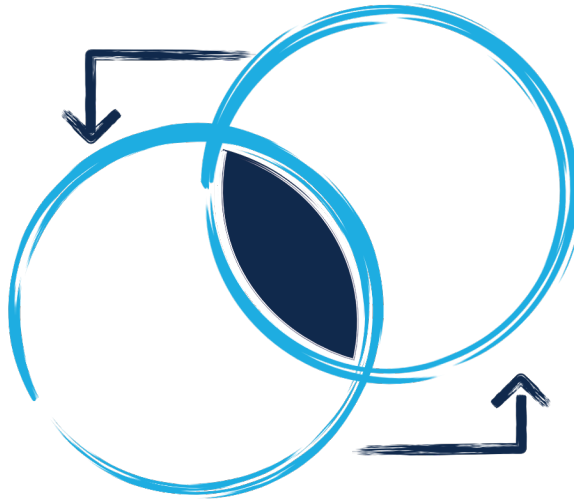




NAMB
Replant



THE WAY OF FRUITFULNESS

BECOMING A MORE
PRODUCTIVE LEADER

WALKER ARMSTRONG

The Way of Fruitfulness: Becoming A More Productive Leader
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This book is dedicated to the memory of my friend and mentor **C. Mark Corts** who preached God's Word faithfully, cared deeply for the flock at Calvary Baptist Church, mentored hundreds of pastors in pastoral leadership, and was an incredible visionary leader for world missions.

May his tribe increase.

(1 Chronicles 12:32)

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Access worksheets for the material covered
in each chapter by going to:**

<https://replanthub.com/thewayoffruitfulness/>

or by scanning the QR code below.



PREFACE

Being a pastor is one of the most difficult jobs on the planet. By nature, it involves a lot of sacrifice, and the full impact of what pastors do will never be seen on this side of eternity. The relentless challenges, frequent heartaches, insensitive criticisms, general lack of appreciation, pressure of unseen spiritual battles, and the humbling reality of personal struggles make this calling feel almost unbearable at times. It is good that God gives deep encouragement in the day-to-day toil, and that there are times of inexpressible joy in seeing people come to Christ and choose to follow Him or everyone would probably give up (2 Cor. 1:8-10).

The North American Mission Board (NAMB) loves pastors. It is dedicated to helping pastors lead with integrity and effectiveness. I am grateful to the Lord to be able help in this worthy endeavor. Particularly, I work with the Replant Team at this great organization. We have a saying in our team that “God has a plan for every church.” This

infers that God not only loves every single church that proclaims the good news of Jesus, but that He also has deep affection and loyalty towards those who lead.

Because of our deep and abiding commitment to be of real service, we are frequently looking at multiple ways we can come alongside of pastors and help them lead their churches to become healthy outposts for the gospel (Eph. 4:11-14). The volume before you is a specified tool designed to do just that.

There are many good books out there that deal with the subjects of time management and the process of setting goals. Over the last forty-plus years that I've been connected to these subjects, I've done a lot of experimentation on how to maximize my time, talents, and treasure for the Lord. The Bible, Christian writers, and even secular authors have aided me to think in concrete and creative ways so that I can feel as if I'm being a good steward of all that the Lord has entrusted to me.

Over the years, I've not only read a great deal on these topics, but I've also even been able to lead a few workshops. In all these experiences I've discovered that there is no magic bullet or hidden path towards greater productivity. It involves a lot of hard work and trial and error to arrive at a custom-fit way for individuals to become more effective and efficient. This work of crafting a fruitful life is so important that the Apostle Paul exhorts us to walk with wisdom, making the most of the days we've been given be-

cause we live in a world that would pull us away from serving the Lord (Eph. 5:15-16).

To make this subject less academic and more approachable, I've chosen to write in narrative form. The characters in this book represent a culmination of multiple conversations I've had with lots of people over many years. Through this approach, I have sought to insert various principles of goal setting and diverse experiences I've had in all types of situations, including my own failures. To me, this style lends itself to be a bit more realistic, because none of us have it all together. All of us can relate to trying to get important stuff done in the midst of a hectic schedule and coming up short. That's why it takes great humility of spirit and an overall hunger to grow for us to successfully navigate the winding pathways of our lives.

While this book is written with pastors in mind, I hope that it helps anyone who wants to have the deep and abiding peace that the Lord gives to those who seek to do their best for His glory, our growth, and others' good.

Sola Deo Gloria!

WALKER ARMSTRONG

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No book is ever the work of one person alone.

I am indebted to my parents Louis and Rachel Armstrong who constantly encouraged me to explore my gifts, especially in writing.

I am grateful for my wife Gina whose rock solid love and attention to detail has helped me in multiple ways to make sure that I'm more mindful of what I'm doing.

I am thankful for pastors who expressed gratitude for my written works which opened the door to deep and meaningful conversations.

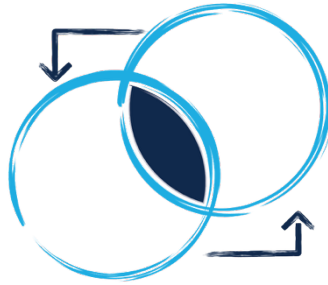
I am thankful for Kevin Ezell of the NAMB whose support had made resources like this possible.

I am thankful for Mark Clifton and Bob Bickford who over eight years ago thought, for some inexplicable reason, that I had something important to share.

I am thankful for the Replant Team at the North American Mission Board, particularly JimBo Stewart, Brandon Moore, Mark Hallock, David Jackson, Matt MacNaughton, and Evan Skelton who gave great input on ways to make this a useful resource.

I am thankful for my family, especially my granddaughters Hadleigh, Ava, Lily, and Elliott who make me want to leave behind a good and inspiring legacy.

And finally, I want to express my deepest appreciation for my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who for my sake became poor that I might become rich in all things I have previously mentioned.



Chapter 1

INTENTIONALITY: A STRESSED-OUT PASTOR

Joel Birch raced through traffic, trying to get to the diner as quickly as possible. He'd forgotten that he was scheduled to meet with John Tyler, a prospective deacon, and was hurriedly seeking to make his way across town. Lately, missing appointments seemed to be a habit of Joel's, and he was hoping John hadn't already written him off because of his tardiness.

In Joel's eyes, John was no ordinary candidate. He was an impressive, young entrepreneur who ran a wildly successful digital marketing company. Yet he still found enough time to help at-risk kids in their community. He, his wife, and their two young children had joined the

church a couple of years ago and jumped right into serving. Joel wondered why John landed at his church when there were other, larger congregations in the area with pews full of people with similar capabilities and backgrounds.

Recently, John had even expressed to his pastor that he was praying about becoming a co-vocational minister, but he wanted to get more ministry experience under his belt. If this were to happen, he would be the first man called into ministry under Joel's tenure at Faith Baptist Church. He was excited to learn more about how God was moving in John's life and wanted to do anything he could to enhance this young man's journey. However, at this moment, he felt like he were blowing his chance to influence such an accomplished man.

As Joel weaved through traffic like a racecar driver pressing toward the finish line, he muttered self-recriminating accusations about his lack of intelligence and discipline to the degree that he wondered if he were even fit for the pastorate. After all, it was Monday once again.

Joel reached down into his pant pocket to retrieve his phone. Even though he exhorted his wife to stop fiddling with her phone while driving, he didn't care a bit about being a technological hypocrite. He tried to reach John on his cell phone but got bumped to voicemail. On the third try, he left an apologetic message.

Joel whipped his car around the corner of Fulton Avenue. He looked up and saw through his rearview mirror

blue lights flashing behind him. “Oh, some poor soul is in trouble,” he said out loud, shaking his head in spiteful judgment. Only then did he notice the police car pulling in behind him. John moved off to the side of the road and felt an unexpected wave of nausea sweep over him.

“Great! Just great!” he growled as he slammed his fist on the steering wheel. He reached into his glove box and pulled out his registration and insurance cards. Then, he sought to pry his license from his wallet but struggled to no avail. He finally yanked it out and summarily popped his elbow on the windshield, expelling a yelp not unlike a dog that had stepped on a shard of glass.

When he looked up, he saw the police officer standing with what Joel felt was a countenance of condemnation and rolled down his window, waiting for the disapproving looks of the oncoming traffic, too. The officer approached him and asked for his license, registration, and proof of insurance. The uniformed man leaned in a bit and spoke.

“Mr. Birch, do you know why I pulled you over?” he began.

“I’m sure I was speeding, Officer,” Joel sheepishly replied.

“Yes, sir, and you were also talking on your cell phone and driving recklessly. I’ve been following you for almost a mile. You nearly clipped another vehicle over on James Street.”

Joel bowed his head and shook it in contrite agreement.

“Mr. Birch, please give me a minute to check your information,” the officer stated before returning to his squad car.

Joel leaned back on his headrest and took a deep breath.

“Calm down and take your medicine,” he said out loud to himself in an effort to stop the spiral of angry, attacking thoughts and to soothe his rapidly rising heart rate. After a couple of minutes, the officer returned.

“Mr. Birch, it looks like you have an exemplary driving record, so I’m going to drop the violation of reckless endangerment. However, I am writing you up for speeding 14 miles over the limit. This will be indicated on your ticket, where you will find a court date for when you’ll need to appear.” The officer handed Joel the bright red piece of evidence that illustrated his utter foolishness.

“You have a good day, sir,” continued the officer respectfully. “And remember, no meeting is worth endangering your life or the lives of others.” With that, the man walked away, leaving Joel staring blankly at the ticket in his hands.

“Lord, please forgive me for this,” uttered Joel remorsefully. “Help me do better somehow.” He cranked his car and looked to see if there were any oncoming cars before slowly pulling out.

It didn’t take Joel long to get to the diner. He walked in, half expecting his companion to already be long gone. He searched the restaurant, noticing John at a booth in the

back left corner. John had already seen him and was smiling and waving for his pastor to join him. Joel sheepishly complied, reached the booth, and slumped into his seat.

“Wow, Joel. It looks like you have the weight of the whole world on your shoulders,” said John, concerned. “What’s going on?”

“Well, a lot, John. But first, let me apologize for being late. I would like to tell you that something came up, but that would be a lie. I just completely forgot. And on top of that, I got a ticket for speeding.” Joel pulled his own version of a scarlet letter out of his pocket and laid it on the table as evidence of his utter lack of discipline.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” replied John as he noticed the price of his pastor’s wrongdoing. “I’ve gotten one of those before. I have the names of some really good lawyers if you’re interested.”

“I probably need that. Thanks.” Joel looked out the window and seemed lost in his thoughts.

John noticed, and with that, he took a deep breath, cleared his throat, and decided to take a risk.

ANOTHER WAY

“Pastor, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” replied Joel with exhaustive capitulation.

“Do you ever find yourself overwhelmed with what you’re trying to get accomplished throughout the week?”

Joel looked back at John and then out the window once more.

“Honestly, yes. When I think about it, I feel that way all too often. I’m terribly forgetful, disorganized, and stressed out too much. I don’t know, John. I’m not harboring any secret sin, but I just feel like I’m living on the edge and wondering when I might fall off.”

“Okay, Pastor, that concerns me.” Joel chuckled a little.

“Don’t worry, my friend. I’m just talking about getting to the breaking point where I might kick the proverbial vocational can down the road.”

“Well, that would be a shame because you’re the best pastor our family has ever had.”

“Thanks, John.”

“I understand that feeling of being overwhelmed,” replied John with a look of compassion in his eyes. “Do you have some time to talk about this? I think I might be able to help.”

“Yeah, I don’t have anything else that’s pressing for the rest of the day. But you’ve already been here for about 30 minutes. Don’t you have things to do?”

“I’ve already gotten some things done as I was sitting here waiting for you. I just need to leave around three o’clock to pick the kids up from school.” John smiled reassuringly, allowing his pastor to drop his shield of shame and defensiveness.

“Okay, John. You’ve got a captive audience.”

“Let’s order first. I’m starving!” laughed John.

“I wasn’t really hungry when I arrived, but now that you mention it, I could eat something,” said Joel as he cracked a smile.

The men ordered their food, and John cracked a few jokes, making his pastor feel more relaxed with the time they spent together. As they updated each other on what was going on in their lives, Joel’s curiosity was stimulated.

“So, John, how can you help your utterly disorganized pastor?” John pushed his plate aside and leaned forward.

“Pastor, I don’t think you’re totally disorganized. I just think you’re not operating at an optimum level. Or, as Jesus put it, you’re not bearing as much fruit as you could.”

“That’s an interesting way to put it.” Joel wiped his hands with a napkin and leaned a little closer toward his friend. “Tell me more.”

“Well, in business, we’ve been inundated with management principles heavily influenced by people like Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford, who taught us to practically see people as cogs in a machine.¹ The Bible, on the other hand, talks to us in agrarian terms like trees, vines, and branches, which we see in passages like Psalm 1 and John 15. While I’ve benefited from some of what I’ve learned about efficiencies in business school, I’ve come to believe

¹ Reagan Rose, *Redeeming Productivity: Getting More Done for the Glory of God* (Chicago: Moody, 2022), 69-70.

that because we're living beings, we need to adopt more organic mindsets about productivity."

"Okay, so what does this have to do with being more organized?"

"Well, do you have any goals that you're pursuing right now?"

