponder. About what are you passionate? What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of spouse do you want to become? What kind of parent do you want to be? What kind of grandparent do you want to be? Who do you want to serve? What legacy do you want to leave at the end of your life? Do not throw away your freedom for productive pondering. After

all, it is your life, the only one you get; live it deliberately.

To be able to live with intent, to live more deliberately, is life changing. So, how can you do this?

First, it is essential to spend time in solitude for an honest appraisal. Take time daily to consider who you are and what you have. Embrace what you have as if what you have were seeds, seeds with incredible potential. Seeds you need to plant and maintain. In Psalm 5:3 (TPT), the psalmist states: *“At each and every sunrise you will hear my voice as I prepare my sacrifice of prayer to you. Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on the altar and wait for your fire to fall upon my heart.”* Prayerful, meditative solitude will change your life. Take time, list your dreams, your gifts, your resources, and your options. What will you do with those seeds? You can choose to do nothing, you can throw them away, you can treat them carelessly, you can manage them casually, you can just put them aside, you can give them away, or you can plant them where they will grow and flourish. If you do this in the quiet of the day when there are no pressures for an action, you will find that you will become aware of many more options.

Secondly, take time to quiet the loud noise and demands of the urgent. You will always have urgent matters demanding attention right now, but most of those urgent matters are not necessary. Learn to separate the urgent from the important

and spend some time considering the important - then you can move on to the pressing issues that demand attention.

Thirdly, write out your options. Be creative and list as many options as you can think of, even options you know you would never follow. Writing will help bring to the surface options you may have never thought of before, providing a positive, creative solution to a stressful problem.

Fourthly, plan for essential choices and decisions. When you ponder crucial life decisions like a spouse, education, work, hobbies, or housing, write a list of what is important to you during your time of solitude. Feel free to dream; you have an imagination, use it. Try to make some of these decisions before they become a matter of urgency. The pressure of necessity will destroy your creativity and imagination.

Fifthly, take time daily for significant decisions. The decisions that determine what kind of person you will become are much more important than what you do. Be honest when you evaluate your status; are you angry, are you bitter, are you greedy, are you self-centered, are you a victim, are you discouraged - be honest with where you are if you expect to get somewhere else.

Lastly, do not blame anyone else for your immediate consequences. If you blame, you give away your power and the ability to make choices.

Being overburdened by free choice and personal responsibility will steal your ability to make decisions, kill your dreams and imagination, and destroy your ability to live deliberately. You will witness your grit vanishing.

Take time to pause and consider - it is your life - live it deliberately - it is your choice. God loves you, and God is in control. God made you so you could be creative and productive as you walk with Him.

Chapter 15 – Stronghold 4 – Mortality

Psalm 103:15-16 states (TPT), *“Our days are so few, and our momentary beauty so swiftly fades away! Then all of a sudden, we’re gone, like grass clippings blown away in a gust of wind, taken away to our appointment with death, leaving nothing to show that we were here.”* Life is short, and the longer you live, the more you realize how quickly time and life pass by. And then it is over. One day it will be over for everyone; there is no escaping the reality of our mortality.

In this chapter, I will be dealing with the stronghold of mortality. Our eventual death is an issue faced by all human beings. For many, the subconscious anxiety caused by a fear of death is behind a lot of their daily anguish. This burden affects us all; we are all going to die. The essence of this burden is not death itself because we cannot fear something we have not experienced. The nature of this burden is the fear of separation; separation from ourselves, others, our

dreams, goals, what we value, our purpose, and our sense of meaning. What we fear is not death; we fear ultimate, permanent separation. We fear uncertainty and change, and death represents the most significant change we will ever experience, the shift from being to not being. Through this fear of separation, the enemy tries to convince you that God has permanently separated Himself from you, and there is nothing you can do about it.

To honestly wrestle with this stronghold means we must struggle with our sense of meaning and purpose. As you approach the end of your life, you will face how meaningless and self-centered most of your life has been, and this can be a lot to bear. Having to face meaninglessness and life's disappointments will often lead to a crisis. The Hebrew word for hell is sheowl, meaning a place of no return or exile; this is the stronghold of mortality. We live in the shadow of hell with the enemy whispering that God does not care; God does not love you; you are worthless. The fear of death is a reality we need to acknowledge and accept. It is not healthy to live oblivious to death or to live in constant fear of death. Seeing the burden of mortality as the lie of the enemy can substantially enhance your life. It will significantly aid in our ability to value and use the short time we are alive.

So, in day-to-day living, how does this burden show itself? It may manifest itself as fear or anxiety. We will often disguise

the fear of death with worry about our health or the health of those you love. This worry leads to a compulsive drive to get and stay healthy. In the medical field, we refer to these individuals as the “worried well.” Billions of dollars a year are spent on supplements, health spas, and unproven innovative treatments to push aside the concept of one’s ultimate demise. Faced head-on, this burden of mortality is just too troubling, but the reality is we cannot deny our eventual death; it impacts our lives in many subtle ways. At times of separation or loss, the burden of mortality is more likely to show itself through activities, beliefs, or thoughts that are self-protective, self-absorbed, or self-nurturing. When we feel a threat, we do what we can to protect our fragile selves. These are times when one retreats from relationships or avoids intimacy. Intimacy in relationships requires us to be vulnerable, and when we feel threatened, we do not want to increase our supposed vulnerability. This fear causes us to avoid solitude; solitude represents isolation, and isolation intensifies our awareness of loss. We experience increased discomfort in both intimacy and loneliness when we experience a significant loss, but there is some comfort in being part of an intimate group. Conformity brings a sense of safety. If the threat is long-lasting, this conformity can foster narrow-mindedness where there is adherence to a specific group with fear or avoidance of others who may think differently.

The experience of the burden of mortality varies from person to person. It is more likely for the young to be experienced as separation anxiety where the elderly suffers the burden of mortality as angst about impending death. I have observed many very healthy individuals live in constant fear of death. I have also seen many people with a terminal diagnosis live in peace with renewed freedom and compassion. It is almost as if those with a terminal diagnosis have the freedom to be and are no longer living under pressure to do.

This stronghold of mortality is a reality that affects all areas of our life. It is a reality too painful to address directly, so being the self-protective creatures we humans are, we have developed the fantastic skill of denying what we do not want to face. Studies have shown most people do not believe they will die. Denial can help find a safe harbor while figuring out the next path to take, but if denial becomes a way of life, it quickly becomes destructive. When faced with the apparent reality of our death, it takes an enormous amount of energy to maintain a life of denial. We end up spending considerable amounts of emotional energy in the act of self-protecting. This type of denial is not deliberate deception or lying; it is psychological hiding from the truth or reality; it is honest self-deception. And humans are masters of this type of self-deception. We are in danger of spending so much energy on self-protection and denial we have no grit remaining for other

endeavors. Our grit-bucket begins to drain quickly. We spend our valuable time self-protecting, often unaware of what we are working so hard to protect.

We are working hard to protect a deep fear of exposure to realities too painful to handle. We try to deny we feel isolated and alone and try to hide the anguish of no sense of purpose or meaning. We work to protect ourselves from the shame and guilt of choosing a life direction that did not go as planned and the fear of ultimate separation. We are working as hard as we can to avoid an existential crisis about our meaning and purpose.

We end up wasting a lot of our life trying to fight or change what we cannot change. To tear down the stronghold of mortality, we must address both the reality of our mortality and the denial that often accompanies that reality. The biggest problem with this burden is not accepting the fact that we will die someday. The biggest problem is permitting denial to control our life as we hide from what we are unwilling to accept. The enemy is very skilled in convincing you that denial and distractions work to keep you feeling safe and secure. Accepting mortality is accepting reality – it happens to all of us – it is a reality we all must face. We all live with varying degrees of denial. We spend time and energy wrestling with mortality when we would be much better off spending our time dealing with the denial. Our mortality is a

future reality; our denial is a present opposing force. You need to accept your death to deal effectively with the denial.

The burden of mortality causes universal anxiety, and we attempt to control this anxiety with denial. A little denial for a brief period can be helpful; it can be a safe harbor during times of distress. However, the problem is what serves as a fleeting comfort soon becomes a pattern of living, and the practice soon becomes a lifestyle. We are now living in a dome of denial – not only regarding our mortality but regarding any area of our life that may cause emotional pain. We have become compulsive comfort seekers. If anything dares puncture our denial dome, we are quick to patch the hole with another dose of denial in the form of some self-destructive behavior like drugs, alcohol, excessive exercise, working long hours, embracing bitterness, or anger and on-and-on. We end up being hurt by our self-protective beliefs and actions, but our dome of denial must remain intact. Life is hard; it is hard for everyone; be incredibly careful what you choose as your safe harbor.

Tearing down this stronghold involves acknowledging how much of our lives are consumed and therefore wasted by denial. If we accept our mortality, it will help lessen the power behind a lot of the denial in our lives. Less denial means a lot more energy and grit for living.

So, what is the power and impact of denial? Denial does have the ability to protect, but this only lasts briefly. Denial can be powerful enough to distort reality and erase memories. Denial prevents accurate evaluation and recollection. In this state, living in the dome of denial, other areas of life get confusing. Anything causing discomfort or pain, like relationships and responsibilities, increases our denial. This denial is the power behind the irrational thinking that is part of any addiction. Statements like, I do not know why I am gaining weight; I don't eat anything; this drug will not harm me, I am only hurting myself; drinking and driving is not a problem; this cigarette will not hurt me are all statements from the mind of someone living in the dome of denial. We end up living in a self-destructive world of myopic self-evaluation.

Denial may initially start as a self-protective defense mechanism to shelter us from the thoughts of early parental separation. As we age, denial has lots of opportunities to grow as we mature. Any significantly painful childhood event can substantially increase the growth and development of denial. The experience of abuse at a young age, the experience of trauma, or the death of a loved one can make life without denial seem impossible to bear. The significant negative impact of adverse childhood experiences may be their effect on the development of denial. These are not the only things fostering more considerable denial. Any event that

alters your impression of reality can work to encourage the growth of denial. Growing up in affluence with the belief life should be smooth and pain-free will significantly impact your denial level. This view of life is not reality; life is hard; it is hard for everyone, and no amount of money will change any of that. Life is not to be lived as a fantasy because the fantasy will only disappoint. Freedom in life comes with facing the painful and uncomfortable realities, recognizing all humans share these and that we can meet these realities with faith and perseverance. It takes a dose of Godly grit to tear down the stronghold of denial. Facing life's difficulties and realities are challenging and, at times, feels like it is too much to bear, but denying these realities will destroy you. Living in denial will produce momentary comfort but long-term frustration and exhaustion.

To effectively deal with the stronghold of mortality, you must accept the reality that you will die. Remember, our battle is not with our mortality; it is with our denial. Your death, just like your birth, is a part of life: do not be afraid of it, do not ignore it, do not tempt it, and do not deny it. Do not waste your limited time on this earth, supporting denial and fighting a fight you will only lose. If you accept you will die, you will place a higher value on the time you are alive.

Learn to embrace your fears and your denial; by doing so, you will lessen their power.

Take active steps to limit your denial regarding your mortality. Calculate how many days you have lived and contrast this to how many days your parents and grandparents lived. It can be very sobering to realize you have an expiratory date: you will not live forever, this side of heaven. Take time in solitude to ponder your life and not your problems. Your experience is unique; your issues are not. What kind of person are you, and what kind of person do you want to be? What do you want your legacy to be? Read obituaries and take some time to write your own. Do not shy away from the funerals of family or friends. Death is a reality.

Avoid denial by living authentically. Embrace times of solitude and be honest. You will hurt yourself and all those you contact if you live a lie.

Embrace a sense of wonder. A sense of wonder can help you get things into the right perspective. A sense of wonder can lessen the focus we continually have on ourselves and our problems. You do not want to get consumed by your emotional pain or the injustices you are facing. In Psalm 8:3-4 (TPT), we read, *“Look at the splendor of your skies, your creative genius glowing in the heavens. When I gaze at your moon and your stars, mounted like jewels in their settings, I know you are the fascinating artist who fashioned it all! But when I look up and see such wonder and workmanship above, I have to ask you this question: Compared to all this cosmic*

glory, why would you bother with puny, mortal man or be infatuated with Adam's sons?" Wonder and awe put things into a proper perspective. The sense of wonder from gazing at the night sky, walking in the forest, or looking out over the ocean or the Grand Canyon will change you. Learn to embrace your puniness. A sense of wonder can slowly erode the cover on your dome of denial. You can learn to appreciate a sense of wonder in nature, works of mastery, music, or learning to see things differently. If you are not using up all your grit trying to prop up your denial, you can slow down enough to live your life and embrace the wonder all around you.

Be aware of what is really at the core of your fears and denial. Do not be afraid of the vulnerable part of you that is afraid of separation and isolation. Do not be controlled by the reality of your ultimate non-existence – your mortality. Do not miss the big picture by remaining self-centered and spiritually empty.

Be alert and on guard concerning denial. These are some of the signs that denial is active in your life. If you answer yes to any of these questions, denial is present. Have you lost your sense of wonder? Are you less compassionate and intimate with those you love or those who love you? Do you blame others for your present life situation? Are you living as a victim? Are fear and anxiety controlling you? Do you have an

increase in irrational thoughts and beliefs? Do you demand and seek comfort at any cost? Does bitterness control you?

If you do not address the burden of mortality, it will feed your denial, steal your peace and clarity, kill your joy and compassion, and destroy your perception of reality. Do not be controlled by denial and the burden of mortality. Mediate on John 5:24 (TPT), *“I speak to you an eternal truth: if you embrace my message and believe in the One who sent me, you will never face condemnation, for in me, you have already passed from the realm of death into the realm of eternal life!”* Your eventual death is not the end of your story.

Chapter 16 – Stronghold 5 - Spiritual Emptiness

In the book of Psalms 6:6 (TPT), we read: *“I’m exhausted and worn out with my weeping. I endure weary, sleepless nights filled with moaning, soaking my pillow with my tears.”*

Are you exhausted and worn out? Has your life turned out differently than you expected? Have you run out of answers? Do you feel isolated? Has life lost its meaning? Are you confused? The chances are if you think this way, you are spiritually empty.

In this chapter, I will be dealing with the stronghold of spiritual emptiness. What is spirituality? What is spiritual emptiness? Why is spirituality important?

Spirituality is essentially restoration. It is the restoration of body, soul, and spirit. It is the path and process of reclaiming a relationship with God, learning to walk with Him, and not being in opposition to Him. It is the recovery of the image of

God in man. It is the rebirth of our spirit with subsequent transformation in our soul and body.

Spiritual emptiness is the pursuit of comfort and a sense of completeness apart from a relationship with God. Man attempts to negotiate his life path without depending on God. It feels threatening to rely on something or someone you cannot control.

We live in an age with many potential solutions to our problems that do not require reliance on God, so why do the spiritual things matter? We know about proper diet and exercise. We have beneficial models of psychology and philosophy. We have affluence and distractions that can keep us busy. We have never known so much about diet and exercise, yet we are more obese than ever. We have never had so much information on our psychology and emotions, yet the suicide and addiction rates skyrocket. We are rich in resources yet poor in spirit. Something vital is still missing. We are all aware, deep inside us, there is someone, a master designer, who is much bigger than ourselves. We were created to serve that someone and not to spend our life in endless self-service.

We are rarely aware of our spiritual emptiness. It is apparent when we are up against something much bigger than ourselves, like the threat of a significant loss or the struggle

with addiction. We are also aware of it during times of prosperity when, even if we have acquired everything we could want, we are still aware something vital is missing. This awareness is often written off as a bout of fatigue or emotional exhaustion as we try to fill our spirit with a substance or activity that could never satisfy.

How do you know you are spiritually empty? What are the signs and symptoms of spiritual emptiness? A spiritually empty life is a life of self-centeredness and self-promotion. All that matters are my experiences, my life, my comfort, and my image. IT IS ALL ABOUT ME!! I may be aware of others but not aware of their pain or their struggle. The spiritually empty life mission is to avoid discomfort and pursue comfort, no matter what the cost.

If you are spiritually empty, you are proud; you think your way is the only way. You may be sweet and kind about it, but you are still arrogant.

If you are spiritually empty, you are also deceptive. You deceive others, and you deceive yourself. You work hard to hide your faults and point out the flaws in others - in an ever so lovely way.

If you are spiritually empty, you are not thankful or grateful. You live your life with constant discontent. You are never satisfied.

These are several of the shreds of evidence of living a spiritually empty life, but the most significant proof is that you live a life of constant comparison. You will find hollow contentment or increased discontentment when you live comparing yourself with your peers, your expectations, or with your former youthful self. We continuously use comparison as a tool to determine our value. From the time we are first born, the comparisons begin. We are weighed and measured and labeled based on our size. As life goes on, the comparisons continue. Being spiritually empty means, you live believing the enemy's lie that you will never measure up or that others will never measure up to you.

Just pause for a moment to consider the many tools of comparison you experience on an average day. You have scales to weigh you, measuring tapes that size you, clothing sizes, IQ tests, school grades, credit scores, and of course, the big one, a mirror. We compare ourselves to others and our former selves, and in the end, we are not satisfied. If you score high on the comparison scale today, the result is pressure to maintain your position or arrogance because of your success. If you rate low on the scale, the product is discontentment. As you age, the person you see in the mirror every day becomes a fading vision of your once fit and fashionable self. Spiritual emptiness, the life of constant comparison, results in the life experience of quiet desperation,

full of disappointment and discouragement or out of touch arrogance.

We end up wasting a lot of our life trying to fight or change what we cannot change. It is time to accept that, as people, we are all very self-centered. We grumble and complain that no one understands us. We believe no one can experience our physical or emotional pain the way we can, so we end up on a life-long personal mission to achieve comfort. When we are successful in gaining some degree of comfort, we become proud; when we fail, we become depressed and even more self-centered. To get what we feel we need, we become deceptive and, in the process, lose our authenticity. We are no longer thankful or grateful; we live discontented and dissatisfied in a sea of constant comparison. This experience is the living hell of spiritual emptiness, a life of quiet desperation where at best, we experience momentary comfort amid meaningless, endless distractions. It is a life of continuous self-service and fading compassion. All we care about is our comfort. We are willing to bend the rules because we see our circumstances as unique, so society's rules do not need to apply. We live as bitter, lonely victims with no sense of meaning or purpose. Our thoughts and motives are awash with denial and irresponsibility. We are dependent on our environment to come through for us and lessen our discomfort. When our discomfort increases, we become more

self-focused and more aware of our pitiful human predicament. We spend our life wallowing in discontent. Living this way is the definition of the stronghold of spiritual emptiness. We are all born with our backs turned away from God, determined to go our way, and in the process of seeking comfort, manage to create even more discomfort and pain.

How do we tear down this stronghold of spiritual emptiness? If we recognized the problem and that it is an issue for all humans, we can stop comparing ourselves to one another and address the real problem, our spiritual emptiness. If we are aware that where we are turning to address and fill our void will not work, then maybe we will have a chance to turn in a direction that will be productive. We do not have to remain spiritually empty. However, it takes humility, honesty, courage, and gratitude to turn our lives around and seek God. It takes faith to believe there is a loving creator who has provided a way back to Him through the sacrifice of His Son. A sacrifice that meant He experienced all the physical pain, social isolation, and psychological anguish all humans have ever experienced. There is someone who knows what you are experiencing. He suffered it on the cross. He bore the weight of it for you. He has provided the path back to God. God has provided this gift, a gift we only need to accept.

The stronghold of spiritual emptiness does not have to tear you down; with the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, you

can learn how to tear it down. How can this be possible? How do you tear down this stronghold? So, what does spirituality mean? How do we become more spiritual? The answer is simple. In the book of Jeremiah 29:13-14 (MSG), we read, *“When you come looking for me, you’ll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.”* The path to spirituality is the humble, courageous path of seeking God with your whole heart. As we take these steps, it is essential not to be confused by what spirituality is not. People and society promote many practices and beliefs as being spiritual that are nothing more than counterfeit spirituality.

Spirituality does not involve comparing yourself to anyone else. Spirituality is comparing yourself to what God has in store for you and living by His Word. Much of what we have equated with spirituality is nothing more than a man’s program to feel good about himself. I have worked with many criminal patients over the years; as a group, most of them attend church regularly. They attend church, not for spiritual growth, but as a way of convincing themselves they are good people, and how they conduct their life is not so bad. If you pause and look, you will find self-deceivers in every church. Are you one of those self-deceivers?

Spirituality is not the maintaining of a list of laws and rules. Laws, regulations, and boundaries are helpful to avoid

negative consequences, but the keeping of commandments does not get you closer to God. A life focused on law-keeping will result in a lack of compassion and joy. Rule-keeping and law-focus is another mode of comparison we use to determine our value. If I keep more laws than you, then I am more spiritual than you – this is not spirituality; it is a force that drives people away from God and away from each other.

Spirituality is not a specific group of practices like meditation, prayer, or worship. Prayer, meditation, and worship are valuable elements of a relationship with God but are only weak psychological boosters outside of a relationship with God. Do not use these practices as a measure of your spirituality. Just because you pray longer than your spouse does not necessarily make you a more spiritual person than your spouse. Are you praying, meditating, and worshipping because of your relationship with God, or are you praying, meditating, and worshipping to gain favor with God?

Spirituality is not “sacrifice.” A relationship with God should free us to be generous in our giving, but how much you give does not determine your degree of spirituality. You should be free to give because of what God has given to you, giving out of gratitude and thanksgiving and not as a means of buying special favors from God.

Spirituality is not a specific diet or dietary code. You are

responsible for what you put into your body. A specific diet will not get you closer to God. On the other hand, gluttony, alcohol abuse, and drug abuse are evidence you are spiritually empty. You are responsible for everything you eat, drink, smoke, or inject. Choosing to put anything into your body to alter your mood is evidence of spiritual emptiness.

Spirituality is not a belief. As it states in the Bible – “even the devil believes.” It is more a matter of faith and seeking God than the knowledge of His existence. It is not just the belief; it is what you do with the belief. How have your beliefs changed your life?

Spirituality is not belonging to a specific group or club. Membership or attendance at a church or religious group does not make you spiritual. Encouraging one another of similar faith can be very uplifting and healing. It can promote a relationship with God, but it is not a relationship with God or a measure of your relationship with God.

Spirituality is not knowledge, wisdom, or reason. Spirituality is trusting God and not trusting your ability to reason. It is tempting to those seen to possess knowledge, understanding, or power to rely on their strengths and not to trust God. Gaining knowledge and acquiring wisdom can help determine a path in life with more positive results than negative consequences, but exceptional mental skills do not equate

with spirituality. Knowledge can help you see the wonder of God's creation. Wisdom can help you find a path with fewer negative consequences. Reason can help you evaluate your life, and if mixed with honesty, it can help you realize your knowledge and wisdom is not enough to build a relationship with God. A high intelligence quotient does not equal a high spiritual quotient. True spirituality is only a product of humble faith.

Spirituality is not doing something to gain God's approval; it is accepting what He has so graciously offered. Spirituality is not living with pressure to perform but living with thanksgiving for what He has provided. Many of the efforts and activities you use to gain spirituality may act as diversions or a means to avoid painful areas in your life, but it will not bring you closer to God.

Spirituality is not just crying out to God for deliverance or personal comfort. Most people live their lives with no desire to relate to God. They carry on from day to day until some big disaster; then, they cry out to God to come through for them. God is gracious and, at times, will come through. Still, it is much better to develop this relationship before the going gets tough, at a time when the relationship with God may be able to guide you in a direction that could avoid some of those big disasters.

Spirituality is not a partial surrender or calling out to God to be rescued in times of trouble. Spirituality is not surrendering in part of your life with the hope of seeing improvement; it is a surrender of all areas of your life. In my work in addiction medicine, I meet a lot of people who use surrender as a means of trying to build a stronger inner resolve to fight a craving. This type of surrender is more of a psychological trick to fight off an urge. Often the addiction wins this fight. Surrender and submission are all or none, and it is terrifying.

So, how would you rate your spirituality? Is spirituality important to you? Are you discontented? Are you spiritually empty? Are you working hard to achieve what God has given as a gift? Are you honest about your life? Are you humble? Are you grateful? Are you content? Where do you turn for answers to life's difficult questions? Do not forget the promise that if you seek Him, you will find Him - seek with your whole heart - God will not disappoint. The enemy is whispering to you that you will never measure up, so you might as well give up. This thought is a lie. Because of the cross of Christ, in God's eyes, you now measure up. God has provided for you a path to spiritual completeness.

Chapter 17 – Stress Strongholds

Stress is one of those terms that we toss around with presumed conceptual familiarity while lacking the necessary substantial understanding. Stress strongholds are life experiences where we feel inadequate. The enemy uses these situations to whisper to us that we will not make it, that we should be afraid that we are about to collapse. These strongholds stir up thoughts that if I was only more fearless, more together, more aware, or more intact, then my life would be complete. The enemy also uses these situations to convince us that we need more faith in ourselves and less faith in God.

To handle stress, we must understand what it is and what strategies effectively deal with it. Not all stress is destructive; stress can lead to progress through innovation and invention, and without stress, it is possible to become stagnant. The forms of stress described in the next few chapters are the

chronically draining and destructive stress types.

Stress is often deceptively camouflaged as an uneasy feeling in the pit of your stomach, being irritable, having difficulty sleeping, or experiencing a vague headache or a backache. If we hope to deal with stress effectively, we must first strip away the camouflage to know where to set our sights.

Would you like to be less controlled and pressured by destructive stress? Would you like your grit to grow even in times of stress? Would you like to be aware of the lies of the enemy when it comes to felt stress?

To handle stress, we must understand what it is and what strategies are adequate to deal with it. The approaches to tear down the stronghold of stress differ based on the cause of the stress. The stresses I have observed in my patients' lives in four decades of medical practice fall into one of five categories.

There is the stress of imminent danger, the stress of threatened identity, the stress of uncertainty, the stress of covering responsibility, and the stress of transgressions. Resilience and stress go hand in hand. Resilience is needed most during times of stress, and if you handle stress properly, it will strengthen resilience. Grit is your soul's covering during times of stress; treat it kindly and spend it wisely and do everything you can to foster its

growth.

In the book of Proverbs 22:3 (NLT), it states that: *“A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences.”*

We all want to see ourselves as being prudent or wise and not the foolish simpleton. We will all receive the consequences of our actions and reactions. You do not want to live with the effects of mishandled stress causing a life of turmoil and despair. You will want to live the consequences of a life where stress is dealt with productively. If handled constructively, you will have a life of struggle but with peace, uncertainty but with a direction and purpose, and a life path that encourages your grit to develop.

To get hold of stress, identify it, and control it, you need to pause with your eyes open and be willing to evaluate by asking critical questions. If you expect to preserve and develop grit, it is necessary to identify life stressors, and once identified, you can put a plan in place to limit their negative impact. These stress-induced strongholds can be torn down.

So, what are these categories of external events or happenings that can cause stress?

Firstly, there is the stress of imminent danger. You experience this stress when you, someone you love or

someone you are responsible for, is facing an imminent threat to their life or wellbeing. You are called upon to do something to prevent something horrible from happening. If you don't act, someone might be hurt or die. You are facing a real threat and must act. The danger may be a natural disaster, accident, or illness. The threat is a call to fight or flight, and immediate action is required.

Secondly is the stress caused by some external stressor that alters your self-view. To function in life as a human being with some sense of meaning, purpose, and direction. We all operate from a platform of self-definition. This platform is a form of ego-intactness; it is how we see and define ourselves. It is challenged most directly by either an experience of a significant loss or the experience of gain. A substantial change in any form is a threat to our self-definition and is, therefore, stressful.

The third is the stress caused by uncertainty or confusion. There are many times in our lives that we become weighed down by the burden of uncertainty. Life is filled with moments and periods of confusion and uncertainty in areas of great importance, the more critical the area, the higher the stress. The fields of relationships, health, finance, and security often lack certainty and can be fertile ground for stress to grow.

Another category is the stress caused by covering responsibility. It is hard enough to be responsible for yourself in this ever-changing, confusing world, let alone having to be accountable for another who is unable or unwilling to be responsible for themselves. Caring for others who are unable or unwilling to care for themselves is incredibly stressful. This situation is a complex type of stress, often including real danger, an altered self (you are no longer just a son or a daughter; you are now a caregiver as well), and the stress of uncertainty (you never know how someone will react).

The last category of stress occurs when you realize you are the agent of harm or offense to another person. We have all, at some time in our life, caused unnecessary and hurtful offenses in others. If we are to grow in our ability to handle stress and become more resilient, we must take time to humbly pause and be honest, first with ourselves, as to how our actions or words have hurt or offended someone else. When we face shame, condemnation, and guilt, this time of pause can be incredibly stressful.

Let us take a closer look at these various stress-causing strongholds and see if we can develop a plan for minimizing their negative impact.

Chapter 18 – Stronghold 6 - Imminent Danger

It was a cold but bright Monday morning. It was April 15, 2013, and we had two family members running the Boston Marathon that morning. The morning was buzzing with excitement and anticipation. We rode bus #7 to Harvard Square and then took the subway to downtown Boston. The city was alive with the event of the day. It took over an hour to shuffle our way through the crowd to place ourselves next to the finish-line fence where we told our children we would be cheering for them. I maintained our position next to the barricade, and my wife went to get us some hot chocolate. The warm cup of hot chocolate felt great. As I was taking the first sip, it happened. The first bomb exploded! The crowd was bewildered. What just happened? Did one of the buses at the finish line catch fire? What was going on? It seemed like minutes when it was only a few seconds when the second bomb exploded. Now there was no confusion. We saw what happened across the street from us; we tasted the

gunpowder. We were in imminent danger. It was like a curtain of haze descended on the event. We were confused, the crowd was confused, and the police officers in front of us looked confused. No one knew what to do!

Now, I had worked in an emergency department for twelve years, I have had to deal with many serious medical emergencies, but I was unprepared for this type of palpable threat. Do I jump the fence to give medical assistance? Do I stay with my wife and find a place of safety? Do I look in the crowd for our daughter-in-law and infant granddaughter that were on their way to meet us? Where was my son on the marathon course? It was clear that the same terrifying confusion paralyzed all those around us. The once lively, boisterous crowd was eerily silent.

To do well in these times when danger is present and our action is required, we do not want to be timid or controlled by fear. The stronghold of imminent danger is the stronghold of paralyzing fear.

Suppose you want to preserve and develop your resilience. In the case of the stronghold of imminent danger, you need to be able to evaluate a threat and approach it appropriately, with sound judgment and discipline. This task seems impossible when you are tasting the gunpowder.

This stress is faced day-to-day by many professions in our

community who are there to keep us safe. The police, paramedics, emergency room staff, and fire department staff work amid this type of stress all the time. It is also the stress faced by military personnel who are always under attack. Without these brave individuals in our community and fighting for our country, we would be facing a lot more stress of imminent danger, and we would be doing so without the necessary tools to do it well.

The antidote to this type of imminent danger stress is to accurately evaluate the potential for real danger, avoid it if possible, and, if unable to prevent it, then develop a plan to be adequately trained to deal with the real threat.

If you want to be ready to handle the stress of imminent danger, you will rehearse your plan and put it into practice when the danger level is low. The antidote to imminent danger stress is to act on an already developed plan to deal with the event. In Boston, we had a great plan “A.” We had a prearranged meeting place to get together after the race, and we even went to the finish line the day before to practice the plan. All seven family members knew where to meet and how to get there, but we had a faulty plan “B.” Plan “B” depended on our cell phones. Within minutes of the bombing, the authorities turned off the cell towers. I stood there paralyzed by indecision, but my quick-thinking and quick-acting wife contacted the two family members who were

waiting at the predetermined spot and sent them away from the finish line. She then contacted our daughter-in-law and set up a secondary meeting place; then, we prayed.

The accurate evaluation of danger, practice, and plan will lessen stress and strengthen resilience when facing imminent danger.

However, the problem is that as human beings, we tend to be more affected by presumed danger and motivated by fear.

Most of us face the imminent danger type of stress day-to-day in the category of the fearful “what ifs.” What if someone breaks into my house? What if the road is icy on the way to work? What if there is a flood? What if my house catches fire? What if the stock market crashes and I lose all my retirement?

We are human beings devoid of reason and directed by emotion. So now, when you take a concept of threat and danger and a mix of emotion and fear, you have the ingredients for a toxic soup. Our emotional memory is more robust than our rational memory, and we are governed by a deep-rooted fear much of the time. The goal of the enemy with this stronghold is to hobble you with fear and dread. Meditate on Psalm 34:4-5 (TPT), *“Listen to my testimony: I cried to God in my distress and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears! Gaze upon him, join your life with his, and*

joy will come. Your faces will glisten with glory. You'll never wear that shame-face again." The Bible has hundreds of references to not being controlled by fear.

Fear is not rational; it is unreasonable and often more destructive than the object or event that evokes the fear. If you could somehow calculate all the human hours of productive life lost through the real imminently dangerous situations like natural disasters and war, it would pale compared to the hours of productive life lost because of fear. Fear is powerful. Fear is a limiting disability. It is a ruthless master; it will beat you down; it will make you feel useless and unworthy; it will sicken your soul and drain your grit. Fear is one of the most common tactics used by the enemy. Fear will stop you from finding and using your voice.

Fear is a powerful force and has the power to rob your joy and destroy your potential. Say goodbye to your grit. Fear of cancer has more life robbing power than cancer. Cancer may shorten your life, and it may steal your tomorrow, but fear takes your life today. Fear may protect you at times, but ongoing fear is never your friend.

Fear will leave you in a pile of anxiety and worry that will limit any productive action.

In the end, you will have lost your energy, joy, peace, and resilience.

Fear will convince you that if something is considered dangerous, it will have to be terrifying and that if it is not scary, it is not harmful. Fear is an emotional response and not a rational response. Fear will tell you that if you feel you are in control, you are safe, and if you are not in control, you are in danger. Fear will completely twist your ability to evaluate the potential for real danger. If we are to have any resilience, we need to figure out how to deal with fear.

Let us look at an example of how fear, real danger, and a sense of control can twist our ability to reason. Let us imagine you decide to ride your motorcycle fifty miles to do a tandem skydive. You are a skilled rider, the day is clear, and you will not have to ride at night. You are in control, and therefore you feel safe.

As far as skydiving goes, you get some preliminary training, get strapped in with a skilled skydiver, and off you go. When you leave the plane, you suddenly realize you are not in control; you are terrified and evaluate the experience as dangerous.

Now if you were to look at these two events rationally, the motorcycle ride was much more dangerous than the skydive. However, the problem is that we do not evaluate rationally, we evaluate emotionally, and we end up being controlled by fear or become dangerously confident when we

feel in control.

Fear is powerful. An excellent ability to evaluate risk will serve you well, but fear will only bring you down. Like physical pain, fear is a loud voice that must be reckoned with, or else you will become a self-centered, self-focused pile of misery.

Fear is a liar; it suggests it is present to protect you when, in fact, it is present to destroy you. If we are to reach our potential and become more resilient, we must learn to recognize fear, identify it as an enemy, and learn how to set it aside and move forward. It takes Godly grit to tear down the stronghold of fear.

Not only is fear deceptive, but it is also destructive. It will increase your stress, cause stress-related disease, rob your joy, destroy your plans, drain your motivation, and dissolve your grit.

So then, how should we deal with this mighty stronghold of fear?

To deal with fear, we first need to recognize it for what it is; it is not our friend; it is our enemy. Do not run from it; fear will hunt you down. You must face it and call it by name.

Once you recognize it for what it is, then do not feed it by always letting it rumble around your mind or be the focus of your speech; instead, learn to hate it. Do not let fear limit your

experience of life. Life is short enough.

Ask for help if needed. There are many times when fear is too overwhelming to overcome on your own. Do not internalize or personalize fear; after all, you are trying to get rid of it. Take some quiet time alone to define the fear, externalize, and depersonalize it by giving it a name. For example, if you are afraid of public speaking, then give it a name like, here comes “Anxious Pete” to prevent me from speaking to this group of strangers.

As a final death blow to fear, find someone else with similar fear and help them overcome that struggle. Follow the advice in the Bible in 1 John 4:18 (NKJV), where it tells us that *“Perfect love drives out fear.”* This statement does not mean that we should wait to experience someone loving us entirely; it means that in the presence of our fear, if we focus on loving someone else thoroughly, our fear will soon disappear. Caring for and about others with a common struggle is the power of small groups, as seen in AA or successful drug recovery programs. The presence of a non-judgmental support group allows you the opportunity to help others who are struggling with similar pressures and fears. In turn, you are maintained and strengthened through the process of giving. You end up getting what you give, a reduction of your fear. In this context, make it a goal to give away your fear.

If you are plagued by the stronghold of fear and imminent danger, then assess, avoid, plan, prepare, and practice. Recognize fear, call it out, and then give it away. Do not let the enemy control you with fear-generating lies. Psalm 27:1 (TPT), *“The Lord is my revelation-light to guide me along the way; he’s the source of my salvation to defend me every day. I fear no one! I’ll never turn back and run from you, Lord; surround and protect me.”* Tear down the fear stronghold.

Chapter 19 – Stronghold 7 – Strained Identity

In my early years as a family physician in Canada, I had the privilege of working with a young woman with a horrible seizure disorder. From the time she was an infant, she averaged two hundred grand mal seizures per day. She had seen the best neurologists in several Canadian specialty centers but showed no improvement with any medication. When she was eighteen years old, there was only one other option. This option involved a major neurosurgical procedure that would separate her brain's two halves. She was very anxious about the surgery, but she had no other options. The operation was a success. She went from the two hundred daily seizures to none. Everyone was ecstatic. She had achieved what both she and her family had wished. She was seizure-free but not stress-free. Although she was now living the life she had longed for, she was unprepared for the change. It took a couple of years of regular counseling and encouragement to learn to live her newfound life. Any life-

change is stressful. A significant life-change is incredibly stressful. It involves a redefinition of self and relearning how this new self is to navigate in the world.

