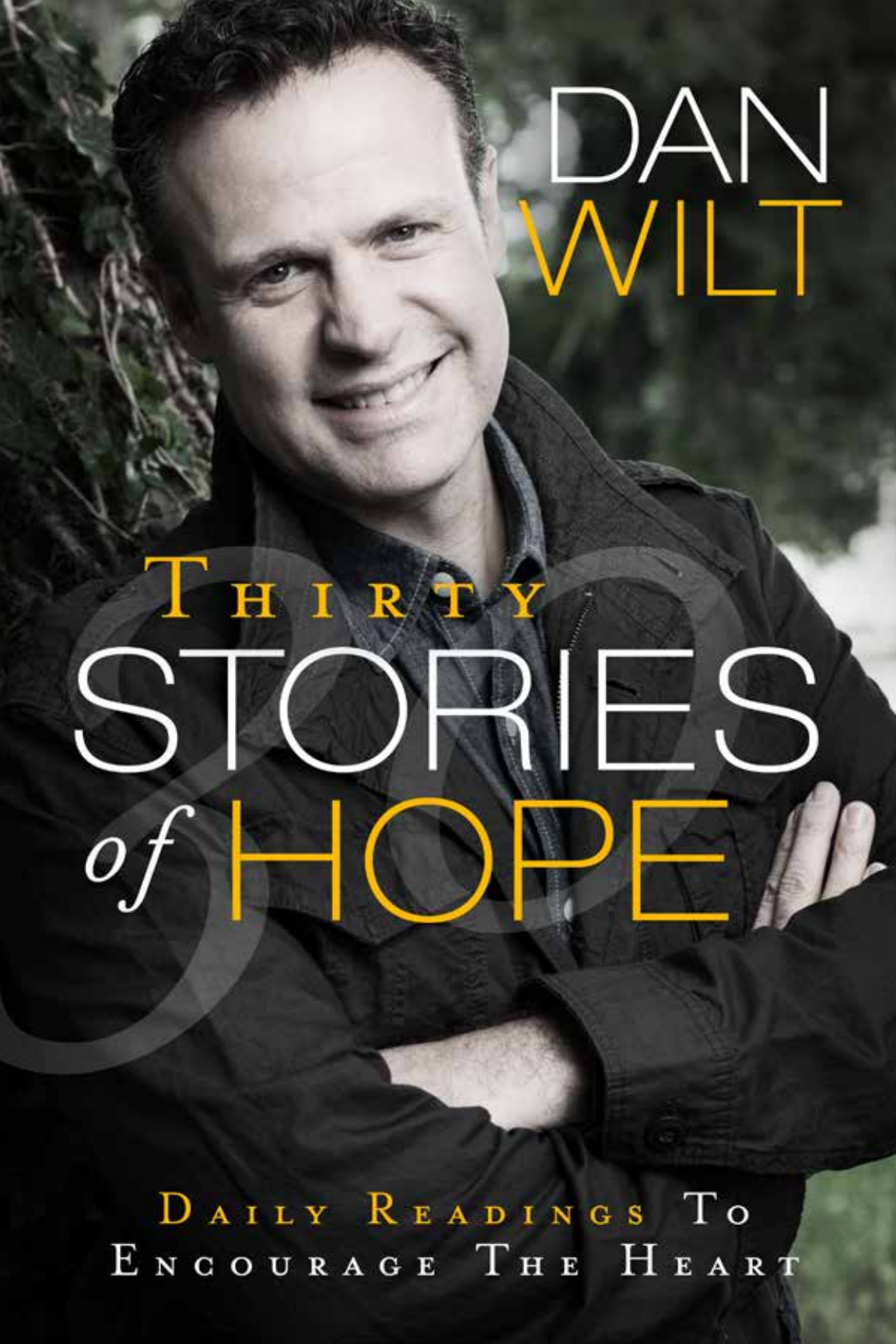

DAN
WILT
THIRTY
STORIES
of HOPE
DAILY READINGS TO
ENCOURAGE THE HEART

Thirty Stories *of* Hope

Daily Readings To Encourage The Heart

DAN WILT



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife,
Anita Siranouche Husnian Wilt.

The story we are telling together will last forever.
I could not be more grateful to God for you, and for what we share.

QUOTES

"Dan Wilt is a storyteller, a philosopher, a theologian. One cannot hear Dan without coming away with a greater sense of hope."

John Frost

"Hearing the power of God's words being given by Dan was exactly what I needed. I am forever grateful for Dan's voice today and will continue to listen to his CD in the car. He is a gifted storyteller, and I love stories!"

A Grateful Mom, TN

"No one marries passion with faith like Dan! Listening to his stories breaks through the clutter in my life and helps me focus on what's truly important."

A Young Dad, IL

"Dan's relatable stories always inspire me, and always make me smile; sometimes they make me laugh out loud!

Listener, PA

"Dan tells stories that speak of the hope of something beyond me, while tapping into exactly where my soul is at in the moment."

Listener, RI

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Our stories are never truly our own.
We are each connected by unseen silver threads to so many, and stories are the most fundamental way we share that connection.

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The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
I have put all my Hope in You.

My wife, Anita.
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My father and mother, John and Elsie Wilt.
My parents-in-law, Azad and Margaret Husnian.
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To those who contributed to the creation of this book:
I am unspeakably grateful to you for your generosity of spirit and resource; I trust that you will be blessed as you read these pages that you helped bring to life in this medium. To the Franklin Vineyard and my wider Vineyard family. You feed Hope in me.

Finally, to all those who listen to my simple stories on the radio:
Thank you. From the bottom of my heart, *thank you*. There could be no greater privilege for me than to tell stories from everyday life that illustrate a spiritual truth – and to have someone listen. The fact that you would tune in, looking for Hope to power your own courageous life, makes this a privilege all the more.

A companion *Thirty Stories Of Faith* CD or download is also available. See the back page for details.

PREFACE

When I was young boy growing up in a small town in South Central Pennsylvania, I would often go to a hill near my home on dark nights when the stars were vivid overhead. I would lay out on that small knoll, alone and dreaming, gazing up at the evening constellations. I imagined I was flying, up, up, up through the clouds and straight into the mysteries of space. Silently in my mind, I would make up stories about aliens, spaceships, and damsels that only *I* could rescue.

But those weren't the only stories buzzing through my brain. My mother is a coal miner's daughter born a few hours north of where I grew up. My father was raised near the Susquehanna River that ambles through the state. Fascinating stories from both sides of the family captured the thrill of careening down coal hills on cardboard, the monotony of eating potatoes endlessly during the depression, and that sober moment when ancestral digging revealed that Sheriff Wyatt Earp (think "O.K. Corral") was a part of our family line.

On that hill, I became not only a dreamer, but also my own personal *storyteller*. Without portable music to distract me, or flickering screens to mesmerize me, I could *think* in those moments – really *think* – and those halcyon days of youth are still precious to me.

In my later teens I came to a profound and deep faith in Jesus Christ, and in the transforming power of his life, death, and resurrection for all of humankind. Always drawn to the arts, I went on to become a musician, a songwriter, an actor, and an author. Then, when I became a worship leader and a pastor, I drew on stories to create teachable moments for the communities in which I served. It was during my pastoral years that I discovered my love of stories was only rivaled by my love of seeing others access Hope through those same stories.

That's what brings us to this moment, and the book in your hand.

The 30 stories in this volume are edited transcriptions of the actual stories I've told on the *Keep The Faith* radio show. Each week, at the time of this writing, nearly 2 million listeners find their way to the stories, songs, and communicators that make up the show. I have the privilege of being one of those voices people hear.

My job is to take a memory of my grandfather, a random act of kindness between neighbors, or a personal experience like sudden unemployment and unpack how the follower of Jesus can better face fear, offer forgiveness, grieve the loss of a loved one, pursue personal dreams, receive second chances, and learn to pray.

These brief stories come from miraculous encounters in the most mundane situations, divine appointments in the daily duties of life. Each simple story here has formed me, by Love, before it has ever touched anyone else. It's my sincere hope that a few of these 30 stories offer you a moment of encouragement, a drop of thirst-quenching Hope, for your courageous life.

On a practical note, I've included a *Reader's Guide* section after the stories for further reflection and encouragement. There you'll find a few thoughts from me about how each particular story illustrates a vital life principle. Each section in the *Reader's Guide* also offers some direct, practical encouragements to help you move forward in that area of your life. Individuals and small groups may benefit from this.

It is a privilege to share these stories with you. If they touch you in any way, and cause you to think of someone else who might be encouraged by them, please make sure they get a copy. Hope restores lives – saves lives – every day. Let's be as generous with it as we can.

Dan Wilt
Franklin, Tennessee, August 2013

INTRODUCTION

Hope is a powerful word. You may have used it, like me, once or twice in the past week. You may have said, "I hope I can meet my bills this month," or "I hope I can see that concert," or "I hope you remembered to take out the trash!" Hope can be a desire, a wish, or an expectation that something *good* lies ahead.

But is there more to Hope than simply longing for our desires, wishes, or expectations to materialize? Something inside of us tells us that Hope is as necessary to our lives as food or water. We begin to get a glimpse into the basic necessity of Hope by analyzing what happens in peoples' lives when they have it – and what happens in peoples' lives when they don't.

What Hope Can Do

Hope, stirred within us, can move us to *change*. In just the right doses, Hope can literally alter our minds, our attitudes, and our actions. Science tells us that Hope even alters our physical bodies. One minute we are stuck thinking one way, spiraling recklessly down into our self-carved pit of fear. Then, in the very next moment, a word of Hope can make us feel alive, refocused, brave, encouraged – ready to cut our way through a black forest of doubt to reach a bright, new destination.

Without hope, we know what happens from raw experience. People resign themselves to dark, sad existences. Relationships crumble into dust. Addictions rise to fill the soul-cavity growing inside. Suicides scar families. Divorce splits homes. Tribes, communities, and societies begin to, sometimes violently, come apart at the seams.

A simple verse, lifted from the pages of Proverbs in the Bible, pronounces the central place of Hope in a fulfilled life:

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick;
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."

Proverbs 13:12 NIV

Hope-dealers everywhere know the power of this simple, 4-letter word. Presidents use the word in slogans to inspire the nation – *and* to encourage us to believe in their programs. Marketers use the word to get us to appreciate their next product – *and* to believe it's worth every penny of our hard-earned money. Experts (in any field) use the word to encourage us to give them our trust – *and* to get us connected to an organization they've created.

Suffice it to say, Hope in any form is powerful medicine for what ails us. But true Hope, lasting Hope, will never be found in a President's promises, a Marketer's products, or an Expert's systems.

Why? Because human beings will eventually, if not inevitably, fail us. The promises coming from endless sources can only be kept if the promise is truly within one's power to fulfill. I can keep my promise to my son to give him a new laptop for his high school graduation present – but I can't promise him that his future will be without difficulty.

A New Definition Of Hope

And that brings us to it. Daily life is full of needs, desires, expectations, and dreams that no human being – including us – can ultimately fulfill. Who can promise to bring peace to the desolations of the heart, to comfort the ragged soul in tragedy, to apply resurrection balm to the sting of death? Who can make such

promises, great and small, and consistently fulfill them in both the present and future?

Hope now takes on a vibrant, more transcendent definition. Hope that lasts is the Hope we all crave: *an unyielding expectation of good that comes from knowing Someone who can deliver on His promises; promises that concern the human heart, the world in which we live, and the eternity that sprawls before us.*

That *Someone*, you and I and multitudes across history have discovered, is *Jesus*. Jesus has made God's promises to us come to life in full, vivid Technicolor. The Scriptures record these promises for us, promises telling us that God's extraordinary goodness is spilling over into our ordinary lives. Here is just one of the promises that only Jesus can fulfill:

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Romans 8:28 NIV

In other words, Jesus is the Someone who has your back, who is with you in every circumstance, and who is ultimately in charge of your present and your future. He alone can bring healing good out of horrible evil; resurrection's life out of insurrection's death. No president, marketer, or expert can promise you that kind of Hope. Jesus, however, can.

Hope Trumps Despair

When Jesus compassionately looked into the eyes of a man who had just lost his little girl (Mark 5), he understood that human beings are quick to despair. Our moods rise and fall with our circumstances, and whether we've lost our keys, our job, or someone we love, despair is

always waiting in the shadows to suck us in, isolate us, and break us.

Hope is the only true remedy for Despair.

What Hope-powered words did Jesus speak to the man in the face of his crisis? "Don't be afraid; just believe" (Mark 5:35-36 NIV).

Over the last few years of recording these brief "stories of encouragement" aired on *Keep The Faith*, I've discovered that all of us need to hear Jesus' words, again and again, as each day's challenges confront us:

"Don't be afraid; just believe."

Everyone has some hidden battle with despair going on inside of their souls almost every day of their lives. Our fears and worries may be different, but they all stem from the same root system. Despair is our common enemy, and Jesus didn't come to calm it or counsel it – he came to defeat it.

How Stories Bring Hope

Amazingly enough, I have found that a simple story, with a simple lesson that calls us back to Hope again, can be enough to encourage us to get up and fight for our lives against despair.

Listeners have kindly told me that the everyday stories included in this book, whether they be about a moment with my grandfather, a group of boys making snow cones, or my journey through unemployment, have been helping them to find the light of Hope streaming through the clouds of their circumstances.

Stories can give us the strength to tell our own stories in a new light, and even to "make encouragement contagious" when we tell others.

Like ancient travelers, we need Hope-filled stories, Scriptures, and songs to inspire us along our journey. We need Hope-filled friends, family, and faith communities to carry us through our next challenge. More than anything, we need the God of Hope to transform our minds, our attitudes, and our emotions with His lasting Hope.