"Not really. I've tried a number of times and failed miserably. Now, I'm just trying to keep up with the responsibilities I already have."

"I've been there, Pastor. There was a time I just kept the spinning plates of to-do lists rotating in my life. Then comes the inevitable crash, and you'll scramble to do better, only to try a more efficient way to keep them rotating. I remember reading a quote by Thomas Carlyle that said, 'A man without a goal is like a rudderless ship.'² At the time, I was in graduate school working part-time, and my wife and I were expecting our first kid. On top of all of that, I'd started the initial steps of creating my own business. To say I felt completely overwhelmed by everything would be a gross understatement. I was ready to quit school, get a job, and give up on my dream for good."

"What happened?" asked Joel more animatedly than before.

"Well, I decided that I had to get clear about what was most important and how I was going to accomplish the things I wanted to come to fruition."

"Okay, I'll bite. How did you do it?"

² Michael Hyatt, *Full Focus Planner* (Franklin: Full Focus, 2025), 143.

“I’ll get to that in a minute. Let me ask you another question.”

“You’re full of questions, aren’t you?” laughed Joel.

“Yes, sir, I am. Good questions help point me in the right direction and aid me in properly evaluating how I’m doing.”

“I can’t argue with that. So, what’s your next question?”

“What do you think about planning out your goals as weekly, monthly, quarterly, and yearly goals?”

“Like I said, I don’t put too much time into that. I make lists every week, but that’s about it. I mean, James 4:15 says, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ We can get too rigid or selfish and miss what God is doing.”

“Agreed. I’m not asking about capitulating to an arrogant mindset that makes us feel as though all our plans will succeed. Proverbs 19:21 says, ‘Many plans are in a person’s heart, but the LORD’s decree will prevail.’ Our plans are finite attempts to do something important or worthwhile. God’s plans are what last. There’s a difference between plans and planning.”

“Okay, that’s a bit confusing,” replied Joel as he paused to recalibrate his thoughts.

“Let me explain it this way. When we make hard-lined plans, we attribute fixed deadlines, regimented processes, and very narrow results to help us achieve our objectives. When those don’t work, it’s very easy to see this whole drive for success as a total failure. Planning, on the other hand, is taking all we know and all we dream of and then

putting together goals or objectives with reasonable deadlines, principle-based processes, and desired outcomes. In this case, even if we don't achieve exactly what we're looking for, we still tend to learn and grow on the journey."

"Isn't that taking it too easy on ourselves?"

"Not really. We still should have deadlines and processes to get the most important things done. I'm just trying to avoid what psychologists call the 'all or nothing' mindset that causes us to quit before we really get started."

"So, you're saying that planning is not arrogant but prudent."

"Yes, sir. Without it, we are going to be bounced around like beachballs on the shore, driven by the winds of whatever is blaring for our attention at the moment. It's what Charles Hummel prophetically referred to almost 60 years ago as 'the tyranny of the urgent.'"³

"What does that really mean?"

"The way I see it, we all need help to discipline ourselves in living purposefully rather than reactively. Everything around us can push and pull us in all kinds of directions. I read something Bob Goff said about us spinning in space around the sun at about 25,000 miles per hour and spinning on our axis at about 1,000 miles per

³ Charles E. Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1967).

hour. On top of that, our eyes see things at 13 milliseconds.”⁴

Joel shook his head in disbelief and laughed. “If that isn’t the picture of being perpetually overwhelmed, I don’t know what is!”

“It gets worse.”

“How so?”

“Social media, for example, can be a helpful or even harmful platform. In its worst presentation, it’s about getting people’s attention to the point of what some believe is a form of addiction. Think Facebook. Every time someone hits ‘like’ or comments on a photo you posted, you get a dopamine hit. That hit is what keeps you coming back for more.”⁵

“But isn’t your business all about getting people’s attention?”

“Good point, Pastor. Yes, but we want to inform people of helpful goods our clients sell that are connected to better health. We vet all of the people we represent on all levels and make sure that the price points of their products are affordable for the average consumer.”

“So, I guess we’re getting back to the original issue. We need to work hard to live on purpose?”

“That’s right, Joel. One of the things that got my attention on how to start living more purposefully is what is

⁴ Bob Goff, *Dream Big: Know What You Want, Why You Want It, and What You’re Going to Do About It* (Nashville: Nelson, 2020), 27.

⁵ Jordan Raynor, *Redeeming Your Time: 7 Biblical Principles for Being Purposeful, Present & Wildly Predictable* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2021), 106-107.

called **the Eisenhower Matrix.**” John took out a legal pad and drew the following diagram:

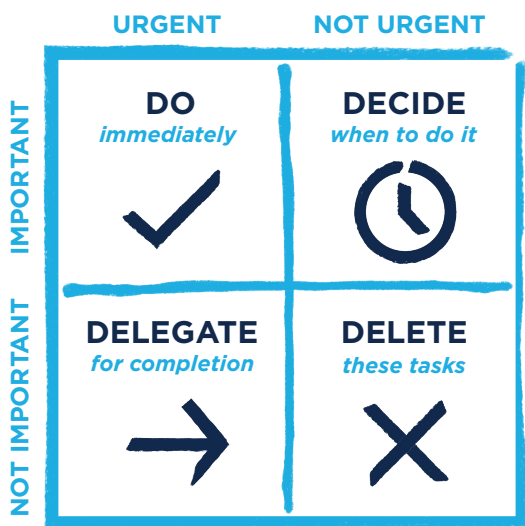


Figure 1: The Eisenhower Matrix

“It’s a tool for prioritization,” he continued. “You see that it’s built on two separate axes—what is urgent and what is important. On the top left are things that are urgent and important, which are emergencies, pressing deadlines, and things like that. By definition, they’re things that need our immediate attention. But, and here is an important point: There are not as many of these things in our lives as we think there are. That is, of course, unless you’re a first responder or emergency room doctor.”

“Or a disorganized pastor. I can see how my lack of organization can add to this list,” laughed Joel.

“Been there, and I’ve got the T-shirt, Pastor. Check out the next box. Below that are things that are urgent but not

important. These could be daily duties that need to be taken care of, like emails and phone calls. In many cases, they can be delegated or delayed.”

“Would this be busy work, John?”

“You betcha. The challenge with these things is that we can fill our days with them in order to feel like we’ve been productive.”

“That’s convicting.”

“Tell me about it. Now, notice that to the right of that quadrant are things that are neither urgent nor important. When properly analyzed, these are things we should ignore or say no to: notifications on our phones or computers, certain phone calls or emails, and even some conversations people want us to have that, in the end, don’t add value to us or even those around us.”

“Why do we do it then?”

“I think it flows out of our anxiety. We don’t want to miss anything, and we don’t want people to be disappointed, so we’re always available. This results in us being spread so thin that we dilute our overall effectiveness.”

“I think I’ve lived in all three of those quadrants, but especially the last two.”

“Me, too, Joel. But it’s the last one that intrigued me, and it still does. It’s things that are not urgent but important. These are long-term goals that, when fulfilled, make us feel fruitful. It’s the kind of stuff I want us to talk about.”

“Okay, I’m taking the bait once again,” grinned Joel. “How do I get to doing those not-urgent-but-important things?”

John laughed. “I love your direct, bottom-line approach. It was your kind but no-nonsense preaching that drew us to Faith Baptist.”

“Thanks, John. That means more to me than I can say. Anyway, I’m kind of a practical guy. I grew up working with my hands—tinkering with cars, working with my dad in his shop. You know, measuring, cutting, and assembling. I’m not much of a theoretical guy.”

LOOKING DEEPER

“I hear you. We most certainly need those elements if we’re going to get important stuff done. But first, I want to establish some biblical theology as the foundation for how we think about making worthwhile goals.”

John flipped the page he’d just drawn on and created another diagram:

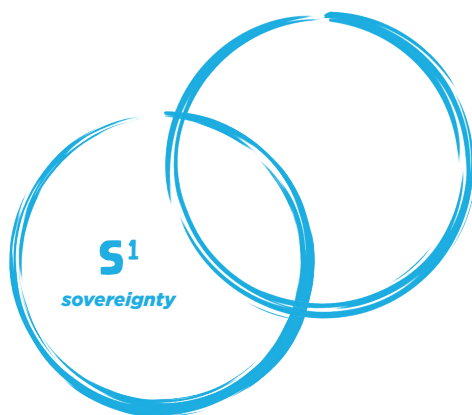


Figure 2a: The Way of Fruitfulness

“This left circle that says ‘S¹’ is about God’s **sovereignty**. You’re a pastor, so I don’t need to go into great detail, but in the context of developing worthwhile goals, we’re talking about the reality that God created us, redeemed us, and has through the Holy Spirit invested talents, gifts, and abilities for His glory, our growth, and others’ good. Does this make sense so far?”

“Sure,” replied Joel thoughtfully. “I’ve never thought of goal setting in light of this, but I guess we can quickly get off track without this perspective.”

“Well said, Pastor. This is one of the core beliefs in this approach. We have to see that God is ultimately in control, even when we feel that our lives don’t make sense or are falling apart. Another way of tapping into all of this is found where ‘**transcendence**’ is written.

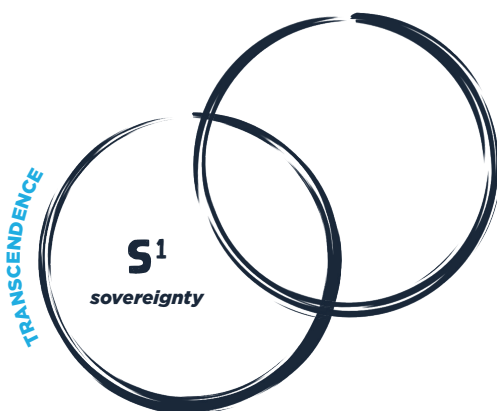


Figure 2b: The Way of Fruitfulness

“The idea here is that God’s ways are not our ways. Not only is He in control, but He is weaving our lives into the greater story of Jesus. Much of this is invisible to us, making it by nature, mysterious and sometimes incomprehensible. Does my simple drawing make sense so far?”

“Yes,” said Joel with a look of increasing intensity on his face.

“So, how do we respond to the reality of His **sovereignty** in our lives, Pastor?”

“Worship Him, follow Him, and obey Him,” replied Joel in an almost mechanistic fashion.

“Exactly! I think this comes in two parts. First, we must realize that we are not ultimately in control of anything outside of ourselves. The second part is knowing that all we can offer God is our open-hearted obedience. He does the rest. This obedience can take on another word, and that is **focus**. It means that we assess who we are, what

we've done, and what we can do, and then hone in on how to work it out.

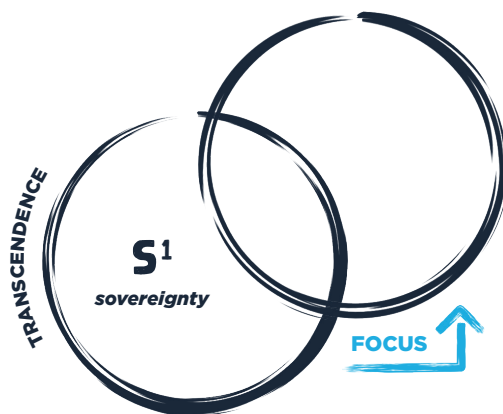


Figure 2c: The Way of Fruitfulness

“I like how Philippians 2:12-13 says to ‘work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose.’ One translation says that God is ‘giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.’⁶ I think **focus** is another way of looking at what you would call stewardship. The Parable of the Steward in Matthew 25 is also one of the anchor passages I use to help me focus on what I need to do. It teaches us that we’re accountable. We’re called to invest in and manage all that God has given us in ways that will bring Him glory.”

⁶ *The New Testament: New Living Translation* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1996).

“I totally agree. Can you tell me more?” continued Joel with a measure of cautious optimism.

“I think **focus** causes us to make all-inclusive assessments of everything behind us and in front of us. We look at how everything we’ve experienced is not random and disconnected but deeply interrelated. That means looking at where we were born, who we were born to, how we grew up, life lessons we learned in school, if we are married, how we chose our mate, what we gleaned from failures and victories, what we know about how we are wired, and determining our deepest desires—things like that.”

“Whew, that is a lot!” laughed Joel.

“Yeah, I know. Now, I realize that people whom God has greatly used haven’t always had that kind of comprehensive perspective when He called them to follow Him by faith to do things that they’d never dreamed of. But one example that speaks to me about this is when God called Moses to deliver His people from slavery and lead them to the Promised Land. In Exodus 4, Moses was still protesting God about how he’d be used by the Lord. God asked Moses what was in his hand. Moses responded by saying it was a shepherd’s staff. God then told him to lay it down, and it became a snake. This scared Moses to death.”

“That would freak me out, too!” exclaimed Joel.

“Yeah, me, too. Do you remember what happened next?” asked John.

“God told him to pick it up, and it turned back into a staff,” replied Joel, nodding his head.

“I think you’re starting to see where I’m going with this, Pastor. God was saying that the past 40 years in the desert were not a waste. He was going to use what Moses learned in the desert for the new assignment He was giving him. But in order to experience this, Moses was going to have to lay it down and totally trust God to use everything, including his past failures, all for God’s glory.”

