A PASSION FOR GOD
The Practical Power of the Holy Spirit in Your Life

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Word must go through you! It’s not how you mark your Bible that counts; it’s how your Bible marks you!

Is the Word affecting you that way? Is it sustaining your life? Is it controlling your thoughts, the way you conduct your business, your home life, and even your free time? It’s only when we put ourselves under the authority of His Word and submit to its teaching that we become true, on-fire disciples of Jesus Christ.

Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Another way to say this would be, “Let Christ’s words be perfectly at home in you.” God wants His Word to permeate every area of your life. If you want your life to be on fire for God to the point that it impacts people around you, you need to fuel that blaze with consistent attention to God’s Word.

CHAPTER FOUR

LOVING PEOPLE, LOVING GOD

A Thriving Christian Is a Loving Christian

Another valuable lesson we learn about these first-century believers is that they loved one another. We read that “they devoted themselves to fellowship” (Acts 2:42). An important word in the original language is used here for the word “fellowship.” It is the Greek word koinonia. This word is so full of meaning it is translated a number of ways in the book of Acts. The words “fellowship,” “communion,” “distribution,” “contribution,” “partnership,” and “partakership” are all used to express it.

The koinonia experience relates to many things. It speaks of the unique bond we experience as believers in our conversations and worship. But koinonia not only speaks of fellowship in worship; it also speaks of fellowship in giving. In fact, koinonia is the word Paul used for the collection he organized among the Greek churches for the needy in Jerusalem.

Jesus taught that it is more blessed to give than receive. True fellowship is not only telling our Christian friends
that we love them, but also looking for tangible ways to show them our love. This trait should be the earmark of every believer who wants to turn his or her world rightside up. As Jesus said, “By this will all know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

This goes against the secular thinking of our day, where everyone wants “their rights.” The slogan of the moment is “What about my needs?” We don’t forgive anymore. We get revenge. We don’t look for opportunities to serve. We seek to be served.

Yet a sign of real spiritual growth is when a believer realizes that going to church is not something he should do merely to be spiritually fed and built up. A believer is truly maturing when he realizes that going to church is also an opportunity to be sensitive to the needs of others. Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28). Instead of sprinting to our car after the singing of the last song in a worship service, we should be praying, “Lord, now that I’ve heard Your Word, please give me an opportunity to put it into action. Lead me to someone I can encourage, help, or pray for.”

But I must warn you: If you start praying like that, you will get answers. So be ready, as Paul instructed Timothy, “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2).

Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. . . . For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you” (Luke 6:38). You may come to church with your “spiritual fuel tank” empty. But if you come to love, serve, and give to others, you will leave with your tank full! Instead of draining your spiritual resources, serving others will cause them to be replenished! Proverbs 11:25 echoes this, saying, “The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself.”

On the last night Jesus spent with His disciples, the emphasis of His teaching was on loving servanthood. Jesus said, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another” (John 13:35). One of the most powerful witnesses Christians have is the unmistakable act of compassion we demonstrate toward others. It speaks volumes and, in a sense, “it earns us the right” to preach the gospel to others.

Before I became a believer, I saw the love and concern the Christians on my high school campus had for one another. It made a deep impression on me. This was in the late ’60s, and although the concepts of peace and love were widely proclaimed, I never saw it in anyone except these obviously committed Christians. It was this example that began to soften my hardened heart to the preaching of the gospel, leading to my acceptance of Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

The church is made up of people just like you. Are you a loving believer? Do your actions live up to your words?

A Thriving Christian Is a Worshipping Christian

The third quality we find in the first-century church that transformed the world was that it was a worshipping church. Again in Acts 2:42 we read, “They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (NIV). Clearly this idea includes worship, for it is a definite form of prayer. Something wonderful and supernatural takes place when God’s people gather together to worship Him. There is nothing like it anywhere in the world.

Recently I watched a video of a well-known rock performer singing a song that had become something of an anthem for his generation, the baby boomers. As the song began in the crowded stadium, thousands of Bic lighters were ignited, creating a starlike effect against the darkness.
As the people swayed in time to the song, singing the lyrics from memory, I was struck by the sadness of it all. Here was a generation who thought they would change their world. They believed their ideals and philosophies would really make a difference. But time marched on. Now they are past the age of 30, the very age of the people they said they could never trust.

