

HOW TO
CAPTURE
THOUGHT YOUR
LIFE

“Take captive every thought.”
—2 CORINTHIANS 10:5

STAN TOLER

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This Bible study is a companion book to Stan Toler's Total Quality Life: Strategies for Purposeful Living, expanded ed.

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WEEK 1

SURRENDER

RECOMMENDED READING

***Total Quality Life*, chapter 1, pages 9-17**

Have you ever wondered why the international symbol for surrender is a body holding both arms high in the air? It is because doing so opens up the part of your body that protects all vital organs, including the heart. Holding arms high makes a person completely vulnerable and dependent on the other person. By holding your arms up high, you are placing your life (or death) in the hands of someone else. There is no such thing as being partly surrendered.

Today, we begin a six-week study on total quality thought. This study is based on one of the major themes in *Total Quality Life*. The Bible teaches that the key to enjoying a quality life is to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). In other words, in order to experience total quality life, we must first learn to capture our thoughts; and the first step to learning how to capture our thoughts is completely surrendering our lives and thoughts to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

DAY 1

ROMANS 12:1-2

Paul wrote today's verses to believers, referring to them as "brothers" (v. 1). He was pleading with people who already claimed to be followers of Jesus to completely surrender their lives as "living sacrifices" (v. 1). In the days of sacrifices, animals did not give their lives halfway; they gave their lives completely, and that is the challenge here.

How can you become a living sacrifice? How can you become transformed into the image of Christ instead of being conformed to this world? Paul said it starts by renewing your mind. Another word for *renewing* is *renovation*. If you have ever remodeled a home, you know there are two parts to renovating. First is the destruction, a tearing down of the old, and second is the construction, a building up of the new.

How can you renew, remodel, or renovate your thought life? First, you have to tear out the old stuff and throw it away. This could include changing what books you read, magazines you receive in the mail, or websites you visit. Or, it could mean changing your TV and movie watching habits. The remodeling may involve listening to different music and guarding how much time you spend watching or listening to the news. Once you get rid of the old, you can begin the building process by making sure positive and godly things enter your mind and thoughts. Many negative thoughts enter our minds through the portals of our eyes and ears. Guarding what we allow to enter through those portals will significantly help the renewing process.

It's not easy to change your thought life. It's not easy to surrender. But the promise associated with complete surrender is well worth the effort. The promise is that we will know what God's will is for our lives. The promise is that we will discover meaning and purpose.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are some things entering your mind through books and media that have had a negative impact on your thought life? What can you do in the next few days as an act of worship in surrendering those things to Jesus Christ?
2. What are some steps you can take this week to allow more positive and godly things to enter your mind and thoughts?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, today I want to surrender my life, especially my thought life, to you as a living sacrifice. Lord, forgive me for allowing all the junk of this world to enter my mind. With your help right now, I want to demolish my old ways of thinking and rebuild with your ways of thinking. I want to be transformed into your image, not conformed to the world's image. At this moment, with my arms held high, I open my heart to you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 2

MARK 8:34-38

The word surrender comes from the ancient word *sur*, meaning “over” and the ancient word *rendre*, meaning “give back.” Literally, to surrender means to give back over or to give up oneself.

What does it mean to give up oneself to Jesus Christ? What does surrender to him look like?

Read today’s verses slowly and deliberately. You may want to read them out loud and more than once. Let them sink into the depths of your soul. These are truly profound and difficult words from the Master Teacher. These words also paint a realistic picture of what surrender to Jesus truly means.

Mark wrote his gospel to believers in Rome who were going through an extremely difficult time. A fire had destroyed a large part of Rome, and Emperor Nero blamed the fire, which he had started, on the Christians. Nero persecuted the small band of Christians by feeding them to wild animals and by using them as torches to light the streets of Rome at night. All of a sudden, being a follower of Jesus was dangerous and costly. There was a good chance being a Christian could cost your life.

Following Jesus meant being willing to die a painful death, like carrying your own cross to crucifixion. A person carrying his cross had already accepted his fate, like a “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). If you weren’t willing to carry your cross—if you wanted to save your life—you would lose it for eternity. But if you were willing to give up your life for the sake of Jesus, you would save it for eternity.

To make his point clear, Jesus asked two haunting questions. First, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). Then, “What can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (v. 37). *Good, gain, forfeit, exchange*—all are words used in relation to one’s financial security. God’s economy, however, is different from the economy of the world. A person’s soul is the part that outlives the physical. Our soul is eternal. Jesus was saying that if you live by the standards of the world and give in to self-preservation, you will lose what is the most valuable thing—eternity. However, if you surrender your life and all that is important to you and give your life over to Jesus, even if you suffer and die because of him, you will gain that which is the most important—eternal life. This is the great inverse of the gospel. In order to gain your life, you must give up your life, and if you keep your life, you will, in the end, lose your life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you were talking to someone who was not a Christian, how would you describe what it means to surrender to Jesus?
2. What is the great inverse of the gospel? How would you describe it in your own words?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father God, I admit that the thought of losing my life for you is not a pleasant thought. Help me to see and understand what it means to surrender my life to you every day. Help me to take up my cross daily and follow you. Lord, show me those things that I am holding onto, trying to gain some sort of profit in this world. Give me the courage to not be ashamed of you. Give me the strength to live for you, regardless of the cost. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

DAY 3

JOSHUA 1:1-9

Initially, surrendering may be an easy thing to do, especially if you are in the midst of a crisis and realize you have no other choice. But surrendering (taking up your cross) daily can become taxing. When you surrender and give control of your life to someone else, it is hard to plan tomorrow. Surrendering can be scary because your future is unknown. How do you consistently live a surrendered life in the midst of the unknown and uncertainty of day-to-day life?

Surrendering to the lordship of Jesus means submitting to what he taught, obeying the whole counsel of God. There is security in the unknown when your life is anchored on the certainty of God's Word.

Joshua's mentor, Moses, had died. Now, Joshua was the leader of the Israelites. Was he up to the task? How would he know what to do or where to turn without his dear friend and trusted adviser? How could he lead the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the Promised Land? Would the people follow him or would they rebel?

Joshua's future was uncertain. He needed assurance that God would be with him. In today's Scripture, God showed up and reminded Joshua of the promises he had made to Moses, reassuring Joshua that those promises were now his.

God then admonished Joshua to "be strong and courageous" (v. 6). His source of strength and courage was to be his complete obedience to God's Word. He was not to "turn from it to the right hand or to the left" (v. 7). He was to stay focused on God's Word and "meditate on it day and night" (v. 8).

The Hebrew word for *meditate* is interesting. The root meaning behind the word (*hagah*) is to growl or moan. The picture is of someone so deep in thought that they appear to be talking to themselves. To meditate day and night means to be so familiar with God's Word that it is never far from your thoughts, lips, and heart. It means to be passionate about reading, studying, applying, and obeying every word of God, not out of an intellectual desire to know about God, but out of an emotional desire to have a personal relationship with him.

When we are passionately connected to God's Word, we are intimately wed to Jesus, with no need to be afraid or dismayed, whatever the future may hold. As we are obedient to God's Word, we have the promise that God will be with us wherever we go.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you see as the difficulties of surrendering to Jesus daily? How can everyday life interfere with your desire to surrender?
2. Joshua's source of strength and courage was obedience to God's Word. How does obedience to God's Word give you strength and courage?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord God, thank you so much for not leaving me to figure out life on my own. Thank you for your Word.

Thank you for Jesus, the personification of your Word (John 1:1). Put within me a desire to know you passionately and intimately through reading, studying, and applying your Word. Help me not to learn to gain knowledge but to know for life-change. I love you, and I want to know you personally. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 4

PSALM 1:1-6

When people surrender, two things take place. First, they leave something behind. Surrendering involves turning away from something. On the battle field, soldiers who surrender lay their weapons down and switch allegiance from one country to another. Second, when people surrender, they also surrender to something. So, there is a turning away from and a turning to something.

When you surrender your life and thoughts to God, from and to what are you turning? Today's Scripture reading gives some insight into this question.

Surrendering to God involves leaving behind your former way of living and thinking. Before you turned to Christ, from where (and whom) did you get your counsel or advice? The answer to that question says a lot about what or who has influenced your thought life.

The psalmist used three pairs of words in verse 1 to describe where we should avoid getting advice. Notice the progression of these words. With each pair of words the intensity increases. The three word pairs are as follows: "walk . . . wicked," "stand . . . sinners," "sit . . . mockers." First we walk, then we stand, then we sit. The more time we spend listening to the wrong advice, the more negative our thoughts become, and the worse the advice gets. First, the advice comes from people described as "wicked," then they are described as "sinners," and finally they are described as "mockers." The idea is a progression from casual indifference to complete participation with people far from God.

Surrendering our lives and thoughts to God first involves a turning away from harmful advisers. Once we have turned away from harmful advisers, surrendering then involves turning to the Great Counselor, filling our minds with his thoughts.

God's wise counsel is found in his Word, and it is in his Word that we are to "delight" and "meditate" (v. 2). Yesterday, we discussed the meaning behind *meditate*, so let's turn our attention to the word *delight*. The Hebrew word is *chefetz* and means more than some spiritual, intellectual feeling. *Chafetz* is a real human emotion of heartfelt joy and even yearning. The idea is being passionate about the counsel of God because you know his advice gives joy and fulfillment.