“Man, that really speaks to me,” explained Joel. He swallowed hard and looked stuck in his thoughts. Finally, he gained the fortitude to speak again. “I never thought of this that deeply. I try to forget my failures, and honestly, I haven’t seen how God could use them. I’ve just tried to lock them in a box and throw away the key.”

“Me, too, Pastor. But they tend to get out of those boxes, don’t they?”

“Yeah, despite my best efforts.”

“I understand. But I’ve learned that He is both our King and Redeemer. Not only is He working out all things for His glory, but He is also changing lives. His aim is to one day make all things new. That means we have to allow Him to take everything about us—including everything we’ve done—and shape us into the people He’s called us to be. But we must be conscious of this truth and participate in it if we want to enjoy the journey.”

“So, how often do you work on ‘S’ stuff?”

“I always take a look at it when I do my yearly retreat. I’ll spend time occasionally adjusting what I’ve worked on before, taking the different streams of influence that make

up my story, and putting them into words. I might prime the pump by using the phrase, ‘I exist to _____.’ Or ‘I serve others most effectively when I _____.’ It may be as simple as ‘This year, I will focus on _____ in order to _____.’ I don’t use phrases like ‘God’s glory’ or ‘others’ good’ because I embed those concepts into my overall perspective. You can call this a purpose or mission statement. I like to refer to it as my focus statement. It seems less intimidating to me.”

“I’m glad you said that because every time I’ve tried to come up with a purpose or mission statement, I’ve felt like I needed to say something profound and then just get mentally paralyzed. Has your focus statement changed?”

“Sure. I mean, I’ve kept some of its basic components. But I want to leave room for God to shape me and thus shape my focus for the coming year. I leave room for fine-tuning and even major changes because life is not static, but dynamic and ever-changing. That’s something we’ll talk about further.”

“That helps, brother. When do you do this, and how long do you spend on it?”

“I try to do it in December. Some years, I’ve waited until January. I try to get away for a day to focus on these ideas. If for some reason I can’t, I try to lock myself up in my office for at least a few hours.”

“How again does this impact your goal setting?”

“That is an important question to ask. For me, it helps to get a sense of what God is doing in my life at that moment. I combine that with what I’ve learned about myself, and I write it down. But I don’t see it as something written in stone. I mean, how can I? It’s simply an estimation of what I would like to accomplish in the coming year.”

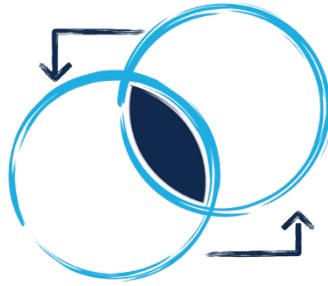
Joel nodded in silent agreement and gave his friend a smile.

WORKBOOK EXERCISES

Chapter 1: Exercises 1-6



<https://replanthub.com/thewayoffruitfulness/>



Chapter 2

INTERRUPTIONS: THE UBIQUITOUS NATURE OF INTERRUPTIONS

“So, what is ‘ S^2 ’?” asked Joel.

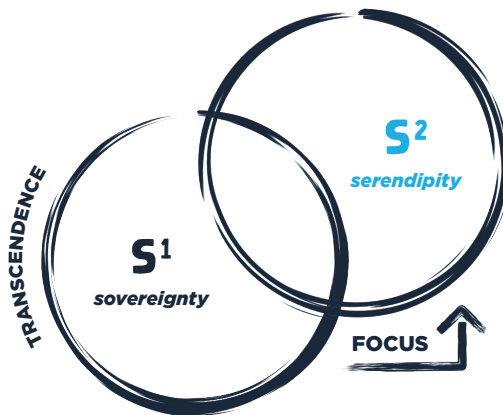


Figure 2d: The Way of Fruitfulness

John laughed at his pastor's drive to know more.

"I was getting to that, but I'm glad you asked! It represents the word **serendipity**. These are moments in our lives when what we've planned doesn't work out, and we're re-directed. This can show up as an unexpected blessing, the revelation of a new opportunity, or even what we feel is the invasion of suffering. At those times, the Holy Spirit helps us to pivot by faith. This pivot is what others call **flow**."

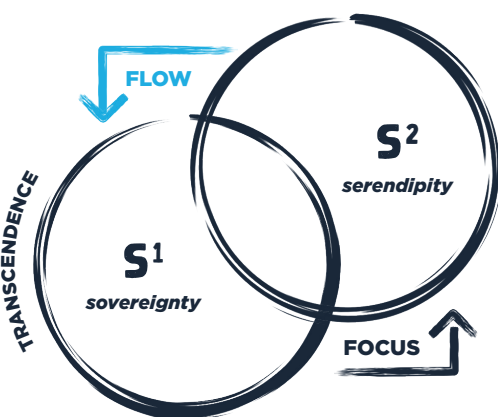


Figure 2e: The Way of Fruitfulness

"Wow, John. This is so rich. How did you come up with this?"

"Well, Pastor, I borrowed from a lot of people, and honestly, much of it has come from my struggles and how the Lord has graciously visited me and provided a way through."

"I get that, John. I've come to believe that it's moments like these when God does His greatest work."

“I couldn’t agree more. But the problem is that we don’t often see it this way, at least not initially. These things seem out of place. They mess with what we want our lives to be until the waves come crashing in, diminishing our sandcastles.”

“That is a fitting metaphor, John.” Joel leaned back and shook his head.

“What are you thinking about, Pastor?”

“I was thinking about an incident with my oldest daughter Noel. She was six when we went to the beach for vacation. She’d spent an entire day working on this intricate sandcastle. I could see the waves coming and told her it was time to go in because she was getting sunburned. Really, I wanted to soften the blow of her seeing the waves come in and melt down what she’d worked so hard on. But she was so locked in that she didn’t see it coming.”

“Oh, good gracious! I bet she was hurt and shocked.”

“That’s an understatement. When it happened, she lost it. I tried to console her, but she made quite the scene. Ultimately, we had to leave the beach. Our family went back to the condo, got cleaned up, and went out for dinner. I made sure she sat beside me. The whole time, I kept consoling her and telling her we could do whatever she wanted the next day. When we finally got back for the night, I put her to bed. She looked up at me with this innocent woundedness and asked, ‘Daddy, why do castles get washed away with the waves?’ I was initially at a loss for words until it came to me.”

“What did you say, Joel?”

“Well, the Lord was gracious to give me something that my bright child could understand. I told her that sandcastles were temporary by design and that they would eventually go away.”

“That’s really good,” replied John, astonished.

“Not so fast, John. You know my daughter! She was born with a curious mind and the relentless desire to have her questions answered. What I said wasn’t satisfactory. She said, with big ole tears streaming down her cheeks, ‘Well, if that is the case, I will never build another sandcastle again.’ I told her, ‘Peanut, you can sure do that. But think about all the fun you’d miss out on! We all have to learn to accept that everything we do will change in some way or even disappear. That’s why we have to learn to be excited and happy for the time we get to spend in the sun.’ Then, I dried her tears and kissed her goodnight. Do you know what happened after that, Joel?”

“I have no idea, Pastor.”

“We were out at the beach the next morning, and she was back at it again. She even asked me to help. We built a new sandcastle that was even larger than the one before. When the waves came, I saw my baby sit, close her eyes, and lift her hands up to heaven. I did the same thing. And when it was all over, we played catch.”

By now, both grown men had tears in their eyes.

HOW TO NOTICE IT WHEN IT HAPPENS

The grown men's tear-a-thon got the attention of the waitress. She slowly came up to the table and asked, "Are you fellas okay?"

The men laughed. John broke the ice by saying, "We're just two sentimental dads thinking about how blessed we are to have our children. Are you a mom, Misty?" he asked as he eyed the woman's nametag.

"Yeah, I have two kids. Billy is 26, and he's out in Montana doing God knows what. I never hear from him. Then, there's Lori. She's 17 and is giving me fits. I work two jobs, and most days, I don't feel like I'm even keeping our heads above water. And then she just adds to my stress by dating these no-good boys. On top of all this, she is pregnant and wants to drop out of high school. I just don't know any more."

Misty looked away to hide her frustration-colored grief.

"Misty, can we say a short prayer with you about your challenges?" asked Joel.

"I'll take any help I can get."

Joel bowed his head and led a simple prayer for strength and deliverance. When he finished, Misty smiled and said, "This is what I really needed. Thank you so much. Can I get you guys anything else?"

John spoke up. "How about two pieces of pecan pie with a couple scoops of ice cream? And before I forget, are

you getting ready to go off-shift? I want to make sure you get a tip from us.”

“Yep. Time to go to the plant and work my second job.”

John reached into his pocket, folded up some cash, and handed it to her. Misty unfolded the wad and counted \$250 dollars. She gasped.

“I can’t believe this! It’s exactly the amount of money I owe my landlord. How did you know?”

John smiled. “I didn’t, but God did,” he replied in an assuring manner. “One of the reasons we’re here is to be a blessing to you.”

Misty smiled at the men and shyly asked, “Can I give you guys a hug?”

“Of course!” exclaimed John. The men stood and embraced her.

“The pie is on me. You men are my angels today!” With that, she moved hastily to retrieve the men’s order. John and Joel returned to their seats. John spoke up, having waited for his pastor to settle back down after this moment that had seemed to be a little slice of heaven.

“That’s **serendipity**, Pastor.”

“Yeah, I know. It happened right in the middle of our discussion. Does this happen to you regularly?”

“More than it used to. What we need to do is to recognize the **immanence** of God.”

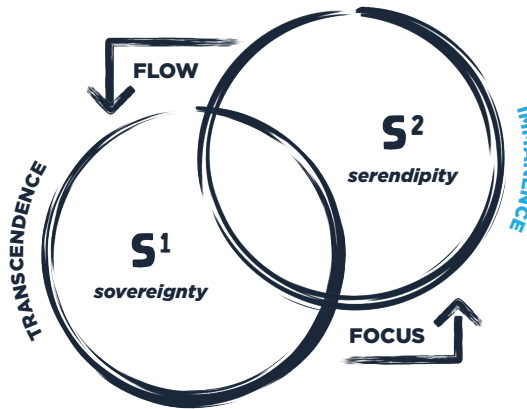


Figure 2f: The Way of Fruitfulness

After adding to the diagram, John continued. "He visits us through an unexpected diagnosis or a homeless man asking for money. It's a child wanting to play, a colleague passionately telling you about a new opportunity, or a phone call from a friend in need just as you're leaving for your next meeting. It's a host of moments like this one."

"So, **flow** is about understanding what God is saying or calling us to do right now?" asked Joel.

"Yes, I got this idea from a buddy who sought to encourage me in a season of intense suffering. He told me that I was like a man swimming upstream in a raging river. He said I shouldn't fight my suffering but seek to flow with it. He even told me to get a canoe rather than continue to unnecessarily punish myself in the forceful torrents of pain."¹

¹ This idea came from a conversation I had with my friend Rick Hughes. It fundamentally changed the way I looked at the physical suffering I have encountered.

SOME BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

“This makes a lot of sense to me, John. I’ve tried to swim upstream more times than I can count. I guess you could attribute it to my hard-headedness.”

“I think every Christian can relate, Joel.”

“Maybe so, but I’m feeling pretty convicted right now.”

“But aren’t there some biblical examples of people who didn’t get it at first?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. This reminds me of Jacob’s first experience with the **immanence** of God in the desert. It happened as he tried to escape his brother Esau. He experienced a dream where he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder up to heaven. He actually said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.’ He named the place Bethel. I believe, among other things, that the Lord was showing him he had all the resources needed to live out his story. But you know, I don’t think he got the message because he continued living deceptively. It wasn’t until several years later that he was back in the desert. This time, his brother had an army ready to intercept him. You could say that the trickster had run out of options.”

“I’ve been there, Pastor. Remind me to tell you about the time my wife was getting ready to leave me.”

“Uh, sure, brother.” Joel looked shocked but continued. “Anyway, the next time the Lord appeared to Jacob, he was facing destruction. In a crazy scene that is so full of grace and mystery, Jacob wrestled with the Lord all night

long and held onto Him, begging to be blessed by Him.”

“You know, I have never fully understood all that, Pastor.”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to. How could we fully understand the almighty God stooping down to invade our lives?” Joel seemed totally lost in this unexpected insight. He cleared his throat, seeming to measure each of his words.

“You know, John, I never saw this until right now. God touched him on the hip and slowed him down for the rest of his life. Through suffering, Jacob learned how to recognize when God shows us how our story is part of something bigger.”

Joel leaned back in the booth as Misty brought them their generous slices of pecan pie, smothered with massive scoops of vanilla ice cream. The men dove into their desert, shifting their focus from deep theology to fully immersed enjoyment of their sweet and salty treat.

“That’s powerful, Joel. The way I see this is that it’s all about adaptability. That should be our main response to His **immanence**. In what you’ve described, God invited Jacob into a new way of life.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. Now that we’re on this subject, was there anything in Paul’s life that could relate to this? I’m thinking of something recorded in the Book of Acts.”

“Again, you’re right on the target, Joel! In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were preaching in Phrygia and Galatia, but the

Spirit of Jesus prevented them from preaching in Asia. I mean, why? Weren't they fulfilling the Great Commission? But this no lead to a big yes, which helped to establish the church in Phillipi."