As I watched the people in this video sing, I thought to myself, *This is as close as this world can get to worship.* It is only a shallow rendition of what true believers experience as we come together in that common bond of *koinonia.* True worship is not merely the singing of songs to God; it is the living of our lives in a way that pleases God. In fact, our singing and prayers are but the outward manifestations of a life lived daily for the glory of God.

Hebrews 13:15, 16 gives us a good overview of the kind of worship God desires: “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well-pleased.”

Passionate worship of God is not just the singing of our songs, but also the sharing of our resources. It is not just the lifting of our hands in praise, but also the giving from our hands to others.

Our “sacrifice of praise to God” is something unique to us as Christians. No other religion “sings” like the Christian life. And we should cherish this. As Psalm 40:3 says, “He has put a new song in my mouth—praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the Lord.”

Not only was worship an active part of these early Christians’ lives, but prayers of supplication and petition were vital as well. Next we will see just how important prayer is to a passionate Christian.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Power of Prayer

ONE CRUCIAL REASON the early Christians were so passionate in their faith and love for God was that they “continued steadfastly . . . in prayers” (Acts 2:42). The book of Acts reveals the indispensable nature of prayer in empowering the New Testament church. For example:

- The church was born as the followers of Jesus prayerfully waited for the power He promised them (1:12-14; 2:1-4);
- When persecution threatened to stamp out the infant church, believers went to prayer, then spoke God’s Word with boldness (4:23-31);
- The growing church appointed additional leaders so the apostles could focus on prayer and preaching (6:1-4);
- In response to Peter’s prayer, Tabitha was restored to life (9:36-43);
The respective prayers of Cornelius and Peter resulted in the gospel being preached to Gentiles for the first time (10:1-48);

Constant prayer by the church resulted in Peter being miraculously delivered from jail and possible execution (12:5-17);

Missionaries were sent out and elders appointed with prayer and fasting (13:1-3; 14:21-23);

Paul and Silas were miraculously delivered from jail, and the jailer and his family were converted, as a result of prayer (16:16-34).

The New Testament epistles, written to those first Christians and to us, persistently instruct believers to pray. Consider these verses:

- [Continue] steadfastly in prayer (Romans 12:12);
- Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints (Ephesians 6:18);
- Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God (Philippians 4:6);
- Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving (Colossians 4:2);
- Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

While prayer was a way of life for the early church, many Christians today don't employ this powerful and effective weapon often enough. We are far quicker to protest than to pray. We are more ready to boycott than to believe that God can be strong on our behalf. It is essential that we understand how effective prayer can be in facing everyday problems, as well as the tragic and seemingly hopeless situations in our world.

**Steadfast, Ceaseless Prayer**

Prayer should be second nature to a child of God. That's the picture of prayer we have in the Scriptures: steadfast, constant, ceaseless, continuing, praying everywhere we go, praying about everything that happens. Prayer should be like breathing.

That reminds me of the time my wife and I taught our youngest son, Jonathan, to pray. It became almost second nature to him, and he almost never forgot! In fact, whenever we forgot to pray at mealtime, he brought it to our attention—but usually he waited until we started to eat, because he liked to catch us red-handed. So he waited until we took our first few bites and then said with obvious glee, "You forgot to pray!"

To this day, if you ask Jonathan to pray for something, he remembers it. I can think of certain things I've asked him to remember to pray for, and without fail he does. Prayer comes naturally to him. Perhaps Jesus had this very quality in mind when He said we must become like little children to enter the kingdom of God.

**Principles of Prevailing Prayer**

In order to identify some important principles to help us continue steadfast in effective prayer, let's take a closer look at one event from the book of Acts. At the beginning of Acts 12, wicked King Herod is persecuting the church, having already executed James the brother of John and imprisoned Peter. Peter had been in prison once before but
had been miraculously released by an angel of the Lord (Acts 5:17-21). To prevent another escape, Herod locked Peter behind two gates, chained him to two guards, and surrounded him with 14 guards. By all human reasoning, there was no way Peter could get out.

What did Peter's fellow believers do about this seemingly impossible situation? We read that: “Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church” (Acts 12:5). The church could have done a lot of other things. They could have staged a protest. They could have picketed the prison. They could have flooded Herod's palace with letters. But instead they recognized the power of prayer. Though every prison door was locked shut, one door remained open: the door into the presence of God. So they began to pray for Peter's deliverance. And their prayers were effective. Why? I think the following principles will help us understand how we, like the early Christians, can lift effective prayers to God.