The psalmist concluded by comparing the life of one who is passionate about God's counsel and one who follows the advice of the wicked. The former is like a strong tree that produces fruit year after year. The latter is like a husk of grain that blows away, becoming nothing of significance.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Who are some harmful advisers (or harmful advice) that you listened to in the past? What was the result of following that advice?
2. Where is it that you find delight in this world? What do you think it means to find delight in God's Word?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father God, show me where I find delight. Reveal to me what brings me joy. My desire is to be prosperous and fruitful for the things of you, not for the things of this world. Place within me a desire to learn from you and to meditate on your Word day and night. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 5

PHILIPPIANS 1:19-26

To surrender means to change alliances, and a big part of doing so is commitment. Surrendering is committing yourself to the person to whom you are surrendering. Your life is no longer yours, but God's. The apostle Paul demonstrated this whole-hearted commitment in today's Scripture reading.

Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi from a prison cell, chained to two Roman guards. Yet the theme of the letter is joy. His prayer was that even in prison and regardless of whether he lived or died, Christ would be exalted. He then made an astonishing confession that came out of a deep commitment. He said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (v. 21).

Can you make such a bold confession? Paul was so committed to Christ that he was torn between living and dying (v. 23). If he were alive today, he might have said, "I am stuck between a rock and a hard place." Paul was essentially saying, "If I live, great, because that gives me more time to be with you and to glorify Jesus. If I die, even better, because then I will be with Jesus forever." That's commitment; that's complete surrender.

How committed are you to live and die in such a way so that, through your life and death, Jesus is exalted? Have you surrendered your entire life and death to him? Have you come to the place in your life where you have realized that life is not about you but about Jesus?

How do you surrender your life completely to God? It's as easy as **ABC**:

Admit you are a sinner, and ask God to forgive you of your sins (Rom. 3:23).

Believe Jesus died for you and that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9–10).

Commit your entire life to him (Rom. 10:13).

If you are ready to surrender your life to the lordship of Jesus, pray the following prayer:

Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner, and I ask you to forgive me of my sins. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for my sins. I surrender my life to you. I confess that Jesus is Lord. I believe you raised him from the dead. And so, God, right now, I commit my entire life to you. Come into my heart and take control. Thank you for your love, mercy, and grace. Amen.

The purpose of your life is to surrender it to God. If you sincerely prayed the above prayer of faith, you have surrendered your life to God. Your life is in his hands. You are committed to glorifying him in all things—life and death, good and bad. You now have the potential to live a total quality life and that includes having total quality thoughts.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you surrendered your life to God? If so, when was that surrendering? What took place? What caused you to realize you needed to surrender? How old were you? Where were you when you surrendered? If you have not surrendered your life to God, what is holding you back?
2. This week, how can you glorify God in your life, especially your thought life?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, thank you for the promise and the hope I have in Jesus. Enable and empower me to live a life of total quality. I pray that your thoughts will become my thoughts. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

WEEK 2 DETOXIFY

RECOMMENDED READING

***Total Quality Life*, chapter 3, pages 41-46**

The human brain is an amazing creation. Just for fun, I did a Internet search on “interesting facts about the human brain” and got the following results. I can neither prove nor disprove the accuracy of what I found, but I did find some interesting “facts.” Do an Internet search yourself and see what you discover.

-Your brain makes up only 2 percent of your total body’s weight but uses 20 percent of your total body’s energy.

-While you are awake, your brain generates twenty-five watts of power. That’s enough to illuminate a light bulb.

-About 75 percent of your brain is composed of water.

-Yawning sends more oxygen to the brain, cooling the brain down, and waking it up.

-After age thirty, the brain shrinks a quarter of a percent (0.25 percent) in mass each year.

Biologically, scientists may know a lot about the brain. But how the brain thinks or where thoughts come from is still a mystery. The brain, like a computer, can be filled with junk and become bogged down; and, like a computer, the brain has to be periodically cleaned of viruses.

DAY 1

REVELATION 2:1-7

You cannot detoxify your mind until you admit you have allowed unhealthy things to enter your mind. Today's Scripture reading shows a direct tie between the words *mind* and *repent*.

The church in Ephesus was a thriving church in an active, metropolitan city. The city was home to the temple of the goddess Diana. The enormity and beauty of the temple made it one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. In the middle of this pagan and immoral environment, the church was known for its good deeds and perseverance. The church was not perfect, however. Something was wrong. Something had changed. The people had forsaken their "first love" (v. 4). The Bible doesn't specifically tell us what happened, but I imagine life had become complicated for them, and many things were competing for their hearts and minds—things not of God. Through it all, they continued to do good works, but their love for Christ faded. The solution was to "repent" (v. 5). The Greek word is *metanoeo* and means "to change one's mind." Every action is first conceived in a thought, and so repentance is when you change your actions because you have completely changed how you think.

The point is this: Before you can detoxify your mind, you first must repent for all the junk you have let enter your mind and thoughts, where it can influence your actions. Before you can experience total quality thought, you must first repent for not having total quality thought. There really is no easier way to say it than, "You have forsaken your first love. . . . Repent and do the things you did at first" (vv. 4–5).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Which comes first: thoughts or actions? Describe the ways in which you think your thoughts influence your actions. Describe the ways in which you think your actions influence your thoughts.
2. Make a list of the things for which you need to change your mind and repent. What are some specific things you can do this week to show you have truly repented?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, I need to repent. When I fail you, I am saying I know more about right and wrong than you. Forgive me of my pride that has caused me not to repent in the past. I pray that my thoughts will become your thoughts and your ways will become my ways. I thank you for forgiving me. In Jesus' name I pray.
Amen.

DAY 2

PSALM 101

Thoughts and actions are two sides of the same coin. The psalmist gives insight into this fact in our Scripture reading for today.

King David wanted to have a godly empire where justice prevailed. He knew in order to have such an empire he would have to keep himself from all wickedness. His desire was to live a life of integrity where what he said he believed (thought) was the same as how he actually behaved (action). The word *blameless* (v. 2) means “to be complete, sound, or whole.” To live a blameless life is synonymous with living a life of integrity.

It is interesting to note that after taking two verses to describe his desire to be blameless, David wrote, “I will set before my eyes no vile thing” (v. 3). He recognized the relationship between actions and the things we allow to enter our minds through what we see. Another meaning for the Hebrew word translated “vile” is “worthless.” How much time do you spend each day watching, reading, viewing, and listening to things that are absolutely worthless? Another, more extreme meaning for the same word is “wicked” or “evil.” Whether it is vile, worthless, wicked, or evil, when we allow negative things into our minds, we will have negative thoughts which lead to negative actions.

In the remainder of Psalm 101, David mentioned some of the vile things from which he wanted to disassociate himself, even if it meant not watching it or listening to it. These things included faithless deeds (v. 3), perversions (v. 4), slander (v. 5), and pride (v. 5). He then repeated his desire to guard what he allowed himself to see and pledged to stand up for what was right.

When a person goes to rehab for a chemical addiction, the first few days can be the most difficult. During that time, the body is detoxifying, ridding itself of the chemicals it has been dependent upon. Some people refer to these first few days as “drying out,” and it is not a pleasant experience to go through or a pretty sight to behold.

Likewise, if we are going to change how we think, we must first go through a drying out period. We have to allow time for our minds to detoxify, and that is not an easy thing to do because we are addicted to noises and images. The challenge for you is to detoxify your mind by going on a media fast. Over the next three days, don’t watch any television, listen to any news, read any newspapers, or listen to any music except praise music. And don’t get on the Internet except for what is necessary for work. During these three days, pray and ask God to show you all the vile, worthless, wicked, and evil things you have been allowing to enter your mind. Repent of those things, and before you get reattached to the media, memorize the first part of Psalm 101:3.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How would you define the word *integrity*? In what ways was King David promoting integrity in Psalm 101?
2. Are you willing to take a media fast for the next three days? From what parts of the media are you going to fast? What do you expect to happen as you fast?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, my desire is to live a life of integrity. In the past, I have failed to do so, but I am beginning to understand that I cannot live a life of integrity while, at the same time, allowing worthless things to enter my mind through my eyes and ears. Over the next three days, I am committing myself to take a media fast.

I pray for strength and courage and also for wisdom and discernment as you show me the areas of my life that are harming my thoughts. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 3

PSALM 51

Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of action. It is admitting that what you thought about something was wrong and what God thought about that same something was right. Repentance is agreeing with God.

Before King David wrote Psalm 101, he wrote Psalm 51. Early in his reign as king, David had an affair with Bathsheba. As a king, he thought he could do no wrong; he thought he was above the rules. But after he was confronted about his sin by the prophet Nathan, he repented—he changed his mind and actions. Today’s Scripture reading is his prayer of confession, repentance, and forgiveness. The psalm can be divided into five parts.

In the first part of his psalm, David expressed his deep sorrow for what he had done (vv. 1–2). Instead of making excuses, David asked for mercy, not because he deserved it, but because of God’s “unfailing love” and “great compassion” (v. 1).