Have The Courage To Hope Again

Every day I talk to people who are facing the battles of their lives. Divorce, cancer, aging, shattered dreams, unemployment, financial crisis, wayward children – all of these challenges are being faced on the frontlines by people whose courage is often remarkable to me.

It will take courage for you to hold on to Hope today. Your heart will be embattled on every side. But please remember as you step forward – Hope is found in a Person, and that Person is on your side. Lean into Hope, into Jesus, with everything you've got. You'll make it.

May these brief stories remind you of your own, and contribute to you coming back to Jesus time and time again for Hope. No one else is smart enough, good enough, kind enough, rich enough, or talented enough to be the eternal Hope you and I need.

Take Hope; God is working in your story right now.

"…I'll show up and take care of you as I promised and bring you back home. I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out – plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for."

Jeremiah 29:10b-11 (*The Message*)

01

JOY IS FOUND IN A PERSON

{ Joy }

If you're anything like me, you'll recognize that we often think of joy as something that *happens* to us. And yet, joy seems to be outside of our control; we simply hope joy will come, and usually our experience reveals that it is fleeting. Joy does not come to us as often as we would like it to. The word "happiness" begins with the prefix "hap" – which literally means *chance*. But joy is something completely different.

My grandfather, as he was dying of heart disease in his 60s, would sit on his front porch with me on a swing, his oxygen mask on and his little cup of ice chips in hand (all the liquid he was allowed to have). We would slowly swing back and forth together while he poured his wisdom into my teenage heart.

He would talk to me about girls, about work, and about what it means to have a fulfilled life. At one point he said to me, "Dan, I want you to never forget this: Joy is not something that happens to you; true Joy is found in knowing a *Person*.

Early in the morning on the day my grandfather died, I was sitting with him at his bedside. He was gripping my hand and in his delirium, he was calling out for old army buddies, for his mommy, and for others that came to his unfiltered mind.

Then, suddenly, he stopped.

He grabbed my hand with as much strength as he had when he was healthy, and he looked me in the eye. "Daniel!" he said with steel in his voice, "Enjoy your life, enjoy your life, enjoy your life! Jesus will

take care of you. I love you, I love you…." His voice trailed off as he slipped back into his delirium.

I was stunned. With tears in my eyes, I recognized that my grandfather had left me a legacy in that moment.

When he said, "Enjoy your life," I knew exactly what he meant. He meant for me to place the One who is Joy at the center of my bright days and dark nights, and to revel in the family and friends that He would give me along my journey.

My grandfather passed on that day – into the waiting arms of His Lord Jesus. For him, his Joy was now complete.

I have never forgotten that day. Nor have I forgotten that Joy – true Joy – is found in knowing a Person. Joy is meant to be experienced daily by constant attention to this priority relationship in our lives.

We allow Christ's Joy to indwell us, and encourage us along this journey. That is what it means to enjoy life. As a worshiper, I encourage you – pursue the Person who is Joy.

"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory."

Psalm 73:23-24 NIV

02

THE GOOD FRIDAY JOB LOSS
{ Fear }

You may have had the experience, as I have, of waking up one day to face one of your greatest fears. I had an unwelcome event occur in my own life just a few years ago; and it was similar to one that many are experiencing during this season of economic hardship. It was the difficult situation of losing my job.

On a Friday, I was called in to meet with my overseers, who were very compassionate as they sat down with me to break the news. After hearing that my role would be terminated due to financial stresses in the company, I remember wandering from the office that day to get my head on straight, to try to think clearly as I prepared to tell my wife. I literally felt like a ghost floating to my car, empty and without hope – feeling as though God had abandoned me.

I got in my car, and drove some distance, alone with my thoughts. I couldn't even pray; I was so disoriented. Then I saw a church off to the left hand side of the road. I drove in and parked in the farthest corner of the vast, empty parking lot.

I turned off the car, glanced to see if anyone was around, and let it all out. I pounded on the steering wheel as hot tears streamed down my cheeks. I said, "Why God? Why? Why would I face this loss at this time in my life? It's already been such a hard road for our family, and here I am – unemployed in a place I've never lived before, after moving here only a few months ago. I'm afraid, and I don't know what to do."

You know, the funny part is that I was so disoriented that I only later realized that it was Good Friday. I remember so vividly how the Lord,

in that moment of my primal anger and honesty, began to lovingly whisper to me.

"You know, Dan, today is Good Friday. Today is a day for you to mourn and grieve and be bewildered. A few thousand years ago, others felt like this, too. You have faced a great fear. But I want to tell you that if you'll walk with Me, we'll walk into tomorrow – which is Holy Saturday. You will still be reeling from having faced your fear, from the loss and the pain of it all, but you will begin to see shades of hope, glimmers of possibility, moving through your heart and your mind.

Dan, I want to remind you that when we face our fear, there is always a Resurrection Sunday awaiting us. You will take My hand, you will rise with Me from this, and we will move forward into the future."

Fear is like a wall in our lives; we come up to it, though we've done everything in our power to avoid it. Some people even form their entire personalities around avoiding their fears. They try to go around their wall of fear, or they turn and run away from their fear.

One of our greatest acts of worship is to face our fears with Christ, to move through the veil, and to become who He designed us to be on the other side.

"Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track."

Proverbs 3:5-6 *(The Message)*

03

A SPECIAL FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE

{ Relationships }

Prioritizing our most important relationships can be hard work. Some time ago I was scheduled to do a conference that had been planned for over a year. It was a few states away from our home, and I was the main speaker. I was committed. I had many responsibilities during the event, and I was prepared to meet them.

When the conference was just one week away, my wife came to me. "Dan, I just heard that on the Saturday while you're away there will be a Father-Daughter dance to kick off Abbi's school prom. You know she would love for you to be there."

I knew I was in the middle of a priority test.

"What do I do?" I thought. "I need to honor my commitment and the investment my hosts have made in getting me to the conference. And yet I have a responsibility to be present for my daughter, especially at an important time in her life like this."

I decided to contact my conference hosts, with no idea how they would react. They were very understanding, and we worked out a way I could leave the event early. I would fly back, drive straight to the dance, change my clothes in the venue's bathroom, and be on the floor in the nick of time.

Anything could go wrong with the timing, but it was worth a try. In my absence, the conference hosts announced why I had left early, and the value of prioritizing our most precious relationships was spread to the entire gathering.

I danced with my daughter for one song, and it was a beautiful, memorable moment. I've never regretted the decision. Sometimes prioritizing the ones we love takes great sacrifice – even the sacrifice of what we think is our impeccable work ethic.

In my experience, the enduring nature of our most precious relationships is what we'll care about in the end. No one on their deathbed wishes they had prioritized their job more. Everyone thinks about their loved ones.

Look for the moments God is giving you to connect deeply with someone you love today – and seize the moment when it comes.

"My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God."

1 John 4:7 *(The Message)*

04

EXTREME ROOM MAKEOVER
{ Loving Your Neighbor }

You've probably had experiences in your life when you've been at a point of need and a neighbor helped you out. Some of our dearest friends have a son with special needs. The families in their surrounding neighborhood would watch his Mom and Dad, every day, pulling the little boy's wheelchair up and down the steps of the front porch of their home.

In the neighborhood there were handymen, an interior decorator, and a photographer. They all got together and decided that they were going to do an "extreme room makeover" for this little boy and his family.

The handymen built a ramp going up to their front porch to make his comings and goings easier. Then other "conspirators of kindness" went to work on the boy's bedroom. While the family was on vacation, the interior decorator and the team of neighbors went into his room, padding and cushioning the walls for him. But they didn't stop there.

They built him furniture with different textures and fixtures that he could explore. They even used cedar, so the boy could smell the room. Finally, the photographer did a beautiful photo shoot of the family that now hangs on the wall of their home.

Those neighbors were involved in a conspiracy of kindness. What made their actions so special was that the little boy was blind and deaf. It would have been easy to say, "What can I possibly do to help in that scenario?" But, with a little creativity, we all have a gift to give. Those neighbors were actively looking for a way to "strengthen the

weak" around them.

In doing so, they realized that their strength had a reason, a purpose. It's not only the weak who need the strong; it is the strong who need the weak. Those neighbors realized that their lives were designed to help other people within their reach.

Do you have neighbors in your world that are in need of your unique gift - a gift that only you can give?

"So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do."

John 13:14-15 *(The Message)*

05

THE LESSON OF THE SNOW CONE

{ Second Chances }

It sure feels good to get a second chance. The other day, some little boys in our neighborhood got together to sell snow cones in their driveway. I wanted to fund their efforts, so I went over to purchase two snow cones.

I don't even like snow cones, but I wanted them to believe that their efforts were worth something.

In their excitement at having a customer, one of the boys grabbed the bowl of ice cubes and rushed for the snow cone maker. He tripped along the way, and all of the ice cubes spilled on the ground. His shoulders slumped. His friends' faces dropped in disbelief. It was a Norman Rockwell moment if there ever was one.

His mother immediately jumped in. "Ask Mr. Wilt if he can come back later! We'll make some new ice cubes and make sure that he has the best snow cone ever!" The boys asked, and of course, I was more than happy to oblige.

Why? I was on their side, and I wanted them to succeed.

Those boys needed a second chance to make me a snow cone. We all make mistakes, but grace and creative solutions with God are always there to meet us on the other side.

Maybe you need a second chance today. God is backing you up and wants you to succeed. If you're struggling right now with a mistake you've made, know that today there is grace to meet you on the other side of your blunder.

When I went back later to get my snow cone, the smile on that boy's face was even bigger than it had been before.

I don't think his smile came from the fifty cents I gave him for the snow cone. I think he smiled because he had tasted the Hope that comes with a second chance.

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 NIV

06

THE ARMENIAN PRINCESS

{ Forgiveness }

All of us have people in our lives whom we have seen walk through tremendous trials and difficulties with an extraordinary grace. Instead of wallowing in self-pity or allowing a root of bitterness to bury itself in the soil of their soul, they seem to come out better rather than bitter. They rise from their struggle more generous, more extravagantly caring than it seems they were before. We admire those people – and watch their lives closely.

One of those people, for me, is my wife's grandmother, Siranouche Husnian. She died some years ago at the rich age of 96, and she was one of the last living survivors of the Armenian genocides, which took place under the Ottoman Turks at the turn of the 20th century. She was an amazing woman. One evening, my wife and I asked her to tell her unbelievable story to our children. They were fairly young, but we felt they should hear the dramatic details of her journey straight from her own lips.

She told them how her family, living among the beautiful orchards in their city of Urfa, was awakened in the middle of the night by the shouts of Turkish soldiers. She was in her pre-teen years. Her entire family was marched outside along with the others in her village; the men were corralled into the churches – which were then burned to the ground. The women and children were eventually marched through the Syrian Desert until they died. She told us story after story about the atrocities that happened to her people.

To end our evening, she told a long, miraculous tale of how she and her brothers were rescued from the death marches. This epic story, to be told another time, left us all in stunned silence.

Then one of my children spoke up, “Do you forgive them?” She was asking about those who had killed her parents. Grandma Siranouche looked at my child and a big, beautiful smile spread across her face. This small, frail, but bright-eyed woman of God answered, “Of course I forgive them, honey! Unforgiveness does not hurt them; it only hurts us.”

As you can imagine, I sat in awe. What was she saying? What gift was she giving to my children? There was no vengeance or hatred behind her steady voice, though many would say she had every right to be bitter. No. This matriarch of the faith was saying that when we allow bitterness and unforgiveness to take root in our lives, to go deep into the soil of our hearts, we are only harming ourselves. When we allow self-pity to encapsulate us in its doom, it chokes out the fragrance of Hope within us. Only forgiveness can release that fragrance.

Your life and my life is a sweet flower with a pleasing fragrance never to be destroyed by a poisonous root of unforgiveness.

It may interest you to know that her name, Siranouche, is the name of an ancient Armenian princess. Her name literally means “lovely woman” or as she told us, “sweet flower.”

Maybe you have struggled to forgive someone. A worshiper of Jesus chooses to take offenses and hurts and place them before God on the altar of His love. We forgive, we let go, and we give those people and what they’ve done back into the capable hands of God. We allow our lives to be marked by a generous fragrance of caring and goodness to those around us, free from the stench of a vindictive heart.

As we have been forgiven, so we too must forgive.

"…And forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors."

Matthew 6:12 NIV

07

BUSINESS CARDS OF THE HEART
{ Identity }

The lifelong quest to discover our identity is a struggle that is common to us all. We are constantly moving through life trying to figure out who we are. We may know where we have come from, and we may know where we are at right now – but we are still in an ongoing process of figuring out what really makes us tick. We all want to have meaning and significance to our lives, understanding what God's purpose for us is all about.

I happen to like business cards. I like their design and texture, as well as what they represent. I especially like looking at other peoples' business cards to see what they have written on them – particularly as titles under their name. There are some pretty fancy titles that people give themselves, or have been given by others.

Imagine your identity being fully captured on a business card. What would you write on your "identity" business card? Of course, you would see your name there, but then (if you're like me) you would try to pack under that name every single, admirable role that you fulfill.

I would make my business card so full of titles that every time I looked at it I would feel as though I had *value*. Whenever I felt that my life was not worth much, or that I was not going anywhere, I could look at that card and be able to see exactly who I was.

I imagine that God would take those business cards at the end of every day when our head hits the pillow, with all those roles written on them saying who we think we are, and He would smile at us with great love. Then He would turn, as we drift off to sleep, and do some editing. In the morning, He would hand our business card back to us.

All the roles we had worked so hard to put on that card the day before would be missing. I imagine that at the beginning of each day, the business card that God would hand to you and me would simply say our names… and *son* or *daughter* beneath it.