1. Pray to God. That's not nearly so obvious as you might think. Sometimes our prayers fail to honor Him as God. Instead, we think of Him as a divine Santa Claus to whom we bring a list of wants. Or we treat Him like our butler or maid by ordering Him to get us the things we need. Or we view Him as some kind of heavenly vending machine, thinking all we have to do is push the right buttons, recite little magic formulas, or claim certain verses and He is required to dispense whatever we want.

Sometimes we never think of God at all because we are all wrapped up in ourselves and our own needs and problems. Then we're like the self-absorbed Pharisee that Jesus described in the parable in Luke 18:9-14 who “prayed thus with himself.” This man's prayers never got any higher than the ceiling because God was not involved in the process.

The first principle of prayer is to recognize who you're addressing. This is your Creator you're speaking to, so approach Him with reverence. Often when we approach God's throne in prayer we skip the formalities and just get down to business. “Hello, God, how are You? Now here's what I want.” That's not prayer; that's reciting a shopping list.

Jesus gave us a model prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 we call the Lord's Prayer. It begins with an address of respect and reverence: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.” “Our Father” recognizes the intimacy of our relationship with Him. “In heaven” acknowledges His holliness. “Hallowed be Your name” expresses our reverence for Him. You don't have to say these words verbatim every time you pray. But enter into His presence with your own heartfelt words that express your love and reverence.

When we address God as God, it's also crucial to remember that our goal is to align our will with God's will. The Lord's Prayer clearly teaches this: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” That is, “Lord, before a petition leaves my lips, I ask You to overrule it if it's outside Your will. I want Your will more than my own.” Think about the request you are about to bring. Is it God's will? Granted, we can't always know the will of God. That's why we always pray as Jesus did in the garden of Gethsemane, “Not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). But we are also promised in James 1:5 that God will provide the wisdom we need to understand His will if we ask Him for it.

Why is it so important to pray in His will? First John 5:14,15 says, “Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him.” That's a significant promise. You'll get what
you ask for if you pray according to His will. So the key is to align yourself with God’s will. Prayer is not bending God your way; prayer is bending you His way. Prayer is not overcoming God’s reluctance; it’s taking hold of His willingness. Prayer is not getting your will in heaven; it’s getting God’s will on earth. Nothing lies outside the reach of prayer except that which lies outside of the will of God.

Jesus had this in mind in John 15:7 when He said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” This verse could be literally translated, “If you are maintaining a living communion with Me, and My words are at home in your life, I command you to ask at once something for yourself, whatever your heart desires, and it will become yours.”

Of course, most of us latch onto such a promise immediately. We like it. It excites us. Whatever my heart desires is mine! But sometimes we skip over the condition of the promise: If we maintain a living communion with Him and His Word is at home in us, then He will give us the desire of our heart. But if we are in communion with God and His Word is at home in us, our desires are going to change. We’re not going to pray for frivolous, self-indulgent things. We’re going to want what He wants for us, starting with a desire to become more like Him so we will love what He loves and hate what He hates. Therefore, when we ask for the desires of our heart, we will receive them.

2. Pray without ceasing. The second principle of prayer we learn from Acts 12:5 is that these early believers prayed without ceasing. “Constant prayer” was being offered for Peter. The phrase could also be translated, “they prayed with agony.” They prayed with passion from the depths of their heart. They didn’t throw up some casual, flippant request off the top of their head and then forget about it.

They agonized in prayer for Peter from the depths of their souls, and they did so until they got an answer.

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the church probably prayed through the night. Note also that Peter was not released from prison until the night before his planned execution. So the church may have prayed continually for days or weeks.

In our fast-paced, busy lives, ceaseless, impassioned prayer is almost a lost art. Many of us race through our prayers as quickly as possible because we have somewhere to go, someone to see, or something to do. But usually we have time for the things we want to do, time that could be used for prayer.

When was the last time you turned off the TV for the evening and spent some time in prayer? If you really want God to use you to touch your community and your world, you must be willing to invest time in fervent prayer as the early Christians did.

3. Agree in prayer. The third principle of prevailing prayer in Acts 12:5 teaches us to pray in agreement with one another. Constant prayer was being offered to God for Peter’s deliverance “by the church.” These believers were acting on Jesus’ promise in Matthew 18:19: “If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven.”