Next, David made a real confession of his sin (vv. 3–6). He said his sin never left his mind, and he accurately stated that all sin is ultimately against God. Something is a sin, not because God arbitrarily appointed it as sinful, but because the act violates the very nature of God in whose image all humanity was created. Furthermore, David agreed with God that what he did was wrong and that God was (and is) right.

Third, David changed his actions, forsaking his sin (vv. 7–9). The phrase “cleanse me with hyssop” (v. 7) was a reference to a ceremonial cleansing. The hyssop plant had a cluster of yellow flowers that was used symbolically to make a sacrifice pure by dipping the end of the flower in water, or some type of anointing oil, and sprinkling the sacrifice. This ceremonial cleansing implied a change in action and conduct by the participant.

Following the confession, repentance, and forgiveness came complete restoration with God (vv. 10–12). David’s sin had caused him to feel alienated from God, but his joy had been restored. The simple truth is that sin always separates. Sin separates us from God and from each other.

Finally, God’s incredible mercy, forgiveness, and restoration gave David the desire to tell others about God’s grace (vv. 13–19). David summarized the repentance process by saying, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (v. 17). Once you have been forgiven and restored, why would you not want to share that good news with other people?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Is there a sin that you need to repent of to God? Are you truly sorrowful about that sin?
2. What do you think it means to say that ultimately all sin is a sin against God?
3. How would you describe the mercy, grace, forgiveness, and restoration of God to someone who is seeking him?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

O God, you are a great and awesome God. Forgive me for all my sins. Restore to me the joy that only comes from being in a right relationship with you. Lord, I repent of all my transgressions. Thank you for your love, grace, and mercy. Thank you for forgiving me and for restoring me to yourself. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

DAY 4

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9

I have a friend who is a news junkie. He dearly loves news talk shows, listening to and reading both conservatives and liberals. He justifies his addiction by convincing himself that knowing what is going on in the world and knowing all sides to the story makes him a better leader. His wife doesn't understand this infatuation. From her perspective, all these talking heads do is argue—loudly.

A few years ago, my friend, who is usually optimistic, went through a period of time when he was in a foul mood, but he couldn't understand why. His wife suggested it was because he watched too much news. Her theory was that filling his mind with all the arguing and negativity was affecting him. My friend decided to put her theory to the test and went on a news fast for several days. During that time, instead of listening to talk shows on the radio, he listened to worship music, and instead of watching the news at night, he read or watched something more lighthearted. And you know what? In just a few days, he told me that his attitude and outlook about things changed completely! In fact, he once again became a more pleasant person to be around.

There is something to be said about the detoxification of our minds, filling our thoughts with positive things and images. The apostle Paul knew this truth, and from a Roman prison, he told his readers that the secret to being joyful in all situations was (and still is) to guard your thoughts.

Paul commanded us to rejoice, regardless of the situation we are facing; then he told us not to worry about things. Easier said than done, but instead of worrying, Paul told us to pray and be thankful. As we rejoice and pray, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). Let that promise sink in. Is there anyone you know who could not benefit from peace that is above comprehension? The peace God wants to give you is that kind of peace.

The key to experiencing indescribable peace is your thought life. The quickest way to lose God's peace is to allow junk to enter your life through what you see, hear, read, or watch. Instead of these things, Paul admonishes us to think about things that are “true . . . noble . . . right . . . pure . . . lovely . . . admirable . . . excellent or praiseworthy” (v. 8). These eight words serve as the filter through which we should run all forms of media we allow ourselves to absorb. How does that list stack up to the music you listen to, the books you read, the movies you watch, or the Internet sites you visit? Could the reason you don't seem to be at peace with God or with anyone else be caused by what you have allowed to enter your mind? The solution is mental detoxification, with the prescribed follow-up care of filling your mind with things that are positive and godly.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways do you think rejoicing instead of complaining and praying instead of worrying would result in experiencing God's indescribable peace?
2. How does your media intake compare with the eight things Paul tells us to think about? Make a list of your favorite television shows, music artists, and other entertainment choices. Think through their influence on your thought life compared to Paul's list.

PRAYER FOR TODAY

My Father, forgive me for the times when I have not been thankful or joyful. Thank you for showing me that there is a direct relationship between my peace with you and what I am allowing to infiltrate my mind. Help me to only think about things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. Help me to change my attitude by changing my thoughts. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 5

ROMANS 8:1-11

Repentance has been a big focus this week because of the relationship between a person's thoughts and actions. Going through a mental detox allows you to see clearly just how much junk you have permitted to infiltrate your mind. Maybe you have been convicted already and have repented. Often, however, even after people repent, feelings of guilt still arise. Today's Scripture reading deals with these misplaced feelings of guilt.

Have you repented? If you have, then Paul's words are for you: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (v. 1). Let that sink in. Because of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, when you repent, God forgives. If you still feel guilty, it is not God making you feel guilty. It could be yourself making you feel guilty, it could be someone else, or it could be Satan. Regardless, if you have repented, you are no longer condemned. Embrace your forgiveness because it cost Jesus his life.

According to Paul, there are two types of people in the world: those who live by the sinful nature and those who live by the Spirit. A key difference between the two is the focus of their minds. People living by their sinful nature have their minds focused on what their nature wants to do—"If it feels good, do it." People controlled by the Spirit "have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (v. 5). Once again, thoughts and actions go together. Right thinking leads to right acting which results in "life and peace" (v. 6). Wrong thinking leads to wrong acting which results in "death" (v. 6).

The moment you place your faith in Jesus Christ is when God's Spirit lives in you. Right then, you have the ability not to live according to your own selfish desires but to live according to the Spirit's desires. You have the ability to live by the Spirit, but living by the Spirit isn't natural. You have to daily submit to the Spirit and guard your mind, staying focused on God and his desires, not on your own natural desires.

It is common for Christians to say they have asked Jesus into their hearts. What needs to be just as common is for Christians to say they have asked the Holy Spirit into their minds to control their thoughts and actions. Have you done so?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you think it means to say that in Jesus Christ, there is "now no condemnation" (v. 1)? If people believe this, how would that belief affect how they live each day?
2. What do you think it means to be sanctified and controlled by the Spirit? In what ways have you allowed the Spirit to control your life, especially your thought life?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, I praise you because in Jesus, I am no longer condemned for my sins. You have set me free. Sanctify me by your presence and power. Cleanse my heart and fill me with your Holy Spirit. I want to submit my life, mind, and thoughts to your complete control. I want to live my life focused on your thoughts and actions. I don't want to waste my time living by my selfish desires. I now claim the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in my life. In the strong and powerful name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

WEEK 3 REALIGN

RECOMMENDED READING *Total Quality Life*, chapter 3, pages 46-51

I have a friend who loves to keep a vehicle for as long as possible. His goal is to see how many miles he can put on a car. His philosophy is to “drive it until the wheels fall off.” Therefore, he is a firm believer in the importance of changing the oil every three thousand miles, rotating the tires every oil change, and balancing and realigning the tires regularly. For sure, consistent maintenance—and taking care of the little things—goes a long way in keeping his vehicle (with over two hundred thousand miles) on the road.

Likewise, as I pursue total quality thought, I need to make sure I consistently take time to realign myself to the thoughts and ways of God. Life is full of bumps and potholes that can knock you off course. Realignment is a necessity.

DAY 1

PROVERBS 1:1-7

The book of Proverbs is full of advice for living a total quality life. The key verse in the whole book is 1:7. To “fear . . . the LORD” means to have a healthy reverence and respect for who he is. Fearing the Lord is admitting he is God and you are not. A healthy fear of the Lord keeps things in perspective, opening the door to living a life of significance. The fear of the Lord, after all, is the “beginning of knowledge” (v. 7).

Knowledge and wisdom go together. Both refer to the ability to make right choices at the opportune time. People who are guided by knowledge and wisdom stand up for justice and equity. These people live with honor, recognizing there is Someone to whom they will give an account one day.

A person striving to live a life of significance will fear the Lord and practice discipline. You can’t be a disciple without discipline. It takes a tremendous amount of fortitude to constantly keep your priorities aligned. Remember, however, for the disciple of Christ, discipline is not self-control but Holy Spirit control.

A third characteristic of a person who fears the Lord and desires to live a significant life, is integrity. This is seen in the word *prudent* (v. 3) and is defined as “doing what is right and just and fair” (v. 3).

The foundation for living total quality life—a significant life—is to fear the Lord. Characteristics of a person striving to live significantly are honor, discipline, and integrity. How does your life line up with those characteristics? Is it time for realignment?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you think it means to fear the Lord? How would you describe the fear of the Lord to someone else?
2. In your own words, based on today’s reading, write a definition of honor, discipline, and integrity. How would you explain those words to someone else?
3. How does your life align with fearing the Lord and living a life of honor, discipline and integrity? What changes do you need to make to realign yourself?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, thank you so much for the book of Proverbs. Teach me even more what it means to fear you, and help me understand how fearing you keeps all of life in perspective. My desire is to live a life of significance. My desire is to be a person of honor, discipline, and integrity. I pray for your Spirit to dwell in me and give me the strength and courage to live such a life for your honor and glory. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

DAY 2

MATTHEW 22:34-40

If you were to list your top five priorities, what would they be? If you are like many people, your list might look something like this: (1) God, (2) family, (3) church, (4) job, and (5) self.