When I put my children to bed at night when they were small, I would say to them, "I love you, not because of *what you do* but because of *who you are*. I love you because you are my son or my daughter." Receive that solid foundation for your identity today – and a new business card.

Maybe you are getting your identity from the various roles you fulfill or from the affirmation of others around you. Know that your identity is found in the fact that you are loved and valued, without even lifting a finger. You have an identity because you are a son or daughter of God, and that identity is as God's beloved child.

"We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright!

We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!"

I Corinthians 13:12 *(The Message)*

08

A 20-SOMETHING DREAM

{ Pursuing Dreams }

We've all had moments when we realize our great expectations are simply not meeting with reality. I recently was talking with a young friend who had high expectations for what his life would be like by the time he hit 25.

He told me he was sure he'd have a great job, a great girlfriend or wife, and a shimmering future bright and lit up before him.

Then, he turned 25. He realized that life had gotten in the way of his goals. He was physically sick, he didn't have a girlfriend, and his dream job had been replaced by a minimum wage grind. His expectation was hit with a Mack truck of *reality*. His pipe dreams were shattered in front of his eyes.

In the gap between our expectations and our reality, we can get out of balance and lose sight of our dreams. We rush around trying to make everything "just a little better," or we do the opposite – we check out, we stop risking, and we settle for a life devoid of adventure.

In my experience, balance and contentment in life come from allowing quiet trust and proactivity to run hand in hand. Our actions are then guided by a sustaining belief that God has a dream for us. Our work is to make sure we are doing our part to see God's dream realized. Because the dream belongs to God, when our life takes a detour that we didn't expect we have the emotional capacity to handle it without unhooking from His call. We are always changed in the process of dream interruptions, because God's greatest dream will always be that your heart and mine belong to Him.

The focus of our dreams shouldn't be on our wish list of expectations all being fulfilled. Rather, our focus should be on becoming people who walk in remarkable trust, and who are willing to take great risks at God's bidding.

It is God's dream we want to fulfill; not our own. Keeping God's call in focus, we are tied neither to our own fantasies nor to our own laziness. Fantasies begin and end with our fulfillment. True dreams begin and end with God's desires – God's fulfillment – being primary in our lives.

Keeping our focus clear, we can remain caught up in God's greater story for by continually asking Him to conform our dreams to His – even when the dream seems far out of reach.

Maybe you feel like your dreams are far away from you. I want to encourage you to stay focused on God's dreams for you, to reconnect to the foundations of your faith that build trust, and to proactively join God in seeing His expectations for your life come to pass no matter your circumstance.

"Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder."

Romans 12:11-12 *(The Message)*

09

STUCK AT STARBUCKS
{ Prayer }

We all want to believe that God hears our prayers, and that He has ways of answering those prayers that fit with His highest purposes.

Often I pray silently, or out loud while I'm driving. I don't do that all of the time, but I try to keep my heart in a posture of listening to hear God's whispers as to what I should pray about. I try to consciously welcome God (even if I'm busy) to bring any interruptions that He knows will serve His plan for my day.

The other day, I was driving down a street in our city. As I drove along, I saw a Starbucks on the opposite side of the road. I had a compelling feeling that I should stop by – not for a specialty coffee, but for some other reason. Knowing that I need to make mistakes in order to grow in hearing God's voice, like a child learning to walk, I got into the left lane, and turned toward the store.

As I pulled into the Starbucks parking lot, I saw a family friend from our church – stranded with her car in the middle of the street. It was blocking all the coffee-crazed traffic, and people were having to go around her. She was very frustrated, as were a few of the people being inconvenienced I'm sure.

I was amazed in the next few moments to see that a few others also seemed to appear from out of nowhere to help her figure out what was wrong with the car. We stood there, chatting, and some light-hearted laughter rose as we tried to figure out what to do. Our friend was most probably comforted by both the laughter and the knowledge that others cared.

She was also probably encouraged that God would care enough to send us all her way.

Sometimes, I think prayer is less about *talking* to God, and more about *listening* to God. Maybe today God wants you to be the answer to a prayer that someone else is fervently praying.

If we're listening, we might have the privilege of joining God in something He's doing to encourage someone in a very special way.

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way
you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Galatians 6:2 NIV

10

THE STONE OF A SONG
{ Worship }

We all know what it's like to face our fears on a field of war – and to be shaking in our boots as we do. Fear is like a battle-hardened giant coming after us. In the biblical story of David, when a giant taunted him, his people, and his God, David grabbed five smooth stones.

With only five round rocks and the experience he had gained from slinging them at predators pursuing his sheep, young David took down the giant he faced.

A few years ago, someone close to me went through a horrifying situation. He was kidnapped as a humanitarian aid worker in Northern Kenya. He and two others were held hostage in Somalia, and after a number of months were miraculously freed. His emotions surely ran wild during this unthinkable time, and there were few things I could imagine that would have kept him from being paralyzed with fear throughout the ordeal.

At one point in our conversation, I asked him if the music of worship had played any part in quieting his heart or giving him faith that he might be rescued.

His answer filled my heart, and to this day is a reminder to me as to how important a song can be.

"Do you know Rita Springer?" he asked.

Rita happens to be a good friend, and he began to recount to me how he would sing her songs and those of others, over and over in the silence of his mind.

While no angel appeared to break their chains of captivity, the songs were a "place he could go" for moments of focus and sanity in his life-threatening trial.

Maybe you're facing your own giant right now. Your situation may not be as dramatic as the one described above, but the emotions are every bit as real.

I believe that a song in our heart can be like one of David's giant-slaying, smooth stones. The Scriptures say that we are to hide God's word in our hearts. It also says that God gives us songs of deliverance in the moment we most need them. I encourage you to hide songs of faith in your heart.

Then, in your next fear-battle, face your giant by singing those songs out loud to God, remembering again who He is, and remembering that He is completely trustworthy. He can quiet you, rescue you, support you, and strengthen you in the middle of the fray.

"Be strong. Take courage. Don't be intimidated. Don't give them a second thought because God, your God, is striding ahead of you. He's right there with you. He won't let you down; he won't leave you."

Deuteronomy 31:6 *(The Message)*

11

219,000 HOURS OF MARRIAGE

{ Forgiveness }

If you're married, or even if you're not, you'll know that we all make thousands of mistakes over a lifetime. If we think we don't make mistakes, married life has a way of reminding us that we are fallible human beings. Many years spent living with one person create a world where you simply can't hide your flaws anymore – your faults will reveal themselves.

In my own marriage, my wife and I have had plenty of opportunities to both forgive and to ask forgiveness. Marriage takes tremendous patience, and nothing less than the grace of God can enable two people to ceaselessly forgive one another over 10, 30, or 50 years. In our home we work hard to create as many opportunities as possible for practicing patience – so that we can master it! Having been with each other now for many moons, I think my wife has earned a black belt in patience – while I remain a novice.

This year Anita and I marked our 25th anniversary. We went away on a special trip together to renew our friendship and celebrate our milestone. While we were eating breakfast one morning, we decided to count up exactly how many hours we had been married.

When we calculated the number, we were astounded. Being married for 25 years, for 24 hours a day is no small feat. (Note: The nighttime hours count, too. When someone is stealing your covers at 3 am, or one of your older children is not home yet and someone needs to find out why, marriage is still in full operation.)

Over thousands of hours, we realized that neither of us did everything right all the time. And yet our marriage has a rich,

passionate, imperfect beauty to it. We realized how important it has been to be quick to forgive one another throughout the day. Exerting patience as our "new normal" response, when the wear and tear of life has frayed our edges, has been a lifelong lesson for us.

How many hours did we count that we had been married?

You guessed it from the title – 219,000 hours. That's 219,000 hours of learning how to serve each other with the gifts of patience and forgiveness.

We plan to keep working on getting better at giving both.

"There's more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next.

In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary – we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!"

Romans 5:3-5 *(The Message)*

12

THE BUSINESSMAN'S WIFE
{ Dealing With Loss }

Recently I had an experience I'll never forget. I was sitting with two friends in a public spot, when a businessman, trembling and shaken, walked up to us.

"I've been listening to you," he said, "and I can tell that you are men of prayer and faith. My wife has been given less than a week to live because of cancer. I don't know what to do. I don't know how I'll live without her. I don't know; I just don't know."

He was beside himself with anguish.

My friend put his hand on the man's arm and said these words: "We are your brothers, and we will pray for you now. Know that if God sees fit to heal her, we rejoice with you. But if God sees fit to take her home, He will be with you in this, and you will find your way."

He touched the businessman's arm and prayed for him, and you could see a visible sense of comfort momentarily changing the distraught husband's countenance.

I have had the privilege of walking with many people through the death of someone they love. It is one of the most difficult things a human being can do – to let go of someone they treasure, maybe more than their own lives, as they entrust them to the heart of God.

If you are in a time of grieving or loss right now, I'd like to say the following words to you:

"You will get through this. You will find your strength again, and you will find life on the other side of this great chasm. Hold on to Jesus

with everything you've got."

The promise of God is not that we will never lose someone dear to us; the promise of God is that He will be with us in those moments and in the moments that follow – to be leaned on, and trusted in – as we walk with Him through our grief.

'"Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I."'

Psalm 61:1-2 NIV

13

OUR EASTER HOPE

{ Hope }

Recently I spoke to a good friend who had a very pressing question. He and his wife were going through some tremendous difficulties, specifically with their older children. There are addictions, broken relationships, and daily crises spawned by these troubles that fill their days with wrestling.

He said to me, "Dan, I need to ask an honest question. How can we find hope in a world where it seems that thousands of prayers are left unanswered – while so few are answered?" His question was born out of the real pain that shoots through his and his wife's life. I have been a pastor long enough to know that quick answers don't fly when someone is in the middle of a hellish onslaught.

My normal response to these hard questions is to take my time answering, to speak directly to the felt needs of the person asking the question, and to help them search for frequencies of Hope vibrating through what may seem like a hopeless situation.

In every circumstance, I've found that there are reasons to give thanks that we must actively discover – even if we just come back to thanking God we're still alive through it all! As writer Ann Voskamp suggests, the "hard eucharisteo" – the hard act of giving thanks in severe difficulty – can unveil the gifts that are glimmering in our dark nights of the soul.

However, in this case, my response was uncharacteristically immediate. It was the season of Easter, and these words of explosive faith came bursting from my heart:

"Resurrection will occur," I said with resolve. "God will right this world. All things will be made new. If our Hope lies in anything less than Christ's resurrection, in anything other than in His transforming life healing and restoring all things one day, then our hope is vain and empty."

I felt like I had just unloaded a summary of everything I believe about suffering and the trajectory of Hope in our lives.

I believed my words, as did my friend, and I still believe them to this day. Asking questions in the face of our suffering is good and right. God is not put off by our questions. But sometimes we can get lost in them, leading us to give up on God when His answers are just taking a lifetime to emerge. At some point, like the saints throughout the Scriptures, we have to make the faith jump no matter how we feel or what the bad news stations in our mind are feeding us. God's best answers to our prayers may only one day be revealed to us when we see our resurrected Lord face to face.

God is the beginning and end of every story that occurs in your life and mine. Every sleepless night and every worrisome day will one day find its complete meaning in God's grand Story, in God's great meaning. I encourage you – put your Hope in Christ.

The plot of God's Story is not finished yet.

"…Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it!"

2 Corinthians 5:17 *(The Message)*

14

FASTING FEAR AND WORRY
{ Fear }

We've all been visited at one point or another by those unwelcome guests – fear and worry. Last year, my wife and I decided that we were going to take 40 days during the Lent season to give up some things to which we had become accustomed.

Now don't get crazy on me here – we didn't give up coffee, and we didn't give up chocolate – we decided that we were going to give up *fear* and *worry*.

As we went through those 40 days, we were faced with daily moments of emotional hunger that fear and worry had formerly filled. Those twin confections were always right there for the taking when any difficulty occurred, urging us to indulge by sinking our spiritual teeth into their momentary, hollow satisfaction.

We'd look at each other, and with ferocity and resolve in our eyes we would remind ourselves: "Right – worry and fear are not options. We are fasting those, till our hunger for them is replaced by a new hunger for God." Audibly spoken thanksgiving proved to be a satisfying substitute that filled our souls with something healthier than the familiar fix of unrestrained anxiety. It took some time, but a new habit began to form in us, and that habit of giving thanks has permanently changed the way we handle fearful moments.

Maybe you're facing fear and worry right now in the situations that are surrounding you. Let me encourage you to try our experiment – make worry and fear not an option. Jesus said that worry won't add one day to our lives.

Worry may seem like the right thing to do when a crisis hits, like it's a "useful" thing to do. But in reality, it won't help us one little bit in getting through our circumstance. In fact, it will scrape a deeper hole into our soul.

Place your worries and cares in the hands of God. Give up fear and worry for a season, and replace them with words of thanks and constant reminders of God's promise to never leave you or forsake you.

As an old emotional habit dies, a new one will form. We think you'll be pleased with the results.

"If you decide for God, living a life of God-worship, it follows that you don't fuss about what's on the table at mealtimes or whether the clothes in your closet are in fashion. There is far more to your life than the food you put in your stomach, more to your outer appearance than the clothes you hang on your body."

Matthew 6:25 *(The Message)*

15

THE TANK IS ON EMPTY

{ Encouragement }

All of us face spiritually "empty" spots in life for which we need some fresh fuel to keep going. The other day I had an experience that I hope you will never have.

This experience happens only to those who realize, when they're driving along, that one's gas tank is not only on empty – but the needle has actually turned on the fuel gauge light for the last 20-30 minutes. At this point, one is truly "running on fumes."