To function in life as a human being, with some sense of meaning, purpose, and direction, we all operate from a platform of self-definition. This platform is a form of ego-intactness, how we see and define ourselves, and how we think others see us. If our self-definition becomes unfamiliar or not authentic, there will be stress. We need a grip on our identity.

In the Bible, we are encouraged in Romans 12:3 (TPT), *“I would ask each of you to be emptied of self-promotion and not create a false image of your importance.”* We need an accurate, familiar self-definition to function successfully.

It is essential to ask ourselves the following questions. How do you define yourself? Is that definition accurate? Has that definition changed recently? How would you like that definition to change in the future?

This “self-definition” develops and changes throughout our lives. It is the culmination of every element that makes up who we are; our upbringing, our family of origin, our birth order, the community where we grew up, and our expectations. This self is the mix of our life experiences, gains, losses, rewards, encouragements, and discouragements.

Our continually changing environment continually challenges this self-definition.

Our self-reflection, our thoughts, self-evaluation, and contemplation also challenge our self-definition. It is also impacted by what we believe and the directions our life takes. It gives our lives an emotional and spiritual path.

The opinions of others also challenge our identity. We are impacted by how family and acquaintances view us and what their expectations are of us.

Then there is all the other stuff that challenges or defines our concept of self: our gender, ethnic heritage, education, physical appearance, abilities, and economic status. In other words, our self-definition becomes the total of what uniquely makes us an individual.

You add up all these elements of who we are and what we are becoming, and you end up with a unique personality, a novel you, a psychological and spiritual fingerprint of yourself. You are an individual, you, and there is no other replica of you. You are utterly unique, the only you that you or your world will ever experience.

Yes, you are unique, but your uniqueness does not give significance to your identity. Your identity is from God and the fact that you bear His image. The enemy wants you to

believe your identity is in what you can do for yourself because, after all, you deserve more. We desire to be valued beyond our uniqueness, for more than what we do, but appreciated for who we are. The enemy whispers to you that it is your uniqueness that makes you special. He wants you to focus on that uniqueness and strive as hard as you can to convince yourself and others that you are special because of what you can do. He wants to reinforce the belief that it is all about you and your uniqueness and not that you are special because God loves you. We run into problems when we start to define this uniqueness as something that makes us special, different, or better than the rest of humanity.

We are all unique, one of kind, individuals. The more you hang on to your uniqueness as the foundation of your identity, the more you open yourself to stress, disappointment, conflict, and despair. If you were to take the time to sit down and write out your self-definition, it would most likely be a list of those things that make you unique. We have lost touch with our identity.

Humility with a sound understanding of your uniqueness is necessary if you are to have a healthy self-definition. You are a unique one of many. It is essential to realize that 90% of human DNA is identical from human to human, and only a small percentage accounts for all the differences we observe. You might be one of a kind, but so is your neighbor

and the rest of the community.

If you appreciate your uniqueness for what it is and live with humility, it will foster growth and strengthen your resilience.

But on the other hand, if you see your unique qualities and attributes as making you special, then you are moving in the direction of excessive amounts of stress. The enemy wants to convince you that your identity has nothing to do with God. We have traded our identity in God for a cheap sense of specialness. We deny that we bear His image and, in the process, devalue ourselves, destroy our grit, and live in misery. Our voice never gets spoken.

This “specialness” is a product of arrogance and an unrealistic world view that requires massive amounts of energy to maintain. Now you are working overtime to prove how special you are; it may work for a while, but eventually, you will burn out. Why do you burn out? Because you are using your uniqueness to support a lie. The lie is that you are different or better than everyone else. Do not believe this lie of the enemy; it will become a stronghold in your life very quickly.

How do issues with our identity cause stress? What are the pressures that cause an alteration in our self-definition?

As we walk the path of life, this self-definition that we so dearly cling to is challenged daily. It is challenged most directly by

either an experience of loss or an experience of gain. We are most acutely aware of this pressure when we experience a significant loss. Loss of a spouse, marriage, child, job, or loss of health is incredibly stressful. In these situations, you are forced to see yourself as different, and it will take time to adjust to this status change. A significant change in any form is a threat to our self-definition and is, therefore, stressful. This ongoing form of stress will drain our resilience, but it can build grit if appropriately handled.

We often do not define the occurrence as stressful when we experience gains, such as a hard-fought-for goal achieved, or a desire realized. We become so accustomed to operating in life with a fixed self-definition that we do not recognize that the definition will change when we reach our goals. A study has shown that 60% of those who complete the Boston marathon end up depressed within the next month. How could achieving this goal result in depression? It takes about two years to prepare and qualify to run the Boston marathon, and all the while, you are defining yourself as “training for the Boston marathon.” Your identity is in the achievement of a challenging goal. You work hard, get up early in the morning, change your diet, adjust your social calendar. You know how to live your life as someone training to run the Boston marathon, so when you reach your goal, you have to change how you have previously defined yourself because you are no

longer training to achieve that goal. This self-definition change can be incredibly stressful.

So how do we deal with this stress of altered self-definition? Is there a way to accommodate to change that does not take years?

Yes, there are several things you can do that may lessen the negative impact when your identity is challenged, attacked, or altered by gain or loss. These actions require honesty, humility, and time.

Firstly, you will need to separate yourself from all the motion and commotion of life. Turn off all your electronic devices that continuously invade your solitude and take some quiet time. Use this time of solitude as an opportunity to take inventory and set aside some of the twisted concepts of what you have come to believe gives you your identity. Your skin color, gender, ethnic group, physical features, age, physical abilities, group memberships, values, beliefs, accomplishments, education, failures, the experience of trauma or abuse, physical pain, illnesses, possessions, job, social status, and on and on and on make you unique but do not make you special. Your identity is much more than these things. Identify and address false beliefs as they present.

We are only here for a limited time; the lines on the fingerprint of your soul are not as important as what you do with that

fingerprint. Live your life deliberately. Live your life humbly.

Take an honest inventory of how you have defined yourself. During this time, journaling can be very productive. Who are you? What events have shaped your view of you? Who do you want to be? What would you want your children or grandchildren to say about you at your funeral?

If you strip away all the elements of uniqueness, you will be left with what it means to be a human being. At the core of who you are, you will find that you are very much alone, it is up to you to ask and answer these hard questions of who you are, and then you will need to take full responsibility for the consequences of those decisions and directions. If you conclude that human life is a random, chance happening, you will have to wrestle with the consequences of ultimate meaninglessness with no bases for morality. If, on the other hand, you look at the incredible order, diversity, and beauty around and determine that this must be the work of a benevolent creator, then you will have to wrestle with what you should do about your relationship with that creator. Should you seek that creator or try to hide?

If you perform this inventory, you will find a lot of the stress you have been carrying will melt away.

Take time to consider what it means to bear the image of God.

What does the Bible say about your identity? In our striving to be considered special, we lose touch with our identity and our real specialness. 1 Peter 2:9 (TPT), *“But you are God’s chosen treasure - priests who are kings, a spiritual “nation” set apart as God’s devoted ones. He called you out of darkness to experience his marvelous light, and now he claims you as his very own. He did this so that you would broadcast his glorious wonders throughout the world.”*

After you have done the challenging and humbling work of self-evaluation, there is an opportunity for reinvention. Not only do you get to redefine yourself, but you also get to redefine yourself with a lot less stress. You can now find your voice and use it for its intended purpose. Your grit will grow, and your life will have a purpose. How would you like to define yourself? Do not believe the enemy’s lies that your identity is your uniqueness or what you can do for yourself.

Chapter 20 – Stronghold 8 – Uncertainty

My palms were sweaty, my heart raced, and the muscles above my left eye twitched like an epileptic hummingbird. It was early Spring 1975, and I was being interviewed by a committee that would determine my acceptance into medical school. The magnitude of stress was almost unbearable. My future was in the hands of that small group of interviewers. The stress that day was the stress of perceived imminent danger. Although it was nerve-racking, I was prepared for that stress. The stress I was not prepared for was the stress that followed that interview. It took eight weeks for the result letters to go to the applicants. There were 650 applicants for only 50 positions. I was not confident that I would be accepted, and I anguished as I waited. What I was experiencing at this point was the stress of uncertainty. My mind raced with different options. What will I do if I am not accepted? What will I do if I am accepted? What else should

I do with my life? My brain felt like a little ping pong ball bouncing from side to side as the time dragged on.

In the book of Philippians 4:6 (TPT) in the New Testament, we are encouraged by the following words. *“Don’t be pulled in different directions, or worried about a thing.”*

Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to live an utterly worry-free life, with no uncertainty or confusion? Unfortunately, life is not that easy to navigate. Life is filled with times of confusion and uncertainty.

So, let us look at this stronghold of the stress of uncertainty.

I have been in the health care field as either a primary care physician or an addiction medicine specialist for over forty years. I can say with conviction that health concerns and uncertainty walk together. Even the terminology that medicine is called a “practice” means there is lots of room for uncertainty, such as an uncertain diagnosis, an uncertain test result, and an uncertain treatment.

As a patient, you experience real symptoms, but the cause is often uncertain. To go from the symptom to an accurate diagnosis is often a path that is both confusing and exhausting. You present to the doctor’s office with a nagging cough, and you are sent for a chest X-ray. The X-ray reports that a possible abnormality has been detected, and the

radiologist recommends that the X-ray be repeated in three months. You are now living with a form of uncertainty that produces terror.

Another area filled with uncertainty is the area of finances and financial security. As living gets more expensive every year, how can you ever determine what you may need to retire? As you look at your newborn son or daughter, you have no idea what you will need to send them to college in eighteen years, let alone know what their first car might cost and how will they ever afford to buy their first house.

No matter what you make as an income, it feels like it will never be enough.

Another area of uncertainty involves our sense of safety. There have always been areas of our communities where we did not feel safe. We felt safe by avoiding those areas while enjoying a sense of safety at school, church, or while attending community events. What has happened to our understanding of security and safety? Uncertainty about our community's safety and security has recently become universal. There seems to be no place that feels safe with reports of school shootings, violent protests, random acts of violence, home invasion robberies, rising distrust of authority figures, and new deadly infectious diseases.

I live in a state where it is relatively easy to get a permit to

carry a handgun. When I first moved to Oregon in 2006, I interviewed all the patients I saw in two weeks, roughly 200 people. 50% of those interviewed reported they either had a handgun on them or in their car. Many people feel safer in their homes only when they are armed.

Where can we go to find safety, security, and peace? Safe places seem to be harder to find.

The most significant uncertainty is in relationships, and nothing is more troubling than for a relationship to sour. We define ourselves by our relationships, and it is incredibly alarming to find out that those relationships were not what we thought. A relationship depends on a lot more than just you, and you do not have control over the other person in the relationship. You never really, with 100% accuracy, know precisely where they stand. That uncertainty can be incredibly stressful.

The stress of uncertainty is present to some degree all the time. This type of stress can negatively impact our lives in several significant ways.

Firstly, the stress of uncertainty causes a lot of confusion. This confusion can initially be very energetic. If you have a physical symptom, it can lead to hours of internet searching for answers, multiple medical consultations, and tests. If the confusion is in the area of finances, it can result

in a feverish review of investments or taking a second or third job. If the confusion is in relationships, it can result in sleepless nights and hours, days, weeks, months, and years of anxious thought.

The worry and fear generated by the stress of uncertainty will eventually burn you out. The uncertainty that plagued you, to begin with, is still present, but now you have no energy to do anything about it. You burn out and give up.

So, if the original uncertainty was in the area of health, then you give up and reach for another donut or beer or beer and donut.

If the original uncertainty was in finance, then you give up and spend all you have today. You think, why bother with a retirement plan that may not be sufficient anyway?

If the uncertainty was in relationships, then you might as well give up and do what is best for you. At least if you abandon relationships to become self-centered, you know the thoughts of the one with whom you are relating.

So now I am left overweight, broke, insecure, and alone. My actions to deal with uncertainty have been not only ineffective but destructive.

At this point, our resilience weakens, and there are no tools to deal with the next area of uncertainty that you may have to

face today. To avoid a life of despair and isolation, you will have to learn to live with uncertainty. The enemy's lie is that you can and should be confident and sure before moving ahead in your life. The result of this lie is that you end up paralyzed by uncertainty and confusion.

To deal with uncertainty, first, you must recognize it. At times, just recognizing something is uncertain and likely to remain uncertain for a while will lessen the uncertainty's power.

If you are starting a new job, it is appropriate to feel uncertain and insecure for the first few weeks. Give yourself the freedom to feel unsure and insecure. These feelings will go away quickly if you do not waste your valuable emotional energy fighting what is appropriate and inevitable.

The same principle applies in the areas of finance, security, and relationships.

Take time to write out the areas of uncertainty in these areas. This exercise may not clear up the uncertainty, but it will go a long way to lessen its negative impact.

Now that you have listed the uncertainty areas, do what you can to clear up the confusion. Ask questions, ask for help, and be patient.

In the medical setting, it can be helpful to ask for options. There are always multiple diagnostic and treatment paths in

medicine, so ask if there are other ways to get a diagnosis or other treatment options.

Find a mentor, and when necessary, ask for help. Help could come from a medical professional if the uncertainty is your health, a financial planner if the uncertainty is in the area of finance, or a marriage counselor if the uncertainty is in the area of important relationships.

There will be times when the troubling uncertainty will just not let go. These are times when there seem to be no answers, and the help you get seems insufficient. During this time of overwhelming uncertainty, one may easily slip into a pit of despair or depression. If you are in one of these times, make a habit of being thankful. Get a gratitude journal and discipline yourself to write daily. Chances are you will not want to write anything, so force yourself and write a daily list of the things and people you are thankful for.

If your stress is in uncertainty, question, clarify and remain thankful. These times of uncertainty can be times for your trust in God to grow. Follow the example of the psalmist in Psalm 143:8 (TPT), *“Let the dawning day bring me revelation of your tender, unfailing love. Give me light for my path and teach me, for I trust in you.”* You will have periods of uncertainty and confusion and do not believe the enemy's lie that you can always eliminate the uncertainty. Do not let

uncertainty destroy your God-given peace. Do not allow uncertainty to paralyze you. Use your Godly grit, trust God, and keep moving. Find your voice and use it.

Chapter 21 – Stronghold 9 – Covering Responsibility

Bob is a 52-year-old male whose life is a living hell. Addiction stole Bob's job, destroyed his marriage and health, and left him renting a small room from his eldest son. However, none of these losses were the central part of his living hell; his living hell was that his youngest son was addicted to heroin. Bob lived in constant fear and torment. He questioned his every action. Should money be given to his son? Should he help him find a place to live? Should he even talk to his son? Bob's living hell is the stronghold of covering responsibility. The stronghold of covering responsibility is the lie of the enemy that your thoughts, words, and actions determine the outcome of someone else's life. You believe you are responsible for the consequences of their actions.

As humans, we function best when we are personally responsible, care for ourselves, and function with a meaningful purpose. However, there are times when this is not possible, and you are in the position where you must provide necessary care, boundaries, and security for someone you care about that is not willing or able to function independently. In Galatians 6:5 (MSG), we read, *“Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.”*

It is hard enough to be responsible for yourself in this ever-changing, confusing world, let alone to have to be responsible for another who is unable or unwilling to be accountable for themselves. This type of stress is present in several different life situations. One of the most stressful life experiences is to be the spouse of someone with dementia. In this situation, day to day life feels like a prison with a life sentence. Both you and the person you are caring for are trapped. You never know what to expect, and you, as the responsible party, are often the target of accusation, disrespect, and abuse. You know, as you walk through the day, you will step on an accusatory landmine, but you do not know when.

The enormous stress of parenting is another example of this stress of covering responsibility. Parenting takes you from caring for an entirely dependent and vulnerable little creature, through times of adolescent rebellion and irresponsibility, to

the struggles of early adulthood. There is no such thing as being adequately equipped to be a parent. It is one thing to be a parent with this stress of responsibility for another when you are young, but it is another thing when you are older. I do not know how grandparents can raise their grandchildren, yet I live in a state where 60% of grandparents raise their grandchildren - being responsible for others as parents is incredibly stressful.

Caregiving is another area where this stress of being responsible for someone else is experienced. Caregiving could be caring for a spouse with dementia, caring for an aging parent, caring for a disabled child, or even keeping an eye on an aging neighbor. This stress is exhausting because it is almost impossible to get a break if you are a caregiver. Many excellent books have been written on the strains of ongoing caregiving, and if you are in this position, you may want to read them.

Lastly is the stress of social responsibility for individuals who are unable or unwilling to be responsible for themselves. As an example, it is stressful for a medical provider to continue to provide ongoing, high-quality care to members of their community that take no responsibility for their health. How much caring energy should you devote to an obese diabetic who continues to eat fast food and consume large soda volumes? It is stressful for society to take responsibility for

those who do not take responsibility for themselves, and in an age of entitlement, this stress is growing.

So, if you find yourself in one of these situations, what can you do? How can you possibly survive? How do you tear down this stronghold of covering responsibility? The enemy uses this stronghold to silence your voice and rob your peace.

The first step is to recognize what this stress is. The pressure in this situation of being responsible for another comes from tension or imbalance between love and trust. If you did not love or care for the person you are responsible for, there would be minimal stress. We struggle with the definition of love when caring for someone who cannot be trusted to care for themselves.

In a healthy, non-stressful relationship, there is a balance between love and trust. On the love side, there is compassion where you care deeply about the other, and over time, this caring becomes more profound and more meaningful.

With a healthy relationship, there is also patience. No one is perfect, and patience needs to be present as our compassion grows for another.

With a healthy relationship, we also have trust. Trust grows in an environment of authenticity and dependability. Yes, there will be times when trust weakens and falters, but with

compassion and patience, the conflicts can be resolved, and the relationship can grow.

With a healthy relationship, there is also personal responsibility. With personal responsibility, you can trust the other will share the load, allowing the trust to grow, and the relationship strengthened.

If on the other hand, when a growing distrust develops, an incredible strain is put on the relationship and produces a lot of stress. When suspicion grows, the person you once cared about is seen as being more unpredictable and undependable. With increasing irresponsibility, the balance between love and trust is strained as the relationship's responsible person becomes exhausted. With increasing exhaustion, trust erodes even more.

If a relationship were a brick wall, love and compassion would be the mortar, and trust would be the bricks. It takes both love and trust to build a healthy, productive relationship. So, now you are in a situation where you love someone, but it is not safe to trust them. This situation is the stress of covering responsibility. Now, what do you do?

Firstly, reaffirm that you do love them. It is a common and natural reaction to deny this love when the going gets tough, but remember it is the tension between love and trust that is the cause of this stress, not your lack of love. You do care,

even if at times you do not feel like it.

Now, if you continue to care and want to avoid being crushed by stress, you will need to establish boundaries. Boundary setting will free you to act without making emotional decisions in the heat of the battle. Choose your battles carefully and, if possible, do not set the boundaries in isolation. If you are dealing with an acting-out adolescent, you may need to establish a behavior boundary contract with clearly stated responsibilities and rewards. If you are dealing with a parent or spouse, it is necessary to develop these boundaries with all the other family decision-makers. It will not work out well if you take your spouse's keys away, only to have them given back by a naive son or daughter.

You may need boundary contracts in the following situations: a rebellious adolescent, a family member with addiction issues, an aging parent (when should driving be stopped, cooking, or using a ladder), or an adult child requesting a financial bailout. These boundaries can be challenging to set in the heat of the moment when things are not going well, so try to think ahead of the conflict and start the discussion early.

There are many times when the burden of this type of stress is just too much to carry alone. You need help. This help could come from other family members, neighbors, community or church programs, or other groups. Explore

what is available early and develop a plan on how and when to request the needed help. Formulate your plan before you are too exhausted to call in any help.

As mentioned in some of the other sections dealing with different types of stress, remember to be and stay deliberately thankful. This conflict between love and trust when you are responsible for a loved one can easily drag you into a bottomless pit of despair. Take time daily to write out five things you are thankful for; it may save your sanity.

If you are struggling with the stronghold of covering responsibility, breath, ask for help, do not personalize, set boundaries, and be thankful. Remember, the enemy wants to use this stronghold to rob your peace, steal your voice, and kill your relationships. Use your Godly grit to tear down this stronghold. Remember, live humbly and honestly with thanksgiving, and you will have a lot less destructive stress.

Chapter 22 – Stronghold 10 – Transgressions

As people, we will do almost anything to hide our transgressions, yet it is the hiding of them that makes them so damaging. We have all done wrong. We have all deeply wounded the people who love us. We all carry the scars of hurting others. To live your life carrying these injuries is stressful. The enemy whispers that you can successfully cover your transgressions, and they will not produce negative consequences.

When I was fifteen years old, I wanted to spend a summer doing something meaningful. I contacted the regional director of the church I attended, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and asked if there was a volunteer project where they could use my help. The denomination was planning to build a new house and chapel for a missionary in the arctic that summer, and they needed four volunteers.

I volunteered, and so did my grandfather. My grandfather was an amazing man. He was physically sturdy and emotionally stable. A day does not pass without me recalling something that I learned from him. I had a perfect mentor; I was blessed. I loved my grandfather, and I knew he loved me. So, we boarded the train and headed for Churchill, Manitoba, and then onto a very loud pontoon plane to fly to Eskimo Point, Northwest Territories. We shared a fabulous adventure. When we returned in the fall, our local church pastor asked if we would report to the congregation. Now, my mentor had taught me a lot that summer; I learned the proper way to hold a hammer, the formula to ensure that a corner was square, and other skills that I would use for home repair projects to this very day. Unfortunately, there was one skill that was modeled by my grandfather daily that I did not learn, and that was humility.

When I spoke to the congregation that day, it was a display of arrogance. I wanted them to think I was great and strong and independent. The pastor interviewed me in front of the congregation and asked about the other volunteers. I mentioned the other volunteers, but I did not acknowledge that my grandfather was my grandfather. I found out from my mother later that evening that my arrogance had hurt my grandfather. I am fortunate that my grandfather was the man he was because he did not let my arrogant display interfere

with our relationship. He continued to be my mentor and even was by my side every day while I built my first house.

On the other hand, I carried the burden of that insult for thirty years. I am thankful that I had an opportunity to talk to him about that event before he passed away. Why did I wait so long? The enemy's lie is that transparency is dangerous and that you can successfully deceive.

In Ephesians 4:32 (AMP), we are encouraged to: *“Be kind and helpful to one another, tender-hearted, compassionate, understanding, forgiving one another readily and freely.”*

None of us like the process of looking at where we have hurt others. The stronghold of transgressions is the anguish of guilt, shame, and remorse. It will require humility, honesty, and Godly grit to overcome this stronghold. Our hearts are very deceptive, so you may be unaware of where you have hurt another.

There are also areas where the offense was not intentional. It is still an offense and harms the relationship.

The transgression could be some form of injustice or misinterpretation of an action. Be very slow to judge because a rapid judgment is usually not accurate and can cause more offense.

Or maybe your action was deceptive, like a little or big lie,

hiding the truth, or spinning a story to make you look better than you should. All of these can offend and result in relational distrust. The Bible states that those we lie to; we hate.

So, what do you do with this stronghold now that you have discovered areas where you have offended?

Firstly, please stop it. Do not continue the offense. Do not keep telling lies to cover other lies. If you recognize where you are hurting others, admit it, and stop it.

Secondly, take time to become more aware of how you have hurt others. We are sensitive to how others have hurt us and yet not very sensitive to where we have hurt them. Take time to consider and ponder where you have hurt others.

Before sending off a quick apology text or leaving a voice mail, take the time to write out the transgression you have committed. Be honest and open. If you run around making superficial apologies as a way of covering your tracks, you will only be increasing your stress, weakening your resilience, and worsening the offense.

Take time to write it out first. Pause to consider the apology. Some apologies are best-delivered by letter, and some are best-delivered face-to-face. A sincere apology is asking for forgiveness and not asking for anything else from

the other individual. You should not expect them to think better of you because you apologize or immediately restore a damaged relationship. A sincere, meaningful apology has absolutely no strings attached.

Once you have delivered the apology, you need to be patient and wait. If the relationship is recoverable, it will take time. Be patient. Do not be demanding. Restoration may not be possible with some relationships because of an offense you are responsible for, and you will have to learn to live with that.

If you are struggling with a stronghold around transgression, be humble, apologize, and wait. Follow the advice in Romans 14:19 (TPT), *“So then, make it your top priority to live a life of peace with harmony in your relationships, eagerly seeking to strengthen and encourage one another.”*

Chapter 23 – Relational Strongholds

The third category of strongholds is the relational strongholds.

The first category we looked at were the existential strongholds, which result from the fall of man. In God's perfect creation, humanity was not made to experience isolation from God and his fellow man. Humankind was not created to experience a life of uncertain meaning and purpose. We were not created to feel powerless or to experience death or spiritual emptiness. These strongholds are part of every human's life. We all must wrestle with the existential strongholds.

The second category were the strongholds that occur because of environmental factors. Unpredictable and uncontrollable elements in our lives and those around us

create situations that cause fear, uncertainty, loss of identity, confusion regarding our responsibilities, and guilt and shame. These types of strongholds affect us all differently depending on our life situation and the resources we have for handling stress. It is vital to remember that all strongholds are a lie of the enemy that nudge you in the direction of believing it is all about you.

The last category of strongholds are the relational strongholds. With our first breath and first cry, we begin learning how to relate to our world. As we grow and mature, we develop and discover ways that we feel work for us. In the world of psychology, these are called coping mechanisms. Many of these coping mechanisms work well for us and the people around us. There are some coping mechanisms that we may feel work well for us but do not work so well for the people around us; we label these extremes as personality disorders. The enemy continues to whisper that we can find a “safe harbor” without God. He encourages the belief that we can find comfort and contentment in our own hands.

We will look at ten of the many potential strongholds in this category. How do you react or protect yourself from offense? About what do you ruminate? How do you cope with trouble or conflict in your world? What are your patterns of response to a real or perceived offense? These so-called safe harbors are lies of the enemy designed to steal your peace, kill your

voice, and destroy your legacy. The enemy uses these strongholds to trip you up, so you end up focusing on yourself. The following is a list of the strongholds we will be looking at in this section.

Bitterness. Bitterness is the internalization and personalization of a real or perceived injustice with a persistent and intense rumination about the injustice or the agent of the injustice.

Greed. Greed is an intense pang of hunger with unattainable peace and demand that the appetite be satisfied.

Shame. Shame is a state of painful, paralyzing remorse when you get a glimpse of who you are.

Grief. Grief is the internalization, personalization, and rumination regarding a significant, unbearable loss.

Legalism. Legalism is the internalization and personalization of a set of rules, or a code of conduct strictly adhered to and promoted as the way to achieve righteousness.

Agony. Agony is the experience of pain that is either physical, emotional, or existential.

Assumption of control. Assumption of control is the mindset of demanding immediate comfort with little regard for the cost. It is behind many of the problems we see in our current

society, such as failed rebound relationships, morbid obesity, escalating alcohol issues, and drug addiction.

Addiction. Addiction is the persistent compulsive use of a habit-forming substance, known by the user to be harmful, characterized by tolerance and well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal.

Self-love. Self-love or narcissism is the internalization and personalization of a perceived inadequacy resulting in ongoing, intense self-centeredness and self-adoration. Self-love is the “sin that so easily entangles” recorded in Hebrews 12:1.

These strongholds are types of insults and offenses used by the enemy to get you to focus on yourself. Once we start focusing on ourselves, we begin to lose our God-given purpose and potential. The enemy is the victor.

Chapter 24 – Stronghold 11 – Bitterness

Bitterness is the internalization and personalization of a real or perceived injustice with a persistent and intense rumination about the offense or the injustice agent, resulting in more damage caused by the bitterness than could ever be caused by the injustice. There will be times in your life when rumination about a major injustice will be necessary. Use these times to gain clarity and develop a plan. Be on guard. If you remain thankful and do not grumble to God about your life situation, you should remain protected from the snare of bitterness.

You may have suffered some horrible abuse and feel your bitterness has merit. Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse is never justified. Civil society needs strong laws with harsh penalties for abusers. If you have suffered abuse, you do not

have to live the rest of your life defined by the abuse's pain. Abuse is a real but legless, hungry tiger growling on the other side of the room. Bitterness gives the tiger legs and claws, so now it can tear you to shreds. Do not allow bitterness to provide the destructive power to abuse.

When I first began this journey to write about bitterness, I naively thought it would be a simple task. Bitter people are victims, victims of their own making, imprisoned by their own hands. Working as a family physician for four decades, I have seen lives destroyed by many agents. I have witnessed cancer taking the life of the young, heart disease kill people in their prime, and addiction rob the lives of many. Of all these agents of destruction, none compare to the devastating impact of bitterness. Bitterness will turn the wise into fools, the wealthy into beggars, and the delightful into the disgusting. Bitterness will steal your wealth, your health, and at times, your life.

I thought it would be a simple matter of just stating the evils of bitterness, sound a loud warning, and then move on to another topic. My simplistic view may help someone who is not bitter, but it has no value to those who are already bitter. Bitterness tosses away reason and makes the bitter person both blind and deaf. If it is possible to help someone caught in bitterness, we must look behind the scenes and address the cause. This journey led me to explore the roots

of bitterness, the actions, directions, thoughts, and beliefs of someone bitter. The bitter feel they need more to feel complete, which led to an exploration of greed and self-centeredness. If greed and self-centeredness are behind bitterness, then what is the cause of greed and self-centeredness? This awareness led to a path where only the brave dare venture, an exploration of spiritual emptiness. There is no adequate medical or psychological treatment for the misery produced by greed-fueled bitterness. Some therapies will lessen the pain of the suffering, but they are not a cure. The only effective remedy is spiritual. If you are living in a pond of misery, you are also bitter. No life circumstance can cause you this degree of distress without you also being bitter. You will need to address the bitterness if you hope to escape the misery. So, if you are not bitter, I hope the strong warning to avoid bitterness, like the poison it is, will be sufficient to keep you on the right path. If, on the other hand, you are bitter, and living in misery, then I pray you will have the courage to read on and allow God to guide you out of the hell of bitterness.

Tannerite is a combination of two safe and stable compounds, an oxidizer consisting of ammonium nitrate and ammonium perchlorate and a catalyst comprised of aluminum powder. The oxidizer and the catalyst are very safe if kept separate, but when combined and subjected to a high-velocity impact,

they explode. You get the same result if you mix an offense with bitterness. The offense is the oxidizer, and bitterness is the catalyst; the result is psychological Tannerite. Combine these two and subject the combination to the high-velocity impact of stressful living and, kaboom; you have an explosion of misery.

Bitterness will steal your health, energy, and emotional stability. It will destroy your relationships and rob your joy, peace, and contentment. It will kill your potential, purpose, plans, relationships, aspirations, and dreams. If this interaction between bitterness and injustice were a loaded gun, the injustice would be the gunpowder, and the bitterness would be the armor-piercing bullet. The gunpowder makes all the noise, demands all the attention, fills the room with confusion and smoke. Amid the noise, smoke, and fire, the projectile silently sails through the air and into your heart. Bitterness can and will kill you!

You have heard it said that bitterness is drinking poison, waiting for someone else to die. This statement is false. Bitterness is drinking poison and then giving a little to everyone you care about while waiting for someone to die.

If bitterness were an autoimmune disease, it would be the most lethal. It slowly chews away at your soul and leads you down a path of destruction. Not only is bitterness deadly, but

it is also contagious as it generates bitterness in others as the toxic poison is shared. Bitterness leaves a wide wake of destruction. You must recognize bitterness early. You must take personal responsibility for it, and you must run from it as fast as you can. Treat it as the toxic poison it is, or it is likely to kill you.

Bitterness, to the degree, just described, is easy to identify. You know you are bitter, you are aware of the injustice, you focus on the injustice, and it occupies every thought and often every conversation. To recognize this form of bitterness, just stand in front of a mirror and ask yourself, "Am I bitter?" Your answer will most likely be, "yes, and because of what that so-and-so did, I deserve the right to be bitter." Remember, it does not matter how justified you feel about your bitterness; it will still kill you and most likely have minimal impact on the object of your bitterness. You are not harming them; you are just hurting yourself! If questions remain after you look in the mirror, then just set the timer on your smartphone to ninety minutes; each time the alarm goes off, write down what you are thinking about at that time. It may take a few days, but you will quickly find out if you are ruminating about an injustice. What thoughts waken you in the middle of the night?

In Ephesians 4:31-32 (AMPC), the Bible gives clear instructions regarding bitterness where it states, "*Let all*

bitterness and indignation and wrath (passion, rage, bad temper) and resentment (anger, animosity) and quarreling (brawling, clamor, contention) and slander (evil-speaking, abusive or blasphemous language) be banished from you, with all malice (spite, ill will, or baseness of any kind). And become useful and helpful and kind to one another, tenderhearted (compassionate, understanding, loving-hearted), forgiving one another [readily and freely], as God in Christ forgave you.” If you desire to be free from the impact of injustice and offense, you need to avoid bitterness.

The enemy's lie is that you can correct injustice through bitterness. He wants you to believe that you will win the injustice battle if you ruminate and churn enough. Please do not believe this lie; it will kill you. Do everything you can to recognize and avoid the stronghold of bitterness!

Chapter 25 – Stronghold 12 – Greed

The power behind bitterness is greed and emptiness. Greed is the passionate pursuit of more, just for the sake of having more. It is an insatiable longing that cannot be satisfied. It is a loud, demanding hunger. A hunger that does not go away. It desires more food, money, affirmation, affection, power, knowledge, status, or comfort. It is an inability to experience contentment with what you currently have. Greed is an intense pang of hunger with unattainable peace. The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of greed is “a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (such as money) than is needed, motivated by naked ambition.”

A form of greed is known as avarice, which is an excessive desire to gain and possess wealth. The root word for greed or avarice is also the ancient root word for grasping, craving, long for, gluttony, voracious, hungry, covetous, or eager to obtain, with an emphasis on hunger.

The most destructive component in greed is not the hunger or the object of the craving. The dangerous element is the lack of contentment in the passionate pursuit of attaining more when you already have enough. The lie of the enemy is that if you have enough, you will be content.

Imagine a boatload of refugees afloat at sea attempting to escape execution. They hope to gain sanctuary in a country tolerant of their political and religious beliefs. Their expected journey should be four days, but the weather changes, and they must endure a winter storm. They are now ten days into their ordeal and are tired, sore, and very hungry. A few of the refugees planned better than the others and brought extra supplies of food. One of the refugees brought enough food to last a month. While the group was sound asleep one night, the refugee who had a month's food supply stole the other passengers' food. In this scenario, everyone is hungry, but only some have access to food. Greed is not hunger, nor is it the supply of food brought by one passenger. The picture of greed is the passenger with lots of food, stealing from the others. He craves more, more than he needs, but he remains unsatisfied. Greed is a thirst never quenched, a hunger never satisfied, or a longing never achieved. We all must wrestle with greed.

How does greed lead to bitterness? The intense desire and pursuit of more and the inability to experience contentment

cause the greedy individual to view others as obstacles to attaining the more they desire. We perceive barriers as being unjust and offensive; therefore, we can justify being bitter. In my work in addiction medicine, if you get between an addict and their drug of choice, you will be seen as offensive and a target of bitterness. Greed is the energy behind all the roots of bitterness.

The greedy individual focuses on their needs, and they soon become unaware of the needs of those around them. The greedy become blind and deaf to their world. This world view can be a disaster for relationships and guarantee the failure of a business. A business owner who loses sight of their customers' needs will not be in business very long.

Jesus warned the people of His day to avoid greed as recorded in Luke 12:15 (TPT), *“Speaking to the people, Jesus continued, “Be alert and guard your heart from greed and always wishing for what you don’t have. For your life can never be measured by the amount of things you possess.”* Be on guard; greed is subtle but deadly, and if we are honest, we are all greedy.

Greed will twist your thinking and fill your mind with all sorts of irrational thoughts and beliefs. Greed will convince you an emotional need can be satisfied with a possession. The greedy believe you can eliminate misery with ownership. If I

just possess more, life's anguish will vanish. The enemy wants you to believe that you can purchase peace and contentment. Greed is self-centeredness on steroids.

Greed causes a restless intensity that will never be satisfied. With each unsuccessful attempt to attain more and an ongoing lack of contentment, the result is a growing dissatisfaction and despair. The greedy view other people as obstacles to more, so the greedy end up more isolated.

Proverbs 15:27 (MSG) describes the impact of greed on relationships. *“A greedy and grasping person destroys community; those who refuse to exploit live and let live.”*

The greedy live in constant conflict with others. Their needs are the only essential needs, and they will do what they can to take from others. Proverbs 28:25 (NIV), *“The greedy stir up conflict, but those who trust in the LORD will prosper.”*

In the end, the greedy live out their lives in isolation and full of misery with no hope of a cure. If you are bitter, you are also greedy. You do not want this to be a description of your life.

If you desire to be at peace and avoid greed, your goal should not be more; it should be contentment and gratitude for what you do have. 1 Timothy 6:6-10 (TPT) speaks to this issue. *“We have a “profit” that is greater than theirs—our holy awe of God! To have merely our necessities is to have enough.*

Isn't it true that our hands were empty when we came into the world, and when we leave this world our hands will be empty again? Because of this, food and clothing is enough to make us content. But those who crave the wealth of this world slip into spiritual snares. They become trapped by the troubles that come through their foolish and harmful desires, driven by greed and drowning in their own sinful pleasures. And they take others down with them into their corruption and eventual destruction. Loving money is the first step toward all kinds of trouble. Some people run after it so much that they have given up their faith. Craving more money pushes them away from the faith into error, compounding misery in their lives!"

Do not forget that greed is a part of every one of the roots of bitterness. Greed is ugly! If you are anxious, impatient, a gossip, a mocker, or any one of the roots of bitterness, then you are also greedy. We all need to admit and address the greed in our lives if we want to be free from destructive bitterness.

How do we get a handle on the evil of greed? Understanding where greed originates will help get it under control. Greed is a desperate attempt to fill a deep spiritual emptiness, a bottomless pit of human angst. Empty people are greedy; greedy people are bitter, and bitter people live in misery. Tear down the stronghold of greed.