This principle of prayer is often misunderstood. Suppose two people say, “Let’s agree together and ask God to give us the island of Maui. Then we’ll split up the island. You can take the south and I’ll take the north.” Will God give them what they want? Not likely. Jesus’ promise doesn’t mean that you can pick out anything you want and then find someone to agree with you so God is bound to do what you ask. Rather, it’s saying that if two people with the same God-given burden are sure of His will and in agreement with
the Spirit of God and with one another, God will grant their request. There is great power when same-minded people agree in prayer!

4. Pray even when you doubt. This principle for prayer may not be as commendable as the first three, but it’s vital that you know it. It’s okay to pray when you still have doubts about how God is going to answer. The group of believers praying for Peter prayed to God, prayed ceaselessly, and prayed in agreement—but quite honestly, they also prayed with some doubt that Peter would be delivered.

Peter was sleeping on the night of his deliverance. That’s amazing since James had already been killed by Herod and Peter was to go to trial the next day. He was probably the only Christian in Jerusalem sleeping that night. Everybody else was awake praying and worrying about him. But Peter’s sleep didn’t last long, for God sent an angel to his dark prison cell to wake him up. Miraculously, Peter’s chains fell off, the doors opened automatically, and he walked out a free man.

Peter then went to the house where the Christians were praying for his deliverance and knocked on the door. I can see it now. The spiritual leaders were in the back room, most likely praying something like, “Oh God, deliver our brother Peter! Lord, we love him. We want to see him again. Just bring him back to us. We know you can do it!”

Suddenly, they heard a knock at the door. “What is that distraction? Father, we just . . .”

They heard another knock. A young girl named Rhoda quietly went to answer and then excitedly ran back to the room and interrupted their prayer. “What is it?” they asked impatiently.

“Peter is standing on the front porch!” she replied.

“You’re crazy!” they said. Then they picked up where they left off, “Oh God, deliver Peter.” I’ll bet their mouths dropped down to their knees when they finally saw him.

I don’t think I’m taking liberties with this story. The account in Acts 12 certainly implies that the disciples didn’t believe God had answered their prayer. Yet despite their doubts, their prayer was mightier than Herod and mightier than hell.

Help My Unbelief

Faith is clearly a scriptural requirement for effective prayer. No doubt we have hindered the hand of God by our unbelief on many occasions. Nonetheless, if you are a little weak in the faith department, God can still work on your behalf with what you offer Him.

This certainly is not taught to us by the positive confession, name-it-and-claim-it crowd. They say, “If you claim it and believe it, then you’ll have it. If you don’t have it, it’s because you lack faith.”

Such a position brings an enormous amount of heartache and guilt to needy people. Let’s say that Bill is terminally ill and the doctors hold no hope for his recovery. Then Bob comes in and says, “God wants to heal you, Brother Bill. We’re going to pray right now and you’re going to be healed.”

So Bill and Bob pray. But what if Bill remains ill? “Those are just the symptoms,” Bob says. “God has healed you. Take it by faith and get out of bed right now.”

Bill gets out of bed only to find that he’s not ready to get out. “It’s just a lack of faith,” his well-meaning but misguided friend says. “Don’t look to those things. Just believe God.”

As time passes, however, Bill doesn’t get better. In fact, he gets worse. Assessing the situation, Bob says, “It’s your lack of faith, Bill. If you just had more faith, God would heal you.”
This is wrong and unscriptural! True, the Bible says that God works in response to faith. But it also asserts that God sometimes works despite our lack of faith. The following scenarios show four different levels of faith and how God responded to each of them.

1. Sincere faith. Consider the woman described in Luke 8:43-48 who had a serious illness for 12 years. She believed if she could just touch Jesus, she would be healed.

One day her opportunity came. Jesus was moving through town, surrounded by throngs of excited people. As Jesus and the multitude surged down the road, the woman pressed in, reached through, and touched the edge of His robe. Suddenly God’s healing power bolted through her body and she was cured instantaneously.

Jesus stopped in His tracks and asked, “Who touched Me?”


Jesus said, “I perceived power going out from Me.” The woman bowed down before Him and told her story. Jesus didn’t reprove her. Instead He commended her for her faith.

Yes, your faith can and does play a significant part in meeting your needs. But sometimes God responds to the faith of someone else when our own faith is weak.

2. Another's faith. Matthew 8:5-13 tells the story of the Roman centurion and his servant, who was deathly ill. The centurion came to Jesus and said, “Speak a word, and my servant will be healed.”

Jesus answered, “Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you.” And the centurion’s servant was healed. In this case, God honored the faith of the centurion on behalf of his servant.