As I looked at that gas gauge, I kicked myself for not gassing up the last time I had the chance. I saw the "E" at the bottom and the bright light beside it. Then I saw the "F" at the top.

Suddenly, two phrases popped into my mind, representing those two letters. "E" stood for the phrase, "empty of encouragement." "F" stood for the phrase "full of faith." I began to think about how, in our lives as worshipers, it is so easy to lose track of the faith-fuel we need to keep growing into Hope.

Maybe we weren't watching our gauge, and now we're running empty on spiritual encouragement. We want to be full of faith, but the realities of life have preoccupied us and pushed us to the edge of our resources. We get discouraged, and the empty light is on.

What did I do when I realized I might not make it to the gas station? I did what any North American male would do. I began to coast down hills in neutral. I waved people out of my way at stop signs so I didn't stop and stall the car. I even crossed multiple lanes of traffic (safely) to get to a downward incline that might get me to the gas station.

When we're desperate for juice, we'll do whatever it takes.

I rolled into the gas station, and the car stalled just as I came within hose length of that pump. I felt a sense of satisfaction – just like the one you feel when you're pumping gas and you release the pump handle right at an even dollar figure amount.

I got the pump out, and I filled the car with gas, rejoicing both in the fact that I made it without incident and that my "do-whatever-it-takes" driving skills had shown themselves to be road-worthy. The gas tank was full again, and I was ready to go. As soon as I got in, I remembered. I remembered to thank God for the little gifts, to thank God for the moments in which we have learned a lesson. Funny how that part always comes last.

Where are the places you can refuel your encouragement tank, especially when you're running near empty? Make sure they're on your map, in front of your eyes regularly, and loaded into your spiritual GPS. A song could be a fueling station for you at one point or gathering with a community of faith that is drawing near to God to worship together.

Know ahead of time where to go when you need a fresh fill-up of faith-fuel. And keep your gas tank filled – so you don't stall out in the middle of the road of life.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Hebrews 10:24-25 NIV

16

TWO CHILDREN, TWO UMBRELLAS
{ Forgiveness }

Maybe you've had an experience in your life where you were deeply hurt, by intention or by accident, and you had to choose whether or not you would forgive the infraction. I've known moments like that, and the hurt screamed for justice while my faith demanded a new-minded response.

When my daughters were just under 10, one of them emotionally wounded the other. She didn't intend to hurt her sister, but whatever happened caused quite a stir between them. My daughter came running up to me (the one who had been hurt) crying as she blurted out, "I am never forgiving her for what she did!" After I recovered from the shock of such an emotional display (I was still getting familiar with raising girls), I saw the situation as a teachable moment. A picture illustrating why forgiveness is such a necessary habit came to my mind. It was an illustration that someone had spoken to me years earlier.

I pulled my daughter aside, though she was reluctant as she licked her wounds. "Honey, there are two umbrellas in life. One is the 'umbrella of judgment.' Under that umbrella we put someone that we choose not to forgive, usually because we think it will hurt them in their heart and make them pay for messing up.

The other is the 'umbrella of forgiveness.' Under that umbrella, the one that we like others to put *us* under when we've hurt *them*, everyone can experience God's love and cleansing for what they've done. That's the umbrella that Jesus made available to us all when he died and rose again. We have the forgiveness of God, if we'll stand under that umbrella.

Now, the umbrella of judgment is the one we hold people under when we want them to 'get theirs.' Deep down, we don't want God or anyone to forgive them for what they did because it was so horrible. Does that make sense? Good. Now are you ready for the next part?" She nodded.

"When we hold someone under the umbrella of judgment, it means that we're stuck there too. We have to stay there if we want to hold them there. We can't be under both umbrellas at the same time." My daughter looked at me with big eyes and said, "Do you mean I'm under the umbrella of judgment if I hold her there?"

"Yes," I said. "Do you remember the Lord's Prayer you learned? It says, 'Lord, forgive us as we forgive those who have sinned against us.'" She nodded slowly, feeling the punch line coming.

Then her eyes got wide, and she stated matter-of-factly, "I want to be under the umbrella of forgiveness. I want God to forgive me and other people to forgive me too!" To that lucid moment I said, "Then you'll have to take your sister and put her under the umbrella of forgiveness with you. If that's where you want to be, you need to allow her to be there, too. You don't have to agree with what she did and you don't have to say that what she did was right, but you do need to put her under the umbrella of forgiveness so that God can be at work in her life, too."

Her response was quick and very adult-like. She said, "Daddy, I want to be under the umbrella of forgiveness, so I'll put her there with me too."

"If you have anything against someone, forgive – only then will your heavenly Father be inclined to also wipe your slate clean of sins."

Mark 11:25 *(The Message)*

17

I NEED A HUSBAND

{ Relationships }

Relationships are such a precious treasure to all of us. God gifts people to us, and they become our primary relationships in this life. They weave the threads of their lives in with ours and we become a different person through the tapestry formed by those connections. However, in the busyness and stress of life, you've probably experienced – as I have – that it's hard to find time for love. It's a challenge to find the energy, at the end of a long day, to carefully invest in those relationships that are the most important to us.

A number of years ago, I had the experience of coming home after a long day of pastoral work in our local church family. I remember walking in the door and dropping my briefcase with a thud in the entranceway. My then seven year-old daughter came running around the corner, eager to tell me about her day.

She chattered on, bubbling about her day in one long, run-on sentence. I remember looking at her as she shared with me the amazing things that had happened to her that day. I didn't realize that I wasn't actually looking *into* her eyes – I was looking *through* them. I was preoccupied. My mind and heart were full of other things, other people, and emotional residue from the day.

Sensing my lack of attention to her ramblings, my little girl scuffled off with a hug and a "Bye, Daddy!" – just as my wife came around the corner.

My bride put her hands on my shoulders and with a concerned look said, "Dan, you know I love you, but what your children need right now is not a pastor. Your children need a *daddy*. I don't need a

worship leader – I need a *husband*." I was busted, broken, and awakened with just a few words.

I realized in that moment that in my life as a worshiper, God had called me to give my primary attentions and energies to these precious people who were truly my first priority, my "First Church." It takes a choice to create time, make time, and find time to give affection and attention to those who are most near and dear to our heart.

They are gifts from God to us, and we to them. The worshiper's life is spent on these things, and on these people. Cultivating these relationships is paramount in importance to the God who we worship.

"But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua 24:15b NIV

18

THE GAS STATION OWNER
{ Loving Your Neighbor }

Hopefully you've had the experience of being helped by someone when you were in a moment of great need – someone who was ready to offer you a gift that would help to relieve your distress. Recently my wife went on a long car trip. About halfway through her journey, I got a call on my mobile phone.

Her voice was distraught, "Dan, I'm partway on the trip. I've run out of gas, and I forgot my purse. I have no credit cards and no way to pay for gas. We talked calmly for the next few minutes, and finally she went in to speak to the manager.

What happened next was unexpected and incredibly encouraging to her. The manager, after hearing her story said, "Ma'am, may I please give you a full tank of gas and get you on your way?" She was thrilled, and so surprised by what he said.

When she told me, I was surprised and grateful as well. In this skeptical day and age, we find few people who are so generous in caring for a stranger. There was joy in our hearts because someone decided that they were going to do something profoundly kind with the resources they had at their disposal.

Maybe you're in a situation where you have the opportunity to give to someone who has great need. Like my wife, that person may not know how to ask for what you could easily give.

I'd like to encourage you to look for the need and then make encouragement contagious by meeting that need.

Today, I am telling that story, and that gas station owner is encouraging many people to do radical acts of kindness in resistance to the self-serving spirit of the age.

Is there someone you know whose eyes are filled with need, and you could fill that need with faith and encouragement?

Let me encourage you to roll up your sleeves and be generous with your time, energy, or resources. You never who you are encouraging, and how far that story of God's provision, given through you, might one day reach.

"…And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.'"

Mark 12:31 NIV

19

NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

{ Second Chances }

We've all had experiences in our lives when we've blown it, and we feel like we could use a second chance. I was on an airplane recently and I sat beside a woman who, from the start of the flight, had a very gloomy look on her face. I could tell over the course of our journey that she was a woman who desperately needed someone to give her a second chance.

When we landed, everyone stood up to get their luggage out of the overhead bins, and the flight attendant's voice came on over the intercom. After he told us the particulars about the flights with which we all needed to connect, he said something that shocked me. "As you go, I want you to remember this: Somebody loves you and there's nothing you can do about it."

As soon as he said those words, all throughout the plane, a ripple of appreciative laughter began. Some people began to pat each other on the back; others were outwardly smiling at one another and reciting the words that the steward had just said. I believe they were repeating his words so that they would remember them when they told others later.

I looked at the woman beside me, and her countenance had completely changed. A huge smile was on her face, and I returned the grin. She looked me in the eye and said, "That's so true, isn't it? Somebody loves us, and there's nothing we can do about it."

What happened in that moment? I believe that woman felt like God – who is Love – was giving her a second chance. Maybe you're in that place right now in your life, where you've done something wrong or

you've lost your way – and you could really use a second chance.

Well, I'm here to tell you that you've already got one. Somebody loves you, and there is nothing you can do about it.

Take God's second chance; He's ready to give it to you right now.

"Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that."

Ephesians 5:1-2 *(The Message)*

20

THE FAILURE IN THE MIRROR
{ Self Worth }

You've probably found, as I have, that keeping up our self-worth when the world is bringing us down is no easy task. A number of years ago, when the career track I was on came to a crashing end, I began to feel like an utter failure.

I couldn't shake it. Failure was like a robe I would put on every morning. I'd wander aimlessly into the bathroom and catch that first, startling glimpse of myself in the mirror (we're all familiar with that shocking "morning reflection" staring back at us).

I'd see an imaginary badge across my forehead. It simply said:

"*Failure*."

My wife and others spoke encouraging words to me, reminding me that God was near and that everything would eventually be alright. While their comfort and support fanned the few sparks left in my heart into small flickers, the flame simply wouldn't ignite.

I looked for solace in the Scriptures, gathered with faithful friends who spoke penetrating words of life into my heart, but still the sting of failure remained. All my efforts seemed futile – it was as though the world I knew was tipping away from me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it all from falling to the ground.

It was in that challenging season that I learned two things.

The first thing I learned was that the dark voice, the imaginary badge, and the heavy robe were *not* coming from God. They were coming from me, and from the scripts I allowed to run unchecked in my

mind. They were coming from an enemy who was bent on taking me out emotionally before he took me out physically.

The second thing I learned was that I had to master listening for the whispering voice of God – smack in the middle of the louder taunts from around me and within me.

God's voice, I learned, is unmistakably different than those other voices. He says, "I love you. You can trust Me. There is Hope. You are not a failure; you are My success story – and success will always and only be found in your relationship with Me." Any voice in our lives that echoes that greater Voice should be listened to again and again. Like water soaking into thirsty, dry ground, every drop matters.

Maybe you feel like a failure today, and you can't seem to pick yourself up. I'm here to tell you that God doesn't see you as a failure. A wise mentor of mine once told me, "Dan, success and failure are events, not people." I've never forgotten those words.

If success is a matter of the heart, and your heart belongs to God, then you are set for the next adventure He has planned for you. Look yourself in the eye – in that mirror tomorrow morning – and say, "Today, I am God's success story."

"I ask – ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory – to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is he is calling you to do, grasp the immensity of this glorious way of life he has for his followers, oh, the utter extravagance of his work in us who trust him – endless energy, boundless strength!"

Ephesians 1:17-19 *(The Message)*

21

DO THE DYNO

{ Pursuing Dreams }

I am confident that you, like I, have dreams. A short time ago, I learned a lesson from the rock-climbing world about what's called "the Dyno." The Dyno is what a rock climber does when they have nothing within safe reach to which they can cling for their next move. What do they do? They choose to *leap through the air* to catch their next hold.

With only blue sky and determination standing between them and certain death, the climber has nowhere to go but up, or down. In the moment that precedes the decision, the adventurer in the climber wins, and the "up" choice demands, in its purest form, a *leap of faith through thin air*.

Recently, I began to despair about some unfulfilled dreams in my own life. Hope was taking a beating in my heart, and I knew I needed a voice other than my own to get into my ears. I decided to get together with an old friend over lunch to talk about our dreams and maybe recapture that no-holds-barred spirit I had only a short time before.

This particular friend always tells it like it is. He never lets me off the hook when it comes to being one of God's dreamers. As we sat in that crowded restaurant, he reached across the table, put his hand on my forearm, and said, "Dan, don't limit yourself to your own dreams. Stretch yourself toward God's dreams."

In that moment, I remembered the Dyno and what it must feel like for someone to be suspended in midair, utterly trusting their entire life to the belief that the next grabbing spot would hold them.

I walked away from that lunch remembering that leaps of faith only occur when the dream is *just out of reach*.

Maybe you're wrestling to hold on to the "dreams of God" that you believe He's welcomed you to dream along with Him. It may even be just out of reach, and the voice inside of you is saying, "Go back. It's too hard to believe again, and it's far easier to go back where you came from."

In that moment, look to the encouraging voices around you, listen closely to those who will be affected by the outcome (like a spouse, for example), welcome God to speak into your life through the wise counsel of others – and then make the choice.

Focus on the next hook point, and if those voices are aligning with your sense of God's heart, leap with *all you've got*. Now is the moment; make this jump count.

"That's why we live with such good cheer. You won't see us drooping our heads or dragging our feet! Cramped conditions here don't get us down. They only remind us of the spacious living conditions ahead. It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going. Do you suppose a few ruts in the road or rocks in the path are going to stop us? When the time comes, we'll be plenty ready to exchange exile for homecoming."