Now, here is the problem with listing your priorities. Obviously, God should be first, but how will you know when you have sufficiently satisfied that priority so you can move to the next one? When can you put a check mark by “God” so you can move on to “family”? If you were to try to work through your list of priorities in order, you would be hard pressed to get to number two, much less numbers three, four, and five.

So what should we do? How do we keep track of our priorities so we can keep ourselves aligned? In today’s Scripture reading, Jesus tells us exactly what our priorities should be and how we can keep them.

In order to completely understand Jesus’ words, we need to go back and read Matthew 22:15–33. The religious leaders of the day were trying to trap Jesus by asking him tricky questions. They were like those journalists who don’t report the story but look for a moment that could be used to bias public opinion. First, the Pharisees went up against Jesus and asked him questions about paying taxes. Jesus answered them wisely, so they momentarily gave up.

Next, the Sadducees tried to corner him with a question about the resurrection, in which they did not believe. Jesus astonished them with his answer.

Feeling emboldened, the Pharisees jumped back into the exchange and asked the trickiest question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (v. 36). The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were divided over the issue of which great historical rabbi should be followed. One rabbi, Shammai, was more conservative in his teachings. Another rabbi, Hillel, was more liberal. If Jesus wasn’t careful in his answer, he would be associated with one party or the other, alienating himself from the other group.

Jesus’ answer was short, profound, and to the point. His answer also helps us in aligning our priorities. Simply put, Jesus said, “Love God and love others; that’s all the priorities you need, and you need to do them both at the same time all the time” (see vv. 37–40).

Visualize your priorities not as a list, but as a circle of relationships with God in the center. I am to be the type of husband and father that loves God with all my heart, soul, and mind. When I am at work or church, I am to be the type of person that loves God supremely. How do I demonstrate my love for God? I do so by loving others as I love myself. So, I love God by loving others, and if everything I do from the time I get up till the time I go to bed is motivated by my love for God and love for others, I will fulfill all God requires of me. I will, by the very nature of loving God and loving others, keep myself aligned to proper priorities. I will, by default, keep all the commandments, and so will you.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you tried to keep a list of priorities? What were the difficulties you experienced in trying to keep a list? How do you think keeping God at the center of all you do and loving others would be a better way of keeping priorities?
2. What can you do this week to align your priorities to loving God supremely and loving others unconditionally?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, today I quit trying to please you by keeping a list of priorities. Instead, I commit myself to loving you with all that I am. I am placing you in the center of my family life, church life, work life, and recreational life. I am asking for your help to demonstrate my love for you by loving others. My prayer is

that in every moment of every day my thoughts and actions will be motivated by love for you and love for others. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 3

GALATIANS 5:16-26

It has been wisely noted there are two types of people in the world: those who categorize people into two types of groups and those who don't. The apostle Paul was in that first group. Paul categorized people into those who live by the sinful nature and those who live by the Spirit. Since every action is first a thought, I need to remind myself of the importance of keeping my thoughts on Jesus. A few days ago, we discussed that the difference between those who live by the sinful nature and those who live by the Spirit is the focus of their minds.

As a follower of Jesus, I am not exempt from the struggle between gratifying my sinful desire and gratifying the Spirit. In fact, as a disciple, the battle increases even more. The key is to be "led by the Spirit" (v. 18). The word *led* in this context signifies freely giving yourself up to be led. There is no forced coercion implied. The only way to overcome sinful desires is to willingly submit to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. If you have willfully submitted, there will be a stark contrast between the character of your life and the person who has not willfully submitted.

Paul provided a list of ten characteristics of a person controlled by the sinful nature, ending with the phrase "and the like" (v. 21), to indicate that his list was not exhaustive. Most of the characteristics are self-explanatory, but three need an additional comment. At the root of the word *debauchery* (v. 19, *aselgeia*) is the word *license*. The idea is of an individual not just doing wrong, but feeling like they have the right to do wrong. Jude captures this idea when he translates the word as "license for immorality" (Jude 4). In other places in the New Testament, the word is translated "sensuality" (Eph. 4:19) and "shameful ways" (2 Pet. 2:2). The Greek word translated "witchcraft" (Gal. 5:20) is *pharmakeia* and is the origin of our word *pharmacy*, and drug use may be implied. Also, in this context, a better word than "orgies" (*komoi*) is probably *carousing*. When this word is tied to drunkenness, it implies all the trouble and negative things that go with a group of people who have had too much to drink.

In contrast to the list of characteristics of a person controlled by the sinful nature, Paul listed nine characteristics (referring to them as "fruit," Gal. 5:23) of a person who is controlled by the Spirit. Each characteristic is not to be understood as individual fruit, but together they form a whole, like a cluster of grapes, or a banner crop. Making this distinction is important because disciples should not be content to have most of these characteristics; rather, all of them, at one level or another, will characterize a disciple who is allowing the Holy Spirit to take control. Since these characteristics come from the Holy Spirit, from the inside out, you cannot attain them by obeying a list of dos and don'ts. This fruit is only produced through the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul concluded with a powerful point: As a disciple of Jesus Christ, you are aware that the Holy Spirit has killed the sinful nature in your life. It is now time for you to become alive in the Spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways do you still struggle between pleasing God and pleasing your natural desires? How do you handle this struggle?
2. Is your behavior more similar to the "acts of the sinful nature" (v. 19) or to the "fruit of the Spirit" (v. 22)? Why did you answer the way you did?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, I pray for strength to get out of my own way and allow your Spirit to control my life. I pray for the fruit of the Spirit to be manifested in and through me. Thank you for reminding me that, since I am a

follower of Jesus, you have destroyed the sinful nature and I now have the power and ability to live life according to the Spirit. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.

DAY 4

EPHESIANS 4:25-32

Getting your priorities straight and keeping them aligned is no easy task. The temptation is to make a list of dos and don'ts, but that doesn't always work and can lead to legalism and hypocrisy. However, we do find these lists in the Bible. Paul was especially good at creating such lists. You can keep yourself aligned to the priorities of God by regularly comparing your life with these lists, without falling into the ditch of license (doing whatever you want because you know you're forgiven by God's grace) or legalism (thinking rules and regulations are what God requires instead of faith and obedience to Jesus Christ). These lists should serve as boundaries, defining the freedom you have in Christ, not as chains keeping you in bondage.

In today's Scripture reading, the apostle Paul gives us another list of things to do and not do in order to stay aligned in our thinking and acting. He began by exhorting Christians to speak truthfully to one another, without anger. How many times have you tried to speak the truth to someone, and the result was one or both of you losing your temper and saying things you wish you had not said? When such a situation does occur, resolve the matter quickly so that bitterness will not begin to grow. It might be easier to avoid conflict, but avoidance usually leads to even greater conflict.

Discernment is the secret to knowing when to say something and when not to say something (even when it is the truth). When you feel led to speak and when emotions start to get raw, don't "let any unwholesome talk come out of your [mouth], but only what is helpful for building others up" (v. 29). "Unwholesome talk" refers not only to profanity, but also to anything we could say that would not help the situation. It is worthless speech. The adage is true: If you don't have anything good to say—or something that will benefit the situation— don't say anything. Following Paul's advice requires that you think before you speak.

Speaking before thinking can exacerbate the situation. Apparently, something like this had happened in the church at Ephesus, so Paul admonished the people to get rid of bitterness and all the negative thoughts and actions that follow (v. 31). How much better would all of our relationships be if we were simply kind and compassionate to each other, loving and forgiving each other in the same way that Jesus loves and forgives us (v. 32)?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How can you keep a list of priorities and dos and don'ts to stay aligned with those priorities without becoming legalistic and hypocritical? Has there been a time in your life when you were more interested in keeping a list than in actually following God? How can you avoid this kind of legalism in the future?
2. What are the dangers of not thinking before you speak? What are the benefits of thinking before you speak?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father God, I pray for discernment to know what to say and how to say it. I also pray for discernment to know when not to say anything. I pray my life, thoughts, and actions will be characterized by kindness, compassion, love, and forgiveness. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 5

JAMES 1:19-27

The English word *hypocrite* comes from a Greek word that refers to an actor on a stage, who takes on the role of another person. While an actress is acting, in a sense, she is not being true to herself but to her character. In a similar way, a hypocrite is a person who plays a role, who says one thing in public and does another in private. James explained that hypocrisy starts when we hear without doing.

The first part of today's Scripture sounds similar to what Paul wrote in yesterday's reading. James, though, took things in a different direction when he said, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (v. 22). First, we hear God's Word, and then we process what we have heard to decide if we are going to act on it or not. If we don't act on it, then we are hypocrites; we are playing like we are followers of God, but our inaction proves otherwise. Listening without doing is self-deception. It's like looking in the mirror, seeing that your hair needs combing but then doing nothing to fix it, convincing yourself that your hair looks fine. God's Word, like a mirror, shows us the flaws in our lives and what to do to correct those flaws. When we listen and do (obey), we are blessed. When we listen and do not do (disobey), we are dishonest with God, ourselves, and other people (vv. 23–25).

James then summarized what it means to truly be a disciple of God. True disciples control what they say and how they say it, and they take care of the weakest members of society. James wrote, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (v. 27). Our job as Christians is to stand up for what is right, speak out for those who have no voice, and stay pure from the thoughts and ways of the world (v. 27).