If I was sick and didn’t have enough faith to believe for my healing, I would look around for others who would exercise their faith on my behalf. Even when our faith is weak, God can still meet our needs through the faith of another as He did for the servant through the centurion’s faith.

3. Weak faith. Sometimes the Lord grants our prayers even when our faith is minuscule. This truth is underscored in the story in Mark 9:14-29 of the man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus and asked for help. Jesus responded, “If you believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”

The man exclaimed, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!”

Did Jesus respond, “I’m sorry, but that won’t do. You have to speak it into existence. You have to name it and claim it”? Of course not! He honored the man’s faith, as weak as it was, and delivered his son from the demon.

I believe God will honor your prayer when you come to Him and say, “Lord, with as much faith as I have, I believe. But if there is any doubt standing in the way of my prayer being answered, help my unbelief.”

Look at Acts 12. Here was the church praying to God for Peter, praying fervently, and praying constantly, yet they doubted. When God answered their prayer, they couldn’t believe it.

We’ve done that, haven’t we? Haven’t you been shocked when God actually answered your prayer? What does that show? It shows that God loves us and makes allowances for our struggling faith. This doesn’t mean unbelief is a commendable virtue. We should seek to grow in faith day by day. But in the meantime, if you are honest
to God and say, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief," you can move forward from there.

4. Divine intervention. The story of Lazarus being raised from the dead in John 11:38-44 illustrates how God can work despite a total lack of faith. Certainly, Lazarus didn't have a lot going for him in the faith department. He was dead. Yet Jesus raised him from the grave. Was it because of the faith of his sisters, Mary and Martha? No way. They even accused Jesus of failing them by not coming soon enough to heal their brother while he was still alive. Did Jesus respond to the faith of the mourners? Far from it. They were so filled with unbelief it drove Jesus to tears.

Lazarus was raised from the dead because Jesus directly intervened in his hopeless situation. This gives us confidence that when no one around us has much faith—including ourselves—God can still respond to our prayers and meet our needs. Why? Because He is God and chooses to intervene out of His great love for us.

God's Work and Our Responsibility

Notice in Acts 12:10 that as soon as Peter was outside the prison, the angel disappeared and Peter was left to get to Mary's house on his own. The angel had airlifted him to the house and dropped him right into the room, but he didn't. In response to prayer, God took care of the impossible and left the possible to Peter.

Yes, there is a place for miracles, but there is also a place for our own efforts. Only Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead, but someone else had to loosen him from his grave clothes. Only Jesus could multiply five loaves and two fish to feed 5000, but someone else had to distribute the food and pick up the leftovers. Sometimes we ask for miracles when God just wants us to take practical steps.

Let's say you have a job but you don't want to go to work this week because you're not in the mood. You'd rather stay home and watch television. So you don't work all week long. You call in sick every day even though you're feeling fine. Then at the end of the week you don't get a paycheck. As a result, you become hungry. So you begin to pray, "Oh God; send me food. Oh Lord, I know You can do it. Lord, You provided for Elijah, and I just pray You'll provide for me even as You did for him."

But no food comes. Why not? Because you don't need a miracle; you need to go to work! You're praying for a miracle, but you're violating biblical principles in the process. The Scripture teaches, "If anyone shall not work, neither shall he eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). If you have the ability and the opportunity to work and you don't do so because you just don't feel like it, it's your own fault when you don't receive the material things you need.

On the other hand, sometimes we try to do what only God can do. Suppose you pray for an unsaved friend to come to Christ. But then you think, God needs my help. Some high-pressure witnessing tactics should do the job. So you start badgering your friend to repent and believe, thinking God can't save him without your "help."

The result? You end up complicating the process. Do your part by being a loving, caring friend, sharing the gospel when God provides the opportunity, inviting your friend to church, and praying fervently. Then allow God to do what only He can do.

Acts 12 opens with James dead, Peter in prison, and Herod triumphing. The chapter closes with Herod dead, Peter free, the Word of God triumphing, and the church revived and filled with a holy passion and zeal. What made the difference? Prayer. You need to keep this truth in mind each day. Sometimes things can look pretty bleak, but keep praying! See what God will do over the long term in response to your faithful prayers.
I WAS 18 YEARS OLD AND HAD been a Christian for almost a year when I first felt the call of God to preach and teach. One day I went into the office of my pastor, Chuck Smith. I took a seat in front of his desk and blurted out, “Chuck, God has called me into the ministry. I believe He wants me to preach the gospel and teach the Word of God.”