2 Corinthians 5:6-8 *(The Message)*

22

THE RADIO IN THE BACKGROUND

{ Prayer }

We all have different ways of praying that are particular to our personality and affinities. You could say that our unique ways of praying are like noses; we all have one, and they are all different.

When it comes to building a life of prayer, there are different ways of carrying on a conversation with God that may seem more natural to us than others. One person likes to read written prayers aloud in the quiet of their home; another likes to pray spontaneously while overlooking a mountain vista. Still another prays aloud during their morning commute, while another, sitting at their kitchen table, thrives on writing out their prayers in prose or poetry.

No matter how we like to pray, the Apostle Paul encourages all followers of Jesus to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17 NIV). I remember as a teenager, after I had come to faith in Christ in my high school years, that I had questions about how "continually" I should talk to God. I went to my grandmother, who lived just a few blocks from my home, and who I considered to be one of the greatest saints who ever lived.

I asked her a very simple and specific question that was burning in my heart: "Grandma, how do *you* pray? How should *I* pray? How *often* should I pray?"

She said to me these words, "Oh honey, prayer is like a radio running in the background. It's a conversation that never finishes. You just keep talking to God in the quiet of your heart all day long – and He'll keep talking to you."

As I've aged and both thought about and taught about prayer over these last decades, I have come to understand just how pivotal that simple idea is. God is a Person with whom we can have an ongoing, running, never-ceasing conversation. Throughout our days and nights, God is interested in the smallest details of our lives.

Your requests, your burdens, and your concerns, riding on the wings of your thanksgiving, your appreciation, and your praise, should never cease to flow between Him and you across your lifetime. Like a radio murmuring in the background our prayers can continually rise from our hearts to the listening God.

Maybe you're struggling to maintain a life of prayer. I want to encourage you to "tune in the dial" and make your conversation with God like a radio running constantly in the background.

As you remember to continue that conversation, you will find yourself slowly growing closer to the One who loves to talk to you, and who has a plan and a purpose to reveal for every minute and hour of your day.

"Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live."

1 Thessalonians 5:17 *(The Message)*

23

THE POWER STATION OF FAITH

{ Faith }

We all struggle with fear in our lives. How do we overcome it? How do we build our lives in such a way that the next time fear thrusts its icy claws toward our souls, those claws break on a spirit that has become impervious to their grasp?

I grew up near a power station. Every morning on my walk to school, I would hear it humming along. My friends and I would play basketball on a court located right beside the station. As it charged homes all over our little town, I would often think about just how much power people were drawing from it every day, and how their lives depended on that power station being up and functioning.

When I think about overcoming fear, I think about that power station. When a fear has gotten a hold of us, it's like we have plugged into its power source. The power station of fear feeds us dark energy, and in fits and starts blows our fuses, fries our wires, and destroys the circuitry of faith in our hearts.

Many people plug into the power station of fear because they were taught to do so by a parent, a grandparent, or an entire family line. That power station feeds negative stories – negative expectations – about what will happen next.

We begin to lose Hope, because Hope feeds on a positive belief about what God will do next. With our cord plugged into a faulty system, nothing runs right. We mull our situation over and over again, mixing it up with a strong batch of worry, until it begins to overwhelm and overcome us. But we can make a different choice.

First, instead of plugging into the power station of fear, we can unplug from any outlets or inlets that push us deeper into fear's clutches. Faithful friends and family members can help us identify some of those. We can ask, "What do I run to as an escape from reality?" For some the television they watch, the music they listen to, the friends they keep, and the work and sleep habits they foster can all feed fear's energy. We must unplug from fear.

Secondly, after we've cut ourselves off from fear's power supply, we must then plug ourselves into the power station of faith.

The power station of faith feeds us with new stories about the possible outcomes of our situation. We begin to discover that God – vigilantly at work changing our hearts – is active within our difficulties. The power station of faith hums along as we sing songs that strengthen our trust and as we gather with family and friends who lift us up in prayer and tell us what we need to hear. Faith's power station sizzles with life when we linger in the Scriptures, journal our honest prayers, take the time to pray at the beginning of our day (rather than turning on our smart phone), and close our evenings with moments of thankfulness for all that God is doing in our lives.

When we surround ourselves with these "faith-energy feeders," God's promises to us become vivid, alive, and within reach once again. I want to encourage you today, in your moments of doubt and distrust, to pull the plug on fear – and plug into the power station of faith.

"The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see."

Hebrews 11:1 *(The Message)*

24

TIE DOWN THE BOAT

{ Thankfulness & Community }

We live in a time where many tragedies, which occur around the world, touch people globally through the news and media. Who can forget the great tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012 when twenty children and six adults lost their lives in a shooting rampage at the Sandy Hook Elementary school?

We all mourned, and we all grieved with the families who lost little ones and loved ones on that infamous day. The scenes of the funeral, various moments shared between the victims' families, and those who were rallying in support of the community began to flash onto television screens and web browsers around the world.

Family members of victims poignantly declared their faith through this greatest of trials. The community came together to support and celebrate the gifts they shared in that small town as neighbors and as friends.

An unseen strength was holding up many people who, by no stretch of the imagination, could have locked themselves in a dungeon of despair. There is grief everywhere, yes – in your life, in mine, in our families, and in our towns and cities. Loss is inevitable, but despair is not. How can we face some of the greatest storms of the human condition without losing Hope along the way?

I was talking to a friend who is involved in the world of boating. He was telling me what he and his fellow boat owners do to prepare their vessel at the dock when they know a storm is about to hit.

He shared how they will make their rounds around the boat, tying it down in various places. Making multiple, tight knots with a number of ropes, they secure their boat *before* the storm hits. Note: They know that the boat will most likely take on damage in the storm – but they can minimize that damage by making sure those ropes and knots are in place.

In our times of severe difficulty, what anchors us? What ropes and knots can we tie that will minimize damage and maximize the health of our souls in the midst of a storm?

First, one knot we can tie is to live thankful lives before our tragedy hits. When a habit of thanks is established, it enables us to find threads of God's gifts running through the fabric of our tragedy.

Second, we can build rich, faith-centered communities around us – opening ourselves up in vulnerable friendships, so that Christ-centered people are present when any of us experiences a storm.

Third, we can commit now to growing deeper in our relationship with God. That's a knot we can tie by daily choices that root us in His love and comfort. Our love relationship with Him is then familiar when a crisis reaches our shore.

Fourth, the final knot we can tie is to support others around us in our community. When we live generously, others become generous toward us. Sow into your town; your town may sow into you one day.

"Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

John 13:34-35 *(The Message)*

25

FIND HIS STAR, AND FOLLOW IT HOME

{ Hope }

All of us need some Hope to which we can cling – not only so we can make it through our lifetime, but so that we can make it through the day.

When I think about Hope, I often think about the story of the three wise men, or magi, that are spoken of in the gospels. They were basically astrologers; magicians who studied ancient texts and believed the story of the Hebrew Scriptures that told of One who would come to right the world.

With reckless abandon, they set off toward a far away land with only a glimmering star to guide them. I've thought many times about the Hope that enabled them to traverse the expanse of that desert and to find the courage it would take to bear sweltering days and pitch-black nights.

Each of us has our own 'life desert' to cross when Hope first calls to us. We want the prize that awaits, but we quickly realize that the journey to take a hold of it will cost us our lives.

Deserts are dry, thirsty places. The body grows weak without the comforts of our former life, before Hope called us to cross over the desert of our unbelief. We can go without food for some time, but water? No. Thirst has a way of halting us that hunger doesn't. Thirst demands our attention and screams for an immediate and lasting fix.

The thirst of our desert might represent our draw to old addictions, mental habits, and impure actions that would bring us quick satisfaction when we needed a fix.

Then there is the sand; little irritations that rip and tear at our skin, burning our feet and finding their way into our already bloodshot eyes.

Sand can represent those "little foxes that ruin the vineyard" spoken of in the Song of Solomon. Each granule might represent each relational irritation that comes with the long journey of faith. They can finds their way into the cracks and crevices – and wear us down.

How did those three wise men find the courage to keep going, knowing that their journey would take not days but *months*?

They certainly didn't conquer their desert by staring at the endless sand or mulling over what the day's desert problems would be. Hope doesn't rise when our dire circumstances have us mesmerized.

The way the wise men were able to maintain Hope, were able to cross that desert, was by keeping their eyes *above* the desert on the star that was guiding them.

What star is guiding you through your desert? The thirst and the sand will always be with us; they come with the desert path. But keeping the star of God's presence, love, and purposes locked in our sights is the only way Hope can help us conquer our own desert.

Like the wise men, keep your eyes fixed on the Star that guides you. He is worth the journey, and He will bring you safely home.

"Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!"

Matthew 2:9b-10 *(The Message)*

26

READING YOUR OWN OBITUARY

{ Purpose }

All of us face situations where we just don't think we have what it takes to get back up and try again. We may lack a sense of purpose after a substantial defeat or loss. We simply may be feeling lazy about our lives and have "given up" for a variety of reasons. My teenage children have informed me that when a person begins to wear sweatpants *everywhere* it is a sure sign that the person has given up. I don't know if that's true, but I'll be watching my wardrobe closely for the next few years.

Some time ago, I was talking to a friend who was deeply disappointed in himself over something that he had done. As we talked, we brought up the story of Alfred Nobel.

Nobel was a famous Swedish chemist, engineer, innovator, and armaments manufacturer. He was also the inventor of dynamite. If anyone represented a tycoon of explosives and instruments of war, it was Nobel.

One day in the late 1800s, he had the unfortunate experience of seeing his own obituary mistakenly printed in the newspaper. The obituary called him "the merchant of death," and Alfred was stopped in his tracks. His life needed a redirection, and he was disappointed with the legacy that he was about to leave.

While a birth certificate can tell us *when* we're born, it doesn't tell us *why* we're born. Like Alfred Nobel, sometimes we need the kind of wake up call that only a personal disappointment in ourselves can provide.

To course correct his own impending legacy, Alfred Nobel decided to found the Nobel Prize – honoring achievements that furthered peace and hope in the world.

Take a moment to get a glimpse of what you want people to be able to say about you when you pass from this life to the next. If it helps, imagine yourself at your own funeral, listening to what people are saying about this particular season in your life.

Get your bearings on what they might say now in contrast to what you would hope they would say. Now, instead of lingering in disappointment over the gap between your expectation and reality, reorient your life to live that new "legacy" way.

Maybe you haven't seen your obituary in the paper, but you may have been knocked down by a disappointment recently. You may be finding it difficult to get back up – and Hope again.

I want to encourage you to get the end of your life in mind, and to make choices to live in the light of God's preferred future for you. He believes in you. You should believe in you, as well.

"We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken."

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 *(The Message)*

27

THE DOG IS WALKING YOU

{ Forgiveness }

Most of us have gone through situations in our lives when someone, intentionally or unintentionally, caused us pain. Maybe you've even struggled with a seed of unforgiveness burrowing its roots steadily into your heart. For many of us, we don't realize a chronic bitterness is taking over inside until a moment of unforeseen anger flares up, or someone informs you they've noticed "you never stop talking about that incident" that hurt you. One sure sign that unforgiveness is lurking inside of us is that we can't seem to stop talking about the hurt – whether to seek pity, solace, or a posse for revenge.

I remember a few years ago when I was asked to walk a neighbor's dog. Of course, I said yes; I wanted to be a good neighbor. However, I forgot how large and powerful that dog actually was.

It was a huge Doberman, and it wasn't until I hooked on the leash that I realized the kind of horsepower that is in one of those animals. The neighbors must have thought it was comical to see me being dragged around the neighborhood by that massive animal. I'm a big guy, but that dog was taking me for a walk – I wasn't taking him.

When we're struggling to forgive someone whom we believe has wronged us, it can be like us having them on a leash of bitterness. We want to control them. We want to control how God acts in their lives, and we even turn our pious prayers to that end.

We want them to feel, deep down, how much they've hurt us by having that leash dig into their neck. We also want to control our own emotions and decide on our own terms whether or not we're

going to forgive them, accept them, or tilt our scepter of mercy toward them.

However, I usually find that in those situations when we think that we're in control, we're actually not. It is our bitterness over the situation and our bottled up anger that is actually on the other end of that leash – not the person. As long as our grip is tight on our unforgiveness leash, we are tethered to something powerful that is dragging us anywhere it pleases.

We're led to places in our hearts to which we would never want to go. We're drawn into claustrophobic spaces of disdain for others, and acrimonious words spill in gossip from the same lips that sing praises in church. We are taken to places where grief can overtake us, and we are trapped in a pit of despair that we ourselves helped to dig.

Acting in forgiveness is like letting go of the leash. There is a sweet release when we entrust the circumstance to God's care and action. Releasing that person from our enmity does not mean that justice will never be done in some way; it simply means that God will do what *He* sees as just in His eternal timing – and God's justice is always guided by love for the person.

With your hands off the leash, you are now free to move where God would have you go. Embrace the reviving freedom that comes with forgiveness – and entrust the other person to God.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30 NIV

28

THE LONG WAY IN THE MALL

{ Bad Habits }

All of us have patterns or habits in our lives that we've seen to be unhealthy over the course of a lifetime. Like most bad habits, we know they will cause damage to our body, mind, or relationships – but we're not exactly sure how to break them.

The other day, I was going to the mall. As I sat in my car, before I even stepped out onto the mall parking lot, I fixed my destination in my mind. I knew why I was there, which store I needed to get to, and where it was in relation to where I had parked.

However, as soon as I walked through the doors of the mall, I was met with vendors handing me samples of the meals they were selling. That simple distraction switched my mind to autopilot.