"That's it, John! But I have never dug deeply into this idea of the need for adaptability in that passage." Joel thought for a moment and spoke in a more measured, cautious tone. "Does that mean I could miss the work of the Spirit if I'm too narrow-minded in this focus area?"

"Yes, Pastor, I believe that's the case. At least that's what I've seen in my life and in the lives of those I've helped."

"Okay, John. Then, how do I avoid making that mistake?"

"I think that you first must give God the right to interrupt your plans and to maybe even change your desires. This can come through an unexpected failure, something that didn't pan out, the trials we face, and even our profound suffering.

"Within this context, it's about becoming more adaptable and looking at anything, especially our toughest times, in a different way. For example, **focus** can bring us innovation because it's about working on what you have and making it the best it can be. **Flow**, on the other hand, is about creativity. It's about listening to the Spirit and thinking outside of the box. I guess you could say it's about seeing new things emerge and thinking in new ways, so to speak. In fact, I encourage you to come up with a **flow** statement to remind you of how God has visited you in the

past and impacted your life in unexpected ways. You can use this statement as an anchor to hold on to when things go sideways.”

PUTTING THE TWO SIDES TOGETHER

“What’s the ‘S³’ section of this model?” asked Joel.

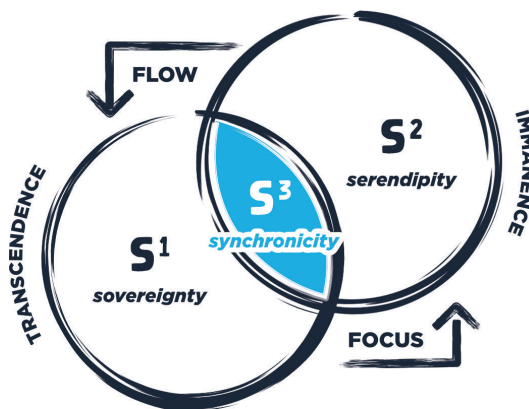


Figure 2g: The Way of Fruitfulness

“That is what I call **synchronicity**. This refers to when both **focus** and **flow** work in unison, and you hit your place of optimum maximization of fruitfulness or what many have referred to as abundant living. When we’re operating this way, we feel as if we’re in harmony with God’s great design for our lives, even when we can’t fully explain all that this means. It’s the peace that surpasses all understanding, like Paul says in Philippians 4:7. I’ve come to believe that when you dig deep and apply the habits of **focus**, you’ll have a clear sense of direction and purpose in your

life. But when you add the dimension of **flow**, you realize that life is not a straight, upward, predictable journey. It involves different landscapes, from climbing mountains, moving through arid places, pushing through deep jungles, and traveling on a rapidly changing river. We need both dimensions to operate effectively in the kingdom of God.”

Joel smiled and began to seem more relaxed.

“Go on, please, John. This is really giving me some new insights.”

“I’m glad. What I’ve learned about the beautiful balance God has created in this **focus** and **flow** approach is, that in a somewhat simplified way, it reflects how the right and left hemispheres of our brains work in unison. Well, technically, neuroscientists would say that our brains work bottom to the top, and then right to left.”²

“I think you might have lost me again.”

“Sorry. I kind of geek out when it comes to this stuff. Let me see if I can summarize it. The left side of the brain majors on language, speech, logical analysis, and critical thinking, while the right side helps to effectively tap into spatial awareness and enables us to read others, create music, and access our imagination.”

“I’ve always heard that we only use about 10 percent of our brains,” laughed Joel. “Some days, I feel like I use less.”

² Stephen M. Kosslyn and G. Wayne Miller, *Top Brain: Surprising Insights into How You Think* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2013).

John laughed in agreement. “I used to think the same thing, Joel, but I learned that we need all of our brains to do things ranging from being able to breathe to solving math problems.”

“So, John, would you say that people are better at some of these things than others and that part of it has to do with our hemispheres?”

“Well, yes. Again, I’m not a scientist, but I do think that in a general sense, we are wired by God to have leanings, giftings, and orientations toward one over the other. I mean, think about the body of Christ. It’s easy to see why we need people who have propensities and gifts in both areas to function and flourish as a church.”

“How about marriage? Do you think the idea that opposites attract fits into this approach?”

“Yes! You might be surprised to hear this, but most of my organizational skills have been learned. My wife is really the one in our family who keeps things humming, and she’s been a huge help with my business in that regard.”

“Interesting,” said Joel, stroking his goatee as he looked out the window. “But you’re saying that we can learn things. We’re not just limited to being dominated by one or the other hemisphere.”

“Absolutely. Think about goals in this way: We first need to assess who we are, where we are, and what we would like to accomplish. This is about assessment and then execution. That is a left-sided angle. But at the same time, we need to imagine what a preferred future would

look like. We need to be deeply motivated to get things done, especially when a goal is challenging. Without both motivations, our execution falls short. We'll never be able to do what God has called us to do."

"This is amazing stuff, John."

"God is indeed a marvelous Creator and Redeemer. But we are responsible for being aware of how we think and feel and then developing our brains to become effective tools in serving our Lord. It's just like how Romans 12 describes the process of renewing our minds. When we **focus** our thoughts and harness the **flow** of our energy and emotions for God's glory, we move out of the limiting conformities of this world and into creating new neural pathways. Those pathways grow bigger and faster the more we proactively reinforce them. This is how we can know and do God's will."

Joel looked at John's drawing of the two intersecting circles. A smile ran across his face as he nodded.

"I think I'm starting to get it. I think my challenge is not about lacking a plan, but about not dreaming big enough or being passionate enough. I guess I only get as far as making a list of things to do every week, and that's about the gist of it."

"That's right, Pastor! It's not just writing down a to-do list and hoping that we get everything done in a week. In my struggle, I found that approach lacking because it was

all about short-term responsibility rather than a lifelong alignment with what matters most.”³

Joel was once again lost in deep contemplation. He tried to reply but backed up and shook his head a little. He finally found the best words he could muster at the moment.

“Can you screw up your life so badly that it’s impossible to recover and become productive in the ways God has intended for you to live?”

“I hear you, Joel. I’ve been in the seat you’re in right now, asking one of my wonderful mentors the same question. But he told me it’s never too late. God’s mercies are new every morning, and it’s His faithfulness that gives us room to fail, learn, and grow.”

“Thanks for that reminder, John. That helps.” Joel’s eyes glistened a bit. He regained his composure and leaned toward John with a sudden level of intensity that would have startled and perhaps even intimidated the average person.

“John, I am sincerely interested. Still, this is a lot to take in. I don’t mean any disrespect, but here is my bottom line: How do I get down to the nitty-gritty of things? I’ve gone to conferences and read books about theories on how to do this stuff, but after a while, it just takes up space on my shelves. I forget what I’ve read, and I’m just too tired to

³ I gleaned this insight from a course I used to teach from Franklin/Covey called “*What Matters Most*,” based on the “Franklin Planner”™ and the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey.

run through another system of goal setting, time management, life purpose, and whatever else you want to call it when, in the final analysis, it doesn't fit who I am and can't be fully integrated into the challenges I face."

"I understand, Joel. While I resonate with some of your evaluations of how some systems don't work for everyone, I'm not criticizing anyone. I've learned so much from so many people. I'm not sure how many so-called 'original thoughts' I've come up with myself. I've just landed on some things that have helped me a good bit over the last few years."

"You got me again! I shouldn't criticize people who have done good work. It's just that I'm a crazy mix of discipline and laziness, clear plans, and wild ideas. I don't know if you can help a mixed-up guy like me."

"Oh, Pastor, there are a lot people just like you, with me being one of them."

"Really? I always thought that you were the kind of person who came out of the womb with a plan. I mean, look how successful you are! You run a multi-million-dollar business and have a wonderful family; you started a nonprofit that helps intercity kids get tutoring, and on top of that, you're studying for the ministry!"

"Pastor, it's taken more than you can imagine to get my life in sync. Even now, there are times I drop the ball with my family and have to hit pause and re-group. I try to learn from my failures and press forward."

"I appreciate and respect your honesty and humility, brother. I just want my life to make sense so I can get more

organized and be able to focus on what really matters.”

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

“Pastor, I don’t want you to feel as if, on the one side, you are totally out of sync, and on the other side, presented with some kind of total overhaul in all that you do. Your life already makes sense.”

“Yeah, I know all the biblical foundations of who I am in Christ.”

“I know you do. But what I’m talking about is something else. Let me ask you a question: When you looked into other programs, did they put an emphasis on discovering your life’s purpose?”

“Sure, John. And I would say that a good deal of them focused on creating a life purpose statement.”

“Yes, and there is great value in discerning your life story through the hard work of crafting a life purpose statement. The only thing I would add is this: We don’t have to create a life story from scratch. It has already been created. The diagram I fashioned infers this. I visualized that this model was placed within a globe-like structure that had painted across it—**His story, our part.**”



Figure 2h: The Way of Fruitfulness

“I think I get it. What is the main difference between approaches?”

“Well, for starters, you don’t have this massive responsibility to make up something that, by nature, has mystery wrapped all around it. For instance, we really don’t know exactly what is ahead of us, and we don’t know exactly when we’re going to die.”

“I get that,” said Joel, leaning forward with anticipation. “What, then, is the right reaction to that reality?”

“I think we need to do as Parker Palmer said when he commented that we can’t force it but should rather listen to our lives and accept our stories as they are—not as we wish them to be.⁴ The writer David Brooks takes a little different approach when he says that we don’t actually create

⁴ Dr. Stephanie Shackelford and Bill Denzer, *You on Purpose: Discover Your Calling and Create the Life You Were Meant to Live* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 80.

our lives, but that we are summoned by life. This means that we pay attention to what is going on around us.”⁵

“So, does that mean we should just become passive and stop worrying about any of this stuff? I’m a bit confused again, John.”

“No, I’m just saying there should be a balance between reflecting on our journeys and noticing what is going on around us.”

“Still confused, John,” said Joel with a look of consternation growing across his brow.

“I get that. Look, I bet I could point out various ways you’re already doing this to some degree. For instance, have you ever been asked to speak on a subject that felt completely out of your wheelhouse?”

“How do you know these things? Yes. One time, I was asked to step in at a small-group conference and speak about evangelism in the small-group setting. Our church had just begun our new discipleship ministry, and we had zero experience on the topic. So, rather than fake it, I declined. It was tough because it happened during a time when our family could have really used the money.”

“But wasn’t it the right decision?”

“Yes, the Lord eventually came through for us another way.”

“See? This is an example of applying context to your situation. But wasn’t there another time you were asked to

⁵ Shackleford and Denzer, 107.

“speak at some conference regarding something you had both knowledge and skill in?”

“This is a little spooky. Last year, I was asked to speak on pastoral care through expositional preaching.”

“How did it go?”

“Really well.”

“See? You were already applying the principle of context based on an honest awareness of areas you were more qualified to speak into. Context is the understanding of a situation, combined with a clear assessment of what you excel at and what you don’t. So, as I said, you’re already doing this.”

“Well, that is encouraging.”

“Glad you feel that way. What I’m proposing is a more intentional, comprehensive way to look at this. I believe that a part of it involves thinking about our up-bringsings, meditating on our giftings, peering into our successes, dissecting our failures, articulating our testimonies, taking inventory of how we’re wired, and really seeing the needs of those in our midst. Investigating all these threads is how we get a clearer picture of who and where we are.”

“That’s a lot, John!” Both men laughed about the work required to take a deeper dive into their own stories.

“How does this shape how we form goals?”

“I’ve found that rather than having some kind of final description of what my life should mean, I think a more short-term, contextual focus statement helps.”

“This makes sense. How does this work?”

“Well, for starters, I think we need to take the pressure off ourselves to come up with some kind of final, profound, all-encompassing summary of your life that in turn gives you some kind of fail-proof plan.”

“Thanks for saying that John because I’ve never been able to do this. At least, not for something that resembles reality.”

“I couldn’t agree more Joel. I like how Kevin DeYoung describes this. He says we need to differentiate between the decrees of God, the desires of God, and the direction of God.⁶ I am grossly oversimplifying it, but DeYoung describes the decrees of God as His predetermined will, His desires as what He commands His people to do, and His direction as the unfolding of His plan for our lives.

“His supposition is that for many reasons we get stuck in trying to determine the exact path or direction we should be on. This obsession creates all kinds of problems. It is better to plan with the understanding that He is a good, trustworthy God who is ultimately in control.”

“So, how does this relate to the focus statement?”

“For me, I’ve found it more liberating to boil it down to three big things I’d like to get done by the end of this year.⁷ That doesn’t mean I just have three goals. It means

⁶ Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God’s Will* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 17-24.

⁷ I got this basic idea of simplification of goals from Michael Hyatt and Company’s “Full Focus Planner System.” I have used this as my basic paper version for several years.

that I think about what Jim Collins might call ‘Big Harry Audacious Goals,’⁸ or very important things I want to get done in a year.”

“Okay, but that sounds like a small number. What if I want to do more?”

“I get that. You can always expand it. But these goals are big ones that encompass a lot of things. Let’s say you want to write a book on shepherding through preaching. This is not only involving research and writing, but how you are going to market it. There are so many steps to this that it might take longer than a year to pull it off. But without focused intentionality, there’s no way it will happen.”