Now that you have heard the Word of God, what are you going to do?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How would you define *hypocrisy*? How can Christians avoid hypocrisy in following Christ?
2. James compares listening without doing to a person looking in a mirror and then doing nothing about what they see. What does it take for Christians to move beyond knowledge to action?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, thank you so much for what I have read and learned this week. I pray for your help to get my priorities in line with your Word and ways, and then to keep myself aligned with those priorities. Forgive me for my past hypocrisy. Help me to be the person you want me to be. Help me to not just listen to your Word but to do what it says. My prayer is for transformation. My prayer is to be recreated into the image of Jesus Christ. It is in his name that I pray. Amen.

WEEK 4 REINFORCE

RECOMMENDED READING *Total Quality Life*, chapter 7, pages 99-105

In *Total Quality Life*, the title for chapter 7 is “Discipline: Daily Decisions That Reinforce Quality.” It begins with the following quote: “Your daily actions determine the course of your life as surely as the moon determines the tides. You must discipline your behavior to achieve a life of quality” (p. 99).

I have a friend who is a scuba diver. His children scuba dive with him. He loves to dive the jetties in the Florida panhandle and plans his annual vacations around what time of day high tide occurs. He says that high tide is the best time to shore dive, and that it works well if high tide is mid-morning, around 10:00. If you are a scuba diver, you will probably find him at Panama City Beach, at St. Andrew’s State Park at 11:17 a.m. on June 2, 2030. He knows when high tide is, twenty years away, because the moon is predictable. Likewise, when you discipline your thoughts, you discipline your life. And when you discipline your life, you can predict how you will respond in certain situations. An undisciplined life, on the other hand, results in chaos.

Reinforce your behavior by disciplining your thoughts so you can achieve total quality life.

DAY 1

1 TIMOTHY 4:6-10

Over the past twelve months, have you purchased a piece of exercise equipment, joined a health club, or started walking or dieting? It is important to take care of yourself physically, but more important is to take care of yourself spiritually. Spiritual fitness requires daily decisions and discipline.

Timothy was a young pastor whom Paul was mentoring. Paul wanted Timothy to know that while caring for other people's spiritual welfare was an important job of the pastor, Timothy's primary responsibility was to care for himself spiritually. Paul exhorted, "train yourself to be godly" (v. 7). Having a total quality thought life doesn't just happen. Being a godly person doesn't just happen any more than staying in good physical condition just happens. The Greek word translated "train" (*gumnazo*) is where we get the English word *gymnasium*. Just as it takes a daily commitment to get up and go to the gym to exercise, so it takes a daily commitment to live a godly life.

Your commitment to living a godly life is reinforced through studying God's Word (v. 6) and not filling your mind with things that have no value (v. 7). Training yourself to be godly is not easy. It requires considerable discipline and self-control. But the results are well worth it. Physically, even the healthiest individual dies. No one has ever said, "He looks healthy," to a person lying in a casket. "But godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come" (v. 8).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does the time, money, and energy you spend on your physical health compare to what you invest in your spiritual health? How do you need to adjust your priorities to maintain both your physical and spiritual health?
2. What are some things you can do this week to "train yourself to be godly" (v. 7)?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear Father, thank you for your Word. Thank you for caring for me. I pray you will give me the strength and ability to live a godly life. Help me to discipline myself for godliness. Help me to reinforce my commitment to you each day. I love you, and I want to be the best I can be physically and spiritually for you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 2

EPHESIANS 5:22-33

Chapter 7 of *Total Quality Life* discusses auditing your beliefs. Doing so “frees your mind. . . . An audit is a methodical examination and review” (p. 100). Try auditing your faith over the next four days: find out what you really believe about faith, marriage, relationships, career, and future. How do your beliefs in these areas reinforce your commitment to quality thought, and how do they line up with God’s Word?

Today’s Scripture reading addresses the relationship between a husband and wife. If you are not married or anticipating marriage, still read carefully, remembering that this passage also speaks of the relationship between Christ and the church.

The first part of today’s reading speaks to wives about their husbands. Paul only wrote two verses to describe a wife’s responsibility to her husband, but these two verses can cause strife when not properly understood. The controversy surrounds the word *submit* in verse 22. Are wives really supposed to submit to their husbands? Well, the short answer is yes. Let me explain.

The submission of a wife to her husband is more a question of operation than authority. A wife is equal to her husband in all things. In fact, in verse 21, Paul admonishes us to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” But in order for there to be unity and peace in the home, one spouse has to yield to the other. Having been married for thirty-seven years, I am quite aware of the importance of both spouses understanding and practicing the discipline of yielding. In fact, true biblical submission, then, does not mean the wife becomes a servant. Rather, it means that both husband and wife are mutually submissive. While Paul makes the case for role fulfillment in marriage, it is through this type of submitting, or yielding, that the wife shows respect to her husband. Likewise the husband shows respect to the wife by through love and mutual submission (v. 33).

It should go without saying that the wife should meet the needs of her husband and that the husband should return her love. He is to meet the needs of his wife just like he would meet his own needs, even placing her needs above his own. It is a high calling for a man to love his wife as Christ loved the church. Jesus protected the church, defended the church, nourished the church, and was never derogatory toward the church, and that is the way a husband should treat his wife. In fact, Jesus died for the church. Thus the question, how does your love for your spouse compare to Christ’s love for the church?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Auditing your beliefs “frees your mind” (p. 100). Do you agree or disagree? How does it free your mind?
2. How would you explain biblical submission to those contemplating marriage? Also, how does being mutually submissive to one another show respect toward your spouse?
3. How does the love you have for your spouse compare to the love Jesus had for the church?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, I pray for wisdom and insight as I do an audit of my beliefs this week. Show me the areas in my life that need work. I pray for your Holy Spirit to guide and help me reinforce my commitment to you by how I live my life in the key areas of marriage, children, relationships, and career. I want to be the person you want me to be. My desire is to live total quality life. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

DAY 3

DEUTERONOMY 6:1-9

If you're like most people, you have a drawer somewhere in your house that is full of owner's manuals of things you've purchased over the years. Maybe you have one for your TV, refrigerator, microwave, and any number of other things.

Parents often wish that someone had given them an owner's manual for their children. But look in the kitchen drawer, and you probably won't find one.

If there were an owner's manual to being a parent, it would be found in Deuteronomy 6:1–9. This passage is known as the *shema* in Judaism. The word *shema* means “hear” and is used twice in these verses (vv. 3–4). Deuteronomy 6:4 is the basic confession of faith for a Jewish family and is the foundation of what parents are to teach their children. A conservative Jewish family would recite these verses every morning and evening, especially verse 4.

If these verses were written as an owner's manual for raising children, the first instruction might be to have a stated goal for parenting. No child is an accident. God has a purpose for every newborn baby, but too many parents have no plan for how they are going to raise that child and what they are going to teach him or her. The ultimate goal of parenting is to teach your children about God and to pass down your biblical faith to the next generation.

But you cannot pass down a faith you do not have, and so the second instruction Deuteronomy gives us as parents is to build our own relationship with God. As a parent, do you love God with all your heart, soul, and strength (v. 5)? Is your relationship with God the most important relationship you have?

The third instruction is to practice what you preach (v. 6). As a parent, your actions are caught more than they are taught. If you want your children to be moral, you must be moral. If you want your children to be honest, you must be honest. If you want your children to put God first in everything, you must put God first in everything.

The final instruction is to teach your children about God over and over again. Did you notice the repetition given in verses 7–9? Never miss an opportunity to talk to your kids about God—how he has answered prayers and how he has provided for you and your family. Talking about God should be as natural in your home as talking about the weather, sports, or homework.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you were to write a purpose statement for parenting, what are some of the things you would include?
2. When was the last time you talked to your children about God? How did it go? What did you say? How did they receive what you said?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, you are the perfect parent. You know my strengths and weaknesses as a parent. I pray for wisdom, strength, and discernment to be the parent you want me to be. Thank you for my children. I recognize that each of them is a gift from you. Help me to raise them in a way that is pleasing to you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 4

ROMANS 15:14-16:27

Life is all about relationships: our relationship with God, our relationships with our spouse and children, and our relationships with everyone else. In fact, the only thing you can take to heaven with you is other people. It is impossible to live a life of quality without friends who can reinforce what you believe and who can help you think and work through life's difficulties.

In today's Scripture reading, Paul—who was a master at building relationships—was finishing his letter to the church in Rome and trying to not leave anything out of all the things he was hoping to say. In the final chapter, he mentioned thirty-seven friends by name. Paul was a people person, and his friends came from all walks of life. From his example, we learn what it means to be a true friend.

Time and space will not permit us to look at all thirty-seven people mentioned here, only a few. There was a woman named Phoebe (16:1). More than likely, Phoebe carried the letter from Paul to the church. She was described as a true servant of the church. In total, Paul mentioned nine women in chapter sixteen.

Other friends of Paul included a married couple: Andronicus and Junias (v. 7). They had served the Lord faithfully and were even imprisoned with Paul on one occasion. Then there was a guy named Rufus (v. 13). It is probable that Rufus was the son of the man who carried Jesus' cross to Golgotha (see Mark 15:21), and as a young boy, Rufus witnessed the crucifixion. Next, a man named Gaius is mentioned (Rom. 16:23). Gaius was a wealthy businessman who opened his home as a place for the church to meet. Erastus (v. 24), another of Paul's friends, was the "city's director of public works."