Chapter 26 – Stronghold 13 – Shame

Shame is the internalization, personalization, and rumination about our inadequacy and depravity. Shame causes emotionally painful self-condemnation. Shame is a state of bitter, paralyzing remorse when you get a glimpse of who you are. Shame is a powerful force. We do all we can to look good and intact from the outside, knowing something is rotten on the inside because of shame. We all hide and avoid exposure.

Abusers use shame to control the behavior of a child, a community, or a nation. Politicians weaponize shame during political campaigns. It is often the candidate with the best use of shame who will win an election. The enemy uses shame to condemn you and leave you feeling hopeless. The enemy wants you to believe you are the most depraved person on the planet, and therefore you are worthy of rejection.

What is shame? What is the power of shame? How does the enemy use shame to increase your self-focus? You cannot talk about your shame without acknowledging your depravity because shame occurs when we get a glimpse of our depravity. Remember Jeremiah 17:9 (NKJV), *“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”* Deceitful and wicked, wow, what a combination and potential for self-destructive deception. In other words, we are all polluted beyond repair.

My parents grew up on a farm in the Canadian prairies before there was indoor plumbing. They thought it would be necessary for my growth and development to experience some of what they experienced while still a young adolescent. I would spend a couple of weeks each summer at the farm owned by one of my mother’s cousins. It was a time full of experiences that were utterly foreign to me, the city boy. My mother’s cousin had a son that was a few years older than me, and he was my on-the-farm mentor. He remains a valued friend to this day. One of the first lessons I learned on the plumbing-deficient farm was that you had two options if you require the facilities in the middle of the night. Option A was to take a very poor-quality flashlight and wander across the yard to the outhouse, where it was cold and dark. Option B was to use the five-gallon pale that sat in each bedroom. Wealthy farmers had exquisitely crafted chamber pots, and

regular farmers had metal five-gallon pales. You know, if you get up quickly in the middle of the night and accidentally kick into that pale or chamber pot, it does not matter much about its style or form. What matters is what is in the pot. I think we live much of our lives in this way. We focus intently on the container and are not concerned with the contents.

The dictionary definition of shame is: “*Shame is an unpleasant self-conscious emotion typically associated with a negative evaluation of the self; and feelings of distress, exposure, mistrust, powerlessness, and worthlessness.*”

We live in fear that if anyone knew what was really inside us, we would not be loved or accepted. We spend our time, energy, and resources attempting to avoid exposure and failure. We hide and deny our wrongdoings and thoughts. We deceive ourselves as we try to deceive others. Shame makes us direct our focus inward and view ourselves in a negative light. The enemy will do whatever he can to cause you to focus on yourself. This intense inward focus blinds us to what is going on around us. Shame caused Adam and Eve to hide from God because of their sin and rebellion - Genesis 3:8 (NKJV), “*And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*” They knew what they did was wrong, and therefore they hid. Since then, we have become skilled

at hiding. We hide in our work, our hobbies, our addictions, our passions, our preaching, our good deeds, our caring, our sacrifice, and on and on. We hide in our gangs and churches where a shared norm helps us feel a little better and more sheltered from exposure. We will do anything to avoid feeling humiliated, exposed, or small.

We are afraid of what will spill out of our pot if it is accidentally kicked. What is the cause of our internal conflict? What is the real reason for our shame? For this conflict to exist, we must be aware of two things. We must be aware, to a degree, of what is inside us; who we are. We must also have some awareness of who we were intended to be. If we were not aware of both, there would be no conflict and no shame. We would live like animals under the control of the strongest and fittest. There would be no right and wrong awareness and no basis for a moral code of conduct. If you have ever experienced shame, you cannot deny that this conflict exists.

If we were able to pry off the lid of our pretentious denial, what would we find inside? What we would see would be our true nature. What is our true nature? How depraved are we? Theologian R.C. Sproul defines our sin-nature or fallen state as one of “radical corruption.” In a 2005 article, he explained radical corruption as; “Radical corruption means that the fall from our original state has affected us not simply at the periphery of our existence. It is not something that merely

taints an otherwise good personality; rather, it is that the corruption goes to the radix, to the root or core of our humanity, and it affects every part of our character and being. The effect of this corruption reaches our minds, our hearts, our souls, our bodies — indeed, the whole person.” This radical corruption is something we have had since our very beginning, as recorded by David in Psalm 51:5 (TPT), “*Lord, I have been a sinner from birth, from the moment my mother conceived me.*” If we were to pry that lid a little more, we would find the expression of our radical corruption is the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23, we read about the fruit of the Spirit. The Greek word used for fruit is singular, meaning there is one fruit with many expressions. The fruit of God’s Holy Spirit is agape love. The enemy’s fruit is the opposite of agape love. The opposite of love is not hate; it is self-centered indifference. Like the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of humanity’s unregenerate heart expresses itself in many ways. Instead of joy, there is only a positive emotional experience dependent on external circumstances. Instead of peace, there is fear, worry, anxiety, and exhaustion. Instead of kindness, there are acts of deception and manipulation. Instead of virtue, there is vengeance and a fight for justice. Instead of faith, there is unreliability and self-preservation at any cost. Instead of the gentleness of heart, there is arrogance, harshness, or pretentious sweetness. Instead of self-control and strength of spirit, there is a loss of focus and

control. Apart from God, we are a mess. We all know we are a mess. The enemy convinces us that our lot is worse than others; therefore, we work hard to hide that mess and experience shame when there is a threat of exposure.

Considering human reality, how can anything good come from anyone living apart from God? There is still good in the world because humanity still possesses the image of God. Yes, that image was severely distorted when man chose to rebel against God, but we still maintain that image's components. This tension between good and evil is the conflict that results in shame. We know what is right and what is wrong. We know how we should be living, yet we are not living that way. We know we are corrupted and worthy of rejection by both man and God. Created in God's image, we were made to experience the giving and receiving of unconditional love; our very existence depends on it. Yet, when we look inside, we see we are neither capable of loving nor worthy of being loved.

As humanity walks this tight-rope between their corrupt nature and their God-image, shame will surface when that awkward balance gets upset. That balance is upset by several different situations. The bubble of pretentious denial weakens, exposing shame, at times of unwanted exposure, failure, unrealized expectations, being left out, loss of love, or times of grief. These are times of increased vulnerability when we either give up or work that much harder to reinforce the denial.

These are times when we may respond with anger or hostility as our corrupt self gets exposed. It is also a time of increased risk for self-harm or suicide.

What is the answer to this universal human dilemma? Where can we turn for comfort or guidance? God's word deals with this as we see in Romans 7:24-25 (TPT), *"What an agonizing situation I am in! So who has the power to rescue this miserable man from the unwelcome intruder of sin and death? I give all my thanks to God, for his mighty power has finally provided a way out through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One! So if left to myself, the flesh is aligned with the law of sin, but now my renewed mind is fixed on and submitted to God's righteous principles."*

Apart from the Holy Spirit's regenerating work, no person in his own power can choose godliness, choose Christ, choose the things of God, refrain from evil, accept the gift of salvation, or choose to follow God. The Bible tells us that this "sin condition" or "radical corruption" affects all of us. Romans 3:23-26 (TPT), *"for we all have sinned and are in need of the glory of God. Yet through his powerful declaration of acquittal, God freely gives away his righteousness. His gift of love and favor now cascades over us, all because Jesus, the Anointed One, has liberated us from the guilt, punishment, and power of sin! Jesus' God-given destiny was to be the sacrifice to take away sins, and now he is our mercy seat because of his*

death on the cross. We come to him for mercy, for God has made a provision for us to be forgiven by faith in the sacred blood of Jesus. This is the perfect demonstration of God's justice, because until now, he had been so patient—holding back his justice out of his tolerance for us. So he covered over the sins of those who lived prior to Jesus' sacrifice. And when the season of tolerance came to an end, there was only one possible way for God to give away his righteousness and still be true to both his justice and his mercy—to offer up his own Son. So now, because we stand on the faithfulness of Jesus, God declares us righteous in his eyes!" We are all dependent on God's grace. As you teeter between good and evil, let shame be a reminder that God has a way that can lead you back to Him and a full, meaningful, and abundant life. He has made a way. Joshua 24:15 (NKJV), "And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

How is the experience of shame, or avoidance of shame controlling your life? The intense pain of shame will cause you to focus on yourself to the exclusion of others. You will not see others as people; you will see them as objects. Shame will affect your relationships, causing you to feel alone

and isolated. Shame will also cause a loss of authenticity as you hide through pretense and deceptions. In the end, you are not deceiving others; you are only fooling yourself. It may take time, but others will become aware of your deception and manipulation. You know the right and acceptable way to act; otherwise, you would not be hiding.

How do you know if you may be struggling with shame? Are you depressed or anxious? Are you afraid of being exposed? Are you hiding from those close to you? Does anger overcome you? Are you struggling with an addiction? Are you hiding from yourself through an overinflated view of yourself; are you narcissistic? Do you have low self-esteem, a loss of hope, feel powerless, or worthless? Do you feel small and inadequate? Do you ruminate or have difficulty letting go of anger? Do you feel defensive towards others, or even hostile? If you answered yes to these questions, you are most likely struggling with the impact of shame. Shame can lead to all sorts of self-focused activities, criminal thinking, and addictions. Shame is a mighty stronghold that needs to be torn down.

How is this stronghold of shame torn down? Like any of these strongholds, the first place to address them is to humble yourself and pray. Admit to yourself and God that shame is impacting your life and spiritual growth. Admit that you are afraid of the exposure of your radical corruption. Humbly

admit that you cannot rescue yourself. Ask God for help. Pray scripture that deals with deliverance over shame. Psalm 31:17 (TPT), *“As I call upon you, let my shame and disgrace be replaced by your favor once again.”* Psalm 119:116 (TPT), *“Lord, strengthen my inner being by the promises of your word so that I may live faithful and unashamed for you.”* Philippians 3:13 (TPT), *“I don’t depend on my own strength to accomplish this; however I do have one compelling focus: I forget all of the past as I fasten my heart to the future instead.”* Psalm 139:5-6 (TPT), *“You’ve gone into my future to prepare the way, and in kindness you follow behind me to spare me from the harm of my past. With your hand of love upon my life, you impart a blessing to me. This is just too wonderful, deep, and incomprehensible! Your understanding of me brings me wonder and strength.”* Shake off the shackles of shame. Do not believe the lie of the enemy who is trying to destroy you. Be grateful for God’s grace and the work of Christ. Live the fruit of the Holy Spirit through love. Shame and fear of accusation do not have to weigh you down. Romans 8:1 (TPT), *“So now the case is closed. There remains no accusing voice of condemnation against those who are joined in life-union with Jesus, the Anointed One.”*

We are all depraved, so depraved that Jesus had to die for us – you no longer have to listen to the enemy’s voice of condemnation.

Chapter 27 – Stronghold 14 – Grief

Grief is the internalization and rumination about a significant unbearable loss. The magnitude of the loss determines the degree of suffering. What losses would result in the experience of grief? This last fall, the area of Oregon where we call home experienced several massive wildfires. The air became thick with smoke as family and friends around us began to evacuate. My wife, Judie, is one of the most organized people on the planet, so we did not have any difficulty finding what we considered essential. I hooked up our small utility trailer behind the car, and we loaded up our treasures. We had a few boxes of family photos, some important papers, a few valuables, a few irreplaceable possessions, and a few days' worth of food and water. At the end of our packing, the little trailer was only a quarter full. We were fortunate in that we did not have to evacuate, but the

exercise of evaluating what we possessed and what was important was very cleansing. The loss of our material possessions would have been inconvenient, but it would not have resulted in much grief. Losses that cause grief are the ones that are so great we question our ability to continue to function. The losses that are this egregious are the losses humanity was never created to experience. The enemy uses these losses to cause us to question God's love. Humanity was not created to experience death, the loss of a significant relationship, the loss of purpose, or the loss of a relationship with God. We do not have the necessary tools in our toolbox to deal with these types of losses. These are the losses we can never be prepared to handle.

The dictionary definition of grief is: *“Grief is the response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual and philosophical dimensions. While the terms are often used interchangeably, bereavement refers to the state of loss, and grief is the reaction to that loss.”*

There are three categories of losses that can produce grief. There are personal losses, relational losses, and significant losses. Personal losses are the ones that involve the loss of identity, status, position, or ability. This type of loss is

experienced many times throughout our lives. It is experienced with retirement, a job change, a loss of an expected promotion, moving to a new community, or changing churches. It is also experienced as a slow act of bereavement where physical and mental skills are slowly lost because of aging. This type of personal loss can occur with any significant status change.

The most significant grief-producing loss is a relational loss. God created us as social beings. He placed us in families. It is in this environment that we experience being loved and loving others. The most significant loss we experience as humans is the loss of a meaningful intimate relationship. This loss can occur through death, divorce, separation, or the slow, gradual loss of a loved one through Alzheimer's or other chronic diseases. These losses are magnified if there is a high degree of dependency in the relationship, such as the loss of a child, a family member with a disability, a miscarriage, or an abortion. In these dependency type losses, there is not only grief, but there is also guilt. The guilt can prevent movement through grief, resulting in a lifetime of unresolved grief.

Grief can also occur with the loss of any element of one's life that has a high value or meaning. Grief can be experienced with the loss of a pet, a home, a place, or even a time. As people age, they often grieve the loss of their youth and

vitality.

The experience of grief, as previously mentioned, was not God's plan for humanity. We were created to be immortal and to have harmonious relationships. Therefore, the experience of significant loss feels impossible to manage. We are left in a state of disbelief, confusion, and turmoil as we try to regroup and move on with life. The danger during this time is that we can quickly become stuck and self-focused on our pain. This path can lead to an increased sense of isolation and chronic loneliness. If you work to suppress the feelings, the process of recovery only gets prolonged. It is common for people stuck in grief to lose the capacity for pleasure, lose interest in eating, neglect self-care areas, become depressed, or develop insomnia. Grief is highly individual and unpredictable; you do not know how you will respond until you experience loss. During the first twelve years of medical practice, I spent most of my time working in an emergency department. I have had to deliver the news to many people that they had just lost a loved one. I have witnessed people cry, laugh, faint, become enraged, and one person even punched me. There is no set or expected formula for how a significant loss will be experienced.

The experience of grief can end in one of four possible ways. Most people with resilience and grit will be able to maintain stable levels of functioning and be able to move on with their

lives. Others may eventually recover after several months. Some people get stuck in grief and have a prolonged period of dysfunction. Others may appear to regain function quickly, but then after some time or the experience of another loss may develop a delayed grief response and lose their ability to function normally. There is a condition called prolonged grief disorder. This condition is defined as an "extreme focus on the loss and reminders of the loved one, intense longing or pining for the deceased, problems accepting the death, numbness or detachment. The prolonged grief disorder can also result in bitterness about your loss, inability to enjoy life, depression or deep sadness, trouble carrying out normal routines, withdrawing from social activities, feeling that life holds no meaning or purpose, irritability or agitation, and a lack of trust in others."

A damning tactic used by the enemy during grief is the tempting belief that more understanding will bring more peace. So, we enter hell through the gate called WHY, never to return. We dig and claw for answers, only to find more troubling questions. WHY quickly becomes WHY ME as our increased self-focus turns to bitterness.

Not only will grief cause increased self-focus, but it can also cause significant relationship issues, addiction, depression, and suicide.

So, what are we to do when we experience a significant loss? Firstly, do not push the grief aside; if suppressed, it will only cause more problems. Recognize the depth and significance of the loss. Acknowledge your feelings, as ugly as they may be. It is valuable to write out the importance of the loss and how you feel, then take that journal and pray. Do not avoid funerals or memorial services. Our society needs times of corporate pausing and evaluating. A time of grief is a valuable time of evaluation and reflection on life priorities. Death is real; it is harsh; it is hard to handle. Take time to consider your mortality. Pause to evaluate; pause to appreciate; pause to reflect and ponder.

In your pausing, take your pain and circumstance to God in prayer. Consider what the Bible says about loss and grief.

John 16:22 (NIV), *“So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”*

Philippians 4:13 (NIV), *“I can do all this through him who gives me strength.”*

Revelation 21:4 (NIV), *“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

Romans 8:18 (NIV), *“I consider that our present sufferings are*

not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Romans 12:2 (NIV), *“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.”*

Psalm 34:18 (NIV), *“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV), *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

Psalm 147:3 (NIV), *“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”*

Psalm 73:26 (NIV), *“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”*

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (NIV), *“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming*

of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

John 14:1 (NIV), *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.”*

Isaiah 53:4-6 (NIV), *“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

Joshua 1:9 (NIV), *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”*

Romans 8:28 (NIV), *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*

Matthew 5:4 (NIV), *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”*

Take time to meditate on these verses and write down your thoughts and prayers. Read the Psalms. Help others who are grieving. God will show Himself strong and faithful. The Holy Spirit will strengthen your Godly grit. Do not believe the enemy’s lie that God is not trustworthy and has abandoned you or does not love you.

Chapter 28 – Stronghold 15 – Legalism

Legalism is the internalization and personalization of a set of rules, or a code of conduct strictly adhered to and promoted as the way to achieve righteousness. Legalism emphasizes what you do and neglects who you are. Legalism is an attempt to secure rightness in God's sight by good works. Those who live legalistically add human rules to God's laws and treat them as divine.

What is the appeal of legalism? What is the power of legalism? Legalism is attractive because the focus of living is on what you do and not who you are. If you are legalistic, you can push aside your depravity and focus on gaining favor with God through outward actions. If you mess up, you deal with the guilt by asking for forgiveness and then move on. Living this way is more controllable than being open with who you are and being dependent on God's grace and mercy to set

you free. There is no need for dependence on grace and mercy; with legalism, work harder, and it will all be okay. You may experience some guilt with legalism, but it is less devastating than being exposed to the shame for who you are. With legalism, the focus is on the external and not the messy, confusing internal. Legalism puts me in control. I get to be the creator, interpreter, and deliverer of the code. I make myself god. Legalism negates the necessity for the atoning work of Christ on the cross. We are not at His mercy; we are at the mercy of a self-crafted set of righteousness-defining rules.

Legalism promotes arrogance, insecurity, desire for power, and greed. There is no room to experience the joy of the Lord or the move of the Spirit under legalism. With legalism, the burden is performance. Legalism will drain your resilience and grit and eventually burn you out.

Legalism is a mighty stronghold as it encourages you to focus on your performance and measuring up to others. It would be best if you tore down the stronghold of legalism. To tear it down does not mean you throw out all the components of a code of conduct. No, there is a way we should be living, a practice that glorifies God, but we should not be living that way attempting to gain favor with God. We should be living rightly out of gratitude and love for God. Our love for God should motivate our living and not the other way around, where we

expect our way of living to give us a special status with God.

The essence of legalism is an attempt to build a manmade structure on a God-given foundation. We need to tear down the structure but not destroy the foundation. There are critical foundational beliefs. If you answer yes to the following questions, your key-belief system is intact. Do you believe the Bible is the inspired, infallible word of God? Do you believe that God sent His Son to be born to a virgin and to die as an atonement for your sin? Do you believe that Jesus rose from the dead? These core beliefs are called the fundamentals of Christianity. Be careful; do not convert your code of faith into a legalistic code of conduct.

What does the Bible teach us about legalism? Jesus addresses legalism in Luke 18:9-14 (TPT), *“Jesus taught this parable to those who were convinced they were morally upright and those who trusted in their own virtue yet looked down on others with disgust: “Once there were two men who went into the temple to pray. One was a proud religious leader, the other a despised tax collector. The religious leader stood apart from the others and prayed, ‘How I thank you, O God, that I’m not wicked like everyone else. They’re cheaters, swindlers, and crooks—like that tax collector over there. God, you know that I never cheat or commit adultery; I fast from food twice a week and I give you a tenth of all I make.’ “The tax collector stood off alone in the corner, away from the Holy*

Place, and covered his face in his hands, feeling that he was unworthy to even look up to God. Beating his breast, he sobbed with brokenness and tears saying, 'God, please, in your mercy and because of the blood sacrifice, forgive me, for I am nothing but the most miserable of all sinners!' "Which one of them left for home that day made right with God? It was the humble tax collector and not the religious leader! For everyone who praises himself will one day be humiliated before all, and everyone who humbles himself will one day be lifted up and honored before all."

Take time to meditate on this parable. Are you legalistic? Is your Christian life a performance? Are you working to gain God's favor? How do you know if you are legalistic? Are you suffering under the stronghold of legalism?

Living a legalistic life affects how you view yourself, others, and God. Are you spending time and energy looking for a formula for righteousness? If you feel a constant pressure to do and your life could be defined by a list of what you feel compelled to do, then you are most likely legalistic. There is no joy in legalism. Actions that are an expression of your knowledge of God's love brings joy. Actions performed to gain God's favor bring defeat. A necessary part of spiritual growth is Bible study, meditation, prayer, fasting, fellowship with godly people, and the performance of good deeds for the glory of God. If these practices are a pressure that you feel needs

to be checked off your daily to-do list, you are most likely legalistic. These spiritual practices are an essential part of knowing God and should not be a performance. Do you live constantly comparing yourself with others? If you live in this storm of constant comparison, you are looking to others to set the standard for righteousness; you are legalistic. If you believe blessings are a reward for good performance and forgiveness needs to be earned, you are legalistic. If you are on a too-tight schedule and focused on continually doing, then you are legalistic. If you do not experience joy, just because your sins are forgiven, then you are legalistic. We should be living the words of the psalmist in Psalm 32:1 (TPT), *“How happy and fulfilled are those whose rebellion has been forgiven, those whose sins are covered by blood.”* We have a reason for joy that is not dependent on our circumstances, performance, achievements, or status. If you perform your good deeds to get God to love you or feel like God is never happy with you, you are legalistic.

If you are legalistic, it will affect how you view others. If you are an impatient judge of others, quick to be critical, you are legalistic. If you see others as being more blessed or favored by God, you are legalistic. If you are angry when others receive grace and feel everything in God's kingdom needs to be equal, you are legalistic. If you look down on others and see yourself as superior, you are legalistic. If you focus on

praising outward actions and miss the motives, you are legalistic.

The most damaging part of being legalistic is that it affects how you view God. If you are legalistic, you view God as a dispenser of blessing based on merit. Legalism is a sin because it devalues the work of Christ that is necessary for our salvation. If you are legalistic, you are saying that Jesus' sacrifice was not enough. It is not humanly possible to save ourselves. The lie of the enemy is that you can save yourself through your righteous performance.

Legalism is much like narcissism in that the focus is self-focus. Keep in mind the words of Jesus from Luke 11:14 (TPT), "*For everyone who praises himself will one day be humiliated before all, and everyone who humbles himself will one day be lifted up and honored before all.*" God did not place us on this planet to build ourselves up; He set us here to know Him and build His kingdom.

Another downside to legalism is that it fosters rebellion. In a legalistic community, you have two options. You can follow the code, or you can rebel against the code. When legalism prefers compliance over a relationship, it encourages outright rejection and rebellion.

Legalism is a destructive stronghold used by the enemy to cause you to focus on your performance and compliance and

miss what God has available for you. So, what is the cure for legalism? The only treatment for legalism is to be continuously reminded of what Christ accomplished, for you, on the cross. As hard as you try, you do not have spiritual bootstraps to grab and pull yourself into God's favor. You are already in God's favor. He provided a way for you, a path that cost the suffering and life of His son before you even acknowledged Him. You cannot buy your salvation or sanctification by trying to do better as hard as you might. This reality should be the source of abundant joy.

What does the Bible say about legalism? God's word talks a lot about the errors of trying to live by the law. God desires that His people are free to experience His love and to know that it is by His generous grace that we can live without the burden of the law today. Obedience to God is the obedience of love, not an adherence to a set of rules. Yes, how you live your life is important, and living in God's grace is not a license to behave foolishly or irresponsibly. Our actions still have consequences, so it is essential to live wisely. God's word is full of advice on how to live wisely, but it is still only by His grace and mercy that we can walk in His favor. Here are a few passages worth considering regarding living by the law versus living by grace.

Galatians 3:10-13 (TPT), *"But if you choose to live in bondage under the legalistic rule of religion, you live under the law's*

curse. For it is clearly written: "Utterly cursed is everyone who fails to practice every detail and requirement that is written in this law!" For the Scriptures reveal, and it is obvious, that no one achieves the righteousness of God by attempting to keep the law, for it is written: "Those who have been made holy will live by faith!" But keeping the law does not require faith, but self-effort. For the law teaches, "If you practice the principles of law, you must follow all of them." Yet, Christ paid the full price to set us free from the curse of the law. He absorbed it completely as he became a curse in our place. For it is written: "Everyone who is hung upon a tree is doubly cursed."

Ephesians 2:8-9 (TPT), "For it was only through this wonderful grace that we believed in him. Nothing we did could ever earn this salvation, for it was the gracious gift from God that brought us to Christ! So no one will ever be able to boast, for salvation is never a reward for good works or human striving."

Romans 3:28 (TPT), "So our conclusion is this: God's wonderful declaration that we are righteous in his eyes can only come when we put our faith in Christ, and not in keeping the law."

Legalism is a stronghold that will cause you to focus on your performance and rob you of the joy of your salvation. You must tear down the fortress of legalism.

Chapter 29 – Stronghold 16 – Agony

The stronghold of agony is the experience of physical pain. The offense in agony is betrayal. This type of betrayal is not one you can easily ignore because, with agony, your own body betrays you. If you are suffering under the stronghold of agony, your world gets exceedingly small, very quickly. Pain is tangible; you feel it, yet the source of the felt pain is often unknown. Pain's origin can be physical, emotional, existential, or spiritual. This chapter is not a thesis on pain's pathophysiology but will show how physical pain's subjective experience can be a stronghold. Physical pain is a loud voice that demands attention. This loud voice is a powerful distraction, yet you are the only one that hears its screams. Pain is a stronghold in that it causes you to focus on yourself. You feel compelled to focus on the area of pain to find a solution. At times, the solution becomes a stronghold, as we

will see in the next chapter on addiction. When it comes to the human experience with pain, physical pain is the one that is the most easily recognized and identified. Suffering from a biological source can be named, like headaches, backache, tooth pain, etc. This physical pain has a specific location and quality, and most often, a pathology causing the pain experience.

On the other hand, non-physical causes of discomfort or anguish, which feel the same as physical pain, are often tough to identify. Yet, this is the type of pain the enemy uses most often as a stronghold.

The field of pain management is controversial and filled with difficulty. Pain is subjective; there is no blood test to evaluate someone's pain score. In the end, we are left with a complaint of anguish and limited treatment options.

Regardless of the cause, the experience of pain is real and can come from four different sources. The first we are all too familiar with, you stub your toe, and it screams out in pain. This type of pain is called nociceptive pain. Nociceptive is the medical term for the kind of pain that comes as a direct result of physical damage. This pain occurs in the nociceptive nerve fibers when they are activated by inflammation, chemicals, or an injury. This type of pain has an identifiable cause and usually lasts a short period.

The next kind of pain is called neuropathic. This pain is the result of damage or disease affecting the somatosensory nervous system. The cause of this type of pain is often more challenging to determine because it is usually not connected to a specific injury or event. This type of pain can be continuous or episodic and usually lasts for a prolonged period.

Another cause of physically experienced pain occurs when there is an enhanced pain response. In this situation, the pain-sensing nerves are overactive and send out pain messages even when there is no nerve damage. This type of pain is called hyperalgesia. Individuals taking or who have been on opioid pain medication can develop hyperalgesia due to the pain medication. In this situation, their pain may worsen because of the drug prescribed to control the pain.

In the presence of opioid or alcohol withdrawal, an individual will experience physical pain. This type of pain is often severe and constant. This type of withdrawal pain may first show itself when a person reduces their daily dose of prescription opioids or when the amount they have been taking is no longer adequate. Do you see the diagnostic dilemma in treating physically experienced pain?

Bob is a 55-year-old mechanic who has had two previous surgeries for lumbar disc disease. The operations failed to

control his pain, so he has been on a moderate dose of prescription opioids that have allowed him to continue working for the last five years. Bob has heard about the opioid crisis and would like to get off the medication. He sees his primary care doctor, and they decide to wean him off the opioids. This weaning task is difficult and often takes many months. Two months into the process, Bob presents back to his physician, complaining that his pain has gotten so much worse he has had to miss days at work and is afraid he may lose his business. The question is what is the cause of Bob's increased pain experience? Is his pain coming from increased damage in his lower back? Is his pain more pronounced because he has developed hyperalgesia from the long history of taking opioid pain meds? Is his pain intensified because of withdrawal now that he is on a lower dose of medication? At the end of the evaluation, it is impossible to explain which scenario best identifies Bob's pain. Bob will need a very understanding, patient, and compassionate physician to explore his care and future options. Hopefully, Bob will find a satisfying solution and not be discharged from his doctor's practice because he complains of increased pain. And Bob, do not run to drugs or alcohol; it will only make your problem worse.

Are you struggling with the stronghold of agony? Is your situation like Job's when he cried out to God? Job 30:17

(NKJV), *“My bones are pierced in me at night, And my gnawing pains take no rest.”* Pain wants to be your master. The enemy encourages a belief about your pain that will steal your peace, kill your voice, and destroy your legacy. Ongoing discomfort is a power that can limit your activities and silence your voice. The powerful distraction of chronic pain makes it challenging to focus past the pain. The experience of physical pain will increase the impact of all the other strongholds. When in pain, you will feel more isolated, meaningless, powerless, empty, fearful, bitter, and self-centered.

The experience of pain is a potent offense that can be used by the enemy. What is the enemy’s lie regarding agony? The enemy can use pain to whisper to you that God does not care. The enemy wants you to believe that you must limit or extinguish your voice until your pain is controlled. The enemy also wants you to think you need to focus on your pain to get it under control.

So, how should we deal with the stronghold of agony? The first step in coping with agony is to humble yourself and pray. Part of humbling yourself is asking for help in dealing with pain. You do not want to ignore an episode of chest pain with shortness of breath and left arm and jaw pain as just a spell of indigestion. If you are experiencing a new onset of pain, you should get it evaluated and, if possible, diagnosed. Do not be foolish or arrogant. Do not be like the fool I heard about

from a colleague working in the medical tent at the Boston Marathon's finish line. A runner limped into the medical tent after completing the marathon, crying that his ankle was fractured. When asked how he knew it was fractured, he reported, "that is what the X-ray showed yesterday." Be wise, if you experience a new pain, check it out, ask about treatment options, and then pray about what options you should follow. Uncertainty about a new pain will give that pain more power than it deserves. If you live with physical pain, you need to live as if you are vulnerable to developing a possible addiction. Do all you can to find and use other methods for pain control. If you need to be on prescription opioids, do all you can to limit the treatment dose and duration.

Secondly, do not believe the enemy's lies. God still loves you, even when you do not have all the answers or solutions. God has not abandoned you; you still have worth in His kingdom, and your voice is still necessary.

Thirdly, do not focus on the pain. Pain that you focus on quickly turns agony into uncontrollable misery. Several years ago, when pharmaceutical companies evaluated the benefits of their new pain controlling treatments, they would have the study subjects record a daily pain journal. They quickly learned that if you keep a pain journal, your pain will increase, if you are on medication or not. Current studies now focus on improved function and not the level of pain.

Fourthly, do what you can do with caution. Once you have ruled out severe, treatable conditions, do not submit to the pain. Stay active and do not isolate yourself.

Fifthly, do not let the pain distract you from your role in God's kingdom. Seek God with your whole being. Love and serve God and others. Use your voice. Write down what you are thankful for daily. Follow the encouragement in Philippians 4:8 (TPT), "*So keep your thoughts continually fixed on all that is authentic and real, honorable and admirable, beautiful and respectful, pure and holy, merciful and kind. And fasten your thoughts on every glorious work of God, praising him always.*"

Consider Jeremiah's cry to God in Jeremiah 15:18 (NKJV), "*Why is my pain perpetual And my wound incurable, Which refuses to be healed? Will You surely be to me like an unreliable stream, As waters that fail?*" And then consider God's response in Jeremiah 15: 20-21 (NKJV), "*For I am with you to save you And deliver you,*" says the LORD. "*I will deliver you from the hand of the wicked, And I will redeem you from the grip of the terrible.*"

Lastly, as you humbly seek God and pray, always remain thankful. Ask others to pray for you and instructed in James 5:14-16 (TPT), "*Are there any sick among you? Then ask the elders of the church to come and pray over the sick and anoint them with oil in the name of our Lord. And the prayer of faith*

will heal the sick and the Lord will raise them up, and if they have committed sins they will be forgiven. Confess and acknowledge how you have offended one another and then pray for one another to be instantly healed, for tremendous power is released through the passionate, heartfelt prayer of a godly believer!”

If you live with agony, then humbly seek God, pray, remain thankful, and continue to exercise and use your God-given voice. Do not believe the lie of the enemy. Meditate on Isaiah 41:10 (NKJV), “*Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.*”

Chapter 30 – Stronghold 17 – Addiction

Let me apologize at the onset of this chapter on addiction. I am a board-certified addiction medicine specialist who has had the privilege of working with patients struggling with addiction for the last several years. This chapter is overly scientific to show the degree of brain change that occurs because of addictive substances. There is hope for the addict, but it will take more than just increased willpower. If you are interested in more information on this subject, then check out my short book on addiction titled, “Now I’ve Gotcha!”

An addictive substance is a non-essential element, meaning it is not necessary to maintain or sustain life. These chemicals can impact the nervous system by producing a sensation of satisfaction. It creates the desire, which is craving, and the need, which is a physiological dependency for more of the

element. Using the element repeatedly will result in a changed nervous system that now defines the element as necessary for life, as essential as oxygen, food, water, shelter, and relationships. Eventually, this element's value surpasses all the other ingredients, and the addicted individual will be willing to sacrifice any of the other elements to get more of the addictive substance.

The stronghold of addiction is the belief that a chemical is a solution to life's trouble and pain. It is the conviction that I can put something into my body that will alter how I feel. The trap of addiction is that once the chemical has been taken repeatedly for some time, the pain in stopping the compound becomes unbearable.

The Merriam-Webster definition of addiction is "the compulsive need for and use of a habit-forming substance characterized by tolerance and by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal: broadly: persistent compulsive use of a substance known by the user to be harmful."

Addiction is a strong memory in the reward pathway of the brain. To understand this memory, we need to understand epigenetics. Genetics is the DNA that we inherit, accounting for our hair color, eye color, etc. Epigenetics is how individual segments of DNA get expressed in a cell. Every cell has the same DNA, but cells perform different functions through

epigenetics. Because of epigenetics, a muscle cell is different from a kidney cell. Epigenetics allows our nervous system to remain adaptable and learn new things. Memory is an epigenetic structural change in the DNA in the neurons in your brain.

Let us look at how epigenetics works in memory formation and how it works with addiction development. A stimulus causes a release of powerful neurotransmitters that directly impact the neurons' DNA in various ways that will eventually result in memory formation.

Triggered neuroplasticity is the process of stimulus-induced change. Triggered neuroplasticity is the ability of the neurons to change or adjust because of stimuli. Without neuroplasticity, we would not be able to learn or develop new memories or, as we shall see, develop an addiction.

The most common process in triggered neuroplasticity is DNA methylation. DNA methylation leads to DNA exposure. This change in the DNA is like the impact a cancer-causing chemical has on a cell, resulting in cancer. DNA methylation prepares the cell to change its structure and function.

Also occurring is a process called posttranslational modifications of histones that allows the tightly coiled DNA to uncoil and expose DNA areas that can then be modified. The DNA is now no longer a tightly coiled bundle of DNA. The cell

structure and function continue to change through modifications of noncoding RNAs that remodel chromatin and facilitate or suppress gene expression. The cell changes and protein manufacture can be turned on or turned off. The neuron has now changed both its structure and its function. Now you have a newly formed memory.

Let's take a closer look at this process in the context of something we can all relate to, the development of different levels or types of memory.

Short term memory formation is the result of a minimal stimulus. This kind of memory extinguishes quickly. For example, what do you remember about last Wednesday? It was not long ago. The chances are that unless it was a special day, you do not remember much. You might remember if it was your birthday or anniversary, but if it was not, then the details are long gone.

If you increase the stimulus, the memory will last longer. This is the type of memory formation you experience when cramming for exams or the memory of significant historical events, such as President Kennedy's assassination or the first moon landing. What do you remember about September 11, 2001? Do you remember that it occurred on a Tuesday? Do you remember where you were? Do you remember what you did that morning or what you had for breakfast?

If you increase the stimulus even more, the memory will last even longer, to the degree it may have a lasting, lifelong impression. The event changes you. You may also act differently or interpret the world differently because of this overwhelming stimulus caused memory. What do you remember about what happened in Boston on April 15, 2013? As I reported earlier in this book, this was the day of the bombing at the Boston Marathon. I can easily relive that moment, from what I had for breakfast to the sensation of the cup of hot chocolate in my left hand as we experienced the explosion across the street. The overwhelming stimulus changed me. This level of stimulation causes a profound type of memory that may result in post-traumatic stress disorder.

This process of DNA unfolding and changing both its structure and function is how different degrees of memories are formed and stored.

Addiction develops similarly, except the brain's area being affected is the limbic system's reward pathway. The magnitude of the stimulus caused by drugs of addiction is more overwhelming than the stimuli that result in a profound memory formation. Several medical studies have confirmed the brain's structural and functional changes in the brain's reward pathway. A study on the effects of cocaine on rats' brains showed 17 DNA changes in six brain areas. A study on heroin addicts that had been in confirmed recovery for over

nine years showed ongoing significant functional MRI changes when exposed to auditory or visual drug-using stimuli. A study where subjects were given Morphine 50 mg daily for 30 days and then followed with monthly functional MRIs showed that the brain function changes that occurred because of the morphine exposure did not improve six months after completing the study. Changes in these areas of the brain have a prolonged and dramatic effect. Some of these changes may be permanent.

Chemicals that can cause addiction produce an overwhelming stimulus to the neuron. This stimulus changes the DNA in the neuron. The stimuli cause a flood of dopamine from the nucleus accumbens that sends messages to parts of the brain, saying, "this is good and necessary." The experience or feeling is something to be desired. You now have a powerful memory of desire and craving.