“I think I’m following you, John. I guess what I’ve found is that I can be all over the map about what I think I should do. This causes me to be unrealistic about the real scope of my capabilities. And when I don’t get things done, I feel like a failure.”

“I’ve been there, John. In fact, I think I’m there right now. But how do the factors in background, breakthroughs, breakdowns, builders, and bent come into play when we’re doing this?”

“Great question! I think that is what **flows** into our current context and helps shape our correct **focus**. Another way of putting it is that our capabilities and experiences provide an awareness of the colors of the paint God

⁸ Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

has given us. It's up to us as stewards to blend them together on the canvas we've been given. Does this make sense? I know I'm sharing a lot with you in a short period of time."

"Yeah, it reminds me of how my dad taught me to swim," Joel replied with a twinkle in his eye.

"How did he do it?"

"He threw me into the deep end of the pool and yelled for me to paddle to the ladder."

"Good gracious! I'm sure that was scary."

"It was, but you'd have to know my Pops to understand his swimming philosophies. Like I said earlier, he was a very hands-on, real-world kind of teacher. I guess it worked because I'm still here, and I know how to swim now." Both men laughed.

"So, John, how do I put all of these things together to create better goals?"

"We're going to get to that. Don't worry. I'll send you a document with everything we talked about this afternoon."

"Good! My memory is not what it used to be." Joel sat back and clapped his hands together. "Okay, I'm ready to do the work. How do we get started?"

"We already have. We've laid some solid foundations here today. But I want you to know something as we dive in further. This is only a summary of everything there is to know. One could literally have a full-day workshop explaining these things more fully."

"Well, maybe one day we can do it at the church."

“That would be fun! With all this in mind, my hope is that everything I’m getting ready to share with you will help you feel less stressed and overwhelmed. The cool part of this approach is that these are principles with practices. You can add, subtract, and even revise what I’m sharing. This can become your way of not only getting more done, but receiving the information that represents your sincere, good desires in a time-conscious way. Shall we proceed?”

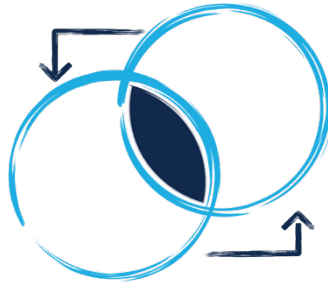
“Absolutely!” replied Joel as he waved down the waitress for another refill on his sweet tea.

WORKBOOK EXERCISES

Chapter 2: Exercise 7



<https://replanthub.com/thewayoffruitfulness/>



Chapter 3

ILLUMINATION, PART 1: **LISTENING FOR** **GOD'S DIRECTION**

Joel took another sip of his coffee. His mind was still whirling with all types of questions as he reflected on what had just occurred with their waitress Misty. He and John had just experienced a holy moment of **serendipity** that seemed to powerfully illustrate what John had just explained. Joel sought to regain his composure and presented a more “I’ve got it together now” posture as he continued the conversation.

“John, you did a tremendous job of laying down strong biblical principles of how we’re being woven into

God's story. What is the best way to know which goals to pursue? How do I get to my Big Three?"

"Great question, Joel! What I've learned through trial and error is that I always begin with the illumination process."

"That sounds a little New Age-y to me," replied Joel as a disapproving look crept across his face.

"I get that. But notice I said to begin with prayer. Jesus seemed to enjoy going to lonely places to get guidance from His Father. I believe that how Jesus spent this time, among other things, gave Him His marching orders for fulfilling His Father's plan for our redemption."

"It is interesting you mention that, John. I've been thinking about going on a personal prayer retreat. I guess I've always felt that this was some kind of luxury."

"I hear you. I guess as a businessman, I might have felt that even more than you because it meant leaving the inmates to run the prison."

Joel laughed so loudly that some customers turned around to see what all the commotion was about. "What changed your mind, John?"

"I guess I just realized that to hear from God and to be honest with Him, I would need to get quiet."

"Go on," replied Joel with less incredulity.

"There is no way that we can delve deeply into the issues of life without spending extended time in prayer. But we have a problem doing that."

"Why do you think that is, John?"

“I’m sure it’s a lot of things, but what I’ve discovered about myself is that I tend to think of prayer as a checklist to ask God for help or an energy shot that protects me from evil or gives me a boost for the day. I think prayer is like those things in some ways, but it’s even more than that.”

“Guilty as charged, brother,” said Joel.

“But when I approach God in prayer through His Word, I gain illumination for what I’m facing. It is all about not only what God has said, but also what God is saying to us now. I’m not talking about a hermeneutic in which we twist the Bible into something self-serving. What I’m referring to is applying the Word to our current context through the wisdom and power of the Spirit. Since we are called by God into an active and living relationship, we should expect Him to show us the path we should walk in. Inspiration from the Lord gives us confidence to know when we’re heading in the right direction, and it always involves His glory, our growth, and others’ good.”

“I agree with you on this, John. I really try to preach in such a way that tells our people what to do next.”

“You do just that, Pastor!”

“Thanks, John. It’s good to know someone sees that. Most weeks, I wonder if all the effort I put into my preaching really matters. I’m sorry—I shouldn’t say that. I’m just not sure how many people are really trying to apply the sermon to their everyday lives.”

“I can see why you might feel that way, Pastor. A lot of what you do is not seen in the short term, but over the long haul of people’s lives.”

Both men remained silent for a moment. Joel looked out the window, trying his best to choke down his feelings of doubt and resignation.

Finally, John once again broke the silence.

“I think guys like me don’t always know how to integrate the inspiration of God’s Word into their lives. I know I was guilty of separating my business world from my church world. It wasn’t until I had some big failures and disappointments that I really began to pray and submit every single area of my life to Christ.”

“Funny, you’ve never struck me that way, John,” replied Joel, releasing some of the tension from his face.

“Oh, that’s because you’ve only known me for a couple of years,” laughed John.

Joel responded with laughter that was punctuated with relief. “So, what happened, John? How did you get it all together?”

“Well, I’m far from that. I know it’s really easy for me to fall off the truck of fruitfulness. I guess to answer your question, my desperation level got higher than my comfort level, and I knew that if things didn’t change, something worse than a lack of productivity would occur.”

“Like what?”

“Well, if I separated my spiritual focus from large chunks of my life, I could become more secretive, and that would lead to dishonesty. That dishonesty could morph into a host of other sins, which would put me into some deep weeds.”

Joel nodded in a way that indicated how intimately aware he was of this reality. “How do you access God’s Word to make worthwhile goals?” he asked earnestly.

“There you go, Pastor. Now, we’re humming!” John leaned forward in his seat, rubbing his hands together as if preparing to see a delicious meal laid out before him. He reached into his backpack and pulled out a thin red book.

“To start with,” said John with a big smile on his face, “what has been of tremendous benefit to me is the discipline of journaling.”

Joel’s anticipation of John delivering an inspiring insight shifted into a look of utter dejection.

“Oh, that figures. I’ve never been any good at that, no matter how hard I’ve tried,” he said with a level of discouragement that would have deflected the conversation if he were speaking with anyone else.

But rather than being frustrated with Joel’s rejection of the idea, John kept pressing forward.

“I know that feeling, Joel. I’ve started and stopped more times than I can count. Maybe my use of the word ‘discipline’ deflated any interest in this, but hang with me here.”

“I’ll try,” laughed Joel, indicating a crack in his initial resistance.

“Good. What helped me was to see journaling not as a thing that only spiritual giants did, but more importantly, as a simple way to record my conversations with God. It

meant I didn't have to muster up profound spiritual insights but just read the Word, reflect, pray, and record what I sensed God was sharing with me as His beloved child."

"That sounds a lot better to me," replied Joel with a measure of relief. "I think I falter when I put pressure on myself to discover one spiritual nugget after another. When I don't get that, I give up."

"Me too, Pastor. But when I stopped seeing it as a rigid requirement and switched to viewing it as an opportunity to fellowship with the Lord, I was ready to let go of the legalistic, sterile perspective that had squelched me from really hearing from God. It was then that my eyes became open to all kinds of truths. These insights not only encouraged me, but they also gave me an opportunity to join Him in what He was doing."

"Sounds like Blackaby," chuckled Joel.

"Yes, sir. The *Experiencing God*¹ study has had a powerful impact on my life. The principles in that study inform a lot of what I will share with you this afternoon."

Joel nodded affirmatively.

"Now, getting back to the big picture of illumination, we could say that when we talk about inspiration, we're referring to direction. The Bible says in Psalm 119:105, 'Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path.' But do we really believe this? Do we come to God expecting Him

¹ Henry Blackaby, Richard Blackaby, Mike Blackaby, and Claude King, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Brentwood: Lifeway Press, 2022).

to show not just what is right and wrong, but also what is most expeditious or alluring?”

“Wow, John. When you put it this way, it is so clear and convicting. I’ve preached on this passage many times, and my only orientation has been to help people not get into the weeds or fall off the cliff. I really never gave a deeper consideration of how God has wired each of us. But tell me, what do you mean when you say ‘alluring’?”

“That’s a good question. For me, alluring refers to living the beautiful life. I know the first thing that pops up into people’s minds is whether or not this is some kind of New Age nonsense. I can assure you it’s not. Consider this: Hebrews 1 talks about Jesus being the ‘radiance of God’s glory,’ but where do you suppose that brilliant beauty now resides?”

“Well, according to 2 Corinthians 4:7,” Joel retorted, “‘we have this treasure in clay jars.’ So, I would say that it’s within us.”

“That’s right, Pastor. But while we typically think of the treasure as just being the message of the gospel, I think it’s more. I think that the radiance of Jesus’ glory shows up in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That’s why I believe the rest of that verse talks about the surpassing power being from God and not from us.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Joel, mirroring John’s contagious spirit. “I get what you’re saying now. Ephesians 2:10 is making so much sense to me now.”

“What do you mean, Pastor?”

“It talks about us being God’s workmanship. The Greek term is where we get the word ‘poetry,’ or some even think of it as a work of art—that God is making us into His works of art.”

Joel seemed mesmerized as this old truth began to take on a new meaning. He gathered his thoughts and continued.

“So, the alluring life is all about reflecting the beauty that’s been planted within us?” he asked hesitantly.

“That’s right. So, when we think of time management or goal setting, if any of this is not saturated with the truth that we’re part of something bigger than ourselves, we’re going to get off track. Have you ever experienced the sensation that you were not on the path that God had for you?”

“You mean like today?” laughed Joel.

“Oh, we all fail, but what I’m referring to is the sense that you might be doing the right thing but for the wrong reasons. Or that over time, you’ve drifted away from your original calling.”

“Are you referring to my call to ministry?”

“For sure, Joel. But I think, in a more fundamental way, we’ve lost track of our first love.² We’ve caught ourselves going through the motions, and we’ve lost a sense of God’s nearness, resulting in a lack of confidence in what we’re doing. We’ve lost track of beauty.”

² See David Jackson, *Falling in Love with Jesus Again* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2025).

“I’ve never heard it put that way before, John. It seems like I’m saying this a lot today.”

“I get it. I’ve been guilty so many times of looking at my life as a calendar or a to-do list and not as a beautiful journey.”

Joel shook his head with sad disbelief as he peered back out the window.

“Now, Joel, I hope what I’m getting ready to say is not insulting.”

“Don’t worry, brother. I’m already convicted about a lot of what you’ve said. Swing away!”

Joel’s smile gave John the confidence to get more personal with his pastor.

“Okay. In my experience, pastors can become very utilitarian about hearing from God. In other words, they look to get insights from the Scriptures they will be teaching on Sundays, but don’t look to God for their entire lives.”

John waited for the other shoe to drop. He anticipated getting chewed out for what many pastors would have considered an insulting statement. But what he received was nothing of the sort.

Joel looked up as if preparing a return salvo. Instead, he lowered his eyes and slowly nodded his head.

“I have to say you nailed me on that one, John. I’m not proud of it, but that statement is accurate for me right now. There was a time when it wasn’t true, but as you said earlier, I’ve kind of lost my way.” He looked lost in the kind of

deep sadness that no one gets out of quickly.

John noticed the look in Joel's eyes and sought to pick his pastor up. "I think of you as a godly man. Nothing you've said to me today makes me think differently."

"Thanks, but I don't feel that way right now."

"I think we can move to a better place this afternoon. Hang in there with me, okay?"

"I will," replied Joel with a little more determination.

APPLYING ILLUMINATION

"So, as we have looked at the inspiration side of illumination, we've seen that we primarily get this through the Holy Spirit's insight into God's Word, redirecting us to live differently than we previously thought. Sometimes, it reminds us of old truths we've lost track of. Has that ever happened to you?"

Joel nodded his head in agreement. "I haven't thought about this in a long while," he reminisced, "but it relates to how we came to Faith Baptist."

"I would love to hear that story, Pastor," replied John enthusiastically.

"Well, it's pretty straightforward now, but back then, it wasn't. We had another church looking at us just a little north of here. They had it all—a great staff, ministries that were highly successful, and a very generous salary package.

