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(From 52 Sermons from the Book of Acts)

GOD'S STRATEGY FOR SUCCESSFUL SERVICE

Acts 16:1-15

ILLUSTRATION:

¹Most people haven't heard of the pro football running back named Tony Richardson. That's because his primary role involves helping other running backs succeed: he blocks so they can run. Over the span of seventeen pro football seasons, teams have often paired Richardson with some of the best backs in pro football. In 2001 he was slated to be the main running back, but instead he went to his teammate Priest Holmes and told him, "It's time for me to step out of the way. You need to be getting the ball. And I'm going to do everything I can to help you." Holmes went on to lead the league in rushing, but Richardson never grew envious or resentful. As Holmes would report, "He used to call me up and say, "I just saw you on SportsCenter! He was happier for me than I was for myself."

All of the running backs that Richardson helped succeed contend that his influence went beyond blocking for them. He would constantly talk to them through the game, advising, pushing, encouraging, and inspiring them. In a recent interview, Tony Richardson said, "I can't explain it, but it just means more to me to help someone else achieve glory. There's something about it that feels right to me."

1. TRAIN THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek. – Acts 16:1-3

And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. – 2 Timothy 2:2

¹ Joe Posnanski, "Made to Last," *Sports Illustrated* (August 23, 2010), pp. 49-51

2. STRENGTHEN THE FAITH OF EXISTING CHRISTIANS

And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily. – Acts 16:4-5

3. FOLLOW THE LEADERSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia, After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not. And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. – Acts 16:6-8

(From 52 Funeral Sermons)

THE CHRISTIAN'S HOME

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. – 2 Corinthians 5:1-8

We are gathered here today to pay tribute to our dear sister in Christ. We know that for all of us this is a time of sorrow--but it is a time of sorrow mixed with joy. It's a time of sorrow because:

We realize that for a time we will not be able to see our loved one. Sorrow because of a touch that will not be felt. Sorrow because of a smile that will not be seen. Sorrow because of a laugh that will not be heard. Sorrow because of a voice that no longer beckons us near. Sorrow because of a love that will be remembered, but not experienced firsthand. Yes, there is sorrow in this time of death – but there is also great joy.

There is great joy today because: the woman we honor is a Christian. Joy because she had turned her life over to the Lord. Joy because she had been bathed in the blood of the Lamb. Joy because she made the decision to embrace the cross of Calvary. Joy because through the power of the resurrection she now dwells in an eternal home promised to her by Jesus Christ our Lord.

And we have joy in knowing that our dear sister in Christ now spends her days where every tear is wiped away; where there is no longer any death, or mourning or crying or pain. We can have joy in knowing that she is home.

1. HER DEAREST ONES ARE THERE

Many of her dear one's are still here with us. But although those whom she has loved on earth aren't with her now, that doesn't mean that she's alone.

1) God is there. He has called her home and was waiting for her with open arms. Can you imagine the joy of finally being in the presence of the One who created the universe? The joy of hearing the voice of the One who commanded the light to be separated from the darkness saying, "Welcome Home"? The joy of experiencing the presence of One who is all-powerful; all-knowing; and in all-places at all times? The joy of being with the One who calls Himself "I Am"?

2) Jesus is there. He bid her welcome into His eternal Kingdom. Oh, what joy to see the One who shed His blood on Calvary so that all who have surrendered their lives to Him could enter into this place of perfection. To touch the hands and feet that were pierced for the sins of the world. To be so close to the One who gave His life, so that we could have eternal life.

3) The Saints are there. All of the Christians who left this earth before her are there with her now. Christian friends who she has grieved over because she no longer had their fellowship – they are there. That fellowship has been renewed now. The Saints who have gone before are there and can welcome her home.

2. SHE BELONGS THERE

The Bible teaches us that this present world is not the real home of the Christian. Peter begins his first letter by addressing the Christians as "strangers" in this world. Again in 1 Peter 2:11 he addresses the believers in the same way – as "aliens and pilgrims" in the world.

Christians who live on this earth do not really belong here. We are here for a temporary purpose--to glorify God--but our true home is in Heaven.

The good news is that our loved one no longer lives as an "alien and stranger" in this world. She is at home with the Lord where she belongs. She is where she was meant to be. She is where God created her to be. She is at a place that can truly be called "home." She is absent from her body and at home with the Lord.