At the other end of the spectrum from Erastus and Gaius were Tertius (v. 22) and Quartus (v. 24). These two men had no names because they were born as slaves. Instead, they had numbers: Tertius means "three," and Quartus means "four." These men were at the bottom of society's stratification system, but Paul placed them on the same level as a rich man and a public official.

Paul had a variety of friends. Some were rich; others were poor. His friends crossed racial, ethnic, and gender barriers. Some were married, while others were single. Paul built relationships with everyone, without being prejudiced. We can learn a lot from how and with whom he built relationships. Most importantly, Paul helped his friends grow in their faith in Jesus, and his friends helped him grow in his faith. He and his friends reinforced what they believed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What kind of friends do you attract? How varied are your friends? What do you think are some key traits of a good friend?
2. How do you build relationships with other people? What do you look for in a friend? Do you discriminate or show prejudice?
3. What can you do this week to be a better friend to someone who really needs a friend?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for being a true friend to me. Thank you for loving me and accepting me unconditionally. Help me love and accept others in that same way. Thank you for my friends and for those who reinforce my beliefs in you. I pray I will be the type of friend you want me to be. Teach me what it means to be a true friend. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 5

COLOSSIANS 3:19-4:1

How has your belief audit gone this week? Have you been challenged and convicted? Have you been given things to think about? Hopefully it has helped and you have learned a lot about yourself and your beliefs toward your spouse, children, and friends. We end this week's study by looking at your beliefs about work and career.

Have you ever wondered why God created work? Adam and Eve worked in the garden before they sinned, and the book of Revelation teaches that we will have some type of work in eternity. Work is not a result of sin; rather, not enjoying work is a result of sin. Why does God desire for us to do work? What is its purpose?

God created work to serve three purposes. First, it gives a person a sense of dignity, self-worth, and identity. Second, work teaches a person responsibility. Third, work gives a person a sense of accomplishment. It is precisely because work was meant to fulfill these three needs that when work is not going well, or when we are unhappy and frustrated at work, we may feel like a failure.

The first few verses of today's reading serve as a review of what you have already read and learned this week. Paul exhorted wives to submit (see day 2), husbands to love (see day 2), children to obey (see day 3), and fathers to encourage instead of discourage (see day 3). Paul then turned his attention to work and career issues.

Paul first mentioned slaves and masters. In our society, we rarely think in terms of slaves and masters, but we do have employees and employers. Looking at these verses through those lenses, Paul told employees to obey their employers, not just when they are watching or only to get a good review and raise, but because it is the right thing to do and demonstrates their reverence to God. To bring home his point even more emphatically, Paul said that whatever it is we do for a job or career, we should do our very best, as if God were our boss.

If you think of your job or career as merely "working . . . for men" (v. 23), you will probably become angry when you are overlooked for a promotion or depressed and dissatisfied when things don't go your way. If, however, you look at your job or career as "working for the Lord" (v. 23), you know that ultimately he is in charge; you will be grateful, your productivity will increase, and you will be more diligent in all you do.

If you are an employer, Paul says you still have a boss in heaven who is watching, and so you need to treat your employees "right and fair" (v. 1). Pretty sound career advice, don't you think?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Of the three reasons God created work, which one do you think is the most important? Why?
2. How would you explain to someone else the benefits of working a job for the Lord instead of men? How would this thinking affect your approach to work?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, thank you for all you have taught me through my belief audit. I pray I can take all I have learned and put it into practice. Help me to be a better person in all the areas discussed this week. I love you with all my heart, soul, and strength. My desire is to give all of myself, including my thoughts, to you. I pray you will make me the person you want me to be. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

WEEK 5

PRAY

RECOMMENDED READING

***Total Quality Life*, chapter 7, pages 105-111**

Someone I know started the habit as a child of singing “Jesus Loves Me” when he could not sleep or if he woke up because something frightened him. He would sing the song over and over again until he fell back to sleep. As an adult, he says he still does this. Something about that simple prayer in song brings peace.

Earlier in this study, we read Philippians 4:6–7, but it is worth quoting again: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” As we take everything to God in prayer, he protects our hearts and minds. What an incredible promise! Total quality thought, which equals total quality life, begins and ends with prayer.

DAY 1

MATTHEW 6:9-15

There is no better place to start a study about prayer than with the Lord's Prayer. Jesus' model prayer came in the middle of his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). There are seven petitions in Jesus' prayer. The first three petitions are about God, and the last four are about ourselves.

In the verses leading up to the Lord's Prayer, Jesus condemned the religious people for how they prayed. It seems as if their prayers were more about themselves than they were about God. Jesus' point is simple: prayer is talking to God, not showing off to others. Prayer is about communicating with the Almighty, not your reputation among your friends (see Matt. 6:5–8).

After criticizing improper prayer, Jesus said, "This then, is how you should pray" (v. 9). Even though prayer is talking to the Creator of the universe, he is still a personal God, whom we can call "Our Father" (v. 9). The word *hallowed* means "to pronounce holy." Jesus essentially said, "Father, even though you are my Dad, my desire is for people everywhere to know and worship you because you are holy." At the heart of all our prayers should be a missionary desire to spread the name of God throughout all the earth.

Jesus came into the world announcing that God's kingdom is here, and so, the petition for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven is a petition for the kingdom of God to take over every aspect of our society. God's kingdom is already here; now may his kingdom rule over earth like it does in heaven.

God's kingdom on earth is seen by how the citizens of his kingdom live. Are we satisfied with the basic necessities of life, or do we follow materialism like the citizens of this world (v. 11)? Do we forgive those who have wronged us, or do we seek to get even (v. 12)? Do we strive to overcome temptations and run from evil, or do we give in to our natural desires and embrace the evil that is around us? Are we subjects of God, or do we follow the ways of Satan (v. 13)?

The only way people know God's kingdom is here and that it is preferable to the kingdom of this world is by watching and observing the lives of people who claim to be citizens of God's kingdom.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How would you define prayer to someone who doesn't believe in it? How would you explain that prayer is not talking to yourself but to God?
2. In what ways has prayer benefited you?
3. Jesus taught us that our prayer should be to make God's name known everywhere and to bring his kingdom into existence by how we live our lives. In what ways does your life answer that prayer? How has your life demonstrated the kingdom of God to others?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

My Father, you are in heaven, but you care about what happens on earth. You are holy, and my prayer is that your name would be known and honored all over the world. I pray that your kingdom would take over every aspect of my life, and for your will to be done here and now, as it is done in heaven. I look to you to meet my needs, and I pray I will learn to be content with the basic necessities of life. Help me to forgive those who have wronged me in the same way that you have forgiven me, and give me the strength to overcome temptations and stay away from evil. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 2

1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-24

Prayer is the easiest thing in the world to do. Yet, it is the hardest thing to do consistently. It is difficult to pray when you feel like your prayers are not going anywhere or when it seems God isn't listening because there are no answers. Sometimes it takes a Herculean effort to say the simplest prayer. Prayer is essential if you desire to keep your mind focused on the things of God.

The Scripture verses today are Paul's final remarks to the church in Thessalonica. In most of his letters, Paul used his final remarks as a catch-all, trying to say everything he wanted to say, but had not yet said, in as few words as possible. In these final remarks, he gave advice on many different issues. Among other things, he challenged the people to respect the leaders of the church who were working on their behalf (vv. 12–13). He encouraged them to have unity and be patient and kind to one another (vv. 13–15). He then told them to “be joyful always” (v. 16)—not some of the time or only when things were going their way, but to always maintain an attitude of rejoicing.

And then, right in the middle of this list of things to do to help you live a quality life, he said, “pray continually” (v. 17). In other words, never stop praying or being in an attitude of prayer. Always recognize that God is with you, and at any moment of any day, you can pray about anything. This means there is no right or wrong way to pray. There are no particular words you are supposed to say or not say, and there is no particular way you are supposed to stand or kneel or hold your hands or close your eyes. Another word for *continually*, and a word that better captures what Paul means, is *incessantly*. Pray with resolve, passion, and determination. Pray as if everything depends on that prayer. Don't ever stop praying.

Would you love nothing more than to have that kind of prayer life? Do you? Do you doubt if you can ever have it? We can never accomplish that type of prayer life on our own, but we can through the power of God. Paul wrote, “The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it” (v. 24). Prayer is simply talking to God, and not only does God want you to talk to him, he gives you the words to say and the ability to pray incessantly. What a great promise!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Has there ever been a time when you felt like your prayers were ineffective? What were the reasons for those feelings? What were you going through? How did you overcome those feelings?
2. In what ways do you think you can pray incessantly and continually this week?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, forgive me for not praying as consistently as I should. Forgive me for making prayer harder than it really is. I ask that you will teach me to pray, and pray relentlessly. May I never get tired or give up on praying. Thank you for loving me enough to want me to come to you for all things at all times in prayer. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 3

ROMANS 11:33-36

Look around and note five things that have the color blue in them. Then, do the same with the color red. Now, whatever you do, try not to think about a pink elephant. You can't do it, can you? When you set your mind on certain things, that thing jumps out at you. Have you ever bought a car, thinking you had never seen that style or color of car before, and then, over the next several days, you see that same car everywhere?