Like a robot, I walked down the corridors of that section of the mall, went up and down escalators, and ended up in front of a store that I normally visit when I go to the mall.

There was only one problem. That was not the store I needed to go to on this particular trip. In fact, the store I needed to get to was actually now on the far side of the mall. By force of habit, I had removed myself a great distance from my goal.

Bad habits can affect everything from relationships to our physical bodies. They can remove us great distances from our goals.

In relationships, a bad habit of dealing out inner judgments of people based on looks, dress, or speech can tie us up – when we actually want to become a person who embraces others for who they are.

We may keep coming back to the same bad habits of comparing ourselves to others, reaping the resulting resentment that can mar even the best of relationships.

When it comes to physical habits, there is a similar issue. Ruts are formed in our brains, and we return to the same comforts that we know, in some cases, have been slowly killing us and our relationships for years.

Bad habits must be replaced by new, better habits in order to be conquered. We have to be intentional to break those old habits and patterns, and often we need to find role models who can lead us by example to where we truly want to go. We then form a new habit by constant repetition – just like we formed the old one.

Maybe you have some bad habits that you'd like to break. Look for those who have conquered those same issues in their lives, and ask them to coach you into some new habits that will shape your future.

"…Everything …connected with that old way of life has to go. It's rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life – a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you."

Matthew 4:22b-24 *(The Message)*

29

OLYMPIANS GET BACK UP

{ Courage }

We all want courage in our lives. We especially want courage *before* we're faced with difficult circumstances. We'd like to have confidence that we'll have the strength to rise to any challenge before it comes our way.

You probably recall the story of the lion in the Wizard of Oz. Throughout the entire story, the lion is seeking courage, but it's not until the lion is actually in a battle that he gets the courage for which he's been longing.

A good friend of mine was the gold medal winner in the Men's 1500-metre in the 1980 Paralympics. He met John Paul II and was at one time one of the world's most elite athletes. He's mostly blind, and yet his courage and vision has inspired many along his journey – including me. He is simultaneously full of faith and confidence in God, and yet is deeply aware of his own weaknesses and needs for support.

I asked him one day, "What has been your secret to finding courage as you go through what can be a challenging life?" His words have lingered in their impact: "I just keep getting back up, Dan. Every time I fall in the race, every time I am knocked down, I keep getting back up."

There are stumbling blocks that appear in front of all of us along the race of life. When these surprises appear, and we fall, we sometimes end up defining ourselves by those losses. As the band U2 put it in their song, we get "stuck in a moment," and we can't get out of it.

You may be familiar with the litany of phrases we tell ourselves. We don't make enough money. We've faced too much resistance. We've failed one too many times. We don't have a perfect marriage. We can't control everything our teenagers do. We hate our job. We're too old to try again. We missed our chance. We're washed up.

Name the "moment" in which you've been "stuck." No matter our season in life, we have many excuses and many good reasons to stay *down* when we fall.

But Olympians get back *up*, and there is no greater race at stake than your life and mine. My friend understood that the secret to true greatness is getting up, again and again, every time life knocks you down. Eventually, with the grace of God empowering you to face each new challenge as it comes, life starts to get the hint. Life says, "This is a person who keeps getting up every time; make way."

That is what faith is all about. We can't see what's ahead of us, but we get up anyway. We may come in last. We may embarrass ourselves. But still, time and time again, we get up and face the uncertain future with God. God acts in response to our faith.

Walk forward in trust with the God who knows you and reaches out to help you rise to your feet again. It's your race; will you stay down or get back up?

"The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?"

Psalm 27:1 NIV

30

OUR HOPE IS IN THE POWER OF LOVE

{ Hope }

One of the most beautiful, incredible things about Hope is that it can reveal itself in the midst of the most dire of circumstances. We are all very aware of the great human tragedy that occurred on September 11, 2001, when a terrorist attack was carried out against the United States.

In the face of great tragedy, C.S. Lewis once said that the character that is already in people is revealed. The truth of this statement was confirmed as reporters and photographers swarmed the streets of New York City, where the twin towers collapsed, capturing moments shared between rescue workers, co-workers, and neighbors.

We watched firemen run into burning buildings to save others – at the risk of their own lives. We saw people hugging one another in the streets. We watched power brokers on Wall Street, of all places, embracing one another with tears.

We saw families of different ethnic backgrounds, all across the airwaves, caring for one another with selfless love in the aftermath of those horrible events. Around the country, a contagious spread of appreciation for our fellow citizens permeated small towns and large cities. The horrors of those days yielded a new sense of national camaraderie and community in the weeks and months that followed.

The people of the United States were reminded that love can ultimately trump hate and its violence. We were reminded as well that people can run, but they cannot hide, from the fact that they were made in the image of God.

Love, caring, compassion, self-sacrifice, and even forgiveness bled through the wounds of a great human tragedy. A nation's Hope was renewed in its citizens.

For those who have pledged their allegiance not primarily to a nation, but to the Person of Jesus Christ, there is an even higher lesson here. As people returned to Faith and Hope as they walked through their grief, a lasting spiritual truth reared its head once again.

Peace is not found simply in the absence of conflict. Hope is not found simply in the absence of despair or trouble.

Rather, our Hope is found in the Person of Jesus Christ, his everlasting love, and his lavish grace poured out on those who seek him with all their heart.

He will one day envelop the greatest of our human suffering in His healing arms, and our troubles in this life will find themselves swallowed into God's great meaning.

"We who have run for our very lives to God have every reason to grab the promised hope with both hands and never let go. It's an unbreakable spiritual lifeline, reaching past all appearances right to the very presence of God where Jesus, running on ahead of us, has taken up his permanent post as high priest for us…."

Hebrews 6:18-20a *(The Message)*

READER'S GUIDE

The following Reader's Guide is designed to help you more devotionally connect with the idea represented in each story. There is one page devoted to each narrative earlier in the book, and all are titled and numbered according to those stories. These notes are for personal use, or for use in discussion with a group.

On each page, you will see two sections.

The first section, *Finding Hope Through This Story*, is an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the theme that each story amplifies. The theme of each story is noted beneath its title, and the author's notes here are meant to further illustrate the lesson about Hope in the story.

The second section, *A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On*, contains practical tips from the author on how you can respond to the encouragement of the story. The "Pass On" part of this title is meant to communicate that if you have received encouragement from this book, please pass on the encouragements to action noted in this section to those you want to see rise in Hope.

READER'S GUIDE 01

JOY IS FOUND IN A PERSON
{ Joy }

Finding Hope Through This Story

There is a confidence that marks a life that knows what it means to be near God. As we grow in an intimate friendship with our Lord, our designs to achieve and succeed begin to diminish, and we begin to desire to know God as we are known by God. Just as my grandfather called me to enjoy my life, so you too can take a hold of God's presence with you, and learn to walk this world's wild terrains with Joy at your side. Take heart; take hope. Your God is with you, and He is your source of Joy.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to set aside the lesser loves with which we fill our lives to invest yourself in knowing the God who has called you exclusively to Himself. He loves you, beyond any human love. If you turn your energies to cultivating that relationship, in prayer, in Scripture reading, in meditation, and in worshiping with other believers, you will find that God's Joy will begin to be stirred in you.

Finding Joy in your life will then begin to become the rule, rather than just the exception, because your eyes will slowly be trained to look for more than "happiness." You'll be looking for God's present love being revealed in each circumstance, which is our ongoing source of Joy.

READER'S GUIDE 02

THE GOOD FRIDAY JOB LOSS
{ Fear }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Leaning on our own understanding rarely gets us anywhere. It certainly doesn't bring us the peace or hope we long for in a crisis. Trusting God, however – listening to God – yields a better return. We take a deep breath, find Him present in the middle of our storm, and learn what it means to be carried in the arms of God.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to see fear as a veil rather than as a wall in your life. Know that Christ has a purpose to fulfill even through your deep sorrow, and hold on to his hand through your Good Friday and Holy Saturday – all the way into Resurrection Sunday.

Take your current fear, name it, and give it to Christ right now. Ask him what that fear is revealing in your heart – maybe pride, a lack of trust, a longing to be understood, or some other area of weakness is hidden beneath it. Identify what you are afraid of in your situation, and begin to place it in the hands of God.

Ask Him to rescue you from an old way of trusting into a new way during this season.

READER'S GUIDE 03

A SPECIAL FATHER-DAUGHTER DANCE
{ Relationships }

Finding Hope Through This Story

C.S. Lewis once said that every day begins with a crowd of priorities, bustling and banging on the door of our hearts trying to get in. The first battle of the day, he suggested, was keeping that door shut and giving the first priority to God.

As you make your way through the responsibilities of today, it is your relationship with God that will help you navigate the "priority war" that goes on inside you. Learn to listen to that still small voice, and prioritize your relationships according to God's better plans. Seeming interruptions will become sacred memories you will not soon forget.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to begin to see the seeming inconveniences that may occur with those you love as opportunities to grow in family love and friendship. If you're a person who loves to have your life planned out each day, know that not all interruptions or last-minute needs are necessarily bad. They may be gifts from God simply dressed up as interruptions. More important than being flexible, however, is being *proactive*. Plan time into your calendar for those relationships that are most precious to you. Make decisions with your time, energy, and money that will help those relationships flourish over the years. Every decision matters; prioritize according to God's best plan for you and yours.

READER'S GUIDE 04

EXTREME ROOM MAKEOVER
{ Loving Your Neighbor }

Finding Hope Through This Story

It's a magical experience seeing someone's eyes light up when you do a good deed for them. The payoff of a gift given, no matter how it is received, is often joy enough to keep us being generous souls.

Just as Jesus washed the feet of his followers, so we too can be the "foot-washers" of our neighborhoods, following in his pattern of loving others extravagantly.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

Be the gracious hand of God to another in your sphere of influence. This week, ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you about a person, or a family, that needs a gift that only you can give. There is a reason that you know who they are and what they need. God will graciously bring them to mind.

The next question to ask is: "How can I creatively participate in God's pursuit of their heart?" Listen for His instructions, ask for input, then gather your resources and act on that leading.

READER'S GUIDE 05

THE LESSON OF THE SNOW CONE
{ Second Chances }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Have you ever "lost heart?" Most of us have, and it's not a pretty sight when we do. We scramble to cover our tracks, over-apologize, and even make amends through our own feeble strength. God's way, when we've lost heart because we failed someone, or failed ourselves, is not for us to mope in self-pity or frantically fix what has been utterly broken.

Know that God's second chances begin the moment we humble ourselves, and confess our inability to "fix" all the damage that has been done. Like the Mom in this story, God often brings a creative solution to the foreground that serves all the parties touched by the mistake. Take God's gift; receive your second chance.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

Even if a failure in our lives feels "unfixable," the story of God's people is packed with those who thought God couldn't redeem their unique failure. David committed adultery and had the woman's husband murdered. Paul killed faithful, loving, servant-hearted people in his zeal to do his religious duty. Mary Magdalene was demonized, and Peter denied Jesus at his most vulnerable moment. You *can* get up, and take God's second chance – just like those mentioned above. Once you humble yourself and take a step forward, become a person who lets others know that God's second chances are available to them.

READER'S GUIDE 06

THE ARMENIAN PRINCESS
{ Forgiveness }

Finding Hope Through This Story

The Lord's Prayer, famous and falling from the lips of millions across history, holds a dangerous thought within it. Jesus was teaching his disciples that they will be forgiven – as they have forgiven others.

While it's a hard pill to swallow, especially if you have felt mortally wounded by someone's corrupted action, it's a pill Jesus swallowed before us. "Father, forgive them," he said under their torture. "…They do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34a).

Forgiveness doesn't endorse what someone has done or turn a blind eye to it; rather, it releases that person from our hateful judgment into the loving judgment of God. His work in them, and in you, is infinitely more loving and healing than our vengeance will ever be.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to put on the glasses of forgiveness today, and to choose God's higher path in a world that has made a familiar friend of bitterness and interpersonal judgment. God will take care of you; you can trust Him as you learn and practice the art of forgiveness.

READER'S GUIDE 07

BUSINESS CARDS OF THE HEART
{ Identity }

Finding Hope Through This Story

There is great strength to be found in knowing your identity according to God. We are not the pursuers – the chasers – of God in this life. We are the pursued, the chased – the beloved of God. We may not know everything about who we are, but the fog will lift one day and our love relationship with God will be the common theme that passes from this life into the next.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to invest time and energy into strengthening your sense of identity in Christ. To put it in a metaphor, small planets in the universe can have incredible gravitational pull because they are dense. Conversely, large, colorful planets may have very little gravitational pull. Why? Because they are mostly gas – a lot of hot air.

Looking big and colorful is not the goal of the Christian life. Being strong and substantial in our intimacy with God is the goal. Nurture the "density," the real substance of your relationship with God by reading the Scriptures, journaling your prayers, and living a generous, gracious life.

Jesus' identity will begin to be formed in you, and you'll move from being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), toward being formed into the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

READER'S GUIDE 08

A 20-SOMETHING DREAM
{ Pursuing Dreams }

Finding Hope Through This Story

There is a fine line between a dream and a fantasy. A dream, born in the heart of God and placed in the heart of one of His children, is designed to influence people's lives toward love – and to bring about redemptive stories in the hearts of others.

A fantasy, on the other hand, is usually focused on our need for self-achievement. Fantasies are aimed at fulfilling our desires for meaning, significance, pleasure, affirmation, influence, or affluence.

The subtle differences lie in the motives of the heart, and the Word of God can help clearly show us what motives are leading us along (Hebrews 4:12).