The impact of the stimulus in the hippocampus enhances the memory of the reward experience. It reinforces the memory that: "This is something I do not want to forget – I should remember as much about this reward as possible – where I got it, who I got it from, the people I used it with, the room I used it in – and on and on."

The impact on the amygdala is an emotional one. It produces a feeling of security, confidence, and peace – a level of

completeness never experienced before the drug exposure.

The impact on the prefrontal cortex is to assign a high level of value to this experience. Nothing else compares to this experience, and the now addicted individual is willing to pay whatever it may cost to maintain this feeling.

As previously described, different levels of stimulus cause different permanence of memory. Varying degrees of activation of the reward system results in different levels of formed desire. For example, a low-level reward stimulus results in a preference. I like puppies better than kittens is an example of a preference, but I do not want to pay for that puppy or pay to take care of it for the next seventeen years. With a preference, I am still free to make rational choices. Preferences can easily be changed, especially if you have an issue with your preference or a better preference presents itself. Wait till that puppy chews your favorite shoes.

Increase the stimulus in the reward pathway, and you get what we call a desire. A desire comes from a felt need for a sense of completeness. This desire area is the realm of the advertising industry. If I can link your felt desire with a product that I sell, then the sale is easy. If I can sell you the fantasy that a new Lamborghini can give you a sense of contentment or acceptance, then you just bought a new Lamborghini. Unfortunately, the romance quickly fades with the first scratch,

the \$1,000 oil change, the eventual awakening to the reality that the illusion did not bring the contentment or sense of wellbeing it promised. But we keep searching and buying.

If you increase the stimulus, even more, you have an overwhelming impulse. This overwhelming stimulus requires significant brain changes to accommodate, and you end up with an addiction. You are now past minor preference and desire, into the world of an intense craving. The chemical has effectively hijacked your neurons.

Your brain tells you that you may die if you do not get the substance that produced the stimulus. Stimulus caused alteration in the function and structure of brain DNA is the disease of addiction.

These addictive elements work in several different ways. They can mimic a natural neurotransmitter and activate a nerve cell directly. They can cause an increased release of a natural neurotransmitter. They can cause a delay in the removal of a natural neurotransmitter, or they can attach to a receptor and block the action of a neurotransmitter. They all share that, to varying degrees, they all cause an increase in dopamine activity in the nucleus accumbens part of the brain. This release of dopamine labels the element as a reward and facilitates memory of the environment associated with that reward. These characteristics are all shared by the

following addictive items: sugar, caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, opioids, cocaine, Ecstasy, Kratom, and methamphetamine.

Why is it so hard to quit? The brain is a delicate organ designed to function with high speed while maintaining a precise balance. If there is just a little too much glutamate released, the cell dies; if too little is released, normal mental function is impossible.

Each addiction has its specific neurological and physiological effects, both during the use of the substance and during abstinence. The alcoholic gets anxious; the narcotic user experiences pain; the tobacco user cannot concentrate. These highly unpleasant symptoms can be enough to encourage continued use, yet all addictions share another layer of anguish.

To varying degrees, all addictions cause issues with the regulation of glutamate in the nucleus accumbens. The normal function of glutamate in the nucleus accumbens involves the release of glutamate with rapid activation of the next cell and then prompt removal of the glutamate by excitatory amino acid transporter 2 (EAAT2). If the glutamate is not rapidly cleared, it can overexcite the cell causing its death. All addictive compounds decrease the effectiveness of glutamate on the cell membrane and reduce the activity of the

excitatory amino acid transporter 2. During times of abstinence, this regulation becomes very unstable, causing a sense of severe anxiety, stress, sleep disturbance, profound fatigue, poor memory function, and even cell death. Abstinence feels like impending death, and the loss of control over mental processes feels like insanity.

The brain, its delicate balance, and proper function is now the prisoner of the compound. Choosing to consume a known toxic chemical feels like life when it is a movement towards a premature death.

The battle with the stronghold of addiction is a war. 1 Peter 2:11 (TPT), *“My divinely loved friends, since you are resident aliens and foreigners in this world, I appeal to you to divorce yourselves from the evil desires that wage war within you.”* If you are struggling with addiction, it is possible to divorce yourself from the raging war. It is possible to remain sober with grit and resolve, but willpower alone will not free you from addiction. It will take humility, honesty, an attitude of gratitude, and the power of the Holy Spirit to be totally free. God loves you and has provided a way to be free from the power of the addiction.

If you do not struggle with addiction, then keep in mind 1 Peter 5:8 (AMP), *“Be sober [well balanced and self-disciplined], be alert and cautious at all times. That enemy of yours, the devil,*

prowls around like a roaring lion [fiercely hungry], seeking someone to devour.” The snare of the stronghold of addiction will rob you of everything you value.

Chapter 31 – Stronghold 18 – Entitlement

The next three strongholds share a common theme. The strongholds of entitlement, narcissism, and adoration present because of a naïve, immature worldview carried into adulthood. What is appropriate and necessary for a three-year-old is not suitable for a thirty-year-old. In 1 Corinthians 13:11 (AMP), it is written: “*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.*” Living entitled, self-focused, and seeking to be worshipped as an adult will end in disaster. Remember, the enemy’s goal is to keep you in that self-absorbed mindset of the three-year-old.

The stronghold of entitlement is the naive belief that I deserve to be served by others. Entitlement is upside-down slavery, where those who see themselves as impoverished and disadvantaged demand service from those viewed as

advantaged. All slavery is evil.

From the moment we take our first breath, we begin to learn a powerful lesson. We realize that we have the power to impact and control our world. This lesson is reinforced dozens of times daily, hundreds of times weekly, and thousands of times monthly. The lesson learned is this; crying brings a comforting action. If something is not quite right, a felt twinge of hunger, a small abdominal cramp, a strange damp, and smelly sensation in one's pants, then cry, and the world responds, and I am comforted. You may be small and inconsequential, but a cry or scream can change your environment, and others will respond to you; very quickly. We grow up learning and expecting that a cry or scream will produce an immediate response, and someone will resolve our discomfort. Felt discomfort followed by a cry with an expected direct comfort provision is the infant and child's mindset. It is more reflexive than reasoned and gets reinforced frequently. This infantile world view may be appropriate for an infant; after all, an infant needs some way to communicate with its world because an infant is utterly dependent on having its needs met by someone else. The infant is confined to an incubator of dependency, and for the infant, this is very appropriate.

From within this incubator, the infant cries out with expectation – someone feed me, someone change me, someone hold me,

someone notice me, someone take care of me. This dependence on its external environment is necessary for the infant to survive. There are no issues with the infant thinking this way; its survival depends on this external support incubator. A problem arises when this worldview persists into adulthood.

In infancy, the incubator of support is necessary for survival; in adulthood, continually crying out for external help becomes a dependency prison. With maturation should come increased resiliency, and with increased resiliency should come greater independence and less demand for external support.

You cannot avoid turmoil, trouble, injustice, or anguish; it is a genuine daily life component. Life is complicated and, at times, harrowing. If you live with the infant's mindset, you will be severely disappointed. To demand immediate comfort as an adult can be dangerous. What gives you comfort, you become dependent on, so be incredibly careful about where you place your dependency.

The lie of the enemy in the stronghold of entitlement is that there is a readily available external solution to your anguish. We have a lot of readily available quick fixes in our modern world. We can choose medication, alcohol, drugs, intense activities, relationships, distractions, gambling, and

shopping. You can choose what you depend on, but you do not get to choose the consequences of that choice. Be incredibly careful and make choices as if you are a responsible adult and not a demanding three-year-old.

It may be true that just one piece of cake, one sip of alcohol, one cigarette, one dose of a drug, etc., will not cause a lifetime of consequences, but the belief that it will not is likely to kill you or leave you paying an exceedingly high price.

This demand for immediate comfort is behind many of the problems we see in our current society, such as failed rebound relationships, morbid obesity, escalating issues with alcohol, and drug addiction. A demand for immediate comfort often leads to a life of chronic discomfort, anger, and despair.

Is there something you can do when every cell in your being is crying out for immediate comfort, crying out for peace, crying out for less pain? First, do everything possible to not react out of discomfort, find the pause button, and push it. Take time to reflect and write down a description of the trouble. Just pausing will help to rebuild some resilience. Step back and look at the issue from a distance by asking yourself: will this issue matter in six months or a year, or will it even matter a month from now. Do not panic about issues that will not matter in the long run. Consider the options you have, be creative, write the possibilities down, and do not

forget to write out those options' consequences. Be honest about the results. Ask for help. Getting someone else's perspective can help lessen the discomfort and uncover more effective alternatives. Relying on one another for increased perspective is essential and helpful. It is not the same as depending on someone else to solve your problems. Learn to function, with contentment, amid discomfort. You will never get all your troubles sorted out. Increased resiliency comes by being strong and content amid turmoil, not by sitting on a beach having all your needs met by someone else. Grow up; after all, it is your life. Live life deliberately and not reflexively. Be patient amid trouble. There are situations in life when dependence on others is needed. If you have a significant physical disability or age-related functional issues, you may need to be dependent, but you do not have to be demanding.

In God's kingdom, contentment and peace come through serving and not in seeking to be served. Take charge of your life and do not live like the demanding three-year-old. Proverbs 29:11 (TPT), *"You can recognize fools by the way they give full vent to their rage and let their words fly! But the wise bite their tongue and hold back all they could say."* 1 Corinthians 14:20 (TPT), *"Beloved ones, don't remain as immature children in your reasoning. As it relates to evil, be like newborns, but in your thinking be mature adults."*

Tear down the stronghold of entitlement and leave it in the crib where it belongs.

Chapter 32 – Stronghold 19 – Narcissism

The stronghold of narcissism is the belief and demand that I deserve to be loved. Narcissism is the internalization and personalization of perceived inadequacy resulting in ongoing, intense self-centeredness and self-adoration. Self-love is the “sin that so easily entangles” recorded in Hebrews 12:1. All the strongholds are types of insults and offenses used by the enemy to get you to focus on yourself. Once we start focusing on ourselves, we begin to lose our God-given peace, purpose, and potential. The enemy is the victor.

The term Narcissism is mostly used to define a type of personality disorder in psychology. The degree of pathology in Narcissism is determined by how it affects others and how it affects the individual. If you work in the mental health field, you know by experience that this is the area where angels fear to tread. There is no reported successful treatment for the

highly Narcissistic, borderline personality disorder, the sociopath, or the highly criminal. The best you can do is to establish boundaries. There is another category of self-love that is more subtle but just as dangerous. We were born self-centered. We cry to get our needs met, and we cry when we want attention. This type of survival narcissism may be appropriate if you are an infant, but it is inappropriate and destructive as you mature. This type of selfishness does not seem to hurt others or even appear to hurt you. It does not have a mental health diagnostic name or medical billing code. This subtle self-focus is present in all of us and has the power to steal from you the blessings of God.

The Bible warns us in Proverbs 3:7 (NIV), "*Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.*" We all struggle to varying degrees with self-centeredness. Honestly, we all have a core of narcissism that negatively impacts our life and growth. If you do not recognize yourself in the description of narcissism, you are deceiving yourself.

What is narcissism? Narcissism is an inflated sense of self-importance, with a lack of empathy for others. If we compare ourselves to each other, we can feel comfortable that we are not too self-centered. On the other hand, if we compare ourselves to God's standard, we are all very selfish. Carnality is selfish, and we are all carnal to a degree. Narcissists require excessive admiration, and they believe that they are

unique and deserve special treatment. The narcissist's feelings of inadequacy result in the pursuit of peace through self-adoration. To the world around him, the narcissist appears charming, confident, and in control. Internally the narcissist experiences fear of abandonment, emotional instability, and deep feelings of emptiness. The narcissist perceives themselves as unique and notable people, but internally, they are driven by guilt and shame. The narcissist is oriented towards success to make oneself look positive, impressive, successful, and essential. They have a hunger for appreciation and a desire to be the center of attention, therefore deserving special treatment.

How does narcissism show itself in your life? Here are a few questions to ask yourself to help in the evaluation of your level of self-centeredness.

Do you relate to other people as equals or as objects?

Do you feel empty much of the time?

How many selfies do you post in a week?

Do you feel entitled, that the world owes you because you are special?

Do you have any empathy for the young mother holding her crying baby in the grocery store?

Are you angry or aggressive?

Do you feel you have low self-esteem?

Are you living with much shame or regret?

How well do you relate to others? Are those relationships full of distress?

Are you able to rejoice with those who are rejoicing and weep with those who weep?

Are you bored much of the time?

How do you respond to a failure? Do you blame the situation or someone else, or do you evaluate your role in the failure?

Would you be defined by others as charming and charismatic but feel empty?

Do you work hard to seek the approval of others?

Do you feel angry or enraged when your self-worth is threatened?

You will require Godly grit to root out self-centeredness. If you do not fight this battle, the enemy will have you right where he wants you. You will live a lonely, empty life. You will have significant problems with your relationships. You will have an increased risk of depression and suicide. You will lose your grit and become a tired, burned-out shell of what you could

have been. You will lose your voice. You will live with confusion and a lack of purpose.

There is no known successful treatment in medicine or psychiatry for this degree of self-centeredness. If you were to seek a mental health worker's help, the best they can offer is boundaries to prevent you from hurting others. As Christians, we do have a greater hope. There is a solution to our self-destructive self-centeredness.

As Christians, how should we view ourselves? What is Godly self-esteem? Just asking the question should cause some concern. We should not be asking, "who am I?" We should be asking who God is and who are others. As much as my sinful, self-centered self would like to make this all about me, it is not all about me.

On the one hand, we are miserable, rebellious sinners, and on the other hand, we are creatures for whom Christ has died. We were made in His image. Just by focusing on self-discovery, am I not partaking in a narcissistic activity? Good self-esteem is not a question of how I view myself; it is an issue with how I view others. The fruit of the Spirit is a list of qualities present in how I relate to others, not how I expect or demand others to conform to me.

Romans 12:3 (NIV), *"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you*

ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”

So, what does it mean to have healthy, appropriate, and suitable self-esteem? Self-esteem, like many other valuable Christian characteristics, is not something you achieve through striving. In God’s kingdom, self-esteem is freely living the authentic you that He created. Our self-esteem comes directly from God. It is not an emotional sensation, or a quality based on achievement. Like forgiveness and the fruit of the Spirit, we experience self-esteem when we give it to others. You receive from God what you give to others. Matthew 6:14 (TPT), *“And when you pray, make sure you forgive the faults of others so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you.”* So, if you want healthy, robust, vigorous self-esteem, then look at the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life. Galatians 5:22-23 (TPT), *“But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions: joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless.”* When you walk into a room, do you make the conversation and activities all about you? If you make your contacts with others all about you, you will have significant issues with your self-esteem. When you walk into a room, do

you bring with you the fruit of the Spirit? Do others see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, virtue, faith, gentleness, and strength of spirit. To be a follower of Jesus, you must set aside what you desperately desire and give it to others. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 16:24 (TPT), *“Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If you truly want to follow me, you should at once completely reject and disown your own life. And you must be willing to share my cross and experience it as your own, as you continually surrender to my ways.”*”

Matthew 10:39 (TPT), *“All who seek to live apart from me will lose it all. But those who let go of their lives for my sake and surrender it all to me will discover true life!”*

You will not get improved self-esteem by memorizing and reciting positive affirmations. Self-esteem is gained by being the authentic person God made and through whom His Spirit gives to the world around you. Yet, the enemy will still whisper that it is all about you. Do not believe the lie.

Chapter 33 – Stronghold 20 – Adoration

The belief and demand that you deserve to be worshipped is the stronghold of adoration. The enemy whispers and the enemy knows when we are vulnerable and where we are weak. The enemy knows what to whisper and when we are in pain, we listen. The enemy's whispers are lies that encourage us to focus on ourselves during times of anguish. With the stronghold of adoration, the enemy exploits another one of our weaknesses, the desire to be worshiped. When it comes to adoration, the enemy has many helpers because not only do we desire to be worshiped, but we were also created to worship. If we do not worship the one true God, we will find a surrogate god in royalty or celebrity. This worship of false gods is not the stronghold of adoration; it is the stronghold of idolatry. The stronghold of adoration occurs if you are the focus of the adoration. This stronghold is one of

the enemy's favorites. Lucifer himself was banished from heaven because of the stronghold of adoration. He was created and gifted by God to be a magnificent being, made in beautiful perfection by God's hand. We learn in Isaiah 14:12-14 (NKJV) what happened to Lucifer when he pursued adoration. *"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'" Humanity, like Lucifer, desires to be above God. We seek our own glory and not the glory of God. John 12:43 (TPT), "For they loved the glory that men could give them rather than the glory that came from God!"*

The stronghold of adoration is different than the stronghold of narcissism. You can be entirely bound by the stronghold of narcissism and never leave your room. The stronghold of adoration is narcissism that craves validation from others. Humans are worshippers. God made us to be complete when we worship Him. If we do not worship God, we will find something or someone else to worship. We adore our gods, our heroes, and our idols. Adoration is the demonstration of respect, showing reverence or strong admiration. Adoration

means to give worth to something, to worship it, or to bow down. Adoration is due to God alone. It is a manifestation of submission and acknowledgment of dependency. We are dependent on what we worship. What we worship defines who we are and where we can go in times of trouble. Hebrews 12:28 (TPT), *“Since we are receiving our rights to an unshakeable kingdom we should be extremely thankful and offer God the purest worship that delights his heart as we lay down our lives in absolute surrender, filled with awe.”*

When it comes to the stronghold of adoration, we need to be aware of several things. We need to be mindful of what it means to worship, what we worship, the value of worship, and the dangers of seeking to be worshipped. With this foundation, we can then look at the disastrous impact of adoration and what to do if we are caught in its claws.

What does it mean to worship? The essence of worship is found in Proverbs 3:6 (TPT), *“Become intimate with him in whatever you do, and he will lead you wherever you go.”* Worship is not found in a building, a liturgy, a body position, a meditation, or an act of sacrifice. Worship is the acknowledgment of God in all your life. This intimate relationship with God will transform you. Do you want Godly grit to sustain you during times of turmoil? Do you want to be able to stand in trials? You will get the strength you need from what you worship. An idol of gold or celebrity will leave you

weakened and discouraged.

What is the value and purpose of worship? Worship focuses our attention away from ourselves and, in so doing, expands our awareness of possibility. In other words, you become more like what you worship. If you worship a celebrity, you will attempt to look like them, wear their clothing, or buy the products they promote. If you worship the one true God, you will find the Godly grit to defeat the enemy, find and use your voice, and be part of building His kingdom. What you worship affects the capacity of your grit and resilience.

Worship impacts your morals and values. Worship encourages personal transformation. We look to what we worship to get insight into how we should be living. If you worship God, you will move in the direction of developing godly morals. You will have a foundation for your morality. If you worship a man-made idol, you have no basis for morality. If you worship a celebrity, well, you will probably end up confused and disappointed. The celebrity you worship is often two different people. The star has a stage persona, and then there is the real person, the one the public rarely gets to see.

While in medical practice in northern California, I was a volunteer physician with Haight-Ashbury Free Clinics providing medical care at rock concerts. My time spent

backstage gave me a glimpse of the two lives of celebrities. One of the all-day shows I worked on was an angry, rebellious event at a ski resort. The music was in-your-face rebellious, the crowd was intoxicated, and our medical team ended up busy all day. The medical area was backstage, where the musicians were gathered and preparing. The performers had access to all the alcohol they wanted, and yet I did not see one musician at the beer tent all day. What they promoted was one thing but what they were was another. They knew if they lived the lifestyle that their music encouraged, they would not survive. I spent considerable time that day talking to several of the musicians about healthy diet and exercise programs.

Worship builds community and social identity. We view ourselves as being inferior to what we worship. This humility in the presence of what we worship is a social glue that knits us together.

Worship will change your perspective and how you can impact the world. Worship will adjust your priorities and values in a way that has a meaningful impact on the world around you.

Worship will allow you to rest in God as you acknowledge that He is in control. Worship prepares you for prayer and gaining a meaningful relationship with God. Worship will open the doors for God's blessings. I have witnessed multiple times in

my work with addiction patients that the moment they take a step towards humility, the blessings start to flow. God is eager to bless those who are willing to be humble.

Considering all these benefits of worship, should not you want to be worshipping all the time as reported by David in Psalm 92:2 (TPT), *“At each and every sunrise we will be thanking you for your kindness and your love. As the sun sets and all through the night, we will keep proclaiming, “You are so faithful!”*”

Victory is a product of worship and praise. So, whatever your battle, approach with a mindset of praise. Psalm 18:3 (NKJV), *“I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies.”*

Worship is soul-satisfying. Meditate on Psalm 63:1-5 (NKJV), *“O God, You are my God; Early will I seek You; My soul thirsts for You; My flesh longs for You, In a dry and thirsty land, Where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, To see Your power and Your glory. Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips shall praise You. Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth shall praise You with joyful lips.”*

Worship brings joy. Psalm 100:4 (NKJV), *“Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be*

thankful to Him, and bless His name.”

Worship will strengthen your faith. Romans 4:20 (NKJV), *“He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,”*

Worship opens us up to our God-given potential to a God-inspired renewal. Romans 12:2 (NKJV), *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”*

All of these incredible benefits of worship are lost if you are the one seeking the adoration. You may have accomplished some feat of excellence for which you receive public recognition and admiration. There is no harm in this, we should use our Godly grit to achieve greatness, but we should not be using that platform to gain self-indulgent worship. A dose of public adoration can go to your head as quickly as an injection of heroin. Be incredibly careful and remain humble. Strive for excellence but leave the devotion to the only one deserving, God. After all, He is the one who gave you all your talents and abilities.

Three groups in our society are the most vulnerable to the stronghold of adoration. We have our cultural gods, heroes, and idols. Our cultural gods are those who have reached the status of celebrity. Among this group are actors, athletes,

royalty, and some of the super-wealthy. Those in this group who use their position to gain public recognition get trapped by the adoration stronghold. As their adoring public, we see their fame, wealth, class, and glory as something to be desired. What we do not see are the consequences of living in this social fishbowl.

A cultural hero is one who expands the sense of what is possible for a human being. We look up to these people because of their accomplishments. They help to define the limits of our aspirations. They are those who have worked for what they have and become influencers because of their sacrifice, education, training, devotion, and availability. They do not seek public recognition but could use their position to gain adoration if they choose. Within this group are many narcissistic individuals who use their position to seek adoration. These people love to either be loved or feared. The problem with this source of worship is that the bar defining “hero” keeps moving. In my grandfather’s day, a hero was someone who graduated from college. In my father’s day, a hero was someone who graduated from medical school. In my day, a medical hero graduated from medical school and worked in a problematic remote part of the world. Today, there is little room for heroes in the field of medicine.

Cultural idols are people with natural gifts of talent, beauty, and charisma that are envied by others. We may not have

many cultural gods or heroes, but we have many cultural idols. There are a few in every family and every classroom. These are the people who seem to have an extra dose of favor. They are more beautiful, humorous, intelligent, talented, charismatic, or athletic. They do not struggle to gain acceptance. They are tempted by adoration even if they do not knowingly use their abilities to seek adoration.

If you are a cultural god, hero, idol, or seek to be, you need to be aware of the pitfalls of the stronghold of adoration. Adoration makes the impact of all the other strongholds more significant. Just look at the tabloid covers the next time you check out at the grocery store. Fame is an accurate predictor of misery. Adoration appears to be a positive platform when it is a snare. You no longer have issues you can keep private. Look at the list of strongholds. Every stronghold will be worse if you are a person who is adored. You will feel more isolated, struggle more with meaning, feel emptier, tend to be more bitter, struggle more with greed, have greater difficulty with shame, and on and on. The enemy loves it when you are adored and especially if you feel you deserve to be adored.

Striving for adoration can foster greed for glory. This greed quickly becomes consuming because adoration is very addictive and is only gratifying briefly. You live frantically chasing a fantasy you can never catch and hold. Fortune and fame will never satisfy for long. Ecclesiastes 5:10 (NKJV),

“He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.”

Seeking adoration multiplies and reinforces the destructive impact of narcissism. After all, if everyone says it is all about me, maybe it is all about me. Perhaps I am bigger and better than others. Remember, this world we create that is all about us is a tiny, lonely world. We need to be part of something bigger than ourselves if we hope to survive and thrive.

Another result of living as the adored is that you quickly lose your sense of authentic self. Adoration and the subsequent loss of privacy can result in a loss of authenticity as there is a felt need to give your adoring public what they want and not your authentic self. With this loss comes increased isolation, mistrust, dysfunctional adaptation to fame, drug addiction, and often untimely death. Fame and celebrity can change a person forever. It alters your reality and worldview in a way that crowds out love as one loses the sources of lasting joy and peace.

Once this form of adoration is experienced, there is a tremendous pressure to maintain the adoration flow. This pressure to hang on to the adoration and maintain a degree of perfectionism is beyond exhausting. A celebrity living with excessive performance-stress will often turn to drugs and alcohol for both the euphoria and the necessary productive

energy. The addictive power of the combination of adoration and narcissism is often fatal. Yet, we are still attracted by the lure of wealth, access, preferential treatment, public adoration, and the desire to be part of an exclusive club. Remember what Jesus said about seeking glory in Luke 9:24 (TPT), *“For if you choose self-sacrifice, giving up your lives for my glory, you will embark on a discovery of more and more of true life. But if you choose to keep your lives for yourselves, you will lose what you try to keep.”* If you live your life to seek glory, you will lose your life.

The enemy's lie is that if you seek your glory, you will find it, and your life will be better. He wants you to believe that more money, power, prestige, celebrity, influence will solve your most profound problems. Yet, we all have an insatiable thirst within us that will not be satisfied with fame, money, power, drugs, or alcohol.

What does the Bible say about seeking adoration? In Proverbs 29:25 (AMPC), we read, *“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever leans on, trusts in, and puts his confidence in the Lord is safe and set on high.”* Those who are addicted to adoration become afraid of losing the attention of their fickle fans. They become afraid of the people they do not know. They are caught in a snare.

What must be done to tear down this deadly stronghold? The

first step in approaching this stronghold is to admit that it is a problem, and that problem is much bigger than you. Cravings for adoration are more significant and more potent than cravings for alcohol or any drug. If you do not humble yourself and seek God's help, you will never have a chance to overcome the stronghold of adoration. This stronghold is a trap that very few escape. Pray that God will show you your heart and the path back to seeking and serving Him. Wash your mind and soul in His word regularly. God created us to seek Him, love Him, and love others, not to be consumed with loving ourselves.

Continue to pursue excellence, aware that God alone is worthy of worship and adoration. Colossians 3:23 (TPT), *"Put your heart and soul into every activity you do, as though you are doing it for the Lord himself and not merely for others."* Seek His glory, not your glory. Be conscious of the enemy's lie who wants you to believe that it is all about you. Seek the glory that comes from God. If you look with humble eyes, you will see the glory of God everywhere. The heavens tell us of the glory of God – Psalm 19:1 (TPT), *"God's splendor is a tale that is told; his testament is written in the stars. Space itself speaks his story every day through the marvels of the heavens. His truth is on tour in the starry vault of the sky, showing his skill in creation's craftsmanship."*

If we seek personal adoration, we will be blind to the glory of

God. 2 Corinthians 4:4 (TPT), *"for their minds have been blinded by the god of this age, leaving them in unbelief. Their blindness keeps them from seeing the dayspring light of the wonderful news of the glory of Jesus Christ, who is the divine image of God."*

We were not made to be adored; we were made to experience the wonder of worship of the one true God. Therefore, we exist.

We live in a time of increased cynicism, distrust, confusion, and skepticism. We have lost trustworthy role models, the role models that point to the glory of God and not the glory of man or human achievement. Use the talents and abilities that God has given you to be that positive role model. Do not use what God has given you to promote yourself. Psalm 37:34 (TPT), *"So don't be impatient for the Lord to act; keep moving forward steadily in his ways, and he will exalt you at the right time."*

This chapter concludes the section on strongholds. I am sure there are many more strongholds than I have listed. These are the twenty most common ones that I have observed in the thousands of patients I have seen in over forty years of medical practice. Take some time to consider what strongholds are currently holding you back and use your Godly grit to set aside those weights that so easily rob you of

your peace, kill your voice and destroy your legacy and strive for all that God has for you.

Chapter 34 – Fortress of Shalom

Life is hard, confusing, troubling, and at times, feels impossible. We all struggle with insults, painful losses, injustices, and our own sinful nature. Our goal during these times of difficulty is not complacency or comfort; our goal is contentment. The Bible refers to another stronghold, one that is protective and not destructive. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you have a defensive fortress manufactured by the cross's wood and nails. This fortress is a place of peace and contentment where you are free to be authentic and honest. Psalm 9:9-10 (NIV), *“The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.”*

Most believers look forward to the mansion Christ is preparing for them in heaven and care little about the fortress He has

provided for them here today. We willingly live in perpetual discontent, looking forward to a time of peace in the sweet by-and-by. Jesus died for you to provide a fortress of peace, available for immediate occupancy. The prayer of the Levites is for us today, Numbers 6:24-26 (NIV), *““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.”* This life of peace, or in the Hebrew, Shalom, is for today. Shalom is a state of peace and completeness. It is a mindset of quiet tranquility and contentment. Within our God-provided fortress, there is safety and security. Outside of this fortress, the world may be upside-down and out of control, but within the fortress’ walls, there is Shalom.

This fortress is not something we can create with our own efforts; it is a gift that is available to us. John 14:27 (TPT), *“I leave the gift of peace with you—my peace. Not the kind of fragile peace given by the world, but my perfect peace. Don’t yield to fear or be troubled in your hearts—instead, be courageous!”* Are you living in this place of peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, and tranquility?

God is our fortress, He is our protector, and our salvation. We have no reason to crumble in fear or cower because of intimidation. Psalm 18:2 (TPT), *“You’re as real to me as bedrock beneath my feet, like a castle on a cliff, my forever firm fortress, my mountain of hiding, my pathway of escape,*

my tower of rescue where none can reach me. My secret strength and shield around me, you are salvation's ray of brightness shining on the hillside, always the champion of my cause."

Psalm 62:6 (TPT), *"For he alone is my safe place. His wrap-around presence always protects me as my champion defender. There's no risk of failure with God! So why would I let worry paralyze me, even when troubles multiply around me?"*

Psalm 46:1-3 (TPT), *"God, you're such a safe and powerful place to find refuge! You're a proven help in time of trouble—more than enough and always available whenever I need you. So we will never fear even if every structure of support were to crumble away. We will not fear even when the earth quakes and shakes, moving mountains and casting them into the sea. For the raging roar of stormy winds and crashing waves cannot erode our faith in you."*

2 Samuel 22:2-4 (NKJV), *"The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; The God of my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, My stronghold and my refuge; My Savior, You save me from violence. I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies."*

Psalm 144:2 (TPT), *"He's my shelter of love and my fortress*

of faith, who wraps himself around me as a secure shield. I hide myself in this one who subdues enemies before me.”

We can take comfort in the fact that the God of our comfort knows us thoroughly. He knows the beginning from the end; He knows the outcome and what we need.

Nahum 1:7 (NKJV), *“The LORD is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble; And He knows those who trust in Him.”*

If you seek Him and find your voice and begin to use it, you will face many challenges that will require a fortress – a fortress of safety, rest, and nourishment.

A life free from discomfort would lack the challenges needed to grow. Yes, we have times when we would like to see things work out smoothly. We long for our environment to change to accommodate our wishes. However, we ultimately desire to know amid very troubling circumstances that we are still at peace and not destroyed emotionally.

God provided the way of escape through the work Christ accomplished on the cross. What does it mean that His yoke is easy, and His burden is light? What does life look like within the walls of His fortress? At times life seems more of a duty and heavy responsibility than a blessing.

Most often, our discomfort and discontent do not lead us to the cross; it leads us to actions within our power and control.

We strive to overcome uneasiness through denial, distraction, reaction, and minimization. All these methods seem to work briefly but given time; they leave us more discouraged and emptier.

To control our discontentment and felt pain, we alter painful reality through denial. This life of denial is a weak self-made fortress. We deny we have a problem, or we minimize the seriousness of the problem. We deny our faults, and by pretending they do not exist, we believe we will be able to hide our flaws. We deny our intent, pretending our intent or motives are pure and positive when they are self-protective. We deny our self-centeredness and selfishness, convinced our actions are to serve others. We use fantasy and superstition to strengthen our denial, removing our felt pain further from experience and reality. We can even use perpetual turmoil as a means of denial, believing that if my life is in constant upheaval, I have an excuse and do not have to deal with the more significant realities and life issues. Through a lack of gratitude, we can even deny the many blessings in our life. If I chose to live in denial as a means of controlling felt pain, then thanksgiving and gratitude will not be a part of my life. Gratitude dissolves denial, so if I am grateful, I would have to face the realities of life.

If denying is not our first choice of controlling discontentment, then we will often choose distraction. Distraction is a mild

form of denial and can effectively deal with some uneasiness and pain. If you want to lessen the pain of childhood immunizations, distract the child with a noisy toy. We distract ourselves in many ways. We distract through entertainment. Social media, movies, television, sports, commuter games are all readily available and effective forms of distraction. Work can serve as a distraction, a way of avoiding dealing with or recognizing discontent in other areas of life. We can be distracted through education or additional learning. Self-help books are plentiful and can even offer some superficial benefit, but they can also be a form of ongoing distraction from life's realities. We can be distracted by hobbies. We can be distracted fighting for a cause or being part of a group of like-minded people. It is not that any of these things are evil; they may be valuable parts of our lives, but not if their sole purpose is a distraction. It would help if you still spent time addressing reality.

We can achieve avoidance-distraction with ritual, the practice of a set of actions or procedures with an expected outcome. If I do things in a specific prescribed way, then God is obligated to bless me. If left uncontrolled, rituals can become compulsions, and compulsions can become obsessions, and the purpose of the action is wholly lost.

If distraction becomes ineffective, it is possible to take it to another level and seek to numb ourselves. It is possible for

you to numb discontentment for some time with food, drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex, or computer games. It is the brief comfort provided by these activities that make an addiction an addiction. Be careful; it is easy to go from distraction to addiction without even realizing it. Your self-made fortress is about to collapse on you.

Another mechanism of dealing with discontentment is a reflexive reaction. Anger can be an effective form of self-protection when you feel threatened. Living as a victim and avoiding responsibility through blame and bitterness can feel like a safe place to hide from life's discontentment. Feeling superior because of your unique situation or life-pain can be used to justify rebellion and even criminal activity.

We long for contentment. Denial, distraction, addiction, and overt reaction do not bring us more pleasure. These activities may be an effective means of avoidance but leave us with more discontentment in the long run.

What is contentment? What is this life of Shalom that Jesus has offered to us as a gift? If you ask, you will get many different answers. Most people would answer that contentment is the solution to an immediate life problem. From the beginning of time, disgruntled people have turned to their spiritual leaders, monks, shaman, mystics, rabbis, imams, priests, and pastors for the key to living a contented

life. We also turn to our psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, and medical doctors to find the path to contentment. If all else fails, we can minimize your discontentment with a medication. We are even promised contentment by the advertising industry, who promote their products as a cure for discontentment. Peddlers of counterfeit contentment fill our world. If a wave of contentment suddenly hit our nation, the jobless rate would skyrocket. Discontent is good for the economy but cruel to the citizens.

Contentment masquerades as many things, so we need to consider what contentment is not to understand contentment better.

Contentment is a vital part of healthy, productive living, but it is not a quality you can achieve through self-generated efforts. Contentment is not a minimizing of expectations and learning to live in the moment. This minimization is just a combination of denial and complacency.

Contentment is not financial security. If you have enough finances for your basic needs, the rest or abundance does not add to your contentment level.

Contentment has nothing to do with leisure time. Leisure as a sole focus of attainable peace will disappoint.

Contentment is not a physical state. You cannot obtain peace with an exercise program or diet. Good health is desirable, but it is not contentment.

So, what then is the contentment or peace available to the children of God?

Hebrews chapter 4 describes this Shalom type of contentment. It is the faith-rest that should be a part of every believer's life. Unfortunately, what we witness most often, or experience in our own lives, is a life where we believe in God, but faith-rest lacks. Where is this promised land of rest? Where is the door to the fortress? We seem to be willing to remain content that our faith will get us to heaven while we continue to struggle with life's burdens. We are no different than the children of Israel; we believe in the promise but walk in the wilderness. Hebrews chapter four encourages us to walk in this faith-rest provided by God, "today." We do not have to be weighed down by the burdens of this life if we live by faith. We do not have to be imprisoned by any of the strongholds. We do not have to be crushed by condemnation or trapped by self-centeredness. Hebrews 4:3 (TPT), *"For those of us who believe, faith activates the promise, and we experience the realm of confident rest!"*

God has promised us His rest; this rest is real contentment. It is the freedom to be the authentic you. It is not a life of

complacency. It is the life available from within His fortress. It is the ability to know God's plan for you and the ability to live that plan with passion and commitment. It is the ability to understand, exercise, and use your voice. It is living with the belief and faith that God's rest and peace are more significant than any of the world's burdens or problems. God is our source, God is our provider, and we should be living free in service to Him. Hebrews 4:10 (TPT), *"As we enter into God's faith-rest life, we cease from our works, just as God celebrates his finished works and rests in them."*

We cannot gain God's faith-rest by our works; it is provided, as a gift, bought with a price. Real contentment is only available through and because of the cross. The cost was high, and He paid the price. Shalom seems to be out of reach because it is out of our reach; it is only available through the cross. All other forms of felt contentment are minimization of genuine contentment. The only true Shalom is the faith-rest Christ died to purchase for us. The burdens of life have no adequate resolution without the cross, but with the cross, there is a resolution, restoration, and rest. Hebrews 4:11 tells us this is not the "let go and let God" kind of complacent rest; we obtain this rest through diligence and effort. We need to allow God to search our hearts; we need to root out unbelief and ask God for faith. We need to seek Him with all our heart and not just seek Him enough to feel a little better about

ourselves today. We also need to gain a growing appreciation for what Christ accomplished on the cross. Hebrews 4:11 (TPT), *“So then we must give our all and be eager to experience this faith-rest life so that no one falls short by following the same pattern of doubt and unbelief.”*

The children of Israel were able to visualize their lives in the promised land but did not have the faith to enter that land. We, too, should be able to imagine what life would look like if we lived in this faith-rest promise. Do we want to be like the children of Israel and miss the promise?