“That’s great, Greg,” Chuck said with a knowing smile, leaning back in his chair. I fully expected next to hear something like, “Listen, Greg, Sunday morning sounds good to me. Why don’t you just preach in my place this week!” But instead he said, “Greg, I want you to talk to one of the pastors on staff here. His name is Romaine.”

Pastor L.E. Romaine is a wonderful man of God. I didn’t know it at the time, but he often runs interference for Chuck Smith. A former Marine Corps sergeant, Romaine has taken countless young bucks like me and whipped us into shape using some of the same tactics he used in the Marines. I eagerly bounded into Pastor Romaine’s office, confident I could do just about anything he set before me.
Romaine looked me over like a drill sergeant eyeing a raw recruit. “I’ll tell you what, young man,” he said. “I’ve got just the job for you.” I visualized a great preaching opportunity or a chance to lead a Bible study or even counsel someone. But he didn’t give me a Bible and a place to preach; he handed me a broom and a place to sweep! And for the next several weeks I ministered faithfully to a large pepper tree that dropped a new batch of leaves as soon as I had swept up the old ones.

What a letdown! I had envisioned crowds of spiritually hungry people waiting for my profound insights from Scripture. I had imagined troubled individuals seeking out seasoned counsel from my one-year experience of knowing Jesus. Instead I swept leaves.

Weeks later Chuck and Romaine apparently saw the light and decided to give me a new responsibility. I was summoned to the office and eagerly awaited my preaching, teaching, or counseling assignment. But I was disappointed again. My next grand mission was to purchase a new doorknob for the church office. Still, I was grateful for the opportunity to do something other than sweep leaves.

On my way to the department store I felt as if I was on a mission for God. I could not fail! It seemed a simple enough task—until I arrived at the doorknob section of the hardware department. I had never seen so many doorknobs in my life. They came in all sizes, shapes, and finishes. I paced back and forth, deciding and then changing my mind. Finally, I made my selection and proudly brought it back to the church office.

It was the wrong size. Deflated but determined, back to the store I went.

In the next several months I was given many similar opportunities to serve the Lord. I learned to do them, not as jobs, but as ministries to the Lord. Eventually I was asked to make hospital calls and lead Bible studies. Before long I was the leader of a small Bible study group that eventually became Harvest Christian Fellowship, the church I pastor today.

I admit that during those first days of my “ministry” I was tempted to sneak into the church yard at night and chop down that worthless pepper tree. But now I treasure the memories of those days sweeping leaves and running errands. I recognize that God, through the wisdom of my pastors at Calvary Chapel, was building in me a quality that has helped keep my passion for the Lord burning for more than 27 years. In fact, even though we don’t have a pepper tree at Harvest, we utilize the same principles for preparing people for ministry I learned from Pastor Chuck Smith and Pastor L.E. Romaine in Costa Mesa.

Your Faithful Servant

The quality I am talking about is faithfulness. As an 18-year-old, brand-new Christian, my enthusiasm for the ministry was strong. I was ready to preach to thousands and attempt great feats for God. But pastors Chuck and Romaine weren’t all that impressed by my fervor. They’d seen scores of young men like me chomping at the bit to get behind a pulpit or take over a Bible study. What they were looking for was someone who would be faithful, even in little things like sweeping leaves and buying doorknobs.

The hallmark of the passionate believers of the first century was faithfulness. The two most prominent apostles in the early church made it clear that faithfulness is the essential quality of the Christian life. Paul wrote, “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). And Peter instructed us, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10, NIV).
Christians who are faithful in the little things can be used by God to accomplish great things. Think about Stephen for a moment. Here was a man of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, but the disciples had him waiting on tables and distributing food and clothing to a bunch of grippers. Stephen could have protested, “Excuse me, but I think I have a higher calling on my life. I feel called to preach and teach, and I have a miracle ministry as well. Don’t you realize that I’m too important for this kind of menial service?”

But that’s not what Stephen did. He started where God called him. Ultimately, we read of his powerful preaching and the miracles Jesus performed through his life. Similarly, if you want to be a person whom God will use, you must be faithful in the small areas. If you are not faithful there, don’t expect God to give you more.

The early church made a significant impact on its world, not because it was made up of great people, but because it was made up of faithful people. Faithful to the Lord, faithful to the ministry, faithful in menial tasks, and faithful in great tasks. We look back today at the great men and women of God listed in the book of Acts and marvel at what they accomplished for God. But think of the thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—of unnamed believers over that 30-year span who quietly and faithfully served God and shared Jesus with their hurting world. If those early believers hadn’t been faithful, who knows if you or I would be following Jesus today?