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to not let go of your dreams. I can promise you that God will reform your dream on the hard rock of the circumstances that inevitably come with life on the planet. However the hand we are dealt can become God's winning hand if we will continue to say "Yes" to the next thing He asks us to do.

Turn your dreams over to God. Don't hold them too tightly, but don't let them go either. Ask God to form them into His dreams for your life, and draw on the counsel of others who have a vested interest in what the dream will take to fulfill.

READER'S GUIDE 09

STUCK AT STARBUCKS
{ Prayer }

Finding Hope Through This Story

We're never far from selfishness, and prayer is one of the best mechanisms I know to resist its pull on our lives. When we carry one another's burdens, we are drawn out of the minutiae of our own errands and task lists – and are drawn into the eternal adventures of God. A life of prayer is a life of listening. Listening takes more restraint – more practice – than talking does. Jesus said that many people mistakenly think their prayers will be heard because of the many words they use. Learning the art of listening prayer takes a lifetime to master, and daily practice is the only way we grow into it. It is those practiced in listening for God's opportunities who get in on divine plot lines that we could never put together ourselves. If you've ever been a part of one of God's miraculous story lines, you'll know that He is a master storyteller. Like my friend, even your challenge can become a cause for thanks and praise.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to practice listening to God in prayer. Instead of using words, try praying in writing. Let your words flow, and at some point, when you sense God near, write the question, "Is there anything or anyone You want to speak to me about that I could pray for right now?" Write down your prayer, and then be available for God to use you to be the answer to that prayer in someone's life.

READER'S GUIDE 10

THE STONE OF A SONG
{ Worship }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Intimidation happens to all of us. We're pushed into a corner by a financial loss or an irreparable relationship, and we freeze. It's like losing our voice in a nightmare when we most need it to call for help. Fearlessness is something the world talks a lot about, but without inviting God into the situation many people lose their lives trying to fight battles they can't win on their own. When God spoke the words of Deuteronomy 31:6 to Joshua, He wasn't trying to pump Joshua up about his own abilities to kick the enemy's can. The entire pep talk is centered on God being *with* Joshua. He could be strong and courageous because God would stride ahead of him, be right there the whole time, and not let him down. A phrase or a song that reminds us that God is truly *with us* is just the ammunition we need to not lose heart when a giant must be shut down. Take out that stone, and hurl it with everything you've got.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to note, and purchase or download, songs that seem to have a unique strength in helping you find your courage again. We all need different kinds of stones, and my loved one had the stone he needed because he had put those songs in his mind and heart before that giant advanced. Journal the words of those songs, or write down phrases, that speak of God's promises to you, and His promise to be with you in trouble. Go back to them again and again to refresh your Hope.

READER'S GUIDE 11

219,000 HOURS OF MARRIAGE
{ Forgiveness }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Patience is one of what Galatians 5 calls a "fruit of the Spirit." In other words, it is the natural blossom of a life that is rooted in the Spirit's soil, water, nutrients, and life flow.

According to the passage above, our troubles form patience in us over time, like the running water of a river smoothes the stones of the river bed. If we yield ourselves to being shaped by God, our newfound patience then becomes a virtue in us.

A virtue is a second-nature response that has become habit by endless, repetitive application – and has even replaced our first-nature response. Often, our first-nature responses are marked by an impulsive inability to allow another the space to grow. Patience, however, can be learned by constant practice.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to practice patience every chance you get. Instead of *reacting* to the next inconvenient moment created by someone who you love or work with, try *responding* with grace and a persevering heart. Your lifestyle and behavior will slowly begin to line up with your patient responses, and like an athlete you will be running faster and faster because of the workout.

READER'S GUIDE 12

THE BUSINESSMAN'S WIFE
{ Dealing With Loss }

Finding Hope Through This Story

We are all on a continual journey of loss. Our bodies age, our relationships change, our family members are affected by illness, our longing for times past rises, and familiar relationships are made strange as circumstances shift and move our lives. Perhaps the most difficult of all losses is the loss of someone we love – a child, a parent, a spouse, or a treasured friend. Psalm 61 above gives us a prayer that groans with the sensitivity that only someone who has suffered could have written. "Hear my cry," it begins. "Listen," as "from the ends of the earth I call to You." "My heart grows faint" captures how grief can sap our strength and our will to go on. Finally, as the Psalm turns the energies of its prayer to confident trust, the writer cries out, "Lead me to the rock that is higher than I."

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

If you are facing grief right now, I want to encourage you to give your heart time to nestle into God's promises as life changes for you. Grief is a window through which God's fresh winds of comfort can blow. Surround yourself, no matter your loss, with thoughtful friends and family who will carry you in prayer and support through this time. Above all, stay close to God and His Word, no matter how you're feeling or what your emotions are telling you. They will go up and down, side to side. But God, your God, will never, ever change. Stand on Him, your Rock; He is higher than you right now, and one day will lift you to see His unique vantage point on this moment.

READER'S GUIDE 13

OUR EASTER HOPE
{ Hope }

Finding Hope Through This Story

The promise of new life is one that Jesus makes to anyone who calls on his name. He takes a tired, weary, striving soul and captures it – again and again – by loving mercies expressed in ways that are only meaningful to the recipient. I have no quick answers for the chronic conflicts that seem to permeate some families' lives. However, I take great confidence in the fact that God's plot is not fully realized in any life. That person we care about, who seems so far from redemption, from inner or outer healing, is part of God's story – and God has not put His pen to the last sentence yet.

Jesus' resurrection points us to One Bright Day in the future, when every tear will be wiped away, and there will be no more grieving in homes fraught with pain. Until that Day, we pray, we love one another, and we serve the world around us with the kind of amazing grace that can only be found in those who Jesus has taught to love.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to keep yourself in close fellowship with others whose lives are set on friendship with God. The trajectory of their lives will inspire you, and feed you with Hope for the future. Don't give despair a chance to isolate you, wear you down, and then take you out in body or mind. Take a hold of Jesus' garment, as the diseased woman did in the crowd (Luke 8:43-48), and don't let go until he heals and blesses you.

READER'S GUIDE 14

FASTING FEAR AND WORRY
{ Fear }

Finding Hope Through This Story

The capacity to lose our worry about the details of life is one enlarged by thankfulness. When we are thankful, when we have cultivated the habit of gratefulness, our words become shaped by our decision to be content rather than by our emotions that rise and fall. In the passage above, we are told that worrying about our food, our clothing, and our appearances is futile. Such worry never yields a satisfying result. In fact, it can hinder us from embracing the very "now" gifts of God that are all around us.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to do a two week experiment where you consciously, and with at least one other person, choose to fast fear and worry. Fasting means that we give up one thing in order to replace it with another. Many times, people attempt to stop worrying, or stop being fearful, without replacing those impulses with another learned impulse.

As situations come up, you and the other person can challenge each other. "Are you fasting worry right now, or indulging in it?" "Are you letting fear fill you up, or are you refusing yourself the luxury?" Each time you succeed in putting worry and fear on the shelf, you start to become a different person. Then, fill those moments you would have previously filled with worry – with thanksgiving instead. Stop and speak out your gratefulness until your heart is at peace once more.

READER'S GUIDE 15

THE TANK IS ON EMPTY
{ Encouragement }

Finding Hope Through This Story

It truly does take a community to build a person in Hope over a lifetime. "No man is an island," the old adage says, but many times in our lives we find ourselves lonely, isolated, and empty because we haven't tended to our most basic need for fellowship with other Christians.

There are a thousand reasons to resist the company of others, but most of them only hold water for the length of time it takes to speak them. Every follower of Jesus has a "faith-fuel" tank that can only be filled by encouragement from others who are also seeking to live the life of Hope.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

If you are in a faith community right now, invest yourself in seeing it succeed. Get yourself emotionally healthy enough to not be offended easily, and to champion others even if they reject you. Jesus never said that life together would be easy – just that it would be *necessary and transforming*. You need the Body of Christ, and the Body of Christ needs you.

Find your fueling station, and get filled up on a regular basis.

READER'S GUIDE 16

TWO CHILDREN, TWO UMBRELLAS
{ Forgiveness }

Finding Hope Through This Story

The illustration of the umbrellas may help us to understand how forgiveness works. When we hold on to a hurt, and let it fester in us, we become vindictive, needing to get some form of revenge on a person who has lacked the ability to honor or care for us. The need to get revenge means that we somehow, psychologically, are holding on to that person. Our cold, bloodless fingers are gripping them tight, keeping them caught in the web of our anger, so that we can continually remind them how offensive their actions have been.

The only problem with this approach is that it's like drinking poison hoping the other person will die. We become intoxicated with our stewing anger, and it begins to shape us into a bitter person. Letting go of that anger, letting go of our need for revenge, sets God's waves of healing in motion in both the person we've forgiven and in us.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to see your next opportunity to offer forgiveness as an opportunity to move forward in the healing of your own heart. Many of us bear wounds that go the whole way back to childhood, to a classroom, to a broken marriage, or to a failed business venture. To move on, and to find healing in one area, we must release forgiveness in another. That way, the dominoes of mercy begin to fall, and people are released to God's healing work.

READER'S GUIDE 17

I NEED A HUSBAND
{ Relationships }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Our choice to be attentive to those who are in our First Church, our family, is the first step in restraining the heart-stealing demons that would cut us down in life.

When there is a solid center at home, when people feel loved and valued by their parents, spouses, and siblings, no cord of death can easily be wrapped around someone's inner life. Under the protection of God and the covering of our prayers, each child, parent, and spouse can thrive knowing that they are worth the time that we take out of our day to focus on them.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to actively prioritize your family relationships by taking a number of practical steps. First, I'd encourage you, as a general rule, to turn your mobile phone off at dinnertime (and for the rest of the evening if possible). When we are present to work emails, Facebook, or other people via text and chat, we are not present to our family.

Secondly, I would encourage you – before any phone, tablet, or computer is turned on in the morning – to spend time in the Scriptures, journaling and praying for your family. It doesn't need to take long; it just needs to happen first.

READER'S GUIDE 18

THE GAS STATION OWNER
{ Loving Your Neighbor }

Finding Hope Through This Story

The Ten Commandments stand as the most compelling divine laws that have ever been given to human beings. For Jesus, the law of love fulfilled those commandments. The very first commandment calls our souls out of their spiritual stupor into the vibrant act of worship. The second commandment, however, flows from the headwaters of the first. We are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. To love God, 1 John says, is to learn the art of loving our neighbor. If we want to say, or sing, or preach that we love God, we must put teeth to our commitments by giving our lives and resources to care for those God has put within our reach. Loving someone as we love ourselves is a tall order, but according to the life of Jesus – it can be done.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

Loving our neighbor is one of the most satisfying activities we can do with our time, energies, and resources. A number of years ago a few families battling cancer in their immediate or extended family began to care for one another in our neighborhood. I got to play a small part, and to this day it is one of the most vivid memories of joy that I have of this season in our lives. Don't let the TV set, or the computer, eat up all the time that you could spend serving the community of which you are a part. You may enjoy the dulling entertainment over years, but you will miss the hundreds of opportunities that God is giving you to experience true, lasting joy. Take a step forward, and love your neighbor.

READER'S GUIDE 19

NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT
{ Second Chances }

Finding Hope Through This Story

At weddings all over the world, the familiar opening words of 1 Corinthians 13 can be heard setting the stage for the highest of all loves – unconditional love. "Love is patient," the passage says, "Love is kind." It is the utter kindness of the Lord that the Scripture says softens us, and leads us to turn toward God.

Just as that flight attendant shared that "Somebody loves you," so we also can carry a sense of God's unconditional love with us wherever we go, giving people everywhere a taste of the kindness of the Lord. When we see that God is kind, and on our side – we can then get up after a failure and take Him at His offer of a second chance. Hope captures our hearts and gives us strength to go on.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

The love of God is the most disarming force on earth. The hardest heart yields when a revelation of God's love completely floods out the residue of bitterness and disillusionment so common to our generation.

Despair and sorrow meet their match when we are reminded of God's love for us. Using that phrase, "Somebody loves you, and there is nothing you can do about it," find someone who is in a fight with despair and deposit this simple idea – that God loves them – into their heart. If they take a hold of it, it will revolutionize their life.

READER'S GUIDE 20

THE FAILURE IN THE MIRROR
{ Self Worth }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Has your energy drained from your bones? Is there a thorn in your mind or heart that keeps telling you that you have missed your calling, or left it behind? If so, *you're right where God wants you*. It is only in those times when we are at our rock bottom that we can taste a certain sweetness of God's presence – a presence that only meets those who come to that desperate place. Let knowing Him be your leading desire, and find friends, new habits, and new ways of growing in God that will keep your eyes "focused and clear." There is a glorious way of life ahead of you, an energetic and vibrant path, that is not fed by lingering in sorrow or despair. Rather, it is fed by making choices that keep intimacy with God and a Hope-filled view ever before you.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

You and I have a part to play in shutting down the "failure voice" within. If it's screaming loud and clear in your life, it's time to drown it out using all means at your disposal. First, set a morning "Hope Appointment" with God. Commit yourself (and make yourself accountable to someone) to get up every morning, light a candle that symbolizes God's devotion to you and your devotion to God, and begin to read the Psalms. Then, start making "Hope Appointments." Hope Appointments are scheduled times with people who will remind you who God is, who you are, and who He has invited you to become through this trial.

READER'S GUIDE 21

DO THE DYNO
{ Pursuing Dreams }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Taking a leap of faith, for any of us, puts not only our own life at risk – but everyone else's around us as well. Pursuing our dreams can be as dangerous as a crack addiction if we pursue those dreams without regard for everyone involved. God's dreams begin with Him, not us. (If your dreams haven't started that way, they may be fantasies.)