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. – John 14:1-3

WHAT GOD HAS PREPARED

ILLUSTRATION:

²Imagine you are driving down the road and your car stalls at a railroad crossing. You are understandably nervous as you try to reignite the car's engine, but you become even more so when you see a train turn the corner in the distance and begin quickly closing the gap between it and you. The train engine's horn is blaring and the engineer has thrown on the brakes, but you are too close and he's coming too fast. You move from trying to get the car to start to trying to unfasten your seatbelt, but fear has made your hands stiffen and shake. You can't get your seatbelt unfastened. The train is rushing toward you, and you know you're going to be hit. And you are. Suddenly and from behind. A man in a truck behind you has decided to ram into your car and push you off the tracks, even as he is destroyed by the impact in the very spot you once occupied.

You get out of the car, shaken and still frightened. You are terrified by the gruesome scene, in shock over your rescuer's sacrifice. You are grateful in a way that you've never been grateful before. ... Even in your terrified awe, it feels good to be alive. You feel woozy, so you sit down on the trunk of your car, and as you're trying to retrieve your cell phone from your pocket to call 911 and marveling at how little damage the violent shove did to the rear bumper, you hear a whimper from inside.

You didn't know that before you'd left the house, as your kids were playing hide-and-seek, your youngest son decided to hide in the trunk of your car. As you open it up frantically and discover that he is miraculously unharmed, you suddenly realize the total greatness of the loss you almost suffered. Your gratitude, your amazement, your new outlook on life takes a giant leap forward. That is the difference between the gospel wakefulness of conversion and the greater wakefulness that often occurs later.

As you grow in your spiritual walk, you will begin to experience a greater and greater wakefulness as you learn more of what God has prepared for you.

1. SALVATION FOR THE SINNER

² Jared C. Wilson, *Gospel Wakefulness* (Crossway, 2011), pp. 24-25

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people. – Luke 2:30-31

2. SATISFACTION FOR THE BELIEVER

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. – Psalm 23:5

3. BLESSINGS FOR THE SPIRITUAL

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. – 1 Corinthians 2:9-10

4. A PLACE FOR THE GLORIFIED

In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. – John 14:2

1) The First, is provided by the Cross.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. – 1 Corinthians 1:18

2) The Second, by the living Shepherd.

Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant. – Hebrews 13:20

LEARNING ABOUT MYSELF

ILLUSTRATION:

³In late 2012 seventy-five year old Marion Shurtleff purchased a Bible in a used book store near her home in San Clemente, California. After making her purchase and returning home, she discovered a couple of folded pages tucked in the middle of the Bible.

The contents of the yellowed notebook sheets contained a child's handwriting that looked familiar. To her amazement, Shurtleff discovered her name at the top of the first page. When she looked closer she realized that she was actually reading a four-page essay she had written as a ten-year-old to earn a merit badge for the Girls Scouts in Covington, Kentucky—more than 2,000 miles from where she had just purchased the Bible.

By her own account, Shurtleff was deeply moved. "I opened the Bible and there was my name," Shurtleff said in a phone interview from her home. "I recognized my handwriting. I was shaking, literally. I was crying."

Although it remains a mystery how the essay ended up in a Bible in a used bookstore half way across the country, one thing is certain. When we look deeply into God's Word we see evidences of our lives, too. In the pages of Scripture we see individuals just like us—people who pursue faith and hope in God, people who also battle depression, doubt, lust, and pride. As we read the biblical stories about Abraham, Ruth, David, Mary, and Peter we also recognize our own life story.

1. WHAT I WAS BY NATURE

Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. – Ephesians 2:3

2. WHAT I DID IN PRACTICE

³ Brian Mains, "Marion Shurtleff makes amazing discovery in used Bible, finds childhood essay she wrote 65 years ago," WCPO Digital (5-28-13)

For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. – Titus 3:3

3. WHAT I AM BY GRACE

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. – Ephesians 2:8

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. – Ephesians 2:10

4. WHAT I SHALL BE IN GLORY

Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. – 1 John 3:2

(From 52 Sermons About Jesus)

JESUS DECLARED THE SON OF GOD

And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. – Romans 1:4

ILLUSTRATION:

⁴Pastor Clifford S. Stewart of Louisville, Kentucky, sent his parents a microwave oven one Christmas. Here's how he recalls the experience:

"They were excited that now they, too, could be a part of the instant generation. When Dad unpacked the microwave and plugged it in, literally within seconds, the microwave transformed two smiles into frowns! Even after reading the directions, they couldn't make it work. Two days later, my mother was playing bridge with a friend and confessed her inability to get that microwave oven even to boil water. 'To get this darn thing to work,' she exclaimed, 'I really don't need better directions; I just needed my son to come along with the gift!' "

When God gave the gift of salvation, he didn't send a booklet of complicated instructions for us to figure out; he sent his Son.