Some of us may aspire to be great missionaries for God. We yearn to cross the seas and convert people in faraway lands. But let me ask you: Have you started by crossing the street to share your faith? Does going to a foreign land make you a great missionary? If you won’t share your faith right now, do you think something magical or mystical is going to happen as soon as you set foot on foreign soil? No,

you need to start where you are now. You must be faithful with what God has set before you at this time in your life. And if you are, only He knows what opportunities will open up for you in the days ahead.

You can never be too small for God to use, but you can be too big. If you start thinking you’re God’s gift to humanity, you’re going to fall, and fall hard. In a deluded moment you may begin to see yourself as indispensable to the work of God. If so, you’re on thin ice. Scripture clearly and repeatedly warns against pride and arrogance. Although it’s true that God has chosen to work through us, it is certainly not out of necessity. God doesn’t need us; He uses us because He loves us and desires to include us in His work.

God could not have made this more plain than He did in Psalm 50:9-12: “I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.”

Or if that’s not enough for you, consider the words of the apostle Paul in Athens: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:24,25, NIV).

When the eminent preacher C.H. Spurgeon was a young man, he was caught up in the great and mighty things God had in store for him. But the Lord brought him back to reality with this verse: “Do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them” (Jeremiah 45:5). Spurgeon stopped seeking greatness and focused instead on God’s glory and being faithful to Him. Ultimately, God used him
as one of the greatest preachers in modern church history. Like the first-century believers, Spurgeon learned the indispensable lesson of being faithful where God called him.

I have come to realize that God can easily get His work done without me. It is a privilege and an honor to be used as His instrument. Any success I enjoy in ministry is certainly not because of my skills or abilities; it's because of His power working in me. If I forget that, my words will fall to the ground and have no impact. The same is true of you in your ministry for Him. It is only when He is working through us that we are effective. God help us all to remain humble and usable to Him, for “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

Running to Finish, Running to Win

It appears that the apostle Paul was something of a sports fan. Throughout his teaching he uses the vivid image of a runner to illustrate his determination and persistence as a faithful servant of Christ. In Acts 20:24, he says, “But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.” In Philippians 2:16, he states that he is “holding forth the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain.”

In Philippians 3:13,14 he continues the analogy: “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul likens himself to a runner in the last lap of the race, straining every muscle as he reaches out to the finish line. He refuses the temptation to look back, lest it break his momentum.

In 1 Corinthians 9:24, the apostle applies the same image to all believers: “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.” Later, in writing to the church in Galatia, he picks up the analogy again. Rebuking believers for allowing false teachers to side-track them with a message of hyper-legalism, Paul writes, “You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (Galatians 5:7). Furthermore, the author of Hebrews, who might well have been Paul, writes, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Paul’s teaching and example call us not only to be faithful in this life, but to remain faithful until we cross the finish line. Sometimes we look at others who have started to follow the Lord but have fallen away, and we wonder if we will remain faithful until we reach the finish line. But I ask you: Do you want to finish joyfully and victoriously? If you do, then you will, because God wants you to do just that.

You are not running alone. Jesus is there with you. He is even more committed to your success than you are. The Bible says that Jesus is the author and finisher of your faith (Hebrews 12:2). It also says that He will complete the good work He began in you (Philippians 1:6). The Lord is prepared to finish what He has started in you, but He would appreciate a little cooperation on your part! If you continue to yield to His Spirit and obey His Word, you will finish with flying colors—and, in Peter’s words, will “receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11, NIV).
Going the Distance

The Christian life is a long-distance run, not a 50-yard dash. We’re not called merely to be faithful while we’re young and strong and healthy or while life is going well for us or for 20 or 30 years until we “retire.” We’re called to be passionate, fervent believers for life. Serving Jesus requires diligence. It requires perseverance. It requires discipline. We don’t like to hear these words much, but they are necessary part of our vocabulary if we want to finish the race.

I was a good runner in high school, but only for short distances. I could beat most people in the 50-yard dash, but I wasn’t as strong in long-distance running. I always got winded and was unable to finish the race. Whenever I ran anything longer than a quarter mile, I would blast off from the starting line and leave everyone in my dust. But about the second or third lap, everyone would start passing me. By the time the race was over, small children, turtles, even inanimate objects were passing me. My problem was trying to run long-distance races with a short-distance mind-set. I didn’t pace myself.