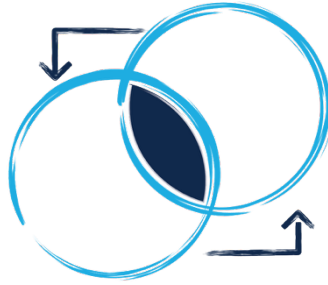
We'd struggled for years to catch up financially from student loans and our youngest's medical bills, so for us, it seemed like a no-brainer until..."

"Until you heard from God. Right, Pastor?" asked John, smiling as he took a sip of water.

"Yeah, John. One of my favorite verses is Matthew 6:33. God has used that verse to comfort us a great deal when we were facing some significant financial challenges. I actually thought that for us, it meant the struggle was over and that we would soon be in great shape. But this time, it meant for us to go with the smaller church. Man, I wrangled with God over that one! But when we stepped out in faith, God showed up in so many ways, including my wife's pay raise at her new job, which more than covered the difference between the other church and what Faith Baptist offered me. That verse, and several others, definitely guided us to make what we thought was a hard decision, but in the end, it was the right one."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about, Pastor. When God shows us something He's calling us to do in His Word, it requires faith on our part to believe it and to act on it. But there's a catch. To quote Blackaby again, this brings about a crisis of belief, where we have to put our trust in God to do what only He can do to see this promise or calling fulfilled. You guys did just that when you were called here."

"Thanks, John. That really helps."



Chapter 4

ILLUMINATION, PART 2: IDENTIFYING YOUR DESIRES

“With all of this in mind, are you ready to move on to the next aspect of illumination? It’s what I call imagination.”

“Sure,” said Joel, with a look of encouragement plastered on his face.

“Where inspiration is about receiving direction, imagination connects us to dreams and desires.”

Joel started to look a little concerned. “But can’t our desires get us off track?” he challenged. Without pause, he continued his measured onslaught. “I mean, the Scriptures tell us, ‘The heart is more deceitful than

anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?’, right?”

“You’re absolutely correct. And yet there are verses like Psalm 37:4 that say, ‘Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you your heart’s desires.’ The Bible has really given me great freedom to do all kinds of things. Now, I know others have said that the greatest thing we can receive is the Lord Himself, and I wholeheartedly agree. But it doesn’t mean He cannot bless us with other things. What I’ve found is that Christians automatically discount dreams and desires, believing that they are almost always sinful or bent.”

“That’s true,” replied Joel more openly.

“Some might say that when you make God the center of your life, you’ll then get what you want and—even more importantly—what you really need. But some people think these desires are just spiritual ones. I think differently.

“I think it means that if we make God our treasure, we are free to follow our desires. I think that’s what Psalm 20:4 means when it tells us, ‘May he give you what your heart desires and fulfill your whole purpose.’ Could it be that, when rightly ordered, our dreams and desires can be a seedbed for wonderful experiences and impactful ministry?”

Joel chewed on every word his companion said. Finally, he spoke up.

“Okay, let me make sure I’m following what you’re saying. Let’s say I want a new fishing rod. How can that be a godly desire?”

“Well, if it doesn’t put financial pressure on your family and if you don’t draw your ultimate joy from it, you shouldn’t see it as ungodly.”

“Hmm, I think I’m following. Please go on,” Joel responded.

“You know how much I love C.S. Lewis. Well, in *The Abolition of Man*, he said, ‘We make men without chests and expect from them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst.’”¹

“I love that quote, Joel. But I’ve always looked at it from the character lens. Are you saying that this relates to our desires in general?”

“Exactly. We need to be people of good character. On top of that, we need to be full of life. It’s not a one-sided thing. We not only get to enjoy the life God has given us; we can spread that infectious, positive perspective on life to others. In fact, I think God is glorified when we invest in ourselves and then, in turn, serve others. This is what some call the ‘overflow principle.’ In God’s economy, we are blessed to bless others. There is nothing so sad as a man or woman who seeks to help others while empty themselves. They do it only out of duty, and if that is your only motivation or reason for doing something, the shelf life of that motivation is short.”

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The C.S. Signature Classics: The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 704.

“But how does that fit in with the **focus** and **flow** model?” asked Joel agitatedly.

“What do you think, Pastor?” asked John with a smile across his face.

“Uh, well, maybe **focus** is about inspiration from the Lord through His Word, and **flow** is about tapping into your desires? I’m not sure.”

“No, you hit the nail on the head! **Focus** is not only about getting things done; it is about getting the right things done. We need illumination to do this. Connected to this is **flow**. It’s not only about adaptability, but in a larger sense, it’s about having a compelling picture and the connected energy to get these things done.”

“This makes a lot of sense, John. As I think about it, when I’ve accomplished something or met a big goal, I’ve always had a plan and an inner drive to get it done. But I also feel like I’ve missed out in some ways. I think about how there have been many times have been when I’ve just been on cruise control. I mean, I’ve gotten things done for sure. But I’ve minimized risk, and as a result, my dreams have been small and—I don’t know—plain and boring? How do I make **focus** and **flow** a regular rhythm in my day-to-day life?”

“It’s simple. For starters, with **focus**, think about passages in the Bible that, for lack of a better phrase, have felt ‘lit up’ to you recently. Jot them down. Then, look back on sermons, podcasts, and books you’ve listened to or read and even conversations you’ve had that awakened your at-

tention. Then, combining all of this, start writing down insights, no matter how small. I think the key here is to somehow capture what you're hearing and seeing. From there, I think you'll begin to see some patterns emerge."

"What about the imagination thing?" asked Joel, seemingly ready to get started on his own path.

"I like your energy, Pastor. What has helped me get a handle on this is what you could call a desires and dreams dump or a bucket list."

"What in the world is that?"

"Things you want to do before you kick the bucket. Get it?"

Joel laughed. "I think I'm going to need a new vocabulary list before we're done. Okay, how do I make a list like that?"

"Glad you asked!" laughed John. "It's not really complicated. With regard to my desires, I take my journal and write down anything I can think of. I might write 20 items on my list. But what I've found with more mature folks is that their lists get shorter."

"Why do you think that's the case?" quizzed Joel.

"Oh, I think that as people age, they have accomplished some things, done some things, acquired some things, and so on. They are ready to center in on the few things they really want to do before they die."

"Now that you mention it, I remember my Dad mentioning a few things he wished he had done better, which surprised me because he was so successful in his field. But, for the most part, he was a very content man when he

died.” Joel smiled with a resonating gratitude that expressed how blessed he felt to have had the father he had.

“I wish my dad could have passed in that way,” replied John in a much different tone than his pastor. “He abandoned my family when I was seven. He went through four marriages, did some jail time, and eventually died of an overdose in some hotel out of state.”

“I am so sorry, John. I had no idea.”

“Yeah, well, it’s part of my story. I think this is part of what Ephesians 5:16 talks about when Paul refers to making the most of your time, or redeeming the time, because the days are evil. You’re not defined by your past or locked within it like some prison. But you do have to take on every aspect of your story. It is then that I think God starts showing you some of the deeper things He’s up to.”

“This is incredible, John. Thanks so much for sharing these things with me. How do desires and dreams connect with this?”

“When I started working on this model, I simply wrote down my desires. I initially didn’t do any editing up front. I just wrote what came to mind. But as I thought about it, I saw dreams as a wider, deeper aspect of my desires. I’d write things like, ‘I would like to get in better shape so I can do my first triathlon.’ An added bonus to this is that I will be able to help others more effectively. Another might be, ‘I want to volunteer at an inner-city school so I can play a small role in seeing underserved kids

receive a quality education.’ It could also be, ‘I want to support a missionary in Ghana so that a community can flourish and the gospel can reach an unreached people group.’ Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does, John.”

“How should I get going?”

“If you need some starter fluid to get going, people often think in terms of areas of responsibility. Others think in such categories as spiritual, community, world, physical, relational, financial, intellectual, material, and recreational. Regardless of the framework you start from, you can write down everything you can think of. But I have found that there’s a challenge with people in full-time vocational ministry.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve found that sometimes people in full-time ministry tend to minimize and even denigrate this part of the process.”

“Why’s that?” responded Joel a bit defensively.

“Again, I don’t want to be offensive here, Pastor.”

“You haven’t been, at least not yet,” countered Joel with a stern look on his face. He then laughed, and that set John at a little more at ease.

“Whew, I was worried for a second. Anyway, I think this happens because they think that having fun with things outside the ministry might be nice now and then, but too much fun makes a person a bit unrighteous.”

“I can’t say that this type of thinking is foreign to me,” replied Joel with a tinge of regret.

“A verse that has helped me confront this in my life is Galatians 5:1: ‘For freedom, Christ set us free.’ What do you think that means?”

“Well, theologically, it means that we are no longer under the unrelenting demands of the law in seeking to be righteous. We don’t have to perfectly fulfill the law. Jesus took care of this for us. He lived a perfect life, died for our sins, and rose for our justification.”

“That’s a perfect theological description of the gospel. But what does that freedom look like?”

“I’m sorry,” Joel responded curiously. “I thought I just described it.”

“You *theologically* described how Christ set us free. But what does that freedom look like?”

“Well, you know... I mean, it looks like living without having to prove you’re good or worthy or anything like that.”

“Great! And what else, Pastor?”

Joel was now, for the first time, getting angry with his young protégé.

“There is nothing else, John! Good grief, a guy who has never been a real pastor is lecturing me on what freedom in Christ means. This is ridiculous!”

John let Joel’s insult hover in the air between them, much like the smell of burnt coffee that hung all around the room.

Enough time passed for Joel to feel embarrassed over his outburst.

“I’m sorry, John. I’m just having a bad day. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. Please forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive, Pastor. The reason I pushed this a bit—maybe even too far—is because this is key to making worthwhile goals. As I’ve said before, this isn’t just about you becoming more productive, as important as that is. It’s about you becoming the best version of yourself that God designed and redeemed you to be.”

“You’re right, John. Please go on. As you can see, I’m all out of answers.”

“Well, Pastor, one way to get at our freedom in Christ is to say that we no longer have to live our lives in fear, shame, or guilt. Another is to talk about optimizing all you know and have experienced for God’s glory, your growth, and others’ good. Is this making sense?”

“Of course. I find that you’re having to repeat yourself a good bit. Guess I’m wearing the dunce cap and sitting in the back of the classroom now, huh?”

“Pardon? That sounds terrible, Pastor! I hope you never had to do such a thing!”

“Chill, my friend,” laughed Joel as he patted John on the forearm. “Being called dumb is not the worst thing ever said to me. Please continue.”

OTHER WAYS TO GLORIFY GOD

“If you say so. To switch gears a little, are you familiar with the quote from St. Irenaeus who said, ‘The glory of God is a man fully alive’?”²

“Yeah, but the other part says, ‘But the life of man is the vision of God!’”

“So true, Joel. When you put those parts together, what do you have?”

Joel thought for a moment and at first seemed stumped. Then, a light seemed to come on, and he excitedly declared, “We glorify God by being fully alive, and at the heart of that is to see God in everything we do!”

“So, can you see God in building a rocking horse for your toddler? Or can you see God when you’re fishing on a lake? Or could you bring glory to God by racing dirt bikes? I could go on and on, you know.”

Joel laughed in agreement and tossed up his hands in surrender.

“You know what, John?” Joel began with ever-increasing enthusiasm. “I think that apart from sinning, we are free to enjoy life with the prescient understanding that it is God who blesses us with the ability to do so. And as I think about it, Jesus did say that He came to give us an abundant life, didn’t He?”

“You bet, Pastor. And this abundant life is not just about praying, fasting, preaching, witnessing, and all of the

² John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 106.

wonderful spiritual disciplines we can practice. It's also about other things like exploring, learning, and engaging in activities we enjoy, and that makes God happy, too."

"As simple as that sounds, John, I've had a hard time my whole life with knowing how to do this."

"I understand, Joel. I truly do. What I would tell you is that if you don't involve yourself in things that bring you joy and renew your soul, there is a good likelihood that you will burn out or maybe even morally flame out. A one-dimensional person is like a flat diamond: It shows no beautiful complexity, and it can't be put on display like the multi-faceted rock that adorns a radiant woman's hand."

"Where in the world did that come from?" laughed Joel.

"I just came up with it! What do you think?"

"It's growing on me. So, you said this was first. What's next?"

"This list will be considerably shorter. Think of problems you want to help solve in your community, nation, and even the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit and with the clarity that the gospel brings. Like the previous activity, don't try to filter your thoughts at first. Write down everything you can think of."

"Then, what?"

"I think this is a really good start. There's a lot you can use from these lists to start developing a holistic view of goal setting."

“Okay, so, then are we ready to get going?” asked Joel with a bit of hesitation.

“Not quite, Pastor.”

“I was afraid of that.”

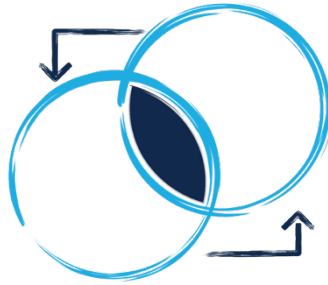
Both men laughed. John excused himself to go to the restroom while Joel sat forward and gazed at his now cool cup of coffee. For the first time in a while, he felt the clouds of frustration and confusion beginning to lift.