What would our experience of the trials and strongholds of life look like if we were to live by faith and understanding God provided “faith-rest”?

Firstly, we would not see the strongholds as insurmountable hurdles. We would see that our discontent comes from not living our lives in the image of God, as God intended. Our God-given image has not changed, but our relationship with God has changed. Contentment comes with “living the image.” At the cross, Christ provided a way back to God, so we should now be able to live in His image as was initially intended. Colossians 1:20-22 (TPT), *“And by the blood of his cross, everything in heaven and earth is brought back to himself - back to its original intent, restored to innocence again! Even though you were once distant from him, living in*

the shadows of your evil thoughts and actions, he reconnected you back to himself. He released his supernatural peace to you through the sacrifice of his own body as the sin-payment on your behalf so that you would dwell in his presence. And now there is nothing between you and Father God, for he sees you as holy, flawless, and restored,” We need to live with a growing awareness of what Christ accomplished for each of us on the cross.

The image of God in us is fractured, and the enemy tries to trip us up with various strongholds, but because of the work Christ accomplished on the cross, we can now renew our relationship with God and live the image and the life that He intended.

If you live the life God has for you, you will need this fortress and comfort only found in Him. God gave you a voice and a purpose. If you use it, you will be a threat to the enemy, and he will try to destroy you. May God give you peace and rest as you seek and serve Him.

Chapter 35 – The Enemy’s Playbook

If you are the coach of a team headed to the Super Bowl, you would have a considerable advantage if you had the other team’s playbook. A playbook details the game plan, listing what options you have and how you will respond based on the game's unfolding. The Bible is not only a guidebook on how to live, but it is also a revelation of the enemy’s playbook. You will be at a considerable advantage if you know how the enemy plans to stop you from fulfilling God’s plan for your life.

If you seek God and have found your voice, you will also discover that the enemy has a plan. The enemy’s objective is to prevent you from using your voice. The enemy has a book of tactics that he uses to knock you off course and cause you to quit. Often, the enemy is victorious. In this next chapter, I would like to uncover the enemy’s schemes to prepare you for

what you will face.

This book is a project that started about fifty years ago. The contents developed slowly into a form that was ready to be shared with others in the fall of 2020. With ninety-five percent of the book written, I released the first podcast on November 18, 2020. The enemy was not happy. I believe I had found my voice and was now taking direct action to share it. On that day, the enemy released an unexpected attack to discourage me and prevent me from moving in the direction God was leading. That day's events included false accusations, mocking, deception, and shaming, with a significant threat to my finances. I was preparing to write this chapter, not realizing I was about to live it. Now, I have never given much stock to my dreams, usually explaining them on my dietary indiscretions or level of fatigue, but the night before these events was different. That night I dreamt that God presented my wife and me with an extraordinary gift – a gift that we at first would not understand to be a gift. I awoke that morning full of peace as I walked out to my shop to record and release the first podcast. God is so good in giving you what you need when you need it. I now have an experiential understanding of 1 Peter 4:16 (TPT), *“If you suffer for being a Christian, don’t consider it a disgrace but a privilege. Glorify God because you carry the Anointed One’s name.”* When you begin to live God’s plan for your life, you will find the enemy whispers, and

he has many willing listeners, ready to cooperate in his plan to get you to become discouraged and quit.

Amid the turmoil, keep seeking God and do not quit. He is your fortress and source of peace. James 1:12 (TPT), *“If your faith remains strong, even while surrounded by life’s difficulties, you will continue to experience the untold blessings of God! True happiness comes as you pass the test with faith, and receive the victorious crown of life promised to every lover of God!”*

This victorious crown of life promised in James 1 is not waiting for you in heaven; it is available today as you find your voice and begin to use it. You will find your life has purpose and meaning; you will experience contentment and peace that can only come from God. You will experience fulfillment as you establish a legacy of God’s love. The enemy will push back with intensity but keep standing.

You are a threat to the enemy's plans, and he will fight back. He wants to steal your peace, kill your voice, and destroy your legacy. He wants to keep you from being who God wants you to be. How does the enemy attack, who does he use? The Bible contains many examples of the enemy’s tactics against people of faith.

The enemy will attack you through condemnation. We read in 2 Samuel 6 about David and Michal after David

experienced a significant victory. When David danced in the streets celebrating the victory that God ordained, his wife mocked and ridiculed him. Do not be surprised if you experience condemnation from those close to you. Condemnation from strangers is powerless, but condemnation from those you love can be devastating. Do not let condemnation destroy you.

Another scheme of the enemy is a false accusation. In Genesis 39, we read the account of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Joseph was where God wanted him. He was in a place of leadership that would ensure the survival of the children of Israel. The false accusation from Potiphar's wife was the enemy's scheme to remove Joseph. A false allegation is an injustice that can destroy you in two ways. If believed by others, the accusation can hurt you. It can also destroy you if you become consumed fighting the false charge. In Isaiah 54:17 (NKJV), we read, "*No weapon formed against you shall prosper, And every tongue which rises against you in judgment You shall condemn.*" When falsely accused, condemn the words as being untrue and move ahead with your God-given purpose. God does not require you to be the enemy's doormat. Strive to love the people, condemn the words, and do not be consumed by the fight. God will defend you. We read the story of Samson and Delilah in Judges 16. In this account, we see that the enemy

used seduction and flattery to prevent Samson from fulfilling his God-given plan. Delilah mocked Samson and then accused him of mocking her. Be careful; the weapons used against you are often how the accuser hides those same actions and intentions. If you are mocked, flattered, or unduly promoted, it is most likely to take something from you and not give you something genuine. God has more for you than the accolades of others.

The events I mentioned occurring on November 18, 2020, happened at a time of personal physical and mental exhaustion. I had been on-call for an inpatient facility 24/7 for 15 weeks. The enemy knows when we are most vulnerable, and one of those times is when we are exhausted. In 1 Kings 19, we read about Elijah running from Jezebel, fearful and intimidated. He was exhausted and wanted to die. 1 Kings 19:4 (NKJV), *“But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die, and said, “It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!”* Take care of yourself – do not burn yourself out. Do not forget that the battle is the Lord’s. Do not become weary in doing good. Galatians 6:9 (TPT), *“And don’t allow yourselves to be weary or disheartened in planting good seeds, for the season of reaping the wonderful harvest you’ve planted is coming!”*

The enemy is aware of your vulnerable areas and will use those areas to steal, kill, and destroy. The enemy will use any of the stronghold areas that have been areas of vulnerability in your life to isolate you and cause you to retreat. As you move ahead in becoming the person God would have you to be, you can expect to wrestle with your past strongholds. Be aware and be on guard – seek the Lord and keep moving forward.

In 1 Samuel 30:18 (NKJV), we read of another scheme of the enemy. The enemy will attack by stealing the fruit of your toil and labor. *“Now it happened, when David and his men came to Ziklag, on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the South and Ziklag, attacked Ziklag and burned it with fire, and had taken captive the women and those who were there, from small to great; they did not kill anyone, but carried them away and went their way. So David and his men came to the city, and there it was, burned with fire; and their wives, their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with him lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep. And David’s two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite, had been taken captive. Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But*

David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.” Moving forward with God may bring with it an attack on your finances, family, and reputation. The enemy will do all he can to rob your joy and peace to discourage you and get you to quit. Do what you can to value and protect your marriage and your family. Pray for them and be available.

We see another example of the enemy's schemes in the account of Moses. Moses was God's man to lead the children of Israel to their promised land. Almost every time Moses moved forward with God's plans, the people turned against him. Exodus 14:11-12 (NKJV), *“Then they said to Moses, ‘Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness.”* Do not be surprised if the enemy uses this scheme against you when it is least expected. A victory won is often attacked by the enemy through other's envy and jealousy.

Another effective scheme of the enemy is to get you to become offended and bitter. Bitterness will quickly steal your peace and kill your voice. Others will pick up on your offense and become bitter themselves. As you move forward with God's plan for you, you will see injustices more clearly for

what they are. Do not pick up these injustices and transform them into a bitter producing offense. Look to Jesus, who faced the ultimate injustice as He hung on the cross yet did not become bitter.

If all else fails, the enemy will use fear and intimidation to cause you to quit and submit. We look at the Bible's heroes as people of exceptional courage and fortitude when, they are no different from the rest of us. What is outstanding about them is that they continued to move ahead with God's plan amid fear and intimidation. Esther 4:15-16 (NKJV), *"Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"* Do not expect to fulfill God's plans for you with feelings of confidence and strength. God's plans for you are much bigger than you could ever accomplish with your own power, and because of this, you will experience fear and intimidation. God's plans for you will take you miles beyond your zone of comfort and confidence.

We will need God's help to survive and move ahead with His plans for us. We need to develop a Biblical approach to spiritual growth and understand our role in God's kingdom. We need to build and supply a storehouse of spiritual weapons so that we will not be consumed by distraction,

complacency, fear, and the enemy's other schemes.

Remember the words of Jesus in John 16:33 (TPT), *“And everything I’ve taught you is so that the peace which is in me will be in you and will give you great confidence as you rest in me. For in this unbelieving world you will experience trouble and sorrows, but you must be courageous, for I have conquered the world!”*

Chapter 36 – Building a Storehouse

To become the person God intends you to be, to fill your part in His kingdom will take more than tearing down strongholds and overcoming the enemy's schemes. You are not a threat to the enemy if you spend your life focused only on the strongholds like lady Macbeth continuously washing her hands. To break free of the cycle of tearing down strongholds and be free to use our voice and live as God intended, we will need a storehouse within His fortress where we can grow and mature. This storehouse is where we find the rest that God can provide, and the nourishment needed to grow and heal. Never forget, this life you have been given is a gift; it is not all about you; it is about Him and sharing His love with the world around you. In Galatians 6:1-5 (TPT), we read, *“My beloved friends, if you see a believer who is overtaken with a fault, may the one who overflows with the*

Spirit seek to restore him. Win him over with gentle words, which will open his heart to you and will keep you from exalting yourself over him. Love empowers us to fulfill the law of the Anointed One as we carry each other's troubles. If you think you are too important to stoop down to help another, you are living in deception. Let everyone be devoted to fulfill the work God has given them to do with excellence, and their joy will be in doing what's right and being themselves, and not in being affirmed by others. Every believer is ultimately responsible for his or her own conscience." This passage should be our guiding light when we reach out to help others. We should be willing to help, humble in our approach, work with the highest standards of excellence, not seeking others' affirmation, as we are comforted by His Spirit. If we move in this direction, we will be fulfilling the law of Christ, stated in Matthew 22:36-40 (TPT), *"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus answered him, "Love the Lord your God with every passion of your heart, with all the energy of your being, and with every thought that is within you. " This is the great and supreme commandment. And the second is like it in importance: 'You must love your friend in the same way you love yourself. Contained within these commandments to love you will find all the meaning of the Law and the Prophets."* If we claim to be followers of Jesus, then this is why we are here on earth today. If we claim we are His disciples, we will be on a path to help those struggling around

us. As we read in Galatians 6:1, it is the ones who are overflowing with the Spirit that are in the position to reach out to help others. Those overflowing with the Spirit will be living lives that demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. We should all be living this life of honesty, humility, acceptance, courage, compassion, forgiveness, and self-discipline. We should all be on the path of spiritual growth if we expect to use our voice to help others and bring glory to God.

The path you are on is not going to be easy; you will need guidance and God-given grit to know how to stand. Life is not a fifty-meter sprint; it is a million-mile marathon; you will need rest and nutrition along the way supplied from a previously filled storehouse.

During times of upheaval and turmoil, there is great comfort in having an adequately stocked storehouse. When I was fifteen, I learned the value of an adequately stocked storehouse. During that summer, I worked with my grandfather in the Canadian arctic, helping a missionary family build a new house and church. A significant part of their home was an attached storehouse. If you lived in Eskimo Point, Northwest Territories, in 1968, the supply ship only arrived once a year. A family had to consider their needs for a year and then order their supplies well ahead of time. If you run out of a specific item, you might still be able to find it at the local Hudson's Bay Company store at a significantly inflated

price. In 1968 a six-pack of Pepsi cost fifty-nine cents unless you lived in Eskimo Point. It was a big thrill for the young men in the community to board the transport ship where you could purchase a Pepsi for \$2.50. I made that trip with some of the local young men and shelled out my \$2.50. Best Pepsi I have ever drunk!

What does it take to build a storehouse? If you are building yourself a storehouse, you will want to consider what items you will want to store carefully. Do you have all the necessities? Do you have enough shelves? Are things arranged in an orderly manner? Are your items secure? Do you have enough toilet paper? Do you have enough batteries? You better consider the shelf life of what you are storing. You cannot expect to keep a side of beef in your living room and expect it to last. You will need to hold what is necessary, lasting, and sustaining. It will also take a lot of effort on your part to gather the essential items and arrange them in your newly built storehouse. In other words, to develop and stock a good storehouse, you will need to take inventory of what will be required, and you will need to create sufficient space. You will need to be diligent, and you will need to devote adequate time for ongoing reevaluation. It is much the same when it comes to building a spiritual storehouse. It would be best to treat it as a priority, take inventory, create space in your life with adequate time and

energy, and be diligent.

If we were able to live without threat or adversity, we would not require a storehouse. The problem is, there will be adversity, and much of it, you will not be able to handle without reliance on a fully stocked storehouse. If you expect to remain strong and viable in God's kingdom, your storehouse will need to be stocked with some vital qualities. You will need a shelf for honesty, one for faith, another for surrender, and yet another for an ongoing honest evaluation. You will need room for confession, redemption, restoration, reconciliation, and ongoing sanctification. If you set up your storehouse correctly, you will also have a large space for service and generosity. You need to fill your spiritual storehouse with all the components of the armor of God.

Ephesians 6:10-18 (TPT), "Now my beloved ones, I have saved these most important truths for last: Be supernaturally infused with strength through your life-union with the Lord Jesus. Stand victorious with the force of his explosive power flowing in and through you. Put on God's complete set of armor provided for us, so that you will be protected as you fight against the evil strategies of the accuser! Your hand-to-hand combat is not with human beings, but with the highest principalities and authorities operating in rebellion under the heavenly realms. For they are a powerful class of demon-gods and evil spirits that hold this dark world in bondage.

Because of this, you must wear all the armor that God provides so you're protected as you confront the slanderer, for you are destined for all things and will rise victorious. Put on truth as a belt to strengthen you to stand in triumph. Put on holiness as the protective armor that covers your heart. Stand on your feet alert, then you'll always be ready to share the blessings of peace. In every battle, take faith as your wrap-around shield, for it is able to extinguish the blazing arrows coming at you from the Evil One! Embrace the power of salvation's full deliverance, like a helmet to protect your thoughts from lies. And take the mighty razor-sharp Spirit-sword of the spoken Word of God. Pray passionately in the Spirit, as you constantly intercede with every form of prayer at all times. Pray the blessings of God upon all his believers."

So, pick up and use the armor of God to build and supply your storehouse, so in this evil day, you will be able to stand and not fall by the wayside.

We will take a closer look at the elements of the armor of God in the following chapters. The belt of truth consists of honesty, evaluation, and confession. For the shield of faith, we will take a closer look at the significance of faith in our lives. For the breastplate of righteousness, we will explore surrender, redemption, restoration, and reconciliation. For the helmet of salvation, we will look at what it means to work out your salvation with fear and trembling by exploring the concept of

sanctification. For the gospel of peace, we will look at the role of service and generosity. For the element of praying in the Spirit, we will look at what gives these weapons their power. We need to put on the whole armor of God – not just part of it.

The following chapters are principles we should all be applying to our lives. These principles are God’s blueprint for personal growth. If we live by these principles, we will grow and be people who are able to be of assistance to those around us who are struggling. We will be using our voice to build God’s kingdom. You will need to address the elements draining your resilience bucket, but these Godly living principles will help fill your resilience bucket. Your Godly grit will grow. Who we are is much more important than what degree we possess or the architecture of our workplace. Use the next chapters as filters for self-evaluation and tools to strengthen Godly grit. We need to be growing if we hope to be the people God desires us to be. We need to have a supply in our resilience bucket if we expect to survive and thrive and be an example to others.

Matthew 6:19-21 (NKJV), *“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is,*

there your heart will be also.”

Your storehouse is where you will get stronger. It is those areas in life where God is changing you. So, build your storehouse. Put on all the armor of God. If you do this, you will grow and see a change in your life. The fruit of the Spirit will begin to show.

The following chapters are God’s spiritual laws for living. Spiritual laws, like natural laws, need to be respected and appreciated, even if they are not fully understood. I did not need to fully understand the law of gravity when I slipped on the deck and dislocated my shoulder. I now have a new respect for the law of gravity. Adherence to spiritual laws is beneficial to all who follow them, regardless of faith. The basis for the many successful twelve-step programs is respect for these spiritual laws. If you have addiction problems, it is possible to remain sober if you live an honest, humble life with willpower and accountability. You will be able to stay sober but not free from addiction. Freedom from addiction only comes through the Spirit of God. God’s Word and His Holy Spirit will guide us in developing an appreciation and understanding of His ways. Stock your storehouse well.

Chapter 37 - Storehouse 1 – Honesty

When it comes to stocking your storehouse with the armor of God, we need to start with the belt of truth. We do not stand a chance against the enemy's attack if we are not grounded in biblical truth. We need to know the truth about God and the truth about ourselves. We need the truth about what the scriptures say about our relationship with God. Without this truth, there is no foundation for the other weapons. John 8:32 (NKJV), "*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*" To be the people God desires us to be, we need to be people of the highest integrity. We need to be people of truth.

The belt of truth has three components; honesty is the leather strap, ongoing evaluation is the notches, and confession is the buckle. We will evaluate the importance of honesty, evaluation, and confession as three components of

truth in the next three chapters.

If we put on the belt of truth, we will be honest. If we are honest, we will speak the truth without pretense, and we will be living authentically. We will take full responsibility for our actions and our emotions.

It takes a tremendous amount of courage, to be honest. It is very humbling to admit when you are powerless, but there is great power in being honest. Many of the strongholds we need to tear down are much bigger and stronger than us. To tear down these strongholds, we need God's help and guidance. We need to admit our inability honestly and in faith to reach out to Him. Our culture, on the other hand, promotes self-sufficiency and personal strength. If you do not have enough internal fortitude or wisdom to solve your problems, you are viewed as an inferior human. While living in northern Canada, I enjoyed kayaking on the glassy smooth, quiet lake in front of our cabin. The sun would rise at 3 am in the summer, and I would regularly go for an early morning paddle before driving in for work. During this time, I learned to do an Eskimo roll with relative ease. After leaving the Canadian medical practice, we moved to Placerville, California. Our house was a short two-mile drive to the South Fork of the American River, a world-renowned river for rafting and kayaking. I was able to raft the river a few times before attempting the trip on my river

kayak. Now, I must tell you, an Eskimo roll on a calm lake is nothing like trying and accomplishing an Eskimo roll on a raging river. I have no idea how many times I swam that day – if I did remember, I would probably lie about it to make my experience sound more accomplished. Let me say the trip ended with me exhausted, clinging to the edge of a rock, losing parts of my kayak, and then being rescued by a sympathetic rafting group. The best part of that day was finally admitting that I was powerless over the river and desperately needed rescuing. If we are honest, we all need rescuing. If you live in a world where you do not recognize your need to be rescued or saved, you live in a delusional world of eventual destruction.

When you pause and evaluate your problems and shortcomings, do not hide in a forest of well-meaning intentions. Talk is cheap and not to be trusted. Good intentions are nothing more than deceptive self-talk. If you are willing to embrace the uncertain struggle for what it is, it will humble you, and it is in the humbling that you become free to be the person God would have you to be.

Being honest enough to admit where you are powerless is very freeing. This kind of honesty does not mean we give up and go home; there is a lot we can and should do, but it is crucial to keep in mind that we are fighting an enemy who intends our destruction. Do not treat this battle lightly!

The Bible has a lot to say about honest living and the vital importance of honesty. If you want to experience God's favor, then you need to live honestly. Proverbs 12:22 (TPT), *"Live in the truth and keep your promises, and the Lord will keep delighting in you, but he detests a liar."*

Living honestly will cost you at times but has great value in God's economy. Proverbs 19:1 (TPT), *"It's better to be honest, even if it leads to poverty, than to live as a dishonest fool."*

Living honestly means living transparently. If you are transparent before God, He will be able to guide and change you into the person you were designed to be. 2 Corinthians 8:21 (TPT), *"for we intend to do what is right and we are totally open both to the Lord's inspection and to man's."*

If you want your God-given dreams to succeed and your voice to be spoken, then you must live honestly. Proverbs 11:3 (TPT), *"Integrity will lead you to success and happiness, but treachery will destroy your dreams."*

Dishonesty destroys relationships and will distance you from others. If you desire quality relationships, you must be honest and authentic. Proverbs 16:28 (TPT), *"A twisted person spreads rumors; a whispering gossip ruins good friendships."*

Do not strive for more; instead, seek to manage with integrity

and honesty what you currently have, and then you will be blessed with more. Luke 16:10 (TPT), *“The one who manages the little he has been given with faithfulness and integrity will be promoted and trusted with greater responsibilities. But those who cheat with the little they have been given will not be considered trustworthy to receive more.”*

Are you honest? Are you authentic? How can you evaluate if you are honest or not? How can this critical trait grow and develop in your life?

Honesty must be a priority and a necessary part of your storehouse. Do not compromise your honesty. 2 Timothy 2:15 (TPT), *“Always be eager to present yourself before God as a perfect and mature minister, without shame, as one who correctly explains the Word of Truth.”*

We need to be aware of how easily we deceive ourselves. Without humility, it is impossible to live an authentic, honest life. Jeremiah 17:9 (NKJV), *“The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”*

1 John 1:8 (TPT), *“If we boast that we have no sin, we’re only fooling ourselves and are strangers to the truth.”*

We require God’s help to guide us to the truth and help us live more honestly. Psalm 25:5 (TPT), *“Escort me along the way;*

take me by the hand and teach me. For you are the God of my increasing salvation; I have wrapped my heart into yours!”

Psalm 86:11(TPT), *“Teach me more about you, how you work and how you move, so that I can walk onward in your truth until everything within me brings honor to your name.”*

To develop honesty requires regular washing by His Word. God’s Word is powerful and active and able to reveal areas of dishonesty in our lives. Ephesians 5:26 (TPT), *“to make us holy and pure, cleansing us through the showering of the pure water of the Word of God.”*

To be authentic and live in the truth, we require guidance and insight only available through the Holy Spirit. John 16:13 (TPT), *“But when the truth-giving Spirit comes, he will unveil the reality of every truth within you. He won’t speak his own message, but only what he hears from the Father, and he will reveal prophetically to you what is to come.”*

We must remain in a relationship with other committed believers. Your honesty will grow in an environment where you are held accountable to others seeking to grow in their relationship with the Lord. Hebrews 10:25 (TPT), *“This is not the time to pull away and neglect meeting together, as some have formed the habit of doing, because we need each other! In fact, we should come together even more frequently, eager to encourage and urge each other onward as we anticipate*

that day dawning.”

Growth in honesty and authenticity is not painless. It will hurt, and you will want to give up at times. It will be a struggle, but the battle will be worth it. If you are not struggling, you are probably not growing.

How stocked is the honesty section of your storehouse? Ask these questions when using this principle as a filter for your life. Are you humble enough to see where you are powerless? Are you humble enough to admit that you struggle with significant issues in life? Do you desire to be the person God intended you to be? If you are not wrestling, you are not living a Christ-centered life, and you will not be able to help others who are struggling. If you want to see your Godly grit grow, you must be humble and honest.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans addresses this issue of ongoing struggle. In Romans 7:15-25 (TPT), he writes, *“I’m a mystery to myself, for I want to do what is right, but end up doing what my moral instincts condemn. And if my behavior is not in line with my desire, my conscience still confirms the excellence of the law. And now I realize that it is no longer my true self doing it, but the unwelcome intruder of sin in my humanity. For I know that nothing good lives within the flesh of my fallen humanity. The longings to do what is right are within me, but will-power is not enough to accomplish*

it. My lofty desires to do what is good are dashed when I do the things I want to avoid. So if my behavior contradicts my desires to do good, I must conclude that it's not my true identity doing it, but the unwelcome intruder of sin hindering me from being who I really am. Through my experience of this principle, I discover that even when I want to do good, evil is ready to sabotage me. Truly, deep within my true identity, I love to do what pleases God. But I discern another power operating in my humanity, waging a war against the moral principles of my conscience and bringing me into captivity as a prisoner to the "law" of sin—this unwelcome intruder in my humanity. What an agonizing situation I am in! So who has the power to rescue this miserable man from the unwelcome intruder of sin and death? I give all my thanks to God, for his mighty power has finally provided a way out through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One! So if left to myself, the flesh is aligned with the law of sin, but now my renewed mind is fixed on and submitted to God's righteous principles."

Would you like God to show up and show Himself strong on your behalf? If you live a life of pretense and self-protective deception, you tell God through your thoughts and actions that you do not need His help. You are only deceiving yourself. Are you committed to living and speaking honestly? Do you have room in your storehouse for this quality? If this quality is not a priority, you will be wasting your time attempting to utilize

the rest of God's armor. You must start with honesty. You owe it to God, you owe it to others, and you owe it to yourself.

Chapter 38 – Storehouse 2 – Evaluation

Inventory taking, we do it all the time without even realizing what we are doing. When we glance at the gas gauge in our car, we are taking inventory. Just try covering up that gauge and going for a long drive. Not being able to see how much gas you have will significantly increase your level of anxiety. When we check our refrigerator and pantry, we are taking an inventory before going to the store to get groceries for the weekend.

At any given time, we are on multiple paths. We should be taking frequent inventory in numerous areas. Remember, do not be deceived by your good intentions; they are only self-generated lies to keep you off track; be brutally honest in your inventory taking. We need to approach each new day as David in the Old Testament did in Psalm 5:3 (TPT), “*At each and every sunrise you will hear my voice as I prepare*

my sacrifice of prayer to you. Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on the altar and wait for your fire to fall upon my heart.” We need to take inventory of all God has given us; our possessions, our time, our home, our relationships, our intellect, our history, our family, our passion, our everything, and hand it all back and then be willing to wait. God’s fire will fall. We need to take inventory of our general life direction. Where are you headed, and what are you trying to accomplish? Have you found your voice? Are you living to serve yourself, or are you living to serve God and others? We need to take inventory of our relationships. We may say we love others, but what do our actions say? Who is important in your life? How are you showing them they are essential? We need to take inventory of our resources. Are you under the weight of a burden of debt? Are you living within your means? Are you resting enough? Are you eating as you know you should? Are you getting enough exercise? Have you checked your health status recently? Do you get your teeth cleaned? Have you evaluated your relationship with God lately? Do the people around you know you are a person of faith? When did you pour your heart out to God last? When did you spend a little time waiting on Him? Time and energy should be spent taking inventory of our attitudes and character. How do others see you? Are you seen as caring or callous? Are you seen as full of the Spirit or full of bitterness? Be honest – it is your life – God will guide you, but

you need to evaluate continually and then walk the path.

I learned the value of ongoing inventory taking while in medical practice in northern Saskatchewan in Canada. During my time in the north, one of my goals was to become a skilled winter camper. Over the years, I gathered the necessary equipment and began taking short overnight trips. In time I discovered that I could survive best with little gear. Winter camping is fabulous, there are no mosquitoes and water is everywhere, even though it is white. After several brief overnight trips, it was time to prove my proficiency as a winter camper. My plan was a seven-day solo adventure. I thought it would be a good idea if someone knew where I was before my wilderness solo, so I had a friend take me to my chosen camping spot on the back of his snowmobile. It was a great experience; it was March 1990; the weather was just below freezing; everything was perfect. Incredibly quiet but perfect. I would sit on a small hill by my tent and watch the wolves dance across the frozen lake in the early morning. I walked a lot and prayed a lot and searched my heart a lot. The day before I was to head the 16 miles back to my cabin, the weather turned; it warmed up to just above freezing and began to snow. I packed up camp at 4 am and headed across the frozen lake now covered with 8 inches of new snow. It was peaceful and beautiful.

You may rightfully ask, what does this have to do with taking

a moral inventory? Well, I used the time in solitude to do some essential soul searching but realistically learned more about stock-taking on my trip back to my cabin. You see, I had 16 miles to travel on snowshoes, where the trail was now completely covered with fresh snow. To get to my destination, I had to rely on my compass and blaze marks left on the trees by the trapper who used to use the trail. A blaze is where a bark piece is cut away from a tree trunk, leaving an easily seen scar. I knew there was a road east of where I was camping. If I made it to the road, I would have no problem finding my cabin. I was able to make it across the lake with only two compass stops and direction adjustments. When I made it to the trail, I was happy to see the blaze marks were still faintly visible. It was a constant pattern of look for the next blaze mark; walk to that tree then pause to look for the next blaze mark. Then hike, pause, look, hike, pause, look. Sometimes I had to turn left, and sometimes I had to turn right, sometimes I could trudge ahead.

I am thankful to that trapper, whoever he is, for leaving those marks on the trees. It was necessary to alter my course every time I checked my compass or looked for a blaze mark. It was an exhausting ordeal, and obviously, I made it out alive. Still, my one-day easy walk turned into two days of uncertainty with frequent inventory checking via compass and looking for the marks on trees left by someone else. I learned that inventory

taking is not a one-time self-evaluation; it is an ongoing continuous evaluation. At times you need a compass, and at times you need to look for marks left by someone else. Your survival depends on it. Is your path taking you where you want to end up?

Several barriers may limit your ability to take an honest, moral inventory. Barriers occur in the form of denial, distraction, or deception.

Denial barriers often arise out of fear. Fear of rejection, fear of death, or fear of loss can set the stage for soul-protecting denial. Denial is when you start to believe your drummed up good intentions. Denial arises out of fear but comes to life out of pride. Do not allow your ego to make you the fool who believes his own lies.

Distraction barriers come in many various forms. It seems the more advanced our society becomes, the greater the number of distractions. How does anyone have any time for inventory taking when their electronic devices are continually monitoring them. My cell phone should allow me to feel free, not at the end of a noticeably short leash. Distractions come in how others treat us or how we think others are treating us. The opinions of others can impact our freedom for accurate self-evaluation. Distractions can also occur in what we think we need to achieve. If by working harder and longer, I can get

the car that would make me feel better about myself, then I work harder and longer. I no longer pause to take an inventory; I get on the treadmill and run as hard as possible. Distraction can also show itself in the reaction to a perceived injustice. If you respond with anger or bitterness when you are wronged or injured, it will distract you from an accurate evaluation. Bitterness and unforgiveness are deadly traps. Distractions are everywhere; be aware of them; they are not there to help you.

Other barriers to accurate inventory taking are deception, confusion, and distrust. When you are drowning in a sea of uncertainty, it is challenging to do an appropriate inventory. It has become impossible to breathe these days without inhaling and choking on a lie. Who can you believe? Who can you trust? From fake news to pretentious Facebook postings, it is becoming more difficult to grab hold of any non-manipulated truth. Lord, help us!

We should make an evaluation an ongoing priority. We should judge ourselves. 1 Corinthians 11:31 (NKJV), *“For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.”*

We need to evaluate and be honest about where we are with our faith. 2 Corinthians 13:5 (NKJV), *“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless indeed*

you are disqualified.”

You alone are responsible for your self-evaluation and what you do with that evaluation. Galatians 6:3-5 (TPT), *“If you think you are too important to stoop down to help another, you are living in deception. Let everyone be devoted to fulfill the work God has given them to do with excellence, and their joy will be in doing what’s right and being themselves, and not in being affirmed by others. Every believer is ultimately responsible for his or her own conscience.”*

Self-evaluation is necessary for the process of becoming the person that God designed you to be to develop Godly grit and use your voice. 1 Peter 1:13 (TPT), *“So then, prepare your hearts and minds for action! Stay alert and fix your hope firmly on the marvelous grace that is coming to you. For when Jesus Christ is unveiled, a greater measure of grace will be released to you.”*

We all need to be comfortable taking a moral inventory. It should be part of our daily life. Finding God’s path for us is like my winter camping experience; we need to pause frequently, look intently, and stroll. There is no need to run. Get comfortable with inventory taking with the small things in life. It will be easier to take stock when it comes to the crucial elements like evaluating your attitudes and character.

Put aside all pretense and make it your goal to be

authentic. Look back at chapter 12 and reevaluate the role of solitude in your life. A manufactured, false image will only foster incorrect, meaningless, pressure-filled connections with others. If you want meaningful, genuine relationships, you need to be authentic. So, what does the path to authenticity look like in this crazy, fast-paced, noisy world? Only in silence and solitude will you find authenticity. In solitude is where isolation will make you stronger. It is a time of separation from the thoughts, actions, words, and opinions of others. It is time to honestly and humbly evaluate and reevaluate.

Another catalyst for accurate inventory taking is to have trustworthy people in your life who care enough about you to say, “no.” We all need people around us who are willing to challenge us. It is easy to see others' faults, and it is hard to see your own flaws. It helps to have others who understand your weaknesses report to you what they see. Be the kind of person who invites people with this level of integrity into their life and then consider what they are seeing and be willing to seek out and take advice and correction.

David wrote Psalm 139 in the later years of his life. He had witnessed God’s love, forgiveness, and strength many times in his life. He saw a giant fall with the impact of one small stone. He saw armies defeated, and the wealth of a nation grow. He records in Psalm 139 how he is aware of God’s expansive knowledge and presence. He acknowledges how

God has formed us in ways that are beyond our ability to comprehend. Knowing all he knows and has experienced from God; he requests just one thing. He asks that God help him see if he is walking in any path of pain. David asks God for assistance with taking an accurate inventory when he wrote Psalm 139:23-24 (TPT), *“God, I invite your searching gaze into my heart. Examine me through and through; find out everything that may be hidden within me. Put me to the test and sift through all my anxious cares. See if there is any path of pain I’m walking on, and lead me back to your glorious, everlasting ways - the path that brings me back to you.”* This should be our prayer as we place our heads on our pillows every night. God, show me the path of pain and the way back to you.

We should be watching over our hearts, taking moral inventory because this will determine the direction and the outcome of our life. You only get one life; spend it wisely.

Proverbs 4:23-27 (AMP), *“Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life. Put away from you a deceitful (lying, misleading) mouth, And put devious lips far from you. Let your eyes look directly ahead [toward the path of moral courage] And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you [toward the path of integrity]. Consider well and watch carefully the path of your feet, And all your ways will be steadfast and sure. Do not turn away to the right*

nor to the left [where evil may lurk]; Turn your foot from [the path of] evil.”

Ask these questions when using this principle as a filter for your life. Am I authentic? What path of pain am I on? Do I have people in my life who care enough about me to say no? Do I make any time for solitude? Am I asking God to help me see the destructive directions in my life?

Chapter 39 – Storehouse 3 – Confession

A confession is a next step after taking a moral inventory. It is the recognition and declaration of a fault or weakness.

The subject of confession is the confessor. A confession is a statement without strings attached. It is not a request for forgiveness – that is an apology. It is not a request for a second chance – that is repentance and mercy. It is not a request for restored trust – that is most often manipulation. Confession can be used as a form of deception where the confessor uses a confession to hide a more significant fault. The purpose of a confession is not to encourage others. This type of confession proclamation is most often a statement of arrogance that is demeaning to others. If you want to promote someone, help them from where they are and not from where you have been.

A confession, most often, is nothing more than speaking what other people know about you anyway. A disclosure or revelation verbalizes a deep dark secret about yourself that everybody else already knew. Others know your faults, but they do not know if you know or how you will react if you find out. You think you have successfully hidden your faults, but others know something is up. They may not know the specifics, but they are aware of the stench of deception in the air.

What should we confess? Why should we confess? To whom should we confess? When should we confess? The topic of the value of confession seems to raise more questions than it answers. Firstly, there are two broad categories of what we should confess. We should confess our sins, meaning our acts of rebellion and offense towards God and others. Secondly, we should confess our weaknesses, meaning our limits, inadequacies, and shortcomings.

Health care is complicated. You are dealing with multiple unknowns amid uncertainty and pressure, with patients that are not always willing to be responsible for themselves. The field of healthcare has many opportunities for errors. On a mild May evening in 1984, I was called to the emergency department to see one of my patients with bursitis problems in his shoulder. He was a rugged man of native descent

returning home from a trip where he had sold some of the pelts from his mink ranch. His work was physically demanding, and his painful shoulder made life exceedingly difficult at times. He had responded very well with previous injections in his shoulder, so I drove the short distance to the hospital and met him in the emergency department.

The nurse had kindly put the necessary supplies on the tray in the patient's room, so it was a simple matter of drawing up the solution and injecting his shoulder. The procedure went very well, and in a few moments, my grateful patient was on his way back to his trap line ninety miles to the north. As I finished up my paperwork and cleaned up the used materials in the examining room, I noticed that the small vial of the solution I had just injected into my patient's shoulder was labeled "depo-provera." I had intended to give him an injection of solumedrol, a steroid, but instead injected his shoulder with a female hormone. This was in a day and era where healthcare quality improvements road on the backs of shame and blame. I felt the guilt and shame but had no one to blame. I waited for the two hours it took for my patient to get home before I called him to admit my error. I informed him that the medication may not help his shoulder and that he may feel a little strange and then offered to give him the right injection the next time he passed through town. I did not report my error to the four other doctors I worked

with; I just embraced my guilt and made sure I double and triple-checked every vial of solution for the rest of my career. Fortunately for my patient, he did not suffer any ill effects; his shoulder improved. In the 1980s, this is the way healthcare errors were handled. Find someone or something to blame, increase the shame and pressure, and then try harder. This practice encourages the practitioner to hide errors and deny near disasters. This methodology did not improve healthcare quality.