I'm sure there has been a time in your life when God seemed absent. During those times, God has not disappeared; we lack a mind set on God. Continual prayer develops a mind-set like God, and the result is that we see God at work everywhere.

Today's Scripture reading contains one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible. It is a prayer of praise, and it shows how a mind-set like God changes your outlook on everything.

Paul considered himself to be an apostle to the Gentiles, but he carried an incredible burden for his Jewish brothers and sisters. In the chapters leading up to today's Scripture reading, Paul had been dealing with God's rejection of Israel because of Israel's rejection of Jesus. But Paul knew this rejection wasn't final. He knew God still loved the Israelites and that he still had a plan for them. He knew God's mercy would ultimately prevail, and he could see God's hand at work in all things. His mind-set caused him to break into spontaneous prayer and praise.

Paul's mind-set caused him to rejoice in the wisdom of God. His wisdom is "unsearchable" (v. 33), and his ways are "beyond tracing out" (v. 33). This phrase is one word in the Greek and can be translated "unfathomable." No one knows the mind of God, and no one has ever given him advice. He is God; he is full of grace and mercy; his plans are always best. He is the source, sustainer, and fulfiller of all things. He is sovereign. The end result of developing a mind-set like God is praying, "To him be the glory forever! Amen" (v. 36).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you think it means to have a mind-set like God? How would you explain this to someone else?
2. Do you see God at work all around you? Why or why not? Have you ever been so moved by the ways of God that you broke into spontaneous prayer and praise? What caused that to happen in your life? What was the result?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, to you be all praise and glory! Words are not enough to thank you for your grace and mercy. Your ways are beyond me, but I see you at work in all things. Why you do what you do is unfathomable, but I trust in your leadership. You are the all-wise and all-knowing God. To you be all glory and honor forever. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 4

1 SAMUEL 2:1-10

Have you ever been so caught up in prayer that those observing you thought you were crazy? Samuel's mother, Hannah, had that experience. She wanted a son so badly that she prayed fervently for God to provide. Eli the priest saw her mouth moving, but he heard no words. He said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine" (1 Sam. 1:14). Maybe that kind of fervent prayer is what is meant by praying incessantly (see yesterday's study). Hannah explained to Eli that she wasn't drunk but was "pouring out [her] soul to the LORD" (1:15). Have you ever prayed so determinedly that it was as if you were pouring out a part of who you are?

God heard Hannah's prayer. When her son was old enough, she fulfilled a vow she had made to God by taking young Samuel to the temple to live and serve the Lord "under Eli the priest" (2:11). She then worshiped the Lord through prayer.

In her prayer, Hannah was overjoyed in her love for God. She confessed that there is no one like God. He is holy and knows the deeds of men. She rejoiced in the fact that God is just and will one day right the wrongs of society. God sends "poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts" (v. 7), and he will "judge the ends of the earth" (v. 10).

It was her faith in God's power that gave Hannah hope and strength in her life. She did not know or understand why things happened the way they did or why it seemed the wicked prevailed while the righteous suffered. But she did know that God was (and is) in control. In the heart of her prayer, she prayed, "For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's; upon them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his saints, but the wicked will be silenced in darkness" (vv. 8-9).

Likewise, when we develop the habit of prayer in our life, it gives us hope in the present world, and it causes us to see clearly, even in the fog of reality. Right now, you may not understand, and things may not be going well. But God is still on his throne. He is still in charge. Nothing catches him off guard. One day, he will judge all things and set everything right. Until then, our responsibility is to pray and to trust in his justice.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What is something that you passionately prayed about— something for which you "pour[ed] out your soul" to the Lord? What happened? Was the prayer answered?
2. How does trusting in God's power and control of the future give you strength and hope to live in the present?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father God, like Hannah, I confess there is no one like you. You are a great God and worthy of all my praise. I praise and worship you, Lord. I place my trust in your unlimited power. I will admit there are times when I don't understand why things are the way they are. But instead of trying to figure things out, I choose to trust in you, knowing that one day you will make things right. Thank you for the strength and hope I find in you. I love you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 5

LUKE 1:38, 46-55

We started this week with the Lord's Prayer. A good place to end this week is with the prayer of Mary, which she prayed after the angel visited her and told her she was going to be the mother of the Messiah. It is a beautiful prayer and perhaps second only to the Lord's Prayer.

It has been said that Mary was the first person to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. After the angel visited her and told her what was going to happen, she responded, "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38). What an astounding statement of faith!

Not long after her encounter with the angel, Mary went to visit Elizabeth, who was also pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth confirmed what the angel had said, and so Mary prayed. In her prayer, she glorified the Lord, and praised him for what he had called her to do. In some ways, her prayer was similar to Hannah's prayer. It was the prayer of a humble servant, who committed her entire life to the will of God, even when she did not know how it all would turn out. Mary's prayer was a tremendous prayer of faith from a humble, teenage girl.

We have spent a week emphasizing the importance of prayer, especially in regards to obtaining total quality thought. How is your prayer life? Do you have faith in God's plan for your life, even though you may not know how things are going to work out? Can you say, "I am the Lord's servant. . . . May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38)?

Prayer should be the first thing we do in every situation, instead of the last. Jesus taught us how to pray, so it should be as natural to us as breathing. Is prayer an important part of your life? How important? Do you pray more than before meals and before bed? Are you praying without ceasing? God loves us, and even though he knows what we need before we need it, he takes joy in his children asking him in the same way any parents take joy in their children coming to them with their needs.

Everything starts and ends with prayer.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you think enabled Mary, as a teenager, to say what she said in Luke 1:38? How can a disciple develop that type of faith and strength?
2. What are some things God has taught you this week about prayer? What are you going to do about it?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt. 6:9-13). God, not only is this Jesus' prayer, it is my prayer as well, and along with Mary, I profess that I am your servant. "May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

WEEK 6

PERSEVERE

RECOMMENDED READING

***Total Quality Life*, chapter 2, pages 31-38**

After fifteen years in the National Football League, Emmitt Smith retired as the league's all-time leading rusher. In his career, he rushed for more than ten miles, and he got knocked down every four yards. But every time he was knocked down, he picked himself back up. For that reason, he is now in the NFL Hall of Fame.

During the ancient Olympic Games, the marquee event was the marathon race. Each runner ran the race carrying a lit torch. The winner wasn't necessarily the fastest runner or even the runner who crossed the finish line first. The winner was the person who finished the race first with his torch still lit.

Both the example of Emmitt Smith and the ancient Olympic Games show the importance of perseverance.

DAY 1

HEBREWS 10:19-36

Living a total quality life, which begins with total quality thought, is not a sprint but a marathon. In order to achieve total quality, you have to make a decision to strive for it, and then you have to wake up each day determined to experience total quality life that day. Living this way will have its ups and downs. It will not always be easy, but you can persevere, and it will be worth it in the end.

In today's Scripture reading, the writer of Hebrews calls us to persevere. The foundation of our perseverance is laid on two crucial things we have in Christ. First, we have "confidence" (v. 19). The idea here is confidence in our speech so that we can boldly enter into God's presence (see 4:16). Second, in Christ, we have a "great priest" (10:21). In addition, throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer mentions that, in Christ, we have forgiveness, new life, abundant life, eternal life, hope, and purpose.

An important key to persevering is "draw[ing] near to God" (v. 22). It is impossible to persevere in your faith if you are not spending time with God so you can grow in your faith. A second key is to "hold unswervingly to the hope we profess" (v. 23). Our hope, according to Hebrews, is that Jesus is Lord, that we have been forgiven, that Jesus intercedes for us, and that he is coming again. Holding on to our hope, without compromise, gives us the courage we need to persevere. A third key to persevering is encouraging other believers in their hope (vv. 24–25). We were never meant to take our journey of faith alone. We are to live out our faith in community with others, because it is in community that we receive support and assurance to continue on.

In Christ, we have confidence, and so the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to "persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (v. 36). It will be worth it in the end.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are some specific things you can do to continue growing in your faith? How can you be sure to persevere in doing those things?
2. Read Hebrews 10:24–25. What are some things you can do to encourage others to continue growing in their faith? What do you think verse 25 says about the importance of church attendance?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear Jesus, thank you for giving your life for me so that I can boldly enter into God's presence. Thank you for being my High Priest. I pray you will help me maintain the hope I have in you and that I will persevere in my faith until the end. I also pray that as I travel this life serving you, I will be an encouragement to other people. I love you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 2

ROMANS 8:28-39

The very fact that the Bible talks about the need to persevere should tell us that we are going to experience difficult periods in our lives. There would be no need to persevere if everything was easy. But life is tough. Things happen for which we aren't prepared and there seem to be no explanations. How do you keep going during those tough times? How do you persevere when everything in you wants to quit?

Paul knew what it was to go through tough times. But he also knew what it was to persevere. In today's Scripture reading, the apostle gives us some insight into continuing through tough times.