For some, a devastating failure is the end of their dreaming. They don't want to risk, and avoiding damage to others is a great excuse to simply stay where they are. But what if God doesn't want you, or your family, staying where you are? What if there is a grand adventure ahead of you, and God wants to do something important through your life? What if that next leap of faith is not only about you, but it is also about your children (if you have children) and others being inspired by your actions? Ask God, and trusted others, about the next leap. With God's green light, give it all you've got. God will lead when we make the choice to follow Him into the danger.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

If you're married, I'm a big fan of spouses being in agreement about the next "dream" to be pursued. Get good counsel. Listen to divergent views. Welcome criticism. Weigh your resources. Then, wait before God; don't be in a rush. At the moment resolve has come related to the decision, take a deep breath, and *jump*.

READER'S GUIDE 22

THE RADIO IN THE BACKGROUND
{ Prayer }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Nurturing a life of unceasing prayer is a spiritual habit that many throughout history have sought to establish. It takes repetition of a new habit, for a month or more, to get it established in our lives.

Consider that your life of prayer has bookends – a morning moment and an evening moment. Then, fill in the rest of the day with the "radio way" of praying. Keep the conversation going. When you realize you haven't been talking to God about everything that happens as it happens, don't beat yourself up. Just get back to it, and move forward. Eventually, you'll find prayer will come easier to you in moments when you have the time to stop and focus.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to use your smart phone, or some other device, to learn to "continually pray." Set prayer appointments throughout the day. Setting a reminder to pop up at 6 am, 9 am, 12 pm, 3 pm, 6 pm, and 9 pm can go a long way to getting you in the habit of "praying continually." When the reminder comes up, just take 30 seconds to pause whatever you're doing. Close your eyes (unless you're driving) and say, "Lord, thank you for the last three hours" (be specific with your thanks for what you sensed God was doing). Then say, "Lord, I also thank You for what you'll do in the next three hours. Make me alert to Your presence." A new habit will begin.

READER'S GUIDE 23

THE POWER STATION OF FAITH
{ Faith }

Finding Hope Through This Story

It's not an easy thing to break a familiar emotional habit like fear. In some families, fear has been nurtured, encouraged, and modeled for generations. It takes a strong wind of the Holy Spirit to topple its power in our lives, and yet to reveal the sources of our fear gently when it is present. Fear provides a service to us: it helps us to identify that something is removing our trust and chaining our imagination to the worst possible outcome. If we'll examine our fear, find out where it's coming from, and unplug from that wrong idea by reclaiming the promises of God's Word, we can eventually disconnect its power at the source.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

It is no small thing to unplug from fear. Once we have examined what our fear is all about (journaling helps me), we can then take each one of the insights that God has given us to Him in prayer. In some cases, when fears are especially irrational, or rooted in mysterious areas of our heart to which we find we have little access, then pastoral ministry, prayer ministry, or professional counseling may be necessary.

Fear gives us an opportunity to go deeper into a dependent, intimate relationship with Christ. He loves you, and this battle you currently face can drive you to new habits of the heart. God wants to be at the center of this triumph, and change you in the process.

READER'S GUIDE 24

TIE DOWN THE BOAT
{ Thankfulness & Community }

Finding Hope Through This Story

For years I focused on giving people tools to handle a crisis when it came up. It wasn't until my friend spoke to me about the boat analogy used in this story that I thought more about preemptive care *before* a crisis hits. I have walked with people through some incredible storms of suffering. The ones who had built a habit of being thankful, and who had secured a community of "faith-friends" around them in times of peace, were the ones who always fared best when a storm began to wreak havoc in their lives.

As they cultivated their intimate, personal relationship with Christ before the storms, and as they served others in their community before the clouds rolled in, they were tying down their boat almost without thinking about it. When the thunder clapped, the lightning struck, and the rains came down, they had both interior and exterior supports that held them together. As well, they became an incredible support to others.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

The 4 areas of relational investment noted in this story earlier in the book will take some commitment from you to nurture. Sit down with a friend, or a spouse, or someone you trust, and talk through how you can better nurture these supports in your own life.

READER'S GUIDE 25

FIND HIS STAR, AND FOLLOW IT HOME
{ Hope }

Finding Hope Through This Story

If you've been a desert-dweller, much of this story will have made sense to you. The metaphors of the blistering heat and the stinging sand are meant to provoke us to keep focused on the star of Christ on our journey. The star that is Christ's presence is often seen in the sky by noting and following other stars in the constellation around it. Building our life in worship, with a gathering of others, is one key way we learn to sense and experience the presence of God. Learning to "wait" on the Lord, as Isaiah 40:31 says, is all about learning to stay in the Lord's presence long enough, with enough focus, that our spiritual vitality can be renewed and our faith rekindled. This, again, often happens in corporate worship settings, but it can happen in private worship settings as well.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

Are you in a desert right now? First, I encourage you to pull out your water, and take a drink. The water is the Word of God, and a daily "swig" in the morning will get you over the next sand dune with greater strength and energy. Secondly, I would say to cover your eyes from the sand. By this I mean that sometimes we need to get things out of our lives (like too much television, too many movies, or too little faith-enriching music) that are blinding us from seeing what God is doing through our circumstances. We then add in some new habits to replace the old, like Scripture reading, singing new music, or gathering with a small group of faith encouragers.

READER'S GUIDE 26

READING YOUR OWN OBITUARY
{ Purpose }

Finding Hope Through This Story

I have some good news and some bad news for you. Here's the bad news: You're going to die one day. Before you wish I hadn't told you that, remember – I'm going to die too. Now, here's the good news: You're going to die one day. The knowledge that our days are numbered can only help when it comes to properly valuing what God values in our lives – and giving attention to the growth He desires for us this side of eternity. Wake up calls, startling and unsettling as they are, are never preferred – but are always appreciated in hindsight. One day the current wake up call you may be experiencing will be a distant memory. The only thing you'll have to show for having gone through your awakening is a different character – a different strength – in your eyes.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I want to encourage you to embrace any situation that is revealing areas of devotion in you that are not God's best for you. We can get caught up in many habits and schemes that have some kind of buzz that keeps us coming back to them. Anything from football, to eating, to acquiring money can be an idol that distracts us from the most important investments of our life. But, like Alfred Nobel, the buzz of money and industry was not enough to keep him from a wake up call to be more humane and to celebrate those who were humane, through the Nobel Prize. Welcome God to speak to you through your wake up calls.

READER'S GUIDE 27

THE DOG IS WALKING YOU
{ Forgiveness }

Finding Hope Through This Story

If you are going through a battle to forgive someone for what they've done to you, then I have one word for you. *Surrender.*

What I don't mean is that you must surrender to the person who hurt you, or even to actions that are still hurting you. What I mean is that you must surrender your need to fix them, make them suffer, or hold them accountable to God. It is God's work to deal with the heart, and if we don't let go of that leash (I've seen this a hundred times) we will be dragged around by our bitterness until that bitterness shapes our personality and ultimately brutalizes our sensitivity to God's love.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

Surrender can happen right now between you and God. Sit down, take out a journal and a pen, and write these words. "Lord, I choose to forgive _____, as You have forgiven me. I place this person, and the hurt they caused, in Your hands. I place them under Your mercy for You to do what You want to in their life. This day I choose to forgive _____, and I will no longer harbor any bitterness toward them. It is Your work to change them; not mine. Help me to heal from the damage done, and give me the strength to keep honoring this commitment to leave them, and the situation, in Your capable hands. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

READER'S GUIDE 28

THE LONG WAY IN THE MALL
{ Bad Habits }

Finding Hope Through This Story

The one thing about bad habits we can always rely on is that they *always* take us farther away from our dream of a better life. In my pastoral and business work, I watch hundreds of people remain stuck in old ruts, simply because those old ruts are *familiar*. To do something unfamiliar would mean a complete change of lifestyle, and deep down, they can't bear to see the old life go. We're familiar with our bad habits, and we wear them like old slippers or a broken-in bathrobe. We stick to them because something inside of us doesn't want to disconnect from an old way of life and charge into the daring risk of a new one. We only hate bad habits when we wake up one day and find we are somewhere we never thought we would end up. Then, we want to break them. By then, however, damage has already been done. Science and psychology tell us that the only way to break a bad habit, really break it – is to replace it with a better one.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

I would encourage you to sit down with a journal, and begin to list the bad habits you want to see broken in your life. Beside each, write down where you think that bad habit will take you if done every day, for 10 years (approximately 3652.42 days according to the internet). Then, below what you've written, write down the new habits you'd like to replace the old. With a trusted mentor or friend, make practical plans to get the new habit into your daily routine, and the old habit out – before it shapes your future.

READER'S GUIDE 29

OLYMPIANS GET BACK UP
{ Courage }

Finding Hope Through This Story

Getting back on our feet after a significant defeat takes a great amount of courage. In my experience, many people never get back up on their feet after a severe failure. They have given in to fear.

Fear says, "This could happen all over again. You could be embarrassed. You could be rejected. You could fail *again*, and that would be too much for you to bear. How would you live with yourself if you saw that you actually can't do what you thought you could?" Jesus' words, mentioned at the beginning of this book, come in to play again. He knows we are fearful creatures, and yet his words continue to pierce our hearts in the same way they did the first disciples: "Don't be afraid; just believe" (Mark 5:35-36 NIV). In the race of life, giving up is not an option. Like an elite athlete, you have trained to *win*; if not this leg of the race, the next one. Just do it.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

Find your 3 C's – your Courage, your Coaches, and your Cheerleaders. Finding your Courage means it's time to have a heart to heart with God about what He has called you to do. Then, do it. Finding your Coaches means that we all need mentors and trainers to help develop us. Find the best Coaches for you, your calling, and your gift mix. Finally, find your Cheerleaders. Get those people who most believe in you speaking into your ear with words of Hope and affirmation. With the 3 C's in your life – get back up and run.

READER'S GUIDE 30

OUR HOPE IS IN THE POWER OF LOVE
{ Hope }

Finding Hope Through This Story

When widespread despair seeks to choke out the life of the world around us, God's people stand up and offer a resonating voice of Hope to the world. We are not those who listen to the news and quietly (or loudly) shrink under the weight of the world's negativity and self-sufficiency.

Our Hope comes from a higher Source.

As people of Hope, we walk up to those front lines of war with our hands held high in worship, our knees bowed low in humility, and our lives leaning forward against every fear, every worry, every self-worth-killing-thought that sets itself up against us knowing and enjoying God forever.

A Word Of Encouragement To Pass On

These stories of Hope have been meant to equip you with fresh winds of inspiration to fill your sails as you navigate the journey of faith. There is no right or wrong way to be alive – only a better or worse way. According to the Scriptures, a lack of Hope and a cynical attitude sounds a death-knell to the human heart. As Hebrews says,

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess,
for he who promised is faithful"
Hebrews 10:23 NIV

There is no valley that is too deep, no mountain that is too high, where God's love cannot reach you and I.

Find the faith to continue to press into daily worship, Scripture study, and personal prayer. Gather with other believers in a community committed to following the way of Christ, and feed yourself on the feast of God's presence in the midst of His people.

Tell stories about the Hope that is in you, let thankfulness be on your lips at all times, and *keep the faith* as long as you draw breath. From here, I am cheering you on, and from heaven, God and all those with Him are saying, "Run for the prize! Run for the prize!"

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."

Colossians 3:15

A Closing Prayer

Father, let Hope live and breathe in me. Shape me through my stories of success and failure, gain and loss, joy and sorrow – until I am like You. Expecting Your good future is the way I choose to live, and I set the Hope of knowing You before me as my driving life's goal.

In Jesus' name, the One who is our Hope, I pray. Amen.


wildpear

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAN WILT, M.MIN. is a communicator, songwriter, poet, pastor, and worship leader – who loves mining for Hope in every day experiences. With nearly 2 million radio listeners worldwide, he shares weekly lessons of heartfelt encouragement on the *Keep The Faith* radio show to help ordinary people live an extraordinary life of worship.

Dan is also one of today's most respected leaders in the area of worship leadership and artist development. With over 20 years of experience as a worship leader, songwriter, and media resource developer, Dan digs deep to form 21st century creative leaders.

He is the founder of WorshipTraining.com (a training network of thousands worldwide), and has served in worship development roles with Vineyard Worship and many denominational entities globally.

Dan has also served as an adjunct professor with various universities and seminaries in Worship Arts and Spiritual Formation. He leads worship on the hammered dulcimer, and creates ambient instrumentals with his duo, Dunn & Wilt.

Dan lives in Franklin, TN USA with his wife Anita and three children: Anna, Abigail, and Benjamin.

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THIRTY STORIES *of* HOPE

Every day that we wake up, each of us faces a world filled with the clutter of bad news, difficult relationships, and unwelcome surprises. Hope is the inner belief that "…in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose…" (Rom. 8:28 NIV). Hope, powered by the rocket fuel of Faith, needs to be renewed in us *every single day*. Stories can help do just that. As we learn how to forgive, to embrace second chances, to walk well through the loss of a job, to grieve, or to experience God's love, we start to become people of hope in the world. *Thirty Stories Of Hope* is meant to give you daily strength as you embrace God's promises for yourself – and become a Hope-Giver in your own world.

DAN WILT is a storyteller, songwriter, poet, pastor, and worship leader – who loves mining for hope in every day experiences. With nearly 2 million radio listeners worldwide, he shares weekly lessons of heartfelt encouragement to help ordinary people live an extraordinary life of worship. Thirty of these stories are captured in this little book, and each will renew your own Hope and Faith – helping you to become an encourager to everyone around you.

wildpear

THIRTY STORIES OF HOPE DAILY READINGS TO ENCOURAGE THE HEART

DAN WILT