Many new Christians seem to explode off the starting line with great enthusiasm for serving God. They read their Bibles and pray with great fervor. They’re either in church or a Bible study every night of the week. They witness to all their friends. But when the first rush of excitement wears off, their spiritual legs begin to wobble. They can’t seem to do all they want to do for God, so they feel like failures. People let them down, temptations get them down, and discouragement fills their heart. The race has just begun, but they’re out of gas and ready to quit.

We need to help new Christians realize that an enthusiastic start is wonderful, but the race is won on faithfulness. We need to help them learn to hang in there faithfully despite the hurdles of disappointment, temptation, and discouragement that cause them to wonder if they should have stayed at the starting line.

When we begin to feel winded and long to collapse in the shade somewhere off the track, we must keep our eyes focused on the “world record holder” for this event. Hebrews 12:2 says, “Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” When the race gets tough, we must remember that Jesus not only showed us how to endure faithfully (in a much tougher race than ours, by the way), but by His Spirit He lives in us to keep our spiritual passion alive until we cross the finish line.

The Joy of Running

Avid runners tell me that after you run for a certain period of time you reach a kind of euphoric state. It’s called “runner’s high.” I have yet to discover this personally. I only reach greater states of pain. Over the years I have tried to get into running, but I admit I don’t enjoy it. I always start off with a bang. I get a pair of good running shoes and hit the course a few times. But then, after feeling the aches and pains, I give up. I can’t say that I equate my running with joy.

Paul wanted to be among the company of those who finished the race with joy. He knew it required discipline. He knew it could be painful at times. But he also knew the joy of running well and finishing strongly despite the obstacles and pain.

In our faithful service to Christ there is joy in the midst of all the pain and discouragement we might face. What is the joy? It’s the joy that comes from knowing who we are running for and who we are running with. The fact that
Jesus is our ever-present source of strength, our example of righteousness, and our goal makes the hard work and rigorous discipline worth it.

Knowing that Jesus is watching us keeps us going. Knowing that we will stand before Him one day makes us want to finish well. We are not competing with others, so we should avoid the temptation to compare ourselves with one another or to run for someone else's approval. We must run for Christ. People will let us down. But if we fix our eyes on Jesus, He will keep us going.

Some years ago my son Christopher, a good runner, was in a track meet and my wife and I went to cheer him on. After the race the announcer said over the loud speaker, “All right, you dads, now it's your opportunity to get out there and run. We're going to let all the fathers have a big race against each other.”

I thought, The glory days are here again! I casually walked out to the track, feeling smug that I just happened to be wearing my good running shoes. I began sizing up the competition—a bunch of dads with big bellies hanging over their belts—and thought, I'll leave 'em all in my dust. I'll win easily. No problem.

They fired the starting gun and we took off. But after only a few strides the pot-bellied dads started passing me. One, two, three, four, five, six—all of them were suddenly in front of me. I couldn't believe it. I was just getting started and pain was already wracking my body. So as we ran past a tree, I nonchalantly slowed down and walked off the track as though I never really intended to run the race. I was humiliated and in pain, so I quit.

I hope to do better in the race of life, with God's help. Exploding off the starting line may be impressive, but it's fruitless if we flame out and give up before reaching the finish line. Paul's emphasis was faithful, consistent ministry to Christ and others from beginning to end. I want to make his emphasis mine. There are no gold medals for blazing starts, only for gutsy finishes. I want to finish what I have begun and hear those golden words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

People with a passion and zeal for God are people fueled by the power of the Spirit, tied into Jesus by the Word, worship, fellowship, and prayer, and committed to a lifetime of faithful service. This type of passion for God cannot be kept “inside.” It is meant to be shared. Wherever we go, we should “sanctify the Lord in [our] hearts . . . always [being] ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15).

That was God's intention for the church from the beginning: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me” (Acts 1:8).

God has called you to reflect His righteousness and proclaim His love to a world in desperate need. You were not designed to be hidden under a basket, but to blaze brightly and give light to all who are around you (Matthew 5:14-16). It's only as God's fire ignites the hearts of those you touch for Him that you have any hope of seeing your world turned rightside up for the Lord.

But how is this accomplished? What must you understand about God's plan to reach your world in order to fully cooperate with Him and see it begin to happen? Part Two will offer some helpful answers.