1. BY PROPHECY

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. – 2 Peter 1:21

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. – Isaiah 9:6

I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. – Deut. 18:18

And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. – Genesis 12:3

2. BY HIS LIFE

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. – Matthew 4:1-10

For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted. – Hebrews 2:18

For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. – Hebrews 4:15

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. – Matthew 28:18

3. BY HIS POWER

And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his

face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go. – John 11:43-44

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. – Romans 6:1-4

4. BY HIS FATHER

And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. – Matthew 3:17

While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him. – Matthew 17:5

FOUR TYPES OF MEN

ILLUSTRATION:

⁵I know a man who lives in Paris. His wife has Alzheimer's. He was an important businessman—his life filled with busyness. But he said that when his wife fell sick, "I just couldn't put her into an institution, so I kept her. I fed her. I bathed her." I went to Paris to visit them, and this businessman who had been very busy all his life said, "I have changed. I have become more human." I got a letter from him recently. He said that in the middle of the night his wife woke him up. She came out of the fog for a moment, and she said, "Darling, I just want to say thank you for all you've doing for me." Then she fell back into the fog. He told me, "I wept and I wept."

Sometimes Christ calls us to love people who cannot love us in return. They live in the fog of mental illness, disabilities, poverty, or spiritual blindness. As we serve them, we may only receive fleeting glimpses of gratitude. But just as Jesus has loved us in the midst of our spiritual confusion, so we continue to love others as they walk through a deep fog.

1. A MAN FULL OF DEMONS—SATAN'S POWER

And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many. – Mark 5:9

2. A MAN FULL OF LEPROSY—SIN'S CORRUPTION

And it came to pass, when he was in a certain city, behold a man full of leprosy: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. – Luke 5:12

3. A MAN FULL OF FAITH—SALVATION, TESTIMONY

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas & Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World (IVP, 2008)*, p. 66

And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch. – Acts 6:5

4. A MAN FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT—TO SERVE

For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord. – Acts 11:24

GOD'S WORD CHANGES LIVES

ILLUSTRATION:

⁶I remember flying into Midway Airport in Chicago during a blizzard. An engineer from India was sitting next to me. As we talked, I found out he was planning to take a bus all the way to O'Hare Airport and then have his pregnant wife drive from a distant suburb with his two young children to pick him up.

"Look, I have a car at Midway," I told him. "How about if I give you a lift home?"

He was grateful, and during our drive he asked why I had been willing to go out of my way for him. I tried to explain: "Has anybody ever done something so kind for you that it makes you want to pass a kindness along to someone else?"

He nodded slightly.

"Well, Jesus Christ has done something incredibly kind for me," I said.

As we talked, he began to understand that God's outpouring of grace had motivated me to help him. When we arrived at his house, he thanked me and said, "I'm going to have to do some thinking about all of this."

There is no doubt in my mind: My words about Jesus registered with him because he experienced the love of Jesus through my practical deed of giving him a ride through the storm.

1. THE WORD RECEIVED—IN FAITH

And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost. – 1 Thessalonians 1:6

2. THE WORD OBEYED—IN PRACTICE

For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it

⁶ Lee Stroebel, *Men of Integrity, "Why Do You Care?"* (May/June 2010)

is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe. – 1 Thessalonians 2:13

3. THE WORD SOUNDED FORTH—IN TESTIMONY

For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. – 1 Thessalonians 1:8

1) The Message of Reconciliation.

2) The Means of Sanctification.

3) The Mission of Evangelization.

(From 52 Sermons from the Gospel of John)

THE NEW BIRTH

John 3:1-9

ILLUSTRATION:

⁷Every animal on earth has a set of correspondences with the environment around it, and some of those correspondences far exceed ours. Humans can perceive only thirty percent of the range of the sun's light and 1/70th of the spectrum of electromagnetic energy. Many animals exceed our abilities. Bats detect insects by sonar; pigeons navigate by magnetic fields; bloodhounds perceive a world of smell unavailable to us.

Perhaps the spiritual or "unseen" world requires an inbuilt set of correspondences activated only through some sort of spiritual quickening. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above," said Jesus. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned," said Paul. Both expressions point to a different level of correspondence available only to a person spiritually alive.

1. IT IS A NECESSITY TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. – John 3:1-5

Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. – John 1:13

⁷ Philip Yancey, "Seeing the Invisible God" *Books and Culture* (May/June 2000), p.8

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. – 2 Corinthians 5:17

2. IT IS A MYSTERY TO THE NATURAL MAN

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? – John 3:4

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. – 1 Corinthians 2:14

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. – John 1:5

3. IT IS THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. – John 3:6-8

It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. – John 6:63

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. – Romans 8:6-9

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May God bless you as you continue to serve Him!

In Christ,

Barry L. Davis