In 1980 an American engineer, Bill Smith, who was working at Motorola, developed a set of process improvement techniques. These techniques and tools were applied to the business's operation at General Electric by Jack Welch in 1995. This set of quality management methods and practices became known as Six Sigma. Although the Six Sigma process's goal was to produce defect-free products, the principles of Six Sigma error reduction quickly spread to the field of healthcare. One of the tools that were very applicable to healthcare quality was called Root Cause Analysis. I was on the medical executive committee at Marshall Hospital in Placerville, California, when the administration introduced the Six Sigma concepts. It was not easy to shift from the methodology of change through guilt and shame to a model that encouraged exposure of errors and solutions that were not individual-based but

team-based. To perform a successful Root Cause Analysis required a significant culture shift in the way errors were viewed. The entire medical staff had to be educated that errors and near errors needed to be exposed and investigated to find a successful system change that would prevent that error from happening in the future. It was an honor to facilitate a Root Cause Analysis meeting where everyone involved in the case could present their role in an atmosphere designed to find solutions and not look for someone to blame. The previously hidden mistakes because of guilt and shame began to surface in a way that could be addressed as a system, and the quality improved rapidly.

So, you may ask; What does healthcare quality, Six Sigma, and Root Cause Analysis have to do with the value of confession? Confession is a conversation about how we relate to our faults. The most common and destructive mechanism for dealing with mistakes is to deny their existence and keep them hidden. We all have flaws, and many of these faults cause harm and can be just as fatal as a medical error. Confession can unlock your resistance to seeing your weaknesses and allow you to deal with them productively.

Confessing our sins is a powerful antidote against the destructive forces of guilt and shame in our lives. As

recorded in Proverbs 28:13 (TPT), *“If you cover up your sin you’ll never do well. But if you confess your sins and forsake them, you will be kissed by mercy.”* I do not need to list the areas of possible sin in your life; you are aware of those areas and the guilt and shame they produce. This guilt and shame are a heavy weight; confess your sins and receive mercy; let go of the unnecessary weight. Do not forget that once you have confessed your offenses and obtained mercy, you need to forsake those offenses, meaning you do not continue to repeat the same offense. Repeated requests for forgiveness will only erode trust. This kind of confession is not the admission of wrong only when you are found out; that is nothing more than insincere spiritual dodgeball. This kind of disclosure involves owning your sin. It opens your eyes as to why you need forgiveness, grace, and mercy. This type of confession prepares you for the next step, which is repentance and a sincere apology. Admission of your sins and rebellious offenses is the antidote for a life of guilt and shame. Psalm 31:17 (TPT) *“As I call upon you, let my shame and disgrace be replaced by your favor once again.”*

The other area of our lives that requires confession is the area of our weaknesses. We do not like to see or admit our shortcomings. To be open to the reality of our weaknesses causes us to face all those existential realities mentioned in a previous chapter. We believe our imperfections are a

valid reason for us to face rejection by others and experience isolation. We believe that it is our weaknesses that prevent us from finding our meaning and purpose in life. Our physical deficiencies result in our mortality and physical inability to perform tasks necessary for daily life. It is our felt weaknesses that make us feel incompetent in issues that matter. We see our spiritual flaws as leaving us empty and separated from God. We work with all our energy and power to avoid the exposure of our weaknesses. Yet, in 2 Corinthians, Paul encourages us to look at our weaknesses through a different lens. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (TPT), *“But he answered me, “My grace is always more than enough for you, and my power finds its full expression through your weakness.” So I will celebrate my weaknesses, for when I’m weak I sense more deeply the mighty power of Christ living in me. So I’m not defeated by my weakness, but delighted! For when I feel my weakness and endure mistreatment—when I’m surrounded with troubles on every side and face persecution because of my love for Christ—I am made yet stronger. For my weakness becomes a portal to God’s power.”* You will not experience God’s power in your life if you avoid your weaknesses. Recognizing, embracing, and confessing your shortcomings is the antidote to your arrogance. Your arrogance prevents God’s power from being active in your life. Confess your weaknesses! If you do not confess your shortcomings, you will spend the rest

of your resources and energy trying to deny your weaknesses, hide your flaws, overcompensate for your shortcomings, or trying to overpower your weaknesses. Denying your weaknesses will only burn you out.

When it comes to confessing your weaknesses, it is crucial to remember Jeremiah 17:9 (AMP) *“The heart is deceitful above all things, And it is extremely sick; Who can understand it fully and know its secret motives?”* We are all plagued with pride and arrogance. We do a great job of deceiving ourselves. Be honest; ask for God’s help and do not hide or run from your weaknesses.

You need to be open and honest when it comes to productive confession. The world is full of mockers and gossips, so you need to be careful where and to whom you confess. Disclosure needs to be in an atmosphere that is safe, secure, confidential, and non-judgmental.

You need to start the path of confession by confessing to yourself. You will need God’s help to deal with your self-deception, so freely ask for help. You will need to take time and find a quiet place that is free of distraction. Make this time a regular occurrence and use God’s Word to open your heart. You will need to be humble enough to confess to yourself before you will be able to admit to God or others. If you do not acknowledge your weaknesses, the only fool you will be

fooling will be yourself. So, pause and take the time to consider and evaluate what is going on in your life. Look at how you act and react. How does your arrogance show?

Once you have become more honest with yourself, it is time to confess to God. Remember, you are not admitting anything He does not know already; He is just waiting for you to come out of hiding. An open and honest confession to God increases your ability to hear the voice of the Spirit. If you have trouble hearing God's voice, it could be because you are too preoccupied with trying to overcome your weaknesses. Confessing to God will improve your spiritual hearing.

Confession with another person that you trust will improve your honesty and authenticity. As you experience grace and mercy from another, you will find it less challenging to provide grace and mercy to others. If you have difficulty finding someone you can trust, then at least write down your confession. If you want healing and restoration, the key is through confession. James 5:16 (AMP), *“Therefore, confess your sins to one another [your false steps, your offenses], and pray for one another, that you may be healed and restored. The heartfelt and persistent prayer of a righteous man (believer) can accomplish much [when put into action and made effective by God—it is dynamic and can have tremendous power].”*

Stay sensitive to the voice of the Spirit and be ready to confess at any time. Ask the Lord to remove the scales from your eyes. Psalm 119:18 (AMP) *“Open my eyes [to spiritual truth] so that I may behold Wonderful things from Your law.”*

The benefits of confession are social, personal, and spiritual. There are many social benefits to confession. Confession is a communication of transparency and authenticity, qualities that are lacking in today’s world. Confession is a foundation for meaningful apology and forgiveness. Authenticity and forgiveness are necessary to rebuild broken trust. We all have many weaknesses and imperfections. Our strengths are often a cause for separation because of comparison and competition, but our shared weaknesses can serve as a relational bond. Confession communicates trustworthiness and authenticity.

There are multiple personal benefits to living a life open to confession. Taking the time to pause and reflect on who you are considering God’s word and ask the Lord to search your heart regularly will increase your self-awareness. This increased and more accurate self-awareness will increase your honesty and help you realize how much you need grace and mercy. To be capable humans, we need to see ourselves as others see us and not have our vision clouded by our arrogance and well-meaning intentions. It is not a

lack of education that makes you stupid; it is a combination of denial and arrogance. Confession improves relationships by encouraging trust and burden-sharing.

Confession is conscious cleansing; it is like a house cleaning of your soul. It is time for some major Spring cleaning. Pause, open your heart and take out the trash you have been carrying for decades. You will want to rid yourself of this trash of arrogance, guilt, and shame before it becomes soul-rotting and life-destroying bitterness. Psalm 119:116 (TPT) *“Lord, strengthen my inner being by the promises of your word so that I may live faithful and unashamed for you.”* You can live without shame if you do not get tripped up by your arrogance.

Confession will also increase your freedom to grow. With increased authenticity, humility, and honesty, you will be able to see the multiple areas where growth is needed and will be freer to move in that direction.

Another personal benefit of confession is peace. You can now live with freedom from the weight of guilt and shame. You may still have to live with remorse over past faults, but you will experience a renewed freedom without being held back by shame.

As you learn to embrace your weaknesses and shortcomings without guilt and shame, you will become

more tolerant of others. The ability to provide grace to others will generate more mercy shown towards you.

The renewed freedom and emotional energy achieved through confession can strengthen your will and self-control. This increased strength can give the extra resilience needed to change destructive habits.

The most significant benefits of confession are spiritual benefits. Do you feel as if God has abandoned you? Do you feel spiritually lost? Arrogance and shame will leave you feeling far from God. Confession of weakness will weaken the hold of vanity and help you see your place in God's kingdom. There is a lot of unnecessary pressure in trying to be God. God has a place for you, and it is better than you could ever imagine. Confessing weaknesses will also open your heart to God's searching your heart, and this will increase your sensitivity to His whispers. In the face of guilt and shame for our rebellion and self-centered living, if we confess to God, we will experience His grace and mercy. In my four decades of medical practice, I have witnessed a lot of life destruction. The life-destructive power of arrogance, shame, and bitterness is far greater than the destructive power of diabetes, heart disease, and cancer combined.

Confession feels like you are losing your life. Confession is

admitting your weaknesses and facing your guilt and shame. Keep in mind the words of Jesus from Matthew 16:25 (TPT) *“For if you choose self-sacrifice and lose your lives for my glory, you will continually discover true life. But if you choose to keep your lives for yourselves, you will forfeit what you try to keep.”*

Be committed to honesty. Keep up to date on taking your moral inventory. Be ready at any time to confess to yourself, God, and to another. Be on guard against the barriers that may interfere with your growth. You want to avoid living your life with pride clothed in guilt. The shame of living this way will result in you applying a filter to your life that has stamped on the edge, “Not loved by God.”

Your sins, faults, and shortcomings will leave you feeling isolated and alone. You are not alone; we are all in the same mess. Romans 3:23 (TPT), *“for we all have sinned and are in need of the glory of God.”*

Forgiveness is readily available; just confess and ask. 1 John 1:9 (TPT), *“But if we freely admit our sins when his light uncovers them, he will be faithful to forgive us every time. God is just to forgive us our sins because of Christ, and he will continue to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

We could all use more mercy in our lives. It is available through confession. Proverbs 28:13 (TPT), *“If you cover up*

your sin you'll never do well. But if you confess your sins and forsake them, you will be kissed by mercy."

Confession will increase your grit and help clarify your life direction and purpose. James 4:7-10 (TPT), *"So then, surrender to God. Stand up to the devil and resist him and he will turn and run away from you. Move your heart closer and closer to God, and he will come even closer to you. But make sure you cleanse your life, you sinners, and keep your heart pure and stop doubting. Feel the pain of your sin, be sorrowful and weep! Let your joking around be turned into mourning and your joy into deep humiliation. Be willing to be made low before the Lord and he will exalt you!"*

Ask these questions when using this principle as a filter for your life. Am I a disciple of Jesus? Am I afraid of exposing my weaknesses? Am I too arrogant to admit my sins and shortcomings? In what ways do I hide? Do I feel isolated from God and others? What do I currently do with guilt and shame? Do I grant grace and mercy to others?

Do not hide from yourself, hide from God, or hide from others. What feels like weakness is a strength. Put on the belt of truth.

Chapter 40 – Storehouse 4 – Surrender

In the next three chapters, we will look at the importance and significance of the breastplate of righteousness. You will want your storehouse stocked with protective righteousness. As a piece of armor, a breastplate protects your most vital organs, your heart, and lungs. Spiritually we are to pursue righteousness to protect our heart, the source of our emotions and desires, and our lungs, our God-breathed spirit.

I had a chance to check out a breastplate the other day. It was a nylon vest that held two nine by eleven quarter-inch steel plates. One plate protected your front, and one plate covered your back. The vest guaranteed protection from the bullet of a high-powered rifle, but it weighed a hefty thirty pounds. As I carried the vest around a little, I thought, “why would you want to wear something so heavy?” The answer

is obvious. You would wear something this heavy to protect yourself against an attack by a bullet or arrow that you would not be able to see coming at you. It would give you protection against something you could not outrun. Righteousness seems cumbersome and sometimes confusing, but it will protect you against the enemy's attack that you do not see coming your way. Now, you will feel the impact of those bullets, they may even break your ribs, but they will not kill you. Our righteousness is a breastplate, not an isolated bunker. Our God-given light is to shine where the bullets fly.

How does righteousness serve as a breastplate? How can righteousness protect your soul and spirit? What is righteousness?

Righteousness is measuring up to God's standard. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines righteous as "*acting according to* divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin or being morally right or justifiable." God has an exceedingly high standard, a standard that none of us can come close to achieving with our own efforts. If we do not meet God's standard, we cannot be accepted by Him, and we have no hope for a full and meaningful life, let alone where we will spend eternity. The good news of the gospel is that Christ paid the price for us, so God now sees us as righteous. Philippians 3:9 (TPT), "*My passion is to be consumed with him*

and not clinging to my own “righteousness” based in keeping the written Law. My “righteousness” will be his, based on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ—the very righteousness that comes from God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21 (TPT), *“For God made the only one who did not know sin to become sin for us, so that we who did not know righteousness might become the righteousness of God through our union with him.”* The God of the universe, who sees all and knows all, sees me as righteous because of the cross. This God-ascribed righteousness is only available through faith in His Son. The problem, however, is I know I am not righteous. I do not come close to living up to God’s standards.

So, if God sees us as righteous, what are we to do with our present unrighteousness? What is our part when it comes to honest living? Because Christ paid the price for our righteousness, we should do all we can to live that righteousness. This righteous pursuit is not legalism energized by condemnation. This pursuit is out of gratitude for all Christ has done for us. Proverbs 4:23 (TPT), *“So above all, guard the affections of your heart, for they affect all that you are. Pay attention to the welfare of your innermost being, for from there flows the wellspring of life.”* 1 John 3:7 (TPT), *“Delightfully loved children, don’t let anyone divert you from this truth. The person who keeps doing what is right proves that he is righteous before God, even as the Messiah is*

righteous.” Psalm 106:3 (TPT), “*The happiest one on earth is the one who keeps your word and clings to righteousness every moment.*” When it comes to righteousness, we have a part in the pursuing and the clinging.

Even though God sees us as righteous, we are still to pursue righteousness as we pursue our relationship with Him. This pursuit will protect our soul and spirit from the enemy's attacks. In the next three chapters, we will look at three components of this righteous pursuit. We will look at the need for complete surrender, redemption, and restoration.

The surrender of our will and life to God is the ultimate act of humility that can free us from ourselves and our destructive self-centered paths. Surrender is an active step in the direction of living a life that is not all about me. Submission to God is the humble path to contentment. There is no healing in life without humility and surrender, no matter how hard you try.

We need to surrender all of who we are to God, but it is not our place to make someone else surrender. People are free and will determine their path, even if they die in the process. You cannot surrender on behalf of someone else; that is up to them. You can show by your life that there is contentment in surrender that is not available anywhere else. If you need

more power in your life to tear down a stronghold or to exercise your God-given voice, you need to surrender more.

If we rely on ourselves, we will end up arrogant and burned-out. When we are up against a seemingly impossible task, it is common to rely on what we know or what we believe worked in our past. We think and believe that we can do the impossible. Our arrogance drives us to work harder to prove ourselves, we begin to buckle under the burden of what we are trying to carry, and we fizzle-out. We become another tragic statistic of burn-out with other well-intentioned, arrogant do-gooders. We are not the power that a struggling fellow human needs for the restoration of their life.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you should not have an issue believing that God desires restoration of relationship with Him. He did not only give you just a guidebook for this restoration, but He also gave His only Son. He loves you more than you could ever understand. He also loves all of the other people in your world. Believe in His love, trust in His love, and lean heavily on Him for the power necessary for a life-saving change. Keep close to your heart Isaiah 40:28-29 (AMP); *“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become tired or grow weary;*

There is no searching of His understanding. He gives strength to the weary, And to him who has no might He increases power.”

Surrender is the step of faith that frees you to move ahead in your life.

If you decide to live this way, you will find your will, and your desires will start to shift. You will mature in the direction that moves from self-service to serving God and serving others. God did not put you here on earth to get all you can get. He put you here to enjoy Him and give all you can give. This type of life is where joy and contentment live. Follow the advice of Jeremiah when he wrote in Jeremiah 29:13-14 (AMP), *“Then [with a deep longing] you will seek Me and require Me [as a vital necessity] and [you will] find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and I will [free you and] gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.”* Seeking and depending on God is a vital part of the restoration we all desperately need.

We lived in northern California when my sons were in high school. They were both very fit and strong and enjoyed rock climbing. We took classes on climbing at a local gym and

classes on protection placement in Yosemite and went on several guided climbs. My youngest son was fearless and could stick to the rock wall like a spider. I, on the other hand, was fearful and extremely cautious. As our knowledge and experience grew, so did my trust in the equipment. Experience and knowledge lead to more experience and more knowledge, and this developed into trust. Exercised trust became freedom to surrender to the protection provided by the equipment. God wants us to seek Him, get to know Him, experience Him, and His love for us. Seeking Him and experiencing Him will cause our faith to grow. Growing faith becomes a strength to hold us when we have fallen, just like the climbing rope when we stumble. Make no mistake; you have stumbled in the past, and you will stumble in the future. Surrender is terrifying. The first time you surrender to your climbing equipment and push away from the rock wall to begin to rappel to the ground is not a moment of great confidence. It is a moment filled with fear and uncertainty. What do you trust? To what have you surrendered?

As we walk this path of surrender, there are several things to keep in mind. We all struggle with the same major issues, yet we seem to think that we are the only ones struggling. Do not allow periods of discontentment to pull you off the path. Life will continue to have significant struggles, and you will be

tempted to seek contentment from sources other than God.

Most often, our discomfort and discontent do not lead us to the cross; it leads us to actions within our power and control. What we pursue to attain comfort, we eventually become enslaved too. If you stumble and surrender to your stronghold, you will become a slave to that stronghold. There is no joy or freedom in being this type of slave.

So, our options are to either become enslaved or to surrender. In surrender, there is strength and power. In slavery, there is discouragement and emptiness.

The strength you need to fight off the enemy's attack is only found in surrender to God. If you have ongoing issues with a stronghold, the answer is surrender. James 4:7 (TPT), *“So then, surrender to God. Stand up to the devil and resist him and he will turn and run away from you.”*

Surrender sets the stage for victory. 1 Peter 5:6-10 (TPT), *“If you bow low in God's awesome presence, he will eventually exalt you as you leave the timing in his hands. Pour out all your worries and stress upon him and leave them there, for he always tenderly cares for you. Be well balanced and always alert, because your enemy, the devil, roams around incessantly, like a roaring lion looking for its prey to devour. Take a decisive stand against him and resist his every attack with strong, vigorous faith. For you know that your believing*

brothers and sisters around the world are experiencing the same kinds of troubles you endure. And then, after your brief suffering, the God of all loving grace, who has called you to share in his eternal glory in Christ, will personally and powerfully restore you and make you stronger than ever. Yes, he will set you firmly in place and build you up.”

Proverbs 3:5-6 (TPT), *“Trust in the Lord completely, and do not rely on your own opinions. With all your heart rely on him to guide you, and he will lead you in every decision you make. Become intimate with him in whatever you do, and he will lead you wherever you go.”*

Galatians 2:20 (TPT), *“My old identity has been co-crucified with Messiah and no longer lives; for the nails of his cross crucified me with him. And now the essence of this new life is no longer mine, for the Anointed One lives his life through me—we live in union as one! My new life is empowered by the faith of the Son of God who loves me so much that he gave himself for me, and dispenses his life into mine!”*

Psalms 37:7 (TPT), *“Quiet your heart in his presence and pray; keep hope alive as you long for God to come through for you. And don’t think for a moment that the wicked in their prosperity are better off than you.”*

The path of righteousness is the path of surrender, redemption, and restoration. It is a challenging path.

Surrender to God, seek Him, find the peace that only He can give, and then work with diligence. Keep in mind the words from Colossians 1:20-22 (TPT), *“And by the blood of his cross, everything in heaven and earth is brought back to himself—back to its original intent, restored to innocence again! Even though you were once distant from him, living in the shadows of your evil thoughts and actions, he reconnected you back to himself. He released his supernatural peace to you through the sacrifice of his own body as the sin-payment on your behalf so that you would dwell in his presence. And now there is nothing between you and Father God, for he sees you as holy, flawless, and restored,”*

In the righteousness section of your storehouse is there a shelf stocked with surrender? Are you enslaved or surrendered? Have you surrendered your will, life, desires, ambitions, talents, and body to God? Are you seeking God with your whole heart? Where do you turn at times of discontentment? How are you living in denial? Are you living at peace? If you desire righteousness to protect your soul and spirit, you will need to start with surrender.

Chapter 41 – Storehouse 5 – Redemption

We pursue a solution where we see a need; we become complacent where we do not see a need. We all know of multiple areas of our lives that require change. We live with the belief that a little effort here and there will accomplish all the needed change. Redemption is a meaningless concept if we do not see a need for redemption. If we do not see the need, we will abandon contentment and cling to complacency.

Redemption is the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil. It is the regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment or clearing a debt.

Through redemption, God offers us a life of contentment, but we most often choose the life of familiar complacency. We are aware that there is a reality far superior to the one

we are experiencing, but we are complacent enough to refuse to leave our comfortable areas. As recorded in Romans 8:22 (TPT), *“To this day we are aware of the universal agony and groaning of creation, as if it were in the contractions of labor for childbirth.”* The redemption problem is that we desperately need it but do not realize how much we need it.

In 375 B.C. Plato wrote Republic. In this work is recorded an allegory about a cave. This parable is a story about a group of people that live in a cave deep beneath the earth's surface. They are chained to the cave walls and can only see the wall in front of them. People walk by the entrance to the cave carrying objects that cast shadows on the cave walls. These shadows are what the cave dwellers define as reality. The cave dwellers do not want to leave the cave as this is the only reality they know. If one did escape the cave and experience a new existence, the sun's bright light would hurt his eyes, and he would run back to the cave. If one of the cave dwellers were forced out of the cave, they would become angry and experience pain because of the sun's overwhelming brightness. If, however, one would escape the cave and remain in the new, bright world, his eyes would slowly accommodate, and he would begin to see a new and superior reality. He would still not understand all aspects of this new reality, but he would know it is superior to the

reality he experienced living chained to the cave wall. As his eyes accommodated, his vision would progress from seeing shadows to seeing reflections in the water to seeing people and objects. If this freed prisoner were to return to the cave to report his findings, he would arrive with a sense of blessing for his new experience and felt pity for those still chained to the cave wall. As he enters the cave, his eyes that have become accustomed to the light would be blinded by the darkness. The cave dwellers would believe that the returning prisoner was damaged by his time outside the cave and would respond with rage to anyone trying to encourage them to experience life outside the cave.

This parable of the cave is an excellent image of the issue with redemption. There is a reality of wonder to be experienced through righteous living, but we remain comforted by the familiar shadows on the wall. Our affluence has brought us some incredible, high-definition shadows. We do not feel comfortable leaving the cave. We will shut down and try to destroy those who encourage us to experience a world outside the cave.

On a recent trip to see our grandchildren, my wife and I drove north on Highway 217 in northern Oregon. We followed a new white Mercedes sports car that still had the paper DMV sticker on the back windshield. In the car were a young man in his early thirties and his female companion.

The car was beautiful, pearly white with fancy gull-wing doors. As we pulled up to the stoplight and signaled to turn left, we saw another young man in his early thirties. This second young man was standing on the side of the road with a cardboard sign that read, “need money to get home for Thanksgiving.” Within my field of vision were two young men of the same age.

Both young men were in desperate need of redemption, but one was more aware of his condition than the other. No wonder Jesus taught in Matthew 19:24 (TPT), *“In fact, it’s easier to stuff a heavy rope through the eye of a needle than it is for the wealthy to enter into God’s kingdom realm!”* Satan does not have to entice us to commit horrible sins to knock us off course. He just needs to see that we are comfortable in our complacency and busy with our distractions. Redemption means “to gain or regain possession of something in exchange for payment.” We need to be redeemed. Christ paid the price for our redemption so we can live the image of God in our lives as He first intended. As recorded in 1 Corinthians 13:12 (AMP), *“For now [in this time of imperfection] we see in a mirror dimly [a blurred reflection, a riddle, an enigma], but then [when the time of perfection comes we will see reality] face to face. Now I know in part [just in fragments], but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known [by God].”* We need redemption from ourselves

and comfortable complacency.

Ephesians 1:7 (TPT), *“Since we are now joined to Christ, we have been given the treasures of redemption by his blood—the total cancellation of our sins—all because of the cascading riches of his grace.”*

Colossians 1:14 (TPT), *“For in the Son all our sins are canceled and we have the release of redemption through his very blood.”*

Titus 2:14 (TPT), *“He sacrificed himself for us that he might purchase our freedom from every lawless deed and to purify for himself a people who are his very own, passionate to do what is beautiful in his eyes.”*

1 Corinthians 6:20 (TPT), *“You were God’s expensive purchase, paid for with tears of blood, so by all means, then, use your body to bring glory to God!”*

Psalms 130:7 (TPT), *“O Israel, keep hoping, keep trusting, and keep waiting on the Lord, for he is tenderhearted, kind, and forgiving. He has a thousand ways to set you free!”*

1 John 3:16 (TPT), *“This is how we have discovered love’s reality: Jesus sacrificed his life for us. Because of this great love, we should be willing to lay down our lives for one another.”*

Are you aware of how much you need to be redeemed? Are you grateful for the redemption provided to you? Do you realize that you require as much redemption as the worse sinner? Are you living with the awareness of your redemption?

We are all tempted to turn our backs on God in similar ways but do not forget the next part of the verse that He has provided a means of escape. God provided the way of escape through the work Christ accomplished on the cross. He has paid the price for our redemption. We no longer need to be chained to a cave wall, interacting with shadows and reflections.

The image of God in us is fractured, and we need redemption. Because of the work Christ accomplished on the cross, we can now renew our relationship with God and live the image and the life that He intended.

God has promised that the work of redemption in our lives is an ongoing process, Philippians 1:6 (AMP) *“I am convinced and confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will [continue to] perfect and complete it until the day of Christ Jesus [the time of His return].”*

Our redemption is not dependent on what we say, what we do, or our good intentions. Our redemption is dependent on Him. Ephesians 1:7 (AMP), *“In Him we have redemption [that*

is, our deliverance and salvation] through His blood, [which paid the penalty for our sin and resulted in] the forgiveness and complete pardon of our sin, in accordance with the riches of His grace.”

Even though we are the product of generations of chained cave-dwellers, we are free because of the cross to escape those chains and live as God has intended. 1 Peter 1:18-19 (TPT), *“For you know that your lives were ransomed once and for all from the empty and futile way of life handed down from generation to generation. It was not a ransom payment of silver and gold, which eventually perishes, but the precious blood of Christ - who like a spotless, unblemished lamb was sacrificed for us.”*

Stop and pause. Be thankful for the redemption that has been purchased for you. Colossians 1:12-14 (TPT), *“Your hearts can soar with joyful gratitude when you think of how God made you worthy to receive the glorious inheritance freely given to us by living in the light. He has rescued us completely from the tyrannical rule of darkness and has translated us into the kingdom realm of his beloved Son. For in the Son all our sins are canceled and we have the release of redemption through his very blood.”*

Chapter 42 – Storehouse 6 - Restoration and Reconciliation

The third part of righteousness is restoration and reconciliation. When you have done the work of taking an honest, moral inventory and experienced the impact of redemption, it is time to move ahead by admitting offense and harm and moving forward towards apology, forgiveness, and restitution.

We do not live on a desert island. Our relationship with God and our fellow humans is vitally important. The process of apology and forgiveness is how broken relationships are mended. It is also how relationships can strengthen and grow. Righteousness is not demonstrated in a vacuum; it is revealed in how you relate to others through apology and forgiveness.

One of the best examples of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation is the parable of the prodigal son told by Jesus in Luke 15:11-32.

This parable contains all the elements for a study of forgiveness and reconciliation. The self-centered son commits a relational offense. The father longs for a restored relationship. There is recognition of the wrongs committed by the wayward son. There is humility on the part of the rebellious son and his return to those he offended. There is a celebration of the restored relationship and status of the son. The older son's bitterness shows that the same event can be the cause of different reactions by different characters.

How we relate to one another tells the world our character; it is what defines us. The Bible stresses this type of relational restoration. 2 Corinthians 13:11 (TPT) *“Finally, beloved friends, be cheerful! Repair whatever is broken among you, as your hearts are being knit together in perfect unity. Live continually in peace, and God, the source of love and peace, will mingle with you.”* We would all like to have God mingle with us, to have that reassurance that He is always present.

It takes courage and humility to apologize and forgive. God does not desire us to be weighed down with guilt, shame, or arrogance. So, no matter how difficult it may seem, His

plan for His people is to be forgiving and work towards restoration in relationships where possible. It is essential to keep in mind the words of Jeremiah 29:11 (AMP) *“For I know the plans and thoughts that I have for you,” says the LORD, ‘plans for peace and well-being and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.’*”

Now is the time to put some feet on your integrity and begin to work on your relationships.

The first step is to pause and write a list of those you have hurt. You need to take time, in solitude, to reflect. You need to be humble and honest. Your offense was not wounding the feelings of another; it was your arrogance, weaknesses, or self-centeredness. Take time to consider those you have hurt. Carefully make your list, including what it was that you did to cause them harm.

Once you have your list, it is time to consider if an apology is appropriate. You will face some situations where it is best not to deliver an immediate apology. A delivered apology with a request for forgiveness may inflame some cases and cause more harm to the other person. Your goal is to create an opportunity for relational healing and not to cause a more significant division. So, in situations like this, have your apology well thought out and prepared and be ready to deliver it should God open the door.

An apology needs to be sincere and nondemanding. You should be thinking more about the other person than you are of yourself. You are not in a position to demand forgiveness. Be prepared. Writing out an apology before it is delivered is immensely helpful. You need to consider when and where to offer the apology. Will it be given in a face-to-face conversation or sent in a letter? You want the person you have harmed to know they are in control of the conversation and that you are not pressuring them for an answer or immediate resolution.

The purpose of an apology is to address issues in a relationship where you have crossed a boundary and caused harm. It is an opportunity for humble and honest communication with another person because you value the relationship. It is doing what you can do to rebuild a relationship and, over time, set the framework for trust. It is an opportunity to express regret over the wrong you have committed. It is an opportunity for you to own every part of the wrong committed. Saying, "I'm sorry I made you feel bad," is not a sincere apology. This type of apology leaves the other person responsible for part of the issue, their wounded feelings.

An adequately delivered apology will help to define and reestablish boundaries in the relationship. It should help you learn from your past mistakes and be a chance to

rebuild lost trust. An apology can also help put the conflict behind you and not allow it to fester into unresolvable bitterness.

A humble apology can help you maintain your integrity and assist you in being able to forgive yourself. Many times, the hardest person to forgive is yourself. There are many benefits to an apology, but what are the consequences of refusing to apologize?

We all know that relationships are essential, and healthy relationships are valuable. We also know that an apology is a useful tool in the restoration of the relationship when we wrong another. So, why do we refuse to apologize at times? A refusal to apologize may mean that I am indifferent, that the relationship was not meaningful, that I do not care. For example, if I accidentally cut off another driver in traffic, I will not chase him down to apologize; he would most likely be intimidated, and I could get shot. My relationship with the other driver is not essential; therefore, I do not see the need for an apology. If, on the other hand, I rudely honk my horn at an elderly couple, as I have done, who were on their way to see me in the office, then an apology would be appropriate. In this case, the relationship has some meaning, and I crossed a boundary. You want to eat that crow before it has a chance of becoming a vulture.

Another reason for not apologizing is because I see the apology as being a threat to my self-image. This excuse is not an attempt to salvage my self-image but protect my arrogance. If this is your excuse for not apologizing, then you are in big trouble.

Another reason for not apologizing is the belief that an apology will not help or the impression that it will make the situation worse. This belief may be a valid reason but be sure that you are not using it as an excuse to soothe your wounded pride. As mentioned before, there are some situations where you should be ready to deliver the apology but wait for the appropriate time. Some apologies will never be offered.

Whatever the reason, there are consequences for not apologizing. A refusal to apologize when it is appropriate to apologize will damage personal and professional relationships. A refusal to apologize will erode trust and encourage destructive rumination. The rumination can quickly turn into anger, bitterness, or even hostility. These are not the ingredients for a healthy, meaningful relationship; they are the ingredients for a war.

How do we know when to apologize? You can use yourself as a filter. If what you did to another was done to you and it would have bothered you, then it probably deserves an

apology. You should take the time to think through and prepare your apology and be ready to deliver it when the opportunity presents.

As you pause to ponder where you need to deliver an apology, keep in mind the necessary elements of a sincere and meaningful apology. You need to consider others more than yourself. The subject matter of the apology is what you did to cause harm. Make that subject matter the focus of the conversation and make it clear. The apology needs to be free of blame. You should not blame the other person, the circumstances, or anything else. You crossed the boundary and are taking full responsibility. It is time to state the offense, take responsibility, express regret, and ask for forgiveness. Once you have apologized, you can reaffirm the relational boundaries and start to build back trust.

When you are delivering an apology, you cannot guarantee the result. You may be asking for forgiveness, but you should not expect it or demand it. Do not manipulate the other person's response or pressure them in any way. You may have to wait for an answer. Do not forget the essential part, which is to communicate the value of the relationship.

It is not possible to wade through the murky waters of relational restoration without addressing the topic of forgiveness. We need to forgive if we expect our apologies

to result in forgiveness from another. The Bible is clear on the importance of forgiveness. Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24 (AMP), *“So if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and while there you remember that your brother has something [such as a grievance or legitimate complaint] against you, leave your offering there at the altar and go. First make peace with your brother, and then come and present your offering.”* Apology and forgiveness take priority over sacrifice and service. The appropriate response when you have wronged someone else is to apologize. The proper response is to forgive when you have been wronged, even if an apology does not request it.

The actions, injustices, and abuse of others have hurt all of us to varying degrees. Many people have suffered unimaginable damage and injustice. Forgiveness is not condoning the abuser or the offensive action; that would increase the abuse. Forgiveness is not excusing the offender or their responsibility because of extenuating circumstances. No circumstance, medical condition, or psychiatric condition justifies ongoing violence. Forgiveness is not forgetting; forgetting in the face of abuse is denial. Reconciliation is not forgiveness; it may be the goal of forgiveness, but just because you forgive someone you love does not mean you should automatically trust them; that would be foolish. Trust is the bedrock of a meaningful relationship and is only built over time.

What then is forgiveness? Forgiveness is letting go of anger and resentment. It is the recognition that anger and bitterness cause more personal harm than any act of injustice or abuse. If you hang on to resentment and demand anything from the offender, you give all of your power over to them; it will destroy you. Do not give in to anger and bitterness; let go of the offense and take your life back from the abuser. You need to get to the point where you can say and believe that the offender owes you nothing, that your life today is your life and that the past owes you absolutely nothing. Forgiveness is not easy, but it is essential. You cannot undo the injustice, but you can stop it from controlling your life. The act of forgiving is the freedom needed to escape the trap of the offense. A victim lives a lonely life in a prison of their own making.

Forgiveness will free you from that prison. It will increase your optimism and elevate your mood. Forgiveness has been shown through medical studies to guard against anger, bitterness, stress, anxiety, and depression. Forgiveness reduces cortisol, resulting in improvements in blood pressure, heart disease, and inflammation. The reduction of inflammation lessens the likelihood of developing diabetes or cancer.

Forgiveness will also lessen the likelihood of developing an addiction and reduce relapses in those who suffer from

addiction.

Yes, we all want the benefits of forgiveness, but how do we forgive? The first step in forgiving is to be honest about how you were offended, and that the offense made you angry. The process can be extremely uncomfortable as many of us have been raised to believe that all anger is a sin. The reality is that denial about the anger caused by an offense is more likely to lead to sin than the anger itself. You need to be “angry but sin not.” This process is not an encouragement to act on your anger or to act out your anger. It is time to honestly and humbly admit to anger resulting from an offense caused by someone else. If you do not expose the anger, you will not know what needs to be forgiven. It would be best if you then decided to forgive. You know why you should forgive, and you know the consequences of not forgiving, but it will still take choosing on your part to forgive. Now, take some time to walk in the shoes of the offender. If you get close enough to any other human, you will find valid reasons to reject them and compelling reasons to be compassionate. We are all deeply flawed, and we have all caused harm to others. If you realize your need for forgiveness, it can help you develop some compassion for the offender. Forgiving does not mean that you should remain in an abusive relationship or try to restore a previously destructive relationship, but it does mean you can more easily forgive. Now is the time to let go of all those toxic,

angry, vengeful, and bitter emotions. They now owe you nothing; you are free from the burden of the offense. Reflect on your growth and be thankful. Another tool to help with forgiveness is therapeutic writing that was introduced in a previous chapter. This process can help you let go of harmful emotions.

Therapeutic writing can be particularly helpful in two of the more difficult areas of forgiveness; forgiving someone who is no longer alive and forgiving God. If you are blaming God for your present or past life trouble, you need to get to a place where you can forgive. Blaming God is never justified. He is not the author of your pain. He has provided the path away from your trouble. If you feel anger towards God, be honest, and tell Him; write down your thoughts and feelings and ask Him for help. It can also be challenging to forgive someone who is no longer alive. You may feel guilty when you feel anger towards someone who has passed away. After all, you are still alive, but they are not, plus this is a relationship where restoration is not possible. This situation is another time when writing your honest thoughts and feeling may be very helpful. If appropriate, you should write your apologies, ask for forgiveness, and then write out the steps of forgiveness as it applies to that relationship.