WORKBOOK EXERCISES

Chapter 4: Exercise 8-9



<https://replanthub.com/thewayoffruitfulness/>



Chapter 5

INTEGRATION: THE UNEXPECTED REASON WHY PEOPLE FAIL AT GOALS

John got back from the restroom, and Joel looked ready to unload a new series of questions.

“Okay, so once I do all of this work to get some important things on paper, how do I get them organized?” the pastor began excitedly.

“I’m glad you’re ready for the challenge, Joel. But before we delve in, let me ask you another question.”

Joel looked exasperated again, like an anxious race-horse ready to charge out of the gate.

“Holy smokes, John! Right when I think I’ve got it all together, you throw me a curve ball!”

John laughed with empathic understanding.

“I know, Joel, but I think you will appreciate this slow-down. Let me ask you a new question: What keeps people from being successful with their goals?”

“It could be the lack of a process on how to manage progress,” replied Joel, now feeling like a teenager seeking to give the right answer in trigonometry class.

“You’re absolutely right. But there is one more that comes before that.”

Joel looked stumped. He tried to drum up another answer but realized that the well was once again dry.

“I don’t know, John. Please tell me,” was the only honest answer he could muster up.

“No problem, Joel. Most of the folks I work with struggle to come up with this one. In fact, it is something so simple that we usually don’t consider when we’re trying to get things done. I call it ‘integration.’”

“What do you mean by that, John?”

“I mean integrating the key values that are driving and sustaining important efforts. Another way to look at it is aligning your values with your goals.”

“Okay, I still don’t follow,” replied Joel with the renewed suspicion he’d had when their discussion had first begun.

“I understand, Pastor. To put this another way: Illumination provides the framework for your goals while integration provides the fuel for your goals.”

“Okay, so tell me more about this fuel thing. I don’t see how it connects with desires or dreams.”

“I reacted the same way you just did when I first heard this in a workshop. This only came to make sense after I faced yet another failure when trying to get something done, even though I had identified it months earlier. To get a better understanding of why we write down goals and then fail to accomplish them, I started reading about how the brain works.

“Through it, I discovered that the principles of inspiration and imagination are key to receiving clarity. But it’s not enough. We need discipline. This involves the steps we need to take and the processes we need to implement as we move toward our objectives. But there’s something beyond this. I think this is what we might call resilience. The Bible talks about perseverance or endurance. Along those lines, I’ve found Angela Duckworth’s research to be really helpful when she says that it is the combination of passion and perseverance that creates grit.¹ Without it, we tend to forget and flounder.”

“So, why is this important in achieving our goals?”

“Have you ever written down a goal you really wanted to see accomplished, yet it never materialized?”

“All the time, John,” replied Joel with resignation evident in his voice.

“Me, too. I think part of the problem is not understanding the difference between our desires, dreams, and

¹ Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016).

passions. What I've found is that desire is about what I want to do, a dream can be an expanded version of that, and passion is all about why I do what I do. Is it okay for me to go a little deeper with this?"

"Sure, John. It can't get any worse for me at this point."

"Okay, first, let's differentiate between desires, dreams, and passions. I see desires as things that interest us. This level of interest can vary, of course. But desires can change. Last year, I might have been interested in horseback riding. But after some experimentation, it just didn't resonate with me anymore. Now, I'm looking at playing guitar. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. So, you're saying that dreams are the big things we want to see happen in our lives. But in a way, they can remain just that: supreme desires that never take shape or move toward a clear objective."

"Beautifully articulated, Pastor. Is this resonating with your experience?"

"Of course, John. But what about missing out on getting really important things done? I mean, horseback riding and guitar playing are nowhere near as important as taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, right?"

"Yes, but why don't we do this?"

Joel felt the blow of that revelatory question. "I don't know," he said sheepishly. "Maybe, we get distracted or lose our first love.² I'm not totally sure." Guilt and shame

² See David Jackson, *Falling in Love with Jesus Again* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2025).

started sweeping over him to the point that he wanted to disconnect from the conversation entirely.

John picked up on this and sought to lift his pastor up from the depths of his discouragement.

“Joel, I get it. I’ve been where you are right now many, many times. But the Lord has given me insight on how to move out of it, and it is about rekindling those good passions within us. I don’t think we can accomplish long-term goals without it.”

Joel looked more relieved. “I think I’m following you, but just to be sure, what do you mean by good passions?”

IDENTIFYING OUR VALUES

“Great question! I think passions are at the root from which we derive our values. Values, whether good or bad, flow out of what we deem most important. They are the presuppositions we have about what is good, enjoyable, and worthwhile. It is by and through these values that we construct the ways we want to live our lives. One way to get at this is to list the values you would aspire to live out and the ones you actually do. I like what Stephen Covey said in reference to this, that we have inner peace when our schedules and values align.”³

“Now that you put it that way, John, I totally agree.”

“I knew you would. Passions, whether clearly articulated or not, clarify what is most important to us. Passions

³ John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2019), 94.

are what get you up in the morning, and in a way, can keep you up at night.”

“Would you say that the Spirit plants these within us? I mean, I know that there are good and bad passions.”

“Of course, Pastor. We could say that the good values could be love, joy, peace, excellence, and so on. Our good values might also be stimulated by the negative things we find wrong with our world, like injustice, racism, sex trafficking, and greed. Our passion to integrate the good values into our everyday lives is real because, as you’ve just said, the Holy Spirit lives within us, moving us to disentangle from worldly passions and to embed ourselves into God’s way of life. Passages like Mark 7:20-23, James 3:13-18, and Galatians 5:16-25 talk about good versus bad values.”

“So, you’re saying that we could have covert and overt values that are off base and get in our way.”

“Yes, that is why this next step is so important. If you really do a full data dump like I encouraged you to do earlier, listing all the things that you dream or desire to do, you can then go back and see which of these might be easily qualified as ungodly desires. Remember: You’re looking for clear violations of Scripture. No need to be weird or legalistic.”

“I think I can do that.”

“I know you can, Pastor,” grinned John. “This is important. It’s vital to differentiate your deconstructive passions from your constructive ones and their subsequent values. We really need to know what’s driving us.”

“Sometimes, it’s hard to figure out what your true negative values are.”

“It is. But it’s worth it. Think of the list of Scriptures I referenced. If you want to expand from there, another way to peel the banana is to look at a list of negative values online. They might list things like dishonesty, manipulation, looking good to others, and always being in control. Don’t rush this. We can’t fix what we don’t see or acknowledge.”

“What’s the real point of doing this negative thing, John?”

“We have to be honest with ourselves about which aspects of our flesh want the easy way out and how they’re manifested in our lives. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate expert in doing this for us. We have to be honest with ourselves. If we aren’t, the deconstructive values can sabotage our good ones.”

“I have an idea of how this works. Can you give me an example of how it’s worked in your life? If this is too personal, you don’t have to share it.”

John sensed Joel was testing him to see if he really practiced this discipline.

“Sure. Before you met me, I weighed exactly 85 pounds more than I do right now.”

“Oh my gosh, John! I’m sorry for suggesting this restaurant.”

“It’s okay, Pastor. You noticed I ate some egg whites and a salad for lunch. I did cheat on the pie, but hey, once in a while it’s fine to enjoy stuff like that, as long as I don’t make it a habit.”

“So, my obvious question is: How did you do it?”

“Which time?”

“You mean, you’ve tried to lose weight more than once?”

“Oh, goodness, yes. Since I graduated college, probably six times.”

“What was the secret or key for your success?”

“Well, I look at this more like a journey than just completing a particular goal. The reason is because, in previous attempts, I would be successful to varying degrees but eventually would backslide. What I learned is that I wanted to lose weight for primarily the wrong reasons.”

“What do you mean by ‘wrong reasons’?”

“Well, I did it to look good, to show off my capacity for discipline, to prove something to myself, or in one case, to win a contest against people in my company.”

“How did you turn the corner?”

“The last time I sat down with my counselor, Clyde, and asked him to help me understand what was really happening with my yo-yoing weight loss. He told me to go home and write down the reasons I didn’t *really* want to lose weight.”

“That sounds crazy!”

“Yeah, I know. I was very angry, and I let him have it. After I finished my little diatribe, he said to me, ‘John, we fail to succeed at our goals because there are other things more important to us. You have nothing to prove. Jesus is the One who bestows ultimate significance and security.’ Those words just slayed me. So, I went home and did the assignment.”

“What was the number one good reason why you didn’t want to lose weight?”

“For starters, I loved the short-term burst of a sugar high more than I loved reducing the inflammation in my body.”

“Yikes!”

“Yep, that was hard to admit and even harder to address. I was not coming up with a greater resolution for being more disciplined. I had to come up with a better passion.”

“What was it?”

“One was that I wanted to be around as long as possible for my wife, kids, and even one day my grandkids. I guess I would call that the value of good health.”

“But we really don’t have control over how long we live. I mean after all, our days have been numbered by the Lord.”

“You’re right, Pastor. But within that framework, there is this stewardship factor that to abuse myself with unhealthy foods is scientifically proven to let a host of diseases run rampant in my body. And then there is the other

value of honesty. I realized I had a lot of guilt wrapped up in my secretive binge eating, which in turn made me a grouchy and on-edge person.”

“How did your counselor respond?”

“He complimented me on my good work, and then he blew me away.”

“What did he say?”

John seemed deeply moved.

“He looked up, smiled, and spoke in almost a whisper, saying, ‘John, what if you saw this as a way of Jesus caring for you? How would that change things?’”

Joel was stunned by those words. It was as if someone pulled the cover off a camping tarp and found a little boy shivering in the cold.

“Wow, John. I’m practically speechless. How did it help?”

“For one thing, it took the pressure off. I didn’t have to lose weight to prove something to myself, others, or even God. I could lose weight under the canopy of God’s love for me and be content with the results.”

“But couldn’t that have made you work less?”

“No, in fact, it actually made me work harder. Maybe you could say even ‘more effectively,’ because I wasn’t weighed down by the additional baggage of guilt or shame. I wasn’t stuck in my past failures or fearful that I’d mess up in the future. I could actually just enjoy the process, as strange as that might sound.”

“What did you do next?”

“Well, it wasn’t that I actually did something next. It’s that Clyde showed me that I not only needed to integrate my deepest and contextually required values; he taught me that accomplishing goals is always going to be a fight.”

“Wait, once again, I’m confused. How can you enjoy the process *and* say that it’s also a fight?”

“Because that’s part of the way we define our journeys. Accomplishing important things is beautifully hard.”

“Beautifully hard?” Joel listened intently.

“Yeah. Life is both a gift to be enjoyed and a battle to wage. If you lose sight of beauty, you become a bitter person. If you lose sight of the fight, you could get swallowed up in failure and heartache. It’s both.”

“I think I’ve done both,” said Joel shaking his head in humble recognition.

“We all have, Joel. That’s why we need the help of the Spirit to become wise people. Otherwise, the fact that we are eternally accepted by God won’t make sense to us as we try to accomplish our goals. It would be like swinging at a big chunk of wood with a dull axe—we’ll wear ourselves out. We constantly need this gospel comfort from the Lord.”

“So, how does the hard part come into play?”

“This is the grit aspect. I realize that important stuff will ultimately relate to ways I can glorify God. My flesh, the devil, and this world will always push against this kind of work.”

“Okay, I’m tracking now.”

“I like the word ‘grit,’ but others use the word ‘perseverance.’ Whatever definition you use, it’s not simply gutting it through, although that’s a small part. It’s also seeing a vision of what can be and pressing into it. The vision of what we deeply desire to happen based on what is most important to us is what gets us through. Our values are the deep part of who we are and who we strive to be. To link our goals with our values is like turbocharging a small-block engine.”

“Now you’re speaking my language, brother! It’s what Romans 5:1-5 teaches. It tells us that because we’ve been justified by the blood of Jesus, we now operate in the realm of grace. It’s grace that enables us to treat suffering as joyful because we know that any suffering produces for us endurance or perseverance. That endurance creates character, and character builds hope. Our hope is then certified by the presence of the Holy Spirit.”

THE BATTLE FOR OUR VALUES

“Great succinct summary of that important passage, Pastor. What part of that do you think hangs people up?”

“Suffering, of course.”

“How so?”

“I would say that when we treat suffering as something unnatural, we tend to go off the rails. We get super upset, like life should somehow be easier.”

“Exactly. I think suffering is part of having good goals. Nothing important ever comes easy. I think about John 15 where Jesus talks about abiding, and in this passage, He says that He prunes every good branch so that it can bear more fruit.”

“That is so true, but it’s hard. I feel like I’m being pruned right now.”

“Ha! So do I!”

“So, talk to me, John, about spiritual warfare and having good goals.”

“You’re tracking with what I’m trying to say. I think this gets ignored in the whole discussion. Ephesians 6:10-20 tells us that our ultimate battle is not against flesh and blood. There are influential, powerful entities in high places that are out for our destruction. That means we should expect a battle when we’re seeking to do good, which includes setting goals.”

“How does the enemy get in the way of our goal setting?”

“Oh, I don’t know if he necessarily gets in the way. I think he uses what 1 John 2:15-17 says concerning the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. My personal opinion is that he accesses these channels to distract us from what is really important.”

“How do you think this works?”

“Well, think about advertisements. Do you know how many we see daily?”

“I know it’s a lot. Is it 10,000?”