Even when nothing seems to be going our way, and even when tragedies and heartaches dominate our lives, Paul promised that, if we hang in there and keep loving God, God can take the worst situations and bring good out of them. The promise is not only that good things will happen to those who love God, but also that God can turn the biggest personal disaster into a blessing as well. The prime example of this is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Nothing is worse than an innocent man being tortured and killed, but it is through this miscarriage of justice that salvation has come to all who believe.

You and I can persevere because "if God is for us, who can be against us" (v. 31)? The obvious answer is a resounding, "No one!" Furthermore, there is nothing on earth that can happen—no natural disaster, no horrific crime, no professional setback, no broken relationship, no incurable disease, absolutely nothing—that can cause God to stop loving us. The only possible thing that can separate us from God is our own unbelief, but even if we choose not to believe in God, even if we choose to hate God (see Rom. 5:8), God still loves us and his love for us is never far away.

Not only can we persevere through this life, we can overcome whatever this life throws our way. Paul said, "We are more than conquerors" (8:37). In the Greek language, that phrase reads, "We are super abounding conquerors." We do this, not in our own strength, but through the love of Jesus. Perseverance doesn't mean just barely getting by. For the believer, perseverance means overcoming, conquering, and defeating everything that comes our way. *Perseverance* is not a word for the defeated. Perseverance is the rallying cry for the already victorious. There is absolutely nothing in all creation that can separate us from God's love that is found in Jesus Christ!

Are you walking in victory today? If not, why not?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Can you think of an example in your own life, or in the life of someone you know, where something seemingly insurmountable happened, but looking back, you can see God at work even in that difficult situation? What happened? What was the result?
2. What do you think is meant by, "*Perseverance* is not a word for the defeated. Perseverance is the rallying cry for the already victorious"? How would you describe this truth to a nonbeliever?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, I am so overcome by your love for me. I am overwhelmed by your promise to never leave me and to bring good out of every circumstance I have encountered and will encounter. Your love and grace is beyond description. Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for the cross. Thank you for the resurrection. I am amazed. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 3

JAMES 1:2-12

In life we learn more about ourselves during difficult times than we do during good times. It is also through these times that we learn more about what it means to trust God. This should come as no surprise because we see the same thing throughout nature. Pearls are formed after a foreign substance, much like a splinter, enters an oyster's shell, and the oyster, in an attempt to recover from the injury, releases a substance that creates the pearl. Gold has to be purified with fire, and diamonds are formed from extreme heat and extraordinary pressure.

Following Jesus does not always lead down easy paths, and it takes mental strength to persevere. But in the same way heat and pressure make diamonds, so trials and tribulation build character in your life. In today's Scripture reading, James illuminates how the process works.

It is human nature to avoid pain, but James believed trials should be embraced. Don't misunderstand what he said: James did not say we should go out and make trouble for ourselves or look to place ourselves in difficult situations. He also did not tell us to be joyful *for* the trials. Rather, he said to be joyful *in* the trials. James was a realist. He knew trials would come, especially for the believer. When they come, he said to embrace them because you know God will use the pressures of life to purify you, making you all he wants you to be.

Three times in today's reading, the word *perseverance* is used (vv. 3–4, 12). The word means “to remain in place” or “to stand firm.” James gave us a picture of perseverance when he said to ask God for wisdom without doubting, “because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind” (v. 6). People who joyfully embrace trials and learn to persevere stand firm when the waves of life try to knock them down. People who refuse to budge during the storms “will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (v. 12).

What trial are you going through right now? What storms are you presently encountering? Don't run from them; stand firm. Embrace them because you know they are part of God's plan to make you a stronger person.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How can changing the way you think about trials—from something to avoid to something to embrace—enable you to better handle those trials?
2. In what ways do you think “the testing of your faith develops perseverance” (v. 3)?
3. What can you do this week to stand firm in the midst of the difficulty you are presently facing?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, I don't understand how I can be joyful in the middle of trials, but I trust you, and I ask for you to teach me how to embrace struggles instead of running from them. I ask for perseverance and the courage to stand firm. I pray that I will be able to stand the test so I can receive the crown of life you have promised. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

DAY 4

JUDE 1-25

Jude described himself as “a brother of James” (v. 1), and if this was the same James who wrote the book of James, then Jude was one of Jesus’ brothers. Jude is the English form of the name Judas, and in Mark 6:3, Mark mentioned that one of Jesus’ brothers was named Judas. This Judas did not believe in Jesus until after the resurrection (see John 7:5; Acts 1:14). If Jude was the brother of Jesus, then he did not believe Jesus to be the Messiah at first, but later considered himself to be “a servant of Jesus Christ” (Jude 1), not even worthy to be called his brother.

Jude wrote his letter to warn believers to watch out for false teachers and to remain true to the teachings of the apostles. He called all believers to persevere in what they learned so as not to be led astray by “scoffers who will follow their own ungodly desires” (v. 18). In the context of Jude, scoffers were people who ridiculed the true teachings of the apostles and deceived believers with their false teaching. Scoffers made a mockery of the true gospel.

Jude was admonishing believers to stand firm against such teachers by growing in knowledge and praying with the power of the Holy Spirit. Jude then stated, “Keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you eternal life” (v. 21). The word *keep* means “to guard” or “to hold in custody.” The idea behind the word *wait* is “to eagerly anticipate.” As we are anticipating Jesus’ return, we are to be about building others up, helping them persevere in their faith, and not destroying people’s faith, like the scoffers were doing.

The closing two verses of Jude are beautiful. Ultimately, it is Jesus Christ who empowers us to persevere and enables us to stand before God with incredible joy and without guilt. To him and him alone “be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (v. 25).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What steps are you taking, or have you taken in the past, to grow in your faith and knowledge so as not to be deceived by false teachers?
2. What do you think it means to “keep” or “guard” yourselves in God’s love” (v. 21)?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear Jesus, I pray you will keep me strong and help me learn all I can about your Word so I will not be led astray by false teachings. Lord, as I eagerly wait for your return, may I build others up instead of tearing them down. For you alone are able to keep me and others from falling. You alone are able to present me and others to God without fault or guilt. You alone do I praise now and forevermore. In Jesus’ name I pray.
Amen.

DAY 5

2 TIMOTHY 4:1-8

No person in the New Testament personified perseverance better than the apostle Paul. He died by being beheaded on the orders of Emperor Nero around A.D. 64. Paul's last letter was his second letter to Timothy. Paul was in prison when he wrote his final letter, and the tone suggests he knew he was going to die.

In today's Scripture reading, Paul gave a final charge to Timothy. At the end of his charge was a personal testimony of perseverance.

Paul's main charge to Timothy was to preach the Word at all times and in its entirety. Timothy was not to leave anything out, and he was not to only preach what people wanted to hear. Sometimes a pastor has to say and preach things that make people uncomfortable. Sometimes a biblical message can come across as harsh and judgmental. But if the only thing people hear is what they want to hear, over time "they will turn their ears from the truth and turn aside to myths" (v. 4). Nothing will help people grow in their faith more than a steady diet of Christ-centered, biblical preaching. Why? Because "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (3:16–17). Paul further encouraged Timothy to be a strong leader, faithfully carrying out all of his duties as a pastor (4:5).

Paul's letter then turned personal. The reason for his charge to Timothy was because Paul knew he was going to die soon. He described himself as being poured out like a drink offering and like a traveler awaiting his time to leave on a journey; Paul was awaiting his death. The word *departure* (v. 6) pictured the crew of a ship hoisting an anchor and setting sail. Paul was ready to cross the ocean of death. He could die with peace, even though his death would be violent because he had persevered. He had "fought the good fight . . . finished the race . . . kept the faith" (v. 7). Looking back over his life, he had no regrets. He had done his best, remained faithful to his God, and stood firm until the end. Now, he looked forward to receiving his award, and he reminded Timothy that the reward was not just for him, "but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (v. 8). In essence, he was telling Timothy—and us—to remain faithful and persevere just as he had.

Paul said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Persevering to the end of this life will be worth it. This life, no matter how long we live, is temporal, but the next life is eternal.

In a marathon, all runners reach a point where the course becomes difficult and exhaustion tempts them to quit. At that point in the race, all the physical training they have endured is of little help. What causes them to quit or not quit is the gray matter between their ears. At the point of exhaustion, it is mental toughness that makes the difference. Mentally, good marathon runners block out the pain, remember all they have learned in training, talk to themselves, and visualize the finish line. Likewise, when the course of this life becomes difficult and you are too tired to continue, it will be your spiritual/mental toughness that will see you through. Mentally, you will have to block out the pain of your present circumstance, remember all you have learned about Jesus, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and visualize the finish line.

Because of God's grace found in Jesus Christ and through the power of his Spirit that lives within you, you can do it. You can persevere. Keep running the race.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what ways do you think a steady diet of Christ-centered, biblical teaching helps you grow in your faith?
2. Can you think of an example today of how people only want to hear teaching that "will turn their ears away from the truth" (2 Tim. 4:4)? What are some of the dangers of such preaching?

3. What changes can you make in your life so that you will be able to one day say, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (v. 7)? Are you willing to make those changes?

PRAYER FOR TODAY

Our Father, thank you for the emphasis this week on perseverance. I pray for strength to continue. I pray for courage to never give up. I pray, like Paul, that I can look back over my life without regret. Use me to accomplish your will. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.