The Bible teaches that forgiving others allows God to forgive us. To the disciple of Jesus, forgiveness is not an

option; it demonstrates submission to Christ. It is essential to realize that unforgiveness is a willful act of hostility and reflects a lack of faith. Matthew 6:14-15 (TPT) *“And when you pray, make sure you forgive the faults of others so that your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you withhold forgiveness from others, your Father withholds forgiveness from you.”* So, just how much do you need God’s forgiveness? That is how much you should forgive others. Forgiveness is a serious spiritual matter; do not take it lightly.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (AMP), *“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor [perpetual animosity, resentment, strife, fault-finding] and slander be put away from you, along with every kind of malice [all spitefulness, verbal abuse, malevolence]. Be kind and helpful to one another, tender-hearted [compassionate, understanding], forgiving one another [readily and freely], just as God in Christ also forgave you.”* We need to model this life of righteousness. It is the kind of life you should be living if you are a disciple of Jesus.

So, move ahead with your life. Pause to consider how much you need forgiveness; find where you need to be apologizing and let go of the prison of past offenses and forgive.

Today may be your time for a significant life breakthrough. Consider the words of David in Psalm 51:12 (TPT), *“Let my passion for life be restored, tasting joy in every breakthrough*

you bring to me. Hold me close to you with a willing spirit that obeys whatever you say.”

When it comes to apology and forgiveness, ask these questions when using this principle as a filter for your life. Who have I offended? How have I hurt others? Am I aware of my anger? Who has hurt me in the past? Who is hurting me right now? Am I willing to let go of past harm and forgive? Do I realize how much God has forgiven me? Do I realize how much it cost God to forgive me? Is my life a demonstration of negativity? Is my life a demonstration of the positive emotions of forgiveness, love, hope, joy, compassion, faith, awe, and gratitude? Protect your soul and spirit by pursuing righteousness. You will need a large place in your storehouse for the breastplate of righteousness.

Chapter 43 – Storehouse 7 – Service

We must choose our footwear carefully. Our footwear must fit properly and be appropriate for our purpose. Your footwear is your contact point with the world. If you are golfing today, you will need footwear that will give you traction, and if you are ice skating, you will need footwear that will allow you to glide across the ice. If you are a disciple of Jesus, your footwear should be the gospel of peace. The gospel of peace is your faith in action. It is your place and purpose where you connect to your world with your God-given voice. It is your service and generosity demonstrated to others for the glory of God. It is your faith, in action, in your community.

Service is a natural byproduct of a living real faith. Galatians 5:13 (TPT) *“Beloved ones, God has called us to live a life of freedom in the Holy Spirit. But don’t view this wonderful freedom as an opportunity to set up a base of operations in*

the natural realm. Freedom means that we become so completely free of self-indulgence that we become servants of one another, expressing love in all we do.” The opposite of love is not “hate;” the opposite of love is “blinding self-indulgence.” The dictionary definition of freedom is “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint.” The freedom that is worth pursuing should produce joy and contentment, not pressure and disappointment. Freedom used for limitless self-indulgence can only provide very short-lived pleasure and satisfaction. The freedom that results in long-lasting peace is the freedom found serving God and others. As you serve others, you will find your grit will grow.

So, what does it mean to serve? Service is nothing more than love in action. If you are aware of your needs, you know how to serve others. Service requires the ability to see past your wants, conditions, and desires so you can see a little more clearly what is going on with those around you. Service is living and breathing the life of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (TPT), where Paul informs us; *“Love is large and incredibly patient. Love is gentle and consistently kind to all. It refuses to be jealous when blessing comes to someone else. Love does not brag about one’s achievements nor inflate its own importance. Love does not traffic in shame and disrespect, nor selfishly seek its own honor. Love is not easily irritated or*

quick to take offense. Love joyfully celebrates honesty and finds no delight in what is wrong. Love is a safe place of shelter, for it never stops believing the best for others. Love never takes failure as defeat, for it never gives up.” This kind of love is not humanly possible. As self-centered beings, we are all too wrapped up in ourselves to love in the way that God intended that we love. To love God’s way, we need supernatural comfort when we are troubled, we need supernatural guidance when we are confused, and we need supernatural joy when we feel discouraged. The comfort, guidance, and joy we need to love is the promise of the Holy Spirit’s witness to our spirit. With this kind of love, we can prefer others above ourselves and live the life God intended. We can provide others a meaningful level of respect and compassion. “God so loved the World,” so, if we are His children, we should love as He loves.

As we race through life, it is easy to become numbed by reports of people in anguish. We hear media reports hourly of wars, natural disasters, and human tragedy. Lord, help us to slow our pace so we can see others as you see them. The temptation is to see people as statistics on a graph, but those parents who just lost a child to a drug overdose are not numbers on a chart; they are creations of God who are in deep pain. Pause, consider their pain, pray for them, be available, and if God opens the door, be ready to reach out a hand.

This kind of service is not what we would call a “doormat” type of service. There must be a balance between love and trust. To “love” your drug-addicted child who asks for money by giving them what they ask for is not love; it is dangerous codependency. For service to be meaningful, there must be boundaries. God loves us, but He has also established limits and boundaries. Boundaries are for our benefit; they are not meant to constrain us. Setting boundaries is difficult when we are more concerned about ourselves than we are about the other. In the example of the child asking for money, if you need the child to love you for a sense of meaning in your life, you will have a significant problem setting boundaries. Boundaries are necessary and can be lifesaving.

This kind of service is not for show or personal recognition. Service for personal gain is not authentic, and it will eventually fail. When you do receive praise for your service, do not let it go to your head. Remember who you are serving.

Serving is not pressuring someone to go in a direction they are not willing to go. You can and should set boundaries, but you cannot compel a desirable response — an apparent change in lifestyle that occurred under pressure will collapse.

We should serve because we were made and designed to serve. We were meant to be free from the destructive force of living a life of self-focus and self-centeredness. God made man for service as recorded in Genesis 2:15 (AMP), *“So the LORD God took the man [He had made] and settled him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it.”* We are made to cultivate and keep the garden – we are designed to have a fulfilled life in caring for what God has provided. We were created to serve.

We were also made to serve and uplift each other as recorded in Genesis 2:18 (AMP), *“Now the LORD God said, “It is not good (beneficial) for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper [one who balances him—a counterpart who is] suitable and complementary for him.”* God has put us in families and communities to complement each other, not compete. We are to build one another up and not tear each other down.

We get ahead by serving, not by being served. Now, this concept goes against all we frail humans hold dear. We are far more likely to grasp at any opportunity to get ahead, even if it hurts someone else. We resist the promotion of others. We live in a world where it is all about me. In God’s kingdom, it is not all about me. Mark 10:44-45 (TPT), *“The path to promotion and prominence comes by having the heart of a bond-slave who serves everyone. For even the Son of Man*

did not come expecting to be served by everyone, but to serve everyone, and to give his life as the ransom price in exchange for the salvation of many.” In God’s kingdom, the top spots are for the servants. Mark 9:35 (TPT), *“Jesus sat down, called the twelve disciples to come around him, and said to them, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be content to be last and become a servant to all.”*

God wants you to be content, and God made you so that you would experience joy and fulfillment in your life through service. Do you want to succeed in your life? Do you want to get ahead? Do you want to be promoted? If you do, then look at where you could be serving. No level of fame or fortune will give you as much contentment as there is in being in the place where you were designed to serve. God has given you your voice; it is now time to use it and continue to use it. There are areas of service during all the seasons of our life; there is no retiring from service.

If we claim to be followers of Jesus, His disciples, our faith should be seen in our lives' actions. Deeds of service should accompany our words of faith. If I claim that God is my provider, I should not feel I have to hang on tightly to everything I have, and if I declare God is my protector, then I should not be living in constant fear. Keep in mind the words of James 2:14-17 (TPT), *“My dear brothers and sisters, what good is it if someone claims to have faith but demonstrates no*

good works to prove it? How could this kind of faith save anyone? For example, if a brother or sister in the faith is poorly clothed and hungry and you leave them saying, "Good-bye. I hope you stay warm and have plenty to eat," but you don't provide them with a coat or even a cup of soup, what good is your faith? So then faith that doesn't involve action is phony." Is your faith real? Are you a phony? As you move out of your self-protective comfort zone to serve others, it will express your faith and cause your grit to grow.

We were made to be part of something bigger than ourselves. We are members of God's team and a vital part of building His kingdom. No membership in any group or club will be able to replace the significance of being part of God's work. God made us so that we would do His good works as recorded in Ephesians 2:10 (TPT), "*We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are joined to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were born, God planned in advance our destiny and the good works we would do to fulfill it!*" Do you know your part in God's kingdom? Have you found your voice? What gifts or talents do you have to offer to others? Are you providing them or hanging on to them?

We should be serving the Lord and those He created. Our lives should echo the words of John the Baptist regarding Jesus when he stated in John 3:30 (TPT), "*So it's necessary*

for him to increase and for me to be diminished.” How do you measure up? Who is increasing in importance in your life? Living God’s plan for your life does not mean that you are to spend endless hours in prayerful meditation and never interact with your world. No, your world needs the light you possess. So, pray, work hard, be passionate, be committed, love those God has placed in your life and follow the advice of Colossians 3:23-24 (TPT) where we are told to, “Put your heart and soul into every activity you do, as though you are doing it for the Lord himself and not merely for others. For we know that we will receive a reward, an inheritance from the Lord, as we serve the Lord Yahweh, the Anointed One!” Put on your shoes, exercise your voice, build bridges, write music, and throw yourself entirely into the life God has blessed you with, but remember the glory goes to Him. 1 John 4:19-20 (TPT) gives us a way of measuring our stated love of God; “Our love for others is our grateful response to the love God first demonstrated to us. Anyone can say, “I love God,” yet have hatred toward another believer. This makes him a phony, because if you don’t love a brother or sister, whom you can see, how can you truly love God, whom you can’t see?” We are to love and serve God as well as loving and serving those He created. It is not good enough just to state we love God. Those words alone are meaningless.

James 1:27 (TPT) tells us about the evidence of this kind of

love and service; *“True spirituality that is pure in the eyes of our Father God is to make a difference in the lives of the orphans, and widows in their troubles, and to refuse to be corrupted by the world’s values.”* How do you view those who are struggling? Do you see them as suffering from the results of their irresponsibility? Do you see them as being loved by God? Do you believe Jesus died for them as much as you know He died for you? How do you view other humans who struggle with addiction? How do you see their parents? Are you empathetic or judgmental? Remember Matthew 23:11 (TPT), *“The greatest among you will be the one who always serves others from the heart.”* Who are you serving from the heart? You should be serving your spouse, your family, your neighbors, your community, and to some degree, the world. Do not become overly frustrated with the slow progress of others. Keep in mind what we are told in Romans 15:1 (TPT), *“Now, those who are mature in their faith can easily be recognized, for they don’t live to please themselves but have learned to patiently embrace others in their immaturity.”* Are you living to please yourself? Never forget that when we are serving others, we are also serving the Lord as recorded in Ephesians 6:7-8 (TPT), where it states, *“Serve your employers wholeheartedly and with love, as though you were serving Christ and not men. Be assured that anything you do that is beautiful and excellent will be repaid by our Lord, whether you are an employee or an employer.”* Do you see

your employer or employees as if they were Christ, or do you see them as being agents of the devil? Do not become a prisoner of your arrogance and self-indulgence.

We can serve others in many ways. We serve by taking the gifts and talents that God has given us and, in turn, offering them to others by our example, by observation, by hearing, by being, and by doing.

We serve by example. Whether you like it or not, you are being watched, and not just by Google or your cell phone. Your life's message has a lot more to do with how you live your life than the words you speak. How you live your life will communicate if you are authentic and trustworthy. Live your life deliberately; your life speaks loudly. Jesus is our example as to how we should live our lives as recorded in Matthew 20:28 (TPT), "*For even the Son of Man did not come expecting to be served by everyone, but to serve everyone, and to give his life in exchange for the salvation of many.*" Be an example of this type of service. Are you willing to sacrifice for others? What kind of example are you?

Service requires observation. We become aware of a need through observation. It is essential to realize that the other person's needs and stated demands may not be the same. To serve means to address a need, not to give in to a request automatically. Do not be quick to offer solutions for

assumed problems. Be patient, take your time, ask questions, and observe.

We also serve by hearing. The Bible instructs us to be quick to hear but slow to speak and slow to become angry. Listen carefully, and do not assume you know what someone is trying to say. Ask lots of questions and be as specific as possible. It can be incredibly challenging to remain in any relationship with someone who is continuously deceptive. Do not be shocked when you find out that much of what you have been told may have been a lie. Remember the be slow to anger part.

We also serve by being. Serving by being means we should not see ourselves as being better than others. Humble yourself and be willing to learn from others, even those you are helping. Live by the words of Paul to the Philippians and walk together with purpose. If we walk with a common goal, we will be less likely to get off track with self-promotion. Philippians 2:1-11 (TPT), *“Look at how much encouragement you’ve found in your relationship with the Anointed One! You are filled to overflowing with his comforting love. You have experienced a deepening friendship with the Holy Spirit and have felt his tender affection and mercy. So I’m asking you, my friends, that you be joined together in perfect unity—with one heart, one passion, and united in one love. Walk together with one harmonious purpose and you will*

fill my heart with unbounded joy. Be free from pride-filled opinions, for they will only harm your cherished unity. Don't allow self-promotion to hide in your hearts, but in authentic humility put others first and view others as more important than yourselves. Abandon every display of selfishness. Possess a greater concern for what matters to others instead of your own interests. And consider the example that Jesus, the Anointed One, has set before us. Let his mindset become your motivation. He existed in the form of God, yet he gave no thought to seizing equality with God as his supreme prize. Instead he emptied himself of his outward glory by reducing himself to the form of a lowly servant. He became human! He humbled himself and became vulnerable, choosing to be revealed as a man and was obedient. He was a perfect example, even in his death—a criminal's death by crucifixion! Because of that obedience, God exalted him and multiplied his greatness! He has now been given the greatest of all names! The authority of the name of Jesus causes every knee to bow in reverence! Everything and everyone will one day submit to this name—in the heavenly realm, in the earthly realm, and in the demonic realm. And every tongue will proclaim in every language: "Jesus Christ is Lord Yahweh," bringing glory and honor to God, his Father!" Do you see yourself as being better than others? Do you see yourself as the answer to other's problems? Are you willing to learn from others? In your next interaction with someone,

focus on what you can learn from them and not what you can teach them, and see how that works out. Exercise your voice through your ears.

So, you are grateful for all God has done for you, you have observed those you want to serve, you have listened and are not all wrapped up in yourself, and you want to live a life of service, so now it is time to do something. Service requires action; it is a verb and not a noun. We have all been given unique gifts, interests, passions, and abilities that are intended to be given away in service to others for the building of God's kingdom. 1 Peter 4:10 (TPT), "*Every believer has received grace gifts, so use them to serve one another as faithful stewards of the many-colored tapestry of God's grace.*" These God-given gifts are not to be used to gain fame or an inflated sense of self-importance. Your gifts were given to you. Give your gift; do not hide it. You need to give them back to God and then to others in the form of service for the glory of God. Matthew 5:16 (TPT), "*So don't hide your light! Let it shine brightly before others, so that the commendable things you do will shine as light upon them, and then they will give their praise to your Father in heaven.*" God's bountiful gifts are numerous and become spiritual gifts when they are offered to others for the glory of God. If you want a fulfilling life, you will find it in service as you exercise your voice delivering the gospel of peace. You will want to set

aside a large area in your storehouse for service.

Chapter 44 – Storehouse 8 – Faith

We claim to live by faith, yet we live most of our lives as if we are part of a grand science experiment. We use our senses to gather data; we formulate a hypothesis, test, sample, and then proceed down a path we consider is the best and the safest. Now we can look at a chair and feel confident it will hold us. We apply the same formula and determine that some people are safe, and others are dangerous. We consider this faith, but it is not faith. Confidence based on our senses may help us pick a secure chair, but it will not help with many of life's more significant issues. To be the person God designed you to be will take real faith and grit.

What is faith, and why is it important? The Bible speaks a lot about faith. Hebrews 11:1 (NKJV), *“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”* The Greek word for faith in this verse is “pistis,” and

means persuasion, moral conviction, assurance, belief, faith, and fidelity. Faith is more than just intellectual belief in something; it is a conviction about the truth of something. Christian faith is a conviction about the truth of God, Christ, and God's Word. Faith in God is the confidence that He exists, is the creator of everything, and desires a relationship with humanity. Faith in Christ is the confidence that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through Him, we have eternal salvation and a restored relationship with God the Father. Faith in His Word is the confidence it is His inspired Word, and that God is a keeper of His promises.

Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV), *"But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him."* We are genuinely content, as people, only when we are pleasing God. Faith in God and His promises are necessary if we are to please Him. Our familiarity with the word "faith" has caused it to lose much of its essential meaning. We give each other high-fives and proclaim, "keep the faith" when cheering for our favorite losing sports team. Faith in God is much more than a casual cliché. A better word may be "aplomb." Aplomb is complete and confident composure because of a belief. Aplomb comes from the French word meaning "straight up and down." It also means being incapable of being upset or agitated, not quickly excited, calm,

or having undisturbed composure. Faith in God is our aplomb, our ability to remain confident and assured during trials. Faith will show itself as quiet confidence amid crises.

If we are to stand and see our grit grow, we need this confident, unwavering faith. Ephesians 6:16 (TPT), *“In every battle, take faith as your wrap-around shield, for it is able to extinguish the blazing arrows coming at you from the evil one!”* Our storehouse needs to be stocked with a faith that functions as a shield. At the time Paul wrote this passage, Roman soldiers would cover their shields with animal skins soaked in water before a battle. The wet skins would extinguish the flaming arrows that hit their shield. If you have found your God-given purpose and are using your voice to build His kingdom, you will face many flaming arrows. You will need to keep your shield of faith soaked with the water of His Word. Ephesians 5:26 (TPT), *“to make us holy and pure, cleansing us through the showering of the pure water of the Word of God.”* The darts coming your way are filled with highly flammable contents of doubt, fear, worry, anxiety, isolation, powerlessness, insignificance, confusion, weariness, despair, arrogance, pain, and betrayal. The enemy uses these darts to weaken your defenses and prevent the fulfillment of God’s plan for your life.

Is your shield ready for battle? Where does your confidence lie? Are you confident that God exists, that He loves you, and

that He is the creator and sustainer of all? Are you confident that Christ is your savior? Are you confident in God's Word and His promises?

Bible scholars tell us there are over 30,000 promises of God in the Bible. Let us soak our shield of faith in some of these promises to prepare for the darts that may come our way today.

God has promised that He will never leave you and that He has sent you a comforter. Psalm 23:4 (TPT), *“Even when your path takes me through the valley of deepest darkness, fear will never conquer me, for you already have! Your authority is my strength and my peace. The comfort of your love takes away my fear. I’ll never be lonely, for you are near.”* Matthew 28:20 (NKJV), *“teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* Hebrews 13:5 (TPT), *“Don’t be obsessed with money but live content with what you have, for you always have God’s presence. For hasn’t he promised you, “I will never leave you, never! And I will not loosen my grip on your life!”* God will never abandon you or betray you. You may experience times of palatable isolation, betrayal, and loneliness, but God has not left you.

God has promised that He will protect you. Isaiah 54:17 (NKJV), *“No weapon formed against you shall prosper, And*

every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, And their righteousness is from Me,” Says the LORD.” Psalm 121:7-8 (TPT), “He will keep you from every form of evil or calamity as he continuously watches over you. You will be guarded by God himself. You will be safe when you leave your home, and safely you will return. He will protect you now, and he’ll protect you forevermore!” As you face the fiery darts today, God will protect you. You have no reason for fear or intimidation.

God has promised that He will be your strength. Psalm 28:7 (TPT), *“Yahweh is my strength and my wraparound shield. When I fully trust in you, help is on the way. I jump for joy and burst forth with ecstatic, passionate praise! I will sing songs of what you mean to me!”* Philipians 4:13 (TPT), *“I know what it means to lack, and I know what it means to experience overwhelming abundance. For I’m trained in the secret of overcoming all things, whether in fullness or in hunger. And I find that the strength of Christ’s explosive power infuses me to conquer every difficulty.”* The fiery darts are present to wear you down and exhaust you. In your times of exhaustion and weakness, God will be your strength.

God has promised that when you cry out to Him, He will answer you. John 16:24 (TPT), *“Until now you’ve not been bold enough to ask the Father for a single thing in my name,*

but now you can ask, and keep on asking him! And you can be sure that you'll receive what you ask for, and your joy will have no limits!" Psalm 91:15 (TPT), *"I will answer your cry for help every time you pray, and you will feel my presence in your time of trouble. I will deliver you and bring you honor."* God will answer you if you are close enough to hear His voice. Be calm and still and listen.

God has promised He will provide for you. Philippians 4:19 (TPT), *"I am convinced that my God will fully satisfy every need you have, for I have seen the abundant riches of glory revealed to me through Jesus Christ!"* Psalm 34:10 (TPT), *"Even the strong and the wealthy grow weak and hungry, but those who passionately pursue the Lord will never lack any good thing."* God has given and will continually provide you all you need to be the person He created you to be.

God has promised to give you peace. John 14:27 (TPT), *"I leave the gift of peace with you—my peace. Not the kind of fragile peace given by the world, but my perfect peace. Don't yield to fear or be troubled in your hearts—instead, be courageous!"* Isaiah 26:3 (NKJV), *"You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You."* The only peace that is lasting comes from God. The enemy will do all he can to steal your peace. Rest in this promise of God's provision during times of uncertainty or

crisis.

God has promised He will always love you. 1 John 4:16 (TPT), *“We have come into an intimate experience with God’s love, and we trust in the love he has for us. God is love! Those who are living in love are living in God, and God lives through them.”* Isaiah 54:10 (NKJV), *“For the mountains shall depart And the hills be removed, But My kindness shall not depart from you, Nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,” Says the LORD, who has mercy on you.”* As unlovely as we all are, God still promises His eternal love.

While living in northern Canada, we observed a unique event that only occurred about every three to four years. When the weather was perfect, meaning a week of average temperatures of minus 20, the lake would freeze over like a perfectly formed piece of glass. On one of those occasions, we arrived at the cabin on a bright, frigid night. The conditions would be perfect for limitless skating. As the temperatures dropped that night, the ice on the lake thickened and cracked with the sound of an aluminum baseball bat hitting a 45-gallon metal drum. The sound was terrifying. The following day we tied up our skates and headed out onto the lake surface. The first emotion that hit when we stepped onto the lake was fear. The lake was clear, clear enough to see fish swimming under the ice. We moved onto the surface with an anxious feeling until we

noticed something that gave us confidence. Every hairline crack in the ice gave us a visual picture of the ice thickness, and we could skate without anxiety. Faith is like that; from a distance, it produces fear and anxiety, but when we can see where God has come through for us in significant ways, like the cracks in the ice, it gives us the confidence to move ahead and not be held back by fear. Faith is real when you are standing on ice that looks like it will not support you. The antidote to fear is an active and living faith.

How do we grow in this type of faith? The starting point is to ask yourself where your faith or trust is currently. Proverbs 28:26 (TPT), *“Self-confident know-it-alls will prove to be fools. But when you lean on the wisdom from above, you will have a way to escape the troubles of your own making.”* Faith in your abilities, knowledge, and wisdom will not get you far. It is necessary to recognize your need for more faith to make room for faith to grow in your life. You will want an ample supply of faith in your storehouse.

Your faith will grow if you are first honest about where your current confidence is placed and then ask God for more faith. 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 (TPT), *“The message I preached and how I preached it was not an attempt to sway you with persuasive arguments but to prove to you the almighty power of God’s Holy Spirit. For God intended that your faith not be established on man’s wisdom but by trusting in his almighty*

power.” Hebrews 12:2 (TPT), “We look away from the natural realm and we focus our attention and expectation onto Jesus who birthed faith within us and who leads us forward into faith’s perfection. His example is this: Because his heart was focused on the joy of knowing that you would be his, he endured the agony of the cross and conquered its humiliation, and now sits exalted at the right hand of the throne of God!” If you ask in faith, He will grant you more faith.

Our faith will show itself and strengthen by our actions. What do your actions say about your faith? James 2:17-18 (TPT), *“So then faith that doesn’t involve action is phony. But someone might object and say, “One person has faith and another person has works.” Go ahead then and prove to me that you have faith without works and I will show you faith by my works as proof that I believe.”* As you put your faith into action, it will create more opportunities for your faith to grow. It was one thing to believe the ice would hold me; it is another to step onto the ice and begin to skate. It requires faith in action to express your God-given voice.

Your faith will grow as you put God’s word into your mind. You need to soak that shield of faith in His Word frequently. Romans 10:17 (NKJV), *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* Take God’s Word with you everywhere and not just as an app on your phone; place it in your mind and meditate on it continuously.

Your faith will grow by observing the lives of others who walk in faith. The Bible contains many examples of people of faith. Read biographies of people of faith, talk to seniors whose faith is real and inspiring. We would have had less initial fear stepping onto the ice if we had seen someone else standing there first.

Your faith will grow if you pause to consider and record the cracks in the ice. By this, I mean take time to record where God has fulfilled His promises. Recording these experiences will build your faith and be a legacy record of faith for others.

When you are weary, He will give you strength. When you feel you have no might or ability to change, He will increase your power. If you are working or living to promote yourself, you will eventually fail. Let faith be the shield God designed it to be. Pick up your shield of faith and march forward with calm confidence. A shield is not effective when you are retreating. Keep that shield saturated in the water of God's Word and His promises. Quench those fiery darts of doubt, discouragement, fear, anxiety, offense, and despair. There is a world out there in dire need of a demonstration of God's love and your voice. Fill your storehouse with faith.

Chapter 45 – Storehouse 9 – Sanctification

How do we improve as people? How do we become the people that God intended us to be? In the world of theology, the term for this process is sanctification. Unfortunately, there is no place for stable stagnation; we are either growing or dying. The path of faith is a lifelong journey. This process of growth and sanctification requires persistence and grit. The goal is to become the people that God intended. The path is narrow and uncrowded. Philippians 1:6 (TPT), *“I pray with great faith for you, because I’m fully convinced that the One who began this gracious work in you will faithfully continue the process of maturing you until the unveiling of our Lord Jesus Christ!”*

The enemy loves to attack our thoughts and senses. Our salvation and sanctification are a helmet that will protect our minds and thoughts from the enemy’s attacks. Ephesians

6:17 (TPT), *“Embrace the power of salvation’s full deliverance, like a helmet to protect your thoughts from lies.”*

Sanctification is one of those vague theological terms that we do not understand very well. Its most fundamental meaning is “being in a state of proper functioning.” My first car was a yellow 1970 Toyota Corona. On a frigid winter night, while in university in Canada, I would have to use a credit card to hold the carburetor’s butterfly valve open to get the car to start. It was a painfully cold process that worked most of the time. I have also used a credit card to open my college apartment’s locked door and scrape the frost off my frozen windshield. That little credit card was handy, but these accessory uses were nothing compared to what that card could do when it performed as intended.

A sanctified credit card is a beautiful thing. In the context of spiritual growth, sanctification means “to be set apart for the intended use of the designer.” In other words, sanctification is the process of becoming more holy. It is becoming more like Christ. Sanctification is not the appearance of a change but a fundamental transformation. A transformation into the image of Christ. Romans 8:29 (TPT) *“For he knew all about us before we were born and he destined us from the beginning to share the likeness of his Son. This means the Son is the oldest among a vast family of brothers and sisters who will become just like him.”*

The Bible teaches that at salvation, faith in Christ caused our spirit to become alive, and then His Holy Spirit is present in our lives to help transform us into beings that resemble Christ. The question then is, are you more like Christ this year than you were last year? What does it mean for you to be more like Christ? God breathed into man His image at creation. Man's image was damaged when Adam and Eve turned their backs on God. Salvation with ongoing sanctification is the opportunity we now have because of the work of Christ on the cross. We can become what God intended us to be, and our restored selves will then demonstrate the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23 (TPT) *"But the fruit produced by the Holy Spirit within you is divine love in all its varied expressions; joy that overflows, peace that subdues, patience that endures, kindness in action, a life full of virtue, faith that prevails, gentleness of heart, and strength of spirit. Never set the law above these qualities, for they are meant to be limitless."*

If we had any understanding of our potential as God's created beings, we would quickly recognize the need for sanctification. Sanctification is restoration; it is becoming what God intended for each of us. Too quickly, we settle for the mundane when we could be experiencing magnificent. We strive to the point of exhaustion to obtain what God freely offers. Our God-given image was injured when Adam and

Eve rebelled against God. We now, through Christ, can regain the restored image.

Why is sanctification necessary? Why do we need to change? All you must do is pause for a moment and look at the world around you. The rates of addiction and suicide are rapidly rising, trust is declining, and love has grown cold. We have never been more affluent, yet we remain in despair. Improving the economy will not solve the main issues facing humanity. We need a spiritual awakening. We need a community of Jesus followers who are courageous enough to be honest and humble enough to put down their pride and wholeheartedly seek the Lord. Our hurting world is in desperate need of the light that only God can give through His people. We can be the people that God intended, people who have an intimate relationship with Him, who have purpose and meaning, who can live without fear with the vitality necessary for a full and meaningful life. We should be living as if God is restoring the image that He gave us.

Jesus came from God the Father and sacrificed His life for our salvation and our sanctification. Salvation is only the first step in a lifelong path of growth and spiritual maturity. Be grateful for your salvation and be diligent about your sanctification. The road to holiness is for all who are Jesus' disciples.

In Hebrews 12:14 (TPT), we are encouraged to pursue

sanctification, *“In every relationship be swift to choose peace over competition, and run swiftly toward holiness, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord.”* Do you want to see the Lord? Run with all you have toward holiness. Do not dance with compromise or rest in complacency. He has promised an abundant life, and He does not neglect His promises.

If you feel your faith is weak, then what should you do? Sanctification will strengthen your faith. 1 John 2:3-6 (TPT), *“Here’s how we can be sure that we’ve truly come to know God: if we keep his commands. If someone claims, “I have come to know God by experience,” yet doesn’t keep God’s commands, he is a phony and the truth finds no place in him. But the love of God will be perfected within the one who obeys God’s Word. We can be sure that we’ve truly come to live in intimacy with God, not just by saying, “I am intimate with God,” but by walking in the footsteps of Jesus.”* If you feel your faith is weak, you are most likely not walking in the footsteps of Jesus.

The enemy attacks us through our thoughts. Thoughts of weakness, self-importance, isolation, fear, anguish, and despair are the weapons he uses to interfere with our growth. We need the helmet of salvation. We need to trust the Lord and take those thoughts captive as a part of our sanctified life. 2 Corinthians 10:5 (TPT), *“We can demolish every deceptive*

fantasy that opposes God and break through every arrogant attitude that is raised up in defiance of the true knowledge of God. We capture, like prisoners of war, every thought and insist that it bow in obedience to the Anointed One.”

You may ask, how will we know if we are on the right path? We should be progressively growing into God’s desired likeness. We should be becoming Jesus. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (TPT), *“We can all draw close to him with the veil removed from our faces. And with no veil we all become like mirrors who brightly reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus. We are being transfigured into his very image as we move from one brighter level of glory to another. And this glorious transfiguration comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”* Do others see Jesus when they see you, or do they see someone wrapped up in their arrogance? Yes, the transforming work of sanctification will only be complete when Christ returns, but we should expect to see some noticeable changes while we are still here on earth.

Now, wouldn’t it be nice to be thankful for our salvation and then kick up our feet and cruise through life until we enter the golden gates. Scripture teaches that sanctification is not an option. 1 John 1:8-10 (TPT) *“If we boast that we have no sin, we’re only fooling ourselves and are strangers to the truth. But if we freely admit our sins when his light uncovers them, he will be faithful to forgive us every time. God is just to forgive*

us our sins because of Christ, and he will continue to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we claim that we're not guilty of sin when God uncovers it with his light, we make him a liar and his word is not in us."

Sanctification is one of those concepts that is understood best by uncovering what it is not. Sanctification is a process; it does not occur instantaneously at salvation. Paul reported in Romans, the battle between our fallen humanity and our regenerated spirit continues after salvation. Romans 7:14-25 (TPT) *"For we know that the law is divinely inspired and comes from the spiritual realm, but I am a human being made of flesh and trafficked as a slave under sin's authority. I'm a mystery to myself, for I want to do what is right, but end up doing what my moral instincts condemn. And if my behavior is not in line with my desire, my conscience still confirms the excellence of the law. And now I realize that it is no longer my true self doing it, but the unwelcome intruder of sin in my humanity. For I know that nothing good lives within the flesh of my fallen humanity. The longings to do what is right are within me, but will-power is not enough to accomplish it. My lofty desires to do what is good are dashed when I do the things I want to avoid. So if my behavior contradicts my desires to do good, I must conclude that it's not my true identity doing it, but the unwelcome intruder of sin hindering me from being who I really am. Through my experience of*

this principle, I discover that even when I want to do good, evil is ready to sabotage me. Truly, deep within my true identity, I love to do what pleases God. But I discern another power operating in my humanity, waging a war against the moral principles of my conscience and bringing me into captivity as a prisoner to the “law” of sin—this unwelcome intruder in my humanity. What an agonizing situation I am in! So who has the power to rescue this miserable man from the unwelcome intruder of sin and death? I give all my thanks to God, for his mighty power has finally provided a way out through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One! So if left to myself, the flesh is aligned with the law of sin, but now my renewed mind is fixed on and submitted to God’s righteous principles.” Sanctification is not instantaneous, it is a struggle and takes time, but we have help and promised guidance from the Holy Spirit.

Like salvation, sanctification is not something we obtain by our efforts. The same power that saved us also sanctifies us. Ephesians 2:8-10 (TPT), *“For it was only through this wonderful grace that we believed in him. Nothing we did could ever earn this salvation, for it was the gracious gift from God that brought us to Christ! So no one will ever be able to boast, for salvation is never a reward for good works or human striving. We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are joined*

to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were born, God planned in advance our destiny and the good works we would do to fulfill it!”

Sanctification is not a fruit of the Spirit, but authentic fruit will only be present in the lives of those on the path to holiness. Self-generated fruit may look good, but it is toxic if eaten.

Sanctification is not a gift of the spirit. The gifts of teaching, preaching, helping, or praying are gifts God has freely given to serve others. They are to be used to express your sanctification; they do not prove you are sanctified. The gifts are not a badge of honor to be worn as a sign of spiritual superiority. They are to be used by servants.

Sanctification is not resilience or grit. Ongoing spiritual growth will produce grit but being resilient does not mean you are sanctified. God has promised us that He will strengthen us where we need strength. Philippians 4:13 (TPT) *“I know what it means to lack, and I know what it means to experience overwhelming abundance. For I’m trained in the secret of overcoming all things, whether in fullness or in hunger. And I find that the strength of Christ’s explosive power infuses me to conquer every difficulty.”* We should be living and growing with God-infused strength.

Sanctification is not self-control. Evidence of our spiritual growth should be a growing restraint, but self-control by itself

is not sanctification. We are encouraged in scripture to purify ourselves because of God's promises. 2 Corinthians 7:1 (TPT) *"Beloved ones, with promises like these, and because of our deepest respect and worship of God, we must remove everything from our lives that contaminates body and spirit, and continue to complete the development of holiness within us."* Our self-control should be out of respect and gratitude for all God has done for us, not out of pressure to feel better about ourselves or as an attempt to gain God's favor.

Sanctification is not strict adherence to religious rituals. We are called to true holiness, an authentic change of heart, and not ritualistic appeasement. 1 Peter 1:15 (TPT) *"Instead, shape your lives to become like the Holy One who called you."* Yes, if you are on the sanctification path, you will pray more, worship more, and read God's word more, but this is not sanctification.

Living as if our spiritual growth depends on what we can do, our good intentions or strict adherence to a specific code quickly becomes stifling legalism. Sanctification is a work of God's Holy Spirit. Romans 8:4 (TPT), *"So now every righteous requirement of the law can be fulfilled through the Anointed One living his life in us. And we are free to live, not according to our flesh, but by the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit!"*

We should be motivated to grow out of gratitude. 1 John 3:1-3 (TPT) *“Look with wonder at the depth of the Father’s marvelous love that he has lavished on us! He has called us and made us his very own beloved children. The reason the world doesn’t recognize who we are is that they didn’t recognize him. Beloved, we are God’s children right now; however, it is not yet apparent what we will become. But we do know that when it is finally made visible, we will be just like him, for we will see him as he truly is. And all who focus their hope on him will always be purifying themselves, just as Jesus is pure.”*

We are living in the time of God’s new covenant, a covenant of grace. To live believing we can perform to gain God’s approval is to substitute the law for God’s grace. Ephesians 2:10 (TPT) *“We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are joined to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were born, God planned in advance our destiny and the good works we would do to fulfill it!”*

How does one get sanctified? How can we become the people that God intended? Do we have an active role in our sanctification?

Firstly, sanctification is through the body of Christ. If it were not for the cross, there would be no sanctification. Hebrews

10:10 (TPT) *“By God’s will we have been purified and made holy once and for all through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus, the Messiah!”* The necessary sacrifice for our salvation and sanctification has been made; it is not gained by strenuous, sacrificial effort on our part. Our role in this is small but significant. We are to believe, live by faith, and seek Him with our whole being.

Through faith in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, sanctification is possible. It is as if the road back to a relationship with God is a path where Christ, through His sacrifice, opened the door; the Holy Spirit then guided us to the door and now directs us on the way. Galatians 5:16 (TPT) *“As you yield freely and fully to the dynamic life and power of the Holy Spirit, you will abandon the cravings of your self – life.”* Living in a dark, godless world, the Holy Spirit is the light on our path and the breath in our lungs. Is the Holy Spirit guiding you? Are you becoming more like Jesus? What motivates you? Romans 8:5-6 (TPT), *“Those who are motivated by the flesh only pursue what benefits themselves. But those who live by the impulses of the Holy Spirit are motivated to pursue spiritual realities. For the mind-set of the flesh is death, but the mind-set controlled by the Spirit finds life and peace.”* Are you struggling? Are you trying hard under your strength to become Christ-like? Do you realize your efforts will never be good enough? Romans 8:8-10

(TPT) *“For no matter how hard they try, God finds no pleasure with those who are controlled by the flesh. But when the Spirit of Christ empowers your life, you are not dominated by the flesh but by the Spirit. And if you are not joined to the Spirit of the Anointed One, you are not of him. Now Christ lives his life in you! And even though your body may be dead because of the effects of sin, his life-giving Spirit imparts life to you because you are fully accepted by God.”*

One of the Holy Spirit's tools in guiding our sanctification is the inspired Word of God. John 16:13 (TPT) *“But when the truth-giving Spirit comes, he will unveil the reality of every truth within you. He won't speak his own message, but only what he hears from the Father, and he will reveal prophetically to you what is to come.”* 2 Timothy 3:15 (TPT) *“Remember what you were taught from your childhood from the Holy Scrolls which can impart to you wisdom to experience everlasting life through the faith of Jesus, the Anointed One!”* God's Word was inspired by the Holy Spirit and is alive and applicable today. Ephesians 5:26 (TPT), *“to make us holy and pure, cleansing us through the showering of the pure water of the Word of God.”* As we live in a fallen world, we pick up dirt throughout the day. We need regular washing of the Word of God. When I was a younger man, I wrongfully thought that I knew enough of God's Word to last a lifetime. After all, I learned a lot of scripture on a Bible quiz team while in high

school, and I had attended three years of seminary. Little did I realize that knowledge of the Word and being washed by the Word were two different things. If you are on the sanctification path, you will crave the daily washing and refreshing that is only available in God's Word. We need God's Word to help the scales of self-centeredness fall from our eyes so we can see more clearly. Hebrews 4:12 (AMP) *"For the word of God is living and active and full of power [making it operative, energizing, and effective]. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as the division of the soul and spirit [the completeness of a person], and of both joints and marrow [the deepest parts of our nature], exposing and judging the very thoughts and intentions of the heart."* We need to pause and take time to consider while meditating on God's Word what it means to have the mind of Christ. Philippians 2:5 (TPT), *"And consider the example that Jesus, the Anointed One, has set before us. Let his mindset become your motivation."* What is your motivation? Is your motivation self-promotion and affirmation? Is your motivation the mindset of Christ?

The process of sanctification is an act of faith. Romans 12:1-2 (TPT) *"Beloved friends, what should be our proper response to God's marvelous mercies? I encourage you to surrender yourselves to God to be his sacred, living sacrifices. And live in holiness, experiencing all that delights his heart. For this*

becomes your genuine expression of worship. Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the culture around you, but be inwardly transformed by the Holy Spirit through a total reformation of how you think. This will empower you to discern God's will as you live a beautiful life, satisfying and perfect in his eyes." Faith is necessary for sanctification because it is a work of the Spirit that produces growth. God is kind and gentle, He will not force you to grow, but He is there to facilitate your growth if you want it bad enough. Do you want to grow? Do you see the need for the Holy Spirit to be working in your life? Are you complacent about where you are at right now? How does your life measure up to the fruit of the spirit listed in Galatians 5:22? Are you painfully aware of where you need God's help to become what He intended?

If you were to X-ray the bones of a child, you would find something that looks very unusual. In a growing child, there are clear lines visible on the X-ray. These lines are called an epiphysis or a growth plate. The cells at these growth plates are different than the cells that make up the rest of the bone. These cells divide and multiply, with the result being a lengthening of a bone. The rest of the bone cells provide a healthy skeletal structure so the child can learn to walk, run, and perform other physical functions. Just like the growing, immature bones of a child, our spiritual growth also has growth plates. If you want to see where God is working in

your life, you should be aware of your spiritual growth plates. For example, meditate on the fruit of the spirit, and you will find many of these spiritual growth plates. When we look for evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, we should see areas of significant growth and change, but we will also see the places we lack. Where we recognize the need for more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is where the Spirit is ready and able to work. Do you see the limit to your ability to love? Do you see where you need to love others more to become more fully the person God intended you to be? If you see the need for improvement at this point and just try harder, you will fail. At this point in our spiritual growth plates, we need to cry out to God for help. We are dependent on Him for the changes that are desperately needed. With faith He will change you, Hebrews 11:6 (AMP) *“But without faith it is impossible to [walk with God and] please Him, for whoever comes [near] to God must [necessarily] believe that God exists and that He rewards those who [earnestly and diligently] seek Him.”* Take time to consider each fruit of the Spirit, be honest, ask for God’s help, and grow.

Spiritual growth is a process that, at times, is both messy and painful. Keep pressing in; never give up or become complacent. Remain thankful. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (TPT), *“Let joy be your continual feast. Make your life a*

prayer. And in the midst of everything be always giving thanks, for this is God's perfect plan for you in Christ Jesus."

Are you in His will? Are you thankful?

Are you growing or dying? How is the fruit of the spirit demonstrated in your life? Sanctification is a component of your storehouse that you will want to be adding to daily.

Chapter 46 – Storehouse 10 – The Holy Spirit

Our culture has devolved into an individualistic, self-centered, “all about me” society. We have lost our contention with God as well as our compass to find our way back to God. We have turned our backs to God and pursued selfish interests with passion and rage. We may still have “In God, We Trust” stamped on our coinage, but it is gone from our culture’s heart. As a society, we have rushed down this disastrous path as fast as we can, and we are a mess. As a disciple of Jesus, if you hope to survive this upheaval, you will need the comfort, guidance, reassurance, and power of the Holy Spirit. Your communication connection to God is through the Holy Spirit, who is present to interpret God’s Word and to pray on your behalf. You will need your storehouse filled with the Holy Spirit. This upside-down, crazy world you live in is hurting profoundly and needs your God-given Holy Spirit empowered voice.

The previous storehouse items have been reworded and adapted with some success in medicine and psychology. After all, they are spiritual laws of living set in place by our creator. They are the foundation of many self-help programs and twelve-step programs to deal with various addictions and psychological issues. Success with these programs is dependent on adherence to these laws plus willpower and accountability.

The following are examples of how these laws have been “borrowed” and used in modern psychology.

The spiritual law regarding truth stresses the importance of being honest with yourself and others as a foundation for growth. It is the recognition that there is no room or opportunity for improvement if you are not genuine.

The spiritual law regarding confession stresses the need to put honesty into practice. The focus is on the importance of humility and transparency to build willpower.

The spiritual law regarding evaluation stresses the importance of not allowing yourself to become complacent. It encourages ongoing assessment on the pathway to recovery.

The spiritual law regarding surrender addresses the reality that our problems are more significant than our ability to overcome. It stresses the truth that we need help and that

there is added strength in asking for help.

The spiritual law regarding redemption stresses the need to see that a change is necessary and that continuing to live in a current manner will be destructive or fatal.

The spiritual law regarding restoration stresses the need for forgiveness and apology. It focuses on the significance of personal responsibility and a movement away from the powerless victim role.

The spiritual law regarding service stresses the power in giving to others out of gratitude. This law is a potent mechanism and why former addicts run many of the addiction programs. Many of these workers need to help others to remain sober themselves.

The spiritual law regarding faith stresses that a belief in higher power or force greater than you is vital in overcoming your problem. If your problem is bigger than you, you will need a greater strength than yours to overcome the problem.

The spiritual law regarding sanctification stresses the importance of never becoming complacent. It focuses on the reality that you are only one weak moment away from a relapse.

The secularization of God's laws may produce some behavior change, but there is no absolute freedom with this form of

pseudo-sanctification. To become the people God intended, we need a complete restoration. This restoration is more than just a change in thought and emotion; it is a change in spirit. Our dead spirit needs resuscitation, and that new life can only come from the work and power of the Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:17 (NKJV), *“Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”* Our spirit is our contact point with God. John 3:6 (TPT), *“For the natural realm only gives birth to things that are natural, but the spiritual realm gives birth to supernatural life!”* Salvation is the quickening of our dead spirit. This rebirth is the path to freedom. It is now possible to become who we were created to be. We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit if we expect to tear down strongholds, find our God-given voice, and stand for His kingdom.

The work of the spirit will not be understood by many. To those whose spirit is still dead, it will sound like insanity, like you have found an invisible imaginary friend. The truth is the Holy Spirit is a person who is alive and very real. 1 Corinthians 2:14 (TPT), *“Someone living on an entirely human level rejects the revelations of God’s Spirit, for they make no sense to him. He can’t understand the revelations of the Spirit because they are only discovered by the illumination of the Spirit.”* You now have the Spirit of Christ alive within you. Romans 8:9 (NKJV), *“But you are not in the flesh but in the*

Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.”

The Holy Spirit is at work in our lives to guide us, protect us, comfort us, and pray for us. After Jesus rose from the dead, He went to heaven and sent us the Holy Spirit to be our helper. Jesus could not physically be in more than one place at a time, but the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ and is present with all believers. He is in Texas and France at the same time. John 16:7 (TPT), *“But here’s the truth: It’s to your advantage that I go away, for if I don’t go away the Divine Encourager will not be released to you. But after I depart, I will send him to you.”* A life of faith will have trials and difficulties, and we will need help and encouragement from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is necessary as an encourager during those overwhelming times.

The Holy Spirit guides us on the sanctification path. 1 Corinthians 6:11 (TPT), *“It’s true that some of you once lived in those lifestyles, but now you have been purified from sin, made holy, and given a perfect standing before God—all because of the power of the name of the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, and through our union with the Spirit of our God.”*

It was the Holy Spirit who drew us to God and Christ, to begin with, and now continues to lead us in our path of holiness. You cannot become holy without the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is present in your life to make you more like Christ. 2 Corinthians 3:18 (TPT), *“We can all draw close to him with the veil removed from our faces. And with no veil we all become like mirrors who brightly reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus. We are being transfigured into his very image as we move from one brighter level of glory to another. And this glorious transfiguration comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*

Becoming Christ-like should be our goal. If your goal is self-promotion, you do not have the Spirit of Christ.

The Holy Spirit is the one who gifts you for ministry. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 (TPT), *“It is the same Holy Spirit who continues to distribute many different varieties of gifts. The Lord Yahweh is one, and he is the one who apportions to believers different varieties of ministries. The same God distributes different kinds of miracles that accomplish different results through each believer’s gift and ministry as he energizes and activates them. Each believer is given continuous revelation by the Holy Spirit to benefit not just himself but all.”* What he has given to you is for you to use to build His kingdom. Lean into Him to find your unique gifts and voice. What we possess are gifts from the Spirit; they are not self-generated. You are on planet earth at this specific time, for a particular purpose, with a unique life experience and voice to give God glory and build His kingdom.

The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us hope when all hope seems lost. Romans 15:13 (TPT), *“Now may God, the fountain of hope, fill you to overflowing with uncontainable joy and perfect peace as you trust in him. And may the power of the Holy Spirit continually surround your life with his superabundance until you radiate with hope!”* Do you radiate hope, or do you cast despair? Life is an exhausting battle. At times it feels like the only direction to swim is upstream. Strongholds need tearing down; the enemy constantly attacks, and there are times when all seems lost. It is easy to lose hope when we get exhausted. We are in desperate need of Holy Spirit-generated hope.

The Holy Spirit is the one who imparts love. It is not possible to love as God would have us, love, without the Holy Spirit. The evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is not speaking in tongues, it is not performing miracles, it is not prosperity, and it is not proclaiming accurate prophecies. The evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is love. What do others see when they see you? Do they see someone struggling to make a name for themselves, or do they see God’s love? I spent the last several years of my medical career as a physician working with individuals struggling with drug and alcohol addiction. I became adept at accurately identifying the physical signs of heroin, methamphetamine, Ecstasy, or alcohol. Your countenance, especially your eyes, are quite

revealing. Your countenance is powerful and will impact the atmosphere where you are present. What does your countenance say about you? Do others see God's love when you enter a room? Does the atmosphere become more peaceful and pleasant? Romans 5:3-5 (TPT), *"But that's not all! Even in times of trouble we have a joyful confidence, knowing that our pressures will develop in us patient endurance. And patient endurance will refine our character, and proven character leads us back to hope. And this hope is not a disappointing fantasy, because we can now experience the endless love of God cascading into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who lives in us!"* The most potent force available to change your world is love. The problem is that it is impossible to define this kind of love. At times love means giving grace, and at other times it means applying the law. There is no formula for knowing how to love. Loving is not just giving in, and it is not only setting boundaries. We need to depend on the Holy Spirit to know how to dispense God's love with precision.

The Holy Spirit teaches and gives insight. John 14:26 (TPT), *"But when the Father sends the Spirit of Holiness, the One like me who sets you free, he will teach you all things in my name. And he will inspire you to remember every word that I've told you."*

The Spirit opens the meaning of God's Word to make you

more like Christ.

The Holy Spirit confirms you belong to God. Romans 8:16 (TPT), *“For the Holy Spirit makes God’s fatherhood real to us as he whispers into our innermost being, “You are God’s beloved child!”* The Spirit’s affirming whisper during times of trouble and confusion is vital. Have you heard it? Are you listening for that whisper?

Our storehouse needs an area where we can communicate with God. This area is only available through the Holy Spirit. We need to hear God through the Holy Spirit’s interpretation of His Word and His gentle whisper. We need to communicate to God through prayer that is guided and delivered by the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 6:17 (NKJV), *“And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;”* We need the razor-sharp sword of the Spirit to tear down strongholds and defeat the enemy’s lies. The sword of the Spirit is both defensive and constructive. It is defensive in that it can be used to defeat the enemy’s lies like Jesus did when Satan tempted him in Luke 4. God’s Word is truth, John 17:17 (TPT), *“Your Word is truth! So make them holy by the truth.”* God’s Word is light, Psalm 119:105 (TPT), *“Truth’s shining light guides me in my choices and decisions; the revelation of your Word makes my pathway clear.”* The truth and the light of God’s word come alive through the work of the Holy Spirit. If you are to become

what God intended, you will need to wield the Spirit-inspired Word of God to carve your way through the numerous lies of the enemy.

The sword of the Spirit, the living Word of God, is also constructive in that it is a vital part of how we become more Christ-like. We are God's works of art, Ephesians 2:10 (TPT), *"We have become his poetry, a re-created people that will fulfill the destiny he has given each of us, for we are joined to Jesus, the Anointed One. Even before we were born, God planned in advance our destiny and the good works we would do to fulfill it!"* As God's work of art, we are a sculpture and not a painting. Unfortunately, many believers feel they are God's painting. They focus on the outside, adding a little red here and little blue there, believing all is fine. They see no need to address the inside. As God's sculptures, the Holy Spirit interprets God's Word to our spirit to cut away our flesh to reveal His perfect work of art. Hebrews 4:12 (TPT), *"For we have the living Word of God, which is full of energy, like a two-mouthed sword. It will even penetrate to the very core of our being where soul and spirit, bone and marrow meet! It interprets and reveals the true thoughts and secret motives of our hearts."* In this sense, the Spirit-inspired Word is more of a sculptor's chisel than a sword. Michelangelo was a famous painter and sculptor of the Renaissance. He stated that *"Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the*

sculptor to discover it. I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”

In the same way, the sword of God's living Word will cut away slabs of confining bitterness, rage, selfishness, greed, lust, and covetousness. Some slabs will cut away easier than others. We arrived in this world as a twenty-ton block of marble. At salvation, the spirit within that marble came alive, and its heart began to beat. The figure within the marble was still confined, but the figure slowly is freed with time and trials when you invite the Holy Spirit to work. Eventually, the outcome will be a perfect, living sculpture of Jesus. His work will not be complete until Jesus returns, but that does not mean we should give up and become complacent. So, humble yourself, seek God, invite the Holy Spirit to bring God's Word alive, and hopefully, we will start to see the emergence of Jesus in our lives.

Not only do we not know how to love without the Holy Spirit, but we also do not know how to pray without the Holy Spirit. How should we talk to God? What language does He speak? What do we request? Is there a protocol? The Holy Spirit guides our prayers, Romans 8:26 (TPT), *“And in a similar way, the Holy Spirit takes hold of us in our human frailty to empower us in our weakness. For example, at times we don't even know how to pray, or know the best things to ask for. But the Holy Spirit rises up within us to super-intercede on our behalf,*

pleading to God with emotional sighs too deep for words.”

Prayer can be audible and intelligible, audible and unintelligible, silent, or a time of listening. You will want to have room in your storehouse for all types of prayer. For what should we be praying? Paul was near the end of his ministry when he wrote Ephesians. He had experienced a lot of God’s power and revelation by this time, and yet he requests prayer for boldness and freedom. He asked that they pray for him and each other. Ephesians 6:18-20 (TPT), *“Pray passionately in the Spirit, as you constantly intercede with every form of prayer at all times. Pray the blessings of God upon all his believers. And pray also that God’s revelation would be released through me every time I preach the wonderful mystery of the hope-filled gospel. Yes, pray that I may preach the wonderful news of God’s kingdom with bold freedom at every opportunity. Even though I am chained as a prisoner, I am his ambassador.”* We should be asking the Holy Spirit for assistance as we pray for others. This kind of prayer will force you to set aside your “all about me” attitude and begin to focus on what matters to God.

Take time to talk to God, ask Him questions, look for answers to your questions in His Word. Invite the Holy Spirit to use God’s Word to make you more Christ-like. Follow the instructions given in Philippians 2:4 (NKJV) and *“Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also*

for the interests of others.” Do not just rapidly pray for others; take time to consider their “personal interests.” Ask yourself, what is it like to be that person. If you find your love for others has grown cold, you will find it starts to warm again if you take the time to consider their “personal interests.” To help with this a little more, I would like to introduce a concept called “burden filtering.” Your love grows cold because you have become preoccupied with the miseries and concerns of your own life.

The pain of life’s burdens and demands results in a self-focus, which causes our love for others to grow cold rapidly. Following the advice in Philippians 2:4 will begin to warm your compassion. Now “burden filtering” is not just thinking about them; it is filtering your thoughts about them through the struggles and strongholds they may be facing. Make a list of the people you are going to consider. The list should include a parent, your spouse, or a close friend, someone much younger than you like your child or grandchild, a person of prominence you admire, a homeless person that stands on the street corner with their cardboard sign, and a friend. You should also include someone you dislike, like someone who has mocked you or caused an offense. Now take time to consider that person in the light of their struggles. Do they struggle with a sense of isolation and meaninglessness? Are they struggling with their decisions and purpose? Are they

struggling with their mortality? Are they spiritually whole? Are they struggling with issues of trust? Are they aware that God loves them? Are you aware of any specific strongholds that are holding them back? Do not use this time to compare their struggles to yours. Assume that their battles are currently more intense and painful than yours. Remember, we are to consider others above ourselves and not less than ourselves. Once you have completed this time of “burden filtering,” it is time to pray.

Start by thanking the Lord for them, thanking Him that He loves them more than you ever could, thank Him that John 3:16 applies to them as much as it does to you. Ask that the word of God’s love come to them and offer yourself to deliver the message of hope. Ask the Lord to prepare your words and provide the opportunity. Ask the Lord to bless them. Ask that the Lord send other believers across their path who can guide them to Him. Ask that the scales of doubt, denial, self-centeredness, and spiritual blindness fall from their spiritual eyes. Ask that the Lord protect them so they may feel the consequences of their life direction but not suffer harm in pursuing that direction. If this “burden filtering,” followed by prayer, becomes a regular part of your life, you will find you start to see others as God sees them, and your compassion will warm. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you pray and love others.

The Holy Spirit should infuse every element in your

storehouse. You now have a foundation for ongoing growth and a process for increasing your Godly grit. It is now time to stand.

Chapter 47 – Stand!

The first man was created complete and placed in God's perfectly designed world. God created man to experience fulfillment in a quality relationship with Him, aware of his value and purpose, active and creative, with power, and an eternal spirit. We were made to be both physically alive and spiritually alive. God created humanity with everything we needed to be completely content. With disobedience came a fracture in our God-image. Now there was a problem. We still have God's image, but its expression and experience have become severely distorted.

God is patient, God is kind, and God has provided, through His Son, a path of restoration. God loves you and is wanting to relate to a humble, honest, and thankful humanity. Psalm 139:5-6 (TPT) is an expression of His love. *"You've gone into my future to prepare the way, and in kindness, you follow*

behind me to spare me from the harm of my past. With your hand of love upon my life, you impart a blessing to me. This is just too wonderful, deep, and incomprehensible! Your understanding of me brings me wonder and strength.”

We do not need to fear the future; God has gone into our future to prepare our way. Even when things seem dark and uncertain, God has prepared your future. You do not have to be paralyzed by your past; controlled by guilt, shame, offenses, past abuse, or injustices. You do not have to live a life of misery and bitterness. There is hope. You can be free from anxiety about the future and harm from the past and live with thanksgiving today because of a loving God. A relationship with God is the only effective treatment for life's misery. You can now be free to pursue and fulfill your God-given voice to glorify Him as you work to build His kingdom. It is time to stand!

Ephesians 6:13 (NKJV), *“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”* Are you standing, or have you decided to remain seated? Do you have the strength and stamina to stand? Have you done all? To do all means you have done all you can to set aside those weights that so easily trip you up. You have acknowledged and torn down strongholds and are not living a self-centered life. You can now stand, meaning you are established in your faith, using

your voice and not wavering. Are you strong enough to stand, or will you fall over with the faintest breeze of adversity?

If you follow Jesus and begin to use your voice, you will face lots of adversity. John 16:33 (NKJV), *“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* How you react to these tribulations will determine how close you can get to fulfilling God’s plan for your life. You will need the mindset of a warrior. 1 Timothy 1:18-19 (NKJV), *“This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck,”* 2 Timothy 2:3-4 (NKJV), *“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.”* Warriors act righteously. They know what is right and what is wrong and act accordingly. A warrior is courageous in defending righteousness. A warrior is benevolent, respects others, and treats others with honor. A warrior is honest and sincere. A warrior is self-controlled, disciplined, and able to follow orders. Do you have what it takes to be a warrior? I am not talking about a physical combat warrior but a spiritual warrior who has the strength and

stamina to seek God, tear down strongholds, and use their voice. God is looking for men and women who are willing to be His warriors. Most Christians are content just wearing their team colors and cheering from the sidelines. God did not call and equip you to be a casual fan; He called you to be in the game.

Warriors must be humble; confident, but not arrogant. They must acknowledge where they are weak and vulnerable. Philippians 2:5-9 (AMP). *“Have this same attitude in yourselves which was in Christ Jesus [look to Him as your example in selfless humility], who, although He existed in the form and unchanging essence of God [as One with Him, possessing the fullness of all the divine attributes—the entire nature of deity], did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped or asserted [as if He did not already possess it, or was afraid of losing it]; but emptied Himself [without renouncing or diminishing His deity, but only temporarily giving up the outward expression of divine equality and His rightful dignity] by assuming the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men [He became completely human but was without sin, being fully God and fully man]. After He was found in [terms of His] outward appearance as a man [for a divinely-appointed time], He humbled Himself [still further] by becoming obedient [to the Father] to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* If we expect to thrive and

grow, we must humble ourselves as Christ humbled Himself. We must lay aside our self-centeredness and pride and seek Him. 2 Chronicles 7:14 (ASV), *“if my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”* Humble yourself and pray, God will sustain you, and He will restore your strength and resolve as you find your value in Him.

Warriors prepare through training and discipline. 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 (NKJV), *“Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus, I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”* Start training and disciplining yourself by learning to trust God for the little things in life. If your reflex is to turn to Him and His Word when you do not feel threatened, you are more likely to turn to Him when adversity increases. Do you reflexively turn to Him, or do you turn to Google? What you train yourself to do when the pressure is low is what you will do when the pressure is extensive.

Warriors are reliable, trustworthy, and not self-centered. Strive to be authentic. Be honest and humble. Cherish your solitude time with God, ask Him daily to search your heart, then be willing to change what needs to be changed.

Warriors are honorable; they live by an ethical code and are respectful. A warrior has learned to live life considerate of others. Psalm 15:1-5 (NKJV), *“LORD, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And speaks the truth in his heart; He who does not backbite with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor does he take up a reproach against his friend; In whose eyes a vile person is despised, But he honors those who fear the LORD; He who swears to his own hurt and does not change; He who does not put out his money at usury, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.”* A warrior will perish on the battlefield if consumed by self-centered thoughts.

Warriors recognize they are part of something much bigger than themselves. They know they have a specific task, at a particular time, for the benefit of all. 1 Peter 2:9 (NKJV), *“But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;”* Do not complain about the evils of this age and remain seated. God has placed you on earth for this time to stand; this is your time, and He has equipped you and trusts you to do your part.

Warriors have a keen sense of justice. The warrior is ready

and willing to stand up for the weak and vulnerable. A warrior knows the necessary boundaries. Titus 2:11-14 (NKJV), *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”* James 1:27 (TPT), *“True spirituality that is pure in the eyes of our Father God is to make a difference in the lives of the orphans, and widows in their troubles, and to refuse to be corrupted by the world’s values.”* Do you stand up against injustice? Do you see the struggles of the vulnerable? Do you know the boundaries?

Warriors live a sacrificial life of service. The warrior does not seek death but is willing to fight to the death if needed. 2 Timothy 4:6-8 (NKJV), *“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.”* How much are you willing to sacrifice? Are you living for anything for which you are ready to die?

Luke 9:23 (NKJV), *“Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”* Your value does not come from your gifts or talents; they were given to you by God; you do not own them; you are a steward. Use what He has given you, whether that is much or little to serve others. 1 Peter 4:10 (AMP), *“Just as each one of you has received a special gift [a spiritual talent, an ability graciously given by God], employ it in serving one another as [is appropriate for] good stewards of God’s multi-faceted grace [faithfully using the diverse, varied gifts and abilities granted to Christians by God’s unmerited favor].”* We are to be co-creators with God and other believers. We can rely on our God-given creativity and curiosity to pursue our dreams with passion and commitment.

We are free to use our God-given talents and abilities to dream and imagine solutions, businesses, inventions, and so on to serve God and others. Acts 2:17 (AMP), *“And it shall be in the last days,’ says God, ‘That I will pour out My Spirit upon all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see [divinely prompted] visions, And your old men shall dream [divinely prompted] dreams;”* It is time for God’s people to wake up and dream! Find your voice and use it!

Warriors strive for excellence in all they do because their life

and the life of others depends on it. Push ahead with diligence. Colossians 3:23-24 (AMP), *“Whatever you do [whatever your task may be], work from the soul [that is, put in your very best effort], as [something done] for the Lord and not for men, knowing [with all certainty] that it is from the Lord [not from men] that you will receive the inheritance which is your [greatest] reward. It is the Lord Christ whom you [actually] serve.”* If you live to serve yourself, your diligence will dissolve, and you will become discouraged. Do all you do as if you are serving the Lord. You can now live your birthed dream with passion and commitment with the energy to see that vision come to reality. 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 (NKJV), *“Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love.”*

Warriors know their place and position in a chain of command. 2 Timothy 2:3 (NKJV), *“You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.”* We are followers of Jesus, He is our captain, and we are His soldiers.

Warriors live in constant preparation. After a period of intense training and physical preparation, a warrior must live in a state of continuous preparation, always on the ready. As a soldier of Jesus, we must be continuously prepared by renewing our mind and presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice. Romans 8:6 (AMP), *“Now the mind of the flesh is death [both now and forever—because it pursues sin]; but the mind of the Spirit is*

life and peace [the spiritual well-being that comes from walking with God—both now and forever];”

Warriors adhere to ideals that govern their actions and priorities. As God’s warriors, with a restored spirit, we can now live with the right priorities. We no longer need to live in denial because of fear produced by our sense of inferiority or mortality. We can begin to see and prioritize as God sees and prioritizes. We can understand what will last and what will burn.

Warriors do not prepare and go to battle for themselves; they go to war on others' behalf. If we lived in a perfect world, relationships would be straightforward; people would love one another; they would be trustworthy and authentic. We will have to wait for that world. We should be living with a Philippians 2:5 (AMP) attitude as a guide to relationships on this side of heaven. *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit [through factional motives, or strife], but with [an attitude of] humility [being neither arrogant nor self-righteous], regard others as more important than yourselves.”* This attitude will impact our relationships' quality, give love a definition, help with proper placement of trust, and encourage authenticity. The Bible tells us that they will know we are Christians by our love and that we are to love others as we would love ourselves.

Warriors must be trustworthy and must trust their fellow warriors. Trust needs to be based on someone's actions and not just their words. Some of the most brutal criminals will speak some of the sweetest, kindest words. Trust is essential, but it must be with caution. Be patient in your judgment. The Bible tells us it is by their fruit we will know someone. Develop your skills as a fruit inspector. You need to maintain clear boundaries while you wait to see the fruit of their life. Be honest and trustworthy but be wise when it comes to trusting others.

In an ideal world, we would all work together, and our meaning and value would be secure in who we are in a relationship with God. We would all cooperate and work to elevate one another. There would be no competition or striving for meaning, value, or purpose; we would have a clear understanding of our God-provided value. We would have no problem going to battle together.

Warriors are goal oriented. Warriors know what they are fighting and why they are fighting. Our battle as God's warriors is to tear down strongholds, stand against the attacks of the enemy, glorify Him, and make Him known. 2 Timothy 4:2-5 (NKJV), *"Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires,*

because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” Are you living with a clear purpose? Do you know your mission?

Warriors know how to stand steadfast and unwavering. A warrior does not allow room in his life for excuses to knock him off track. You will never use your voice if you are waiting until you are better prepared or for the perfect opportunity. When warriors are called to battle, they do not delay or wait until their shoes are shined, and their garage is clean. We should be living with an eternal purpose and not just living for what we can get for the moment. We should be living with eternity in mind and living to build and support God’s kingdom, not striving to create our own little empire. Is eternity in your mind?

We should value what has eternal value. Pause to consider what will last and what will not last. Where is your focus? What do you value? What do you treasure? Luke 12:34 (AMP), *“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* If your heart is troubled, it is because you have rotting treasure. Live today with eternal priorities and values. Proverbs 4:23 (NKJV), *“Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.”*

Stand for your voice. You are God's warrior. You are unique. God loves you. You can have a meaningful relationship with God. As His child, you have substantial value. You have God-given creative power. God gave you an eternal spirit. So, go out and live the image as God intended, free from loneliness, meaninglessness, the pressure to perform, and anxiety about your mortality. Exercise and use your voice with commitment and passion.

Stand for righteousness. Do what is right. Protect and serve the vulnerable. Be honest and authentic even when the world around you may hate you for your honesty.

Stand against self-centeredness, strongholds, the attacks of the enemy, and the spirit of antichrist.

Our flesh is greedy and self-serving. We need the Holy Spirit to rescue us from ourselves. Our only experience of this world is through our own eyes, and we become blind to others' life and struggles. Apart from a relationship with God, we all, whether sweet or nasty, follow a self-serving life path. If we are not God-serving, we are self-serving. What has been self-serving soon becomes self-consuming. All the self-serving acts we have performed, and all the self-serving stuff we have gathered will eventually lead to our destruction.

Seek the Lord and ask Him to reveal the strongholds in your life. Tear down those strongholds so you can freely become

the person you were designed to be. Do not allow the strongholds to create a self-focused offense. Our spirit has been renewed, and we can live as God intended, but we still have an unrestored mind, habits, emotions, and desires. We need to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, and our minds need ongoing renewal. Romans 12:1-2 (AMP), *“Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies [dedicating all of yourselves, set apart] as a living sacrifice, holy and well-pleasing to God, which is your rational (logical, intelligent) act of worship. And do not be conformed to this world [any longer with its superficial values and customs], but be transformed and progressively changed [as you mature spiritually] by the renewing of your mind [focusing on godly values and ethical attitudes], so that you may prove [for yourselves] what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect [in His plan and purpose for you].”* Our minds are renewed or washed by God’s word. Ephesians 5:26 (TPT), *“to make us holy and pure, cleansing us through the showering of the pure water of the Word of God.”* We are now on the path from misery to peace. The process is one of humbly coming before the Lord, asking Him to search our hearts to identify and root out the irrational thoughts, the untamed emotions, the damaging habits, and the ungodly desires. We can rest confident in Philipians 1:6 (AMP), *“I am convinced and confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will [continue to]*

perfect and complete it until the day of Christ Jesus [the time of His return].” If you are drowning in misery, take time daily to ask God to search your heart and then have the courage and faith to change what He reveals to you. At the end of your day, as you prepare for bed, pray Psalm 139:23-24 (TPT), *“God, I invite your searching gaze into my heart. Examine me through and through; find out everything that may be hidden within me. Put me to the test and sift through all my anxious cares. See if there is any path of pain I’m walking on, and lead me back to your glorious, everlasting ways - the path that brings me back to you.”* If you abandon this growth process, it will not take long, and you will find you will again be struggling with the same strongholds that once held you back.

If you follow this path, do not expect appreciation from your previous group of family and friends. You will need to stand amid rejection from others; often others you have been close to in the past. If you have been part of a group that shares their bitterness and you move on to a godly path, you will face rejection from your former bitter friends. Your contentment is a threat to their beliefs, irrational thinking, and their way of life. You bring with you God’s light, and this is a threat to those hiding in the darkness. They hide knowing they are not living as they should; they know their deeds are self-centered and evil. They do not want your light around. If you become offended because your previous social group rejects you, you

may resort to your previously destructive irrational thoughts as a way of escape. These attacks can leave you feeling more isolated, causing you to question your purpose and meaning. They will challenge your dreams and abilities. The turmoil caused by these attacks can be noisy enough to impact your ability to hear God's still small voice. Stand firm; God is faithful, even when your family and friends are not.

As God's warrior, you live to bring glory to God, and therefore, you will be an insult to Satan and come under attack. The enemy will do all he can to steal your peace, kill your voice and destroy your legacy. Put on the whole armor of God and stand!

As God's warrior, you should also expect to be attacked by the culture of antichrist. So, what is the culture or spirit of antichrist? How do we identify it? God, the Father, through Jesus Christ, has promised to meet your deepest needs. He has provided a way for the restoration of your God-image. He has promised you peace and security in Him. Any culture or system that offers these promises in the absence of Christ is the culture of antichrist. 1 John 4:2-3 (TPT) informs us of the test we can use to identify the antichrist spirit. *"Here's the test for those with the genuine Spirit of God: they will confess Jesus as the Christ who has come in the flesh. Everyone who does not acknowledge that Jesus is from God has the spirit of antichrist, which you heard was coming and is already active*

in the world.” The spirit of antichrist is the proclamation of God’s promises without Christ. The spirit of antichrist masquerades as “the truth” when it is a lie. The spirit and culture of antichrist promise compassion but then cause division by elevating one group over another. Groups based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or financial status have special treatment. On the surface, it appears to be loving, but it is only causing more profound division. The antichrist culture promotes the belief that what I can make of myself is more important than how God made me. It supports the wrong notion that I can find peace by changing who I was made to be. The culture of antichrist glories in deception – lies for the sake of lying. It promotes a life of hiding and a life of secrets. Bonds develop with those with whom you share secrets, not relationships based on God’s truth. With the culture of antichrist, there is a loss of the sacredness of life. The economy and convenience are more important than human life, especially the most vulnerable lives – the unborn and the elderly. Antichrist's culture is a twisted road; it looks like it is going one way when it is going another. The culture of antichrist may also overtly show itself as being perverse through open rebellion and open denial of God’s existence. The culture of antichrist promises protection as it promotes fear; the greater the fear, the greater the need for the protection promised. The culture of antichrist fosters dependency. If I can simultaneously increase your fear of

heart disease and then guarantee solutions to that medical problem, you are now dependent on me. I have become your savior. We live in an age where the culture of antichrist is flourishing. Be wise; do not get swayed by the subtle culture of antichrist.

As God's warriors, we should not be living controlled by fear. We can live with the promise in Romans 8:31(AMP) *"What then shall we say to all these things? If God is for us, who can be [successful] against us?"* We no longer feel the need to waste our life by hiding or guarding secrets with denial. God is big enough to handle any reality. We are free to be humble and honest. You no longer must live being controlled by fear. You are secure in your relationship with God and no longer need to be controlled by fear of failure or reliance on an excellent result to be confident in yourself. Isaiah 41:10 (AMP), *"Do not fear [anything], for I am with you; Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, be assured I will help you; I will certainly take hold of you with My righteous right hand [a hand of justice, of power, of victory, of salvation]."*

As God's warriors, we are more spiritually intact and aware. We know where the battle is and where the struggle is not. We understand the meaning of Ephesians 6:12 (AMP), *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood [contending only with physical opponents], but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this [present] darkness,*

against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly (supernatural) places.” We are aware that there is a lot more going on than we see on the surface. 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 (NKJV), “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.”

You are God’s warrior. Seek Him with all your being. Find your voice, begin to exercise it, and use it for His glory. Put on all the armor He has provided and stand. God created you for this time, as difficult as it may seem. Stand!

In conclusion, I promised to uncover the secret of the smile and twinkle of my 96-year-old patient. The secret is found in Psalm 92:12-15 (TPT), *“Yes! Look how you’ve made all your devoted lovers to flourish like palm trees, each one growing in victory, standing with strength! You’ve transplanted them into your heavenly courtyard, where they are thriving before you, for in your presence they will still overflow and be anointed. Even in their old age they will stay fresh, bearing luscious fruit and abiding faithfully. Listen to them! With pleasure they still proclaim: “You’re so good! You’re my beautiful strength!”*

You've never made a mistake with me."

You know you have a considerable measure of Godly grit when you can be in the declining years of your life and state with confidence and passion that, "You've never made a mistake with me."

Psalm 1:1-3 (TPT)

What delight comes to the one who follows God's ways!

He won't walk in step with the wicked,

nor share the sinner's way,

nor be found sitting in the scorner's seat.

*His passion is to remain true to the Word of "I AM,"
meditating day and night on the true revelation of light.*

He will be standing firm like a flourishing tree

planted by God's design,

deeply rooted by the brooks of bliss,

bearing fruit in every season of life.

He is never dry, never fainting,

ever blessed, ever prosperous.

The End

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