“No. That’s an urban myth. The best I can track down is around 300.”⁴

“Okay, well, that’s still a lot when you think about it.”

“It is, and even when it’s only in the hundreds, it still has an impact. I like what John Mark Comer said about this when he commented that this world is engineered to drive us towards the ‘twin gods of accumulation and accomplishment,’ and that advertising is built to ‘monetize our restlessness.’⁵ It is what I would call the culture of more. We are brainwashed to think that in order to feel satisfied, we have to have more and more things or more and more recognition or more and more agency or whatever else it may be.”

“So, are you saying we should not want anything?”

“Nope. I’m talking about applying the old adage, ‘Make sure what you own doesn’t own you.’ Nothing is wrong with having things or pursuing achievements. It’s when they become the primary motivators in life that they get in the way.”

“I agree. Ecclesiastes tells us that, in the context of a hard life, we should enjoy ourselves, and 1 Timothy 6:17 instructs the rich to not be arrogant about their riches yet at the same time tells us that God is the One ‘who richly provides us with all things to enjoy.’”

⁴ Sam Anderson, “How Many Ads Do We Really See in a Day? Spoiler: It’s Not 10,000,” *The Drum*, May 3, 2023.

⁵ Comer, 147.

“That’s right, Joel. I forgot about those verses. God is glorified when we rightly enjoy the pleasures He has provided us.”

“I guess you could say that when you don’t seek to get meaning or security from these things, you’re free to enjoy them.”

“Right! When we think about grit or perseverance, it’s not simply avoiding the bad but about fighting for what God says is good.”

“Okay, so how does this affect the process of making our list of key values?”

“You’re right on cue, Joel. As I’ve said, the list of your key values comes from what you aspire to do, the corrective ones are what you want to make right, and the experiential ones are what you’ve learned about life. This is all couched within this global understanding that it’s never going to be easy to fight for what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable, like Philippians 4:8 tells us. But it’s worth it.”

“This is so powerful. I’ve never heard goal setting put in this light.”

“Thanks. But I think it’s important to say that there have been countless people who’ve lived fruitful lives yet have never done exercises like this. That being said, I think if you looked under the hood more closely, you would find the principles of intentionality, illumination, and integration at work in their lives, too.”

“I appreciate you saying that, John. Sometimes when you read or listen to people today, you get the impression

that they've invented all this stuff. Then, there are the industries developed out of these principles. I'm not saying it's a bad thing. I think people should be paid for their helpful insights and hard work. I guess I would like to see more transparency and humility around these systems. Am I sounding too cynical?"

"No, brother. I would agree. I think that when people like me are seeking to genuinely help others, it helps to be honest and open-handed."

"I believe that about you, John."

"Thanks. Oh, my goodness! I almost forgot to answer your question about refining that list. Once you've identified those areas, you go through a little culling exercise where you reduce them to a handful of key values. Then, you look at that initial desire list and link each one to a positive value. I've found that in order to both personalize and contextualize the list, it is helpful to put an adjective in front of each, like 'overcoming love,' 'infectious excellence,' 'courageous honesty,' and so on. The positive values are important. But it is vital to note that there's a contextual link to what you're doing at this point in time. Some values are just more important for right now. It's okay to choose these key values to focus on for the time being."

"Are you saying that there aren't lasting values that follow us throughout our lives?"

"Not at all, Pastor. What I'm saying is that sometimes, certain values can take a back seat while others are needed in certain phases of your life."

"Okay, John, give me an example of that."

“Well, let’s say that one of your five-to-ten key values is ‘infectious excellence.’ Suppose your church is tasked with disaster relief. You’re not going to jettison your commitment to ‘infectious excellence.’ But you will maybe lean on another key value like ‘passionate service’ to make sure you get as much accomplished as you can in a small amount of time, due to a pressing need. It’s not that ‘infectious excellence’ is no longer important. It’s that ‘passionate service’ must be leading in this scenario. Does that make sense?”

“I think so. I’ve gotta be honest. Some of this is totally new to me, and it feels a bit embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry, Joel. I know that you’ve already done a lot of this. It’s just that you haven’t been conscious about it in some ways.”

Joel sat silent for a bit, swept away by his own thoughts. “I guess I’m finding it hard to take it all in at once. Kind of like my grandmother’s Thanksgiving dinner—so much great food and so little time!”

John laughed, imagining the vast buffet Joel had described. “I’m still nibbling on this after several years of practicing. Don’t put too much pressure on yourself.”

“If you say so, John. I think I’m just wondering how passion and Scripture go together in this.”

“Sure. One that first comes to mind is Philippians 3, where Paul lists all the accomplishments he has achieved and calls them dung—or whatever word you want to use to describe it—in contrast to knowing and following Jesus.”

“Yeah, my Pops had another word for that!” laughed Joel.

“I got you, Pastor,” responded John with a smirk. “What I find interesting is that after nailing down the value that we might call ‘knowing Christ,’ Paul humbly declares that he hadn’t mastered the practice of doing this but was determined to put lesser things behind him.”

“I definitely resonate with this, John. There have been many times in my life when I’ve had to do some serious reappraisal. Why is it so hard to bounce back from our failures and re-engage our grit?”

“First thing I would say is that failure is a part of the journey. Like suffering, it should have a clarifying, refining influence on us. Unfortunately, that’s not how we’re wired. Take, for example, some things I have learned about the brain. I used to think of it only like a supercomputer that lists, sorts, analyzes, and gives us the answers we need to do what’s right. This is partially correct. But what I didn’t know is that there is an aspect of the brain called the amygdala that is pre-loaded to look for what is wrong above what is good.”

“So, you’re saying that we are wired to look for the negative above the positive. That sure explains a lot!” laughed Joel.

“It sure does, Joel. Among other things, this causes the brain to be a shortcut mechanism designed to help us. Within this protection mode, scientists have found that the brain acts like a threat detector, looking for things to avoid.

Researchers at U.C. Berkley found that the brain must take in nine bits of negative information for every positive one that gets through.⁶ Because of this, we're wired to circumvent risk. There's a lot of good that comes with this nature, but one of the hangups is that we are prone to focus only on the negative."

"Fascinating. I've never heard of this. Go on."

"Well, because of how we're wired, we have to work hard to not get discouraged as we seek to fulfill our goals. Barbara Frederick of UNC has found that we need three positive thoughts to counteract a negative one."⁷

"Oh gosh, I'm in trouble!" exclaimed Joel.

"Tell me about it! That's why I've developed a list of scriptural declarations of who I am in Christ. I try to go over it regularly to pre-load my brain each day with good thoughts."

"That sounds good. Can I get a copy of that list?"

"Sure. I will send it with the file I promised. Oh, I almost forgot. I also seek to integrate the discipline of gratitude on a daily basis. The more I focus on thankfulness, especially as I wind down at night, the less I get hung up on what I haven't gotten done that day."

"I did that for a while, and it was hugely beneficial. Looks like I need to do it again. Is there more?"

"Well, yes. As I mentioned before, I seek to really hear from God in my daily devotions. Even when I receive words of correction, I integrate them into my daily

⁶ Kotler, 79.

⁷ Ibid., 78.

thoughts. Sometimes, that means a change of direction for me and thus a change of goals.”

“John, I sure didn’t expect to get this kind of world-class coaching on the heels of today’s speeding ticket!”

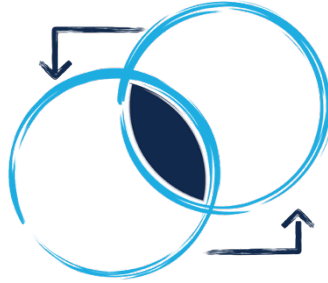
“I don’t know about world-class, but there is a little more I want to tell you about.”

WORKBOOK EXERCISES

Chapter 5: Exercise 10



<https://replanthub.com/thewayoffruitfulness/>



Chapter 6

IMPLEMENTATION: GETTING REAL ABOUT SETTING GOALS

Joel waved at their new waitress and asked for a glass of water with lemon. John did the same, minus the tangy fruit. Once Joel took a long draw from the glass, he came up for air and requested a deeper explanation of goal setting.

“Are we ready now to start putting some goals together?”

“Sort of,” responded John a bit sheepishly.

“Sort of?!” exclaimed Joel with renewed incredulity. “Are we going backwards? I don’t think my brain can take it!”

“No, Joel, not backwards but a bit laterally. Let me bug you with two questions. First, when you create a goal list, have you ever hit your stride and gotten a lot of stuff done except for the most important things?”

“Well, yeah. Isn’t that common?”

“It is. But here’s the thing: If we keep missing out on getting the most important things done, we will give up on setting challenging goals, and whatever we end up doing will resemble a to-do list.”

“Okay, so what’s the solution?”

“I think the first part is based on some things I learned from Jon Acuff. For example, he identified perfectionism as a major obstacle to getting things done.”

“I think I understand what you’re saying. Can you tell me a little more?”

“Glad you asked! Acuff says that perfectionism ‘magnifies our mistakes and minimizes our progress.’¹ This all-or-nothing outlook is why researchers Kahneman and Tversky say 92 percent of people fail to reach their goals. It’s what they call ‘planning fallacy,’ which essentially means that people fail to recognize how much time it takes to get things done.”²

¹ Jon Acuff, *Finish: Give Yourself the Gift of Done* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 15.

² Acuff, 21.³

“So the idea of creating three really big goals per year fits within this framework?”

“Yep. But we typically need a nudge to get to that place.”

“Now you’ve really got my attention! How do I fix it?”

“Acuff says that you need to do two things. First, take your bigger list of direction, desires, and dreams, and cut them in half.”

“What? Okay, I feel like I’m back to square one. I mean, you put all this effort into writing your goals down on paper and even categorizing them into areas like physical, spiritual, intellectual, and relational. Now, you’re telling me to cut them in half?”

“According to Acuff’s research, those who did this increased their ability to actually fulfill their goals by 63 percent.”³

“So, do I just get rid of the other goals?”

“No, you keep them for future reference. In fact, I would order them in priority of importance, so if you accomplish your key goals ahead of time, you can insert the next ones.”

“Makes sense.”

“The key to any insight like this, whether it’s Acuff’s 50% rule or Hyatt’s Big Three, is that embedded within these practices is the realization that we have all have fallen into the trap of overestimating our abilities to get things

³ Ibid., 23.

done. The result is that we're typically deflated to the degree that we give up in some way. This is why we need the gift of **focus**."

"Gee, John. So that's why I have given up. It's not because I lacked discipline but because I've put a weight on myself that God didn't intend for me to bear. But can I challenge something here?"

"Yes, sir. I welcome it."

"Aren't there things God calls us to that seem impossible?"

"Great question! Yes. There are times when we face what seems like insurmountable obstacles or hear God call us to do something way beyond our natural abilities or experience. This requires faith. The perspective of **flow** fits here. But fruitfulness is not just limited to these big things. Jesus said in fact that we can do nothing apart from him. When I see that everything, including my ability to breathe and think, is dependent upon Jesus, I am liberated to not have to feel that I am on some kind of spiritual treadmill."

"Okay. But I know that even with our best laid plans, things happen. How do you adjust?"

"I know you're going to get mad at me, but..."

"You're going to get to that in a bit, right?"

"Yep. So please, be patient with me. It's a fundamental question that we're going to answer."

"Okay. No problem."

"Thank you. Now, that leads me to the next thing. As a point of review: You first download all that you sense God calling you to do, as well as what you would like to do

without any initial editing. Next, you check to see if any of these things are out of bounds scripturally. Now, to be honest, I don't think we really have to worry about putting down bad things. The Holy Spirit warns and convicts us without us asking Him to do so. It's who He is."

"Yeah, as a pastor, I always thought it was funny to ask the Lord to convict us if we're getting ready to do something wrong. He's going to do that with or without our permission."

"Yes, sir. Again, notice I didn't say, 'Omit the impossible.' God enables people to do the impossible on a daily basis. Can you think of a time when God stepped in and helped you do what you could've never imagined yourself doing?" Joel laughed, seeming to capture a memory.

"You will think this is silly. The first thing I thought about was marrying my wife. She was way beyond my league. When I met her in school, I tried to woo her in every way imaginable and struck out every time!"

"What changed?"

"Without trying to sound too 'holier than thou,' I went through a period of simply praying and giving those desires to the Lord. Then, I relaxed, and when I saw her, I just acted glad to see her, but nothing more than that."

"And...?" John urged him to continue.

"Then, one day, she came up to me in front of all my buddies in the cafeteria and asked if I would like to go to a sorority dance with her. When I said yes, she wrote her phone number on my hand and asked me to call her for

the details. When she left, my friends were blown away because we thought she was the prettiest girl in school. They asked me what my secret was, and I told them I really didn't have one. She and I went to the dance together, and the rest is history."

"That is such a great example of Psalm 37:4. You trusted God, and He answered your prayers in an awesome and unexpected manner."

"Indeed. But I did learn over the years that she needs me to keep wooing her as her husband. Once I figured that out, our marriage got a lot better. Oh, I'm sorry. I've lost track of what we were talking about. What happens next?"

John smiled. "That's okay, Pastor. You reminded me of something I need to do this week." John pulled out his phone and jotted down a note.

"Do you do that a lot?"

"Yes, sir. Sometimes, on my phone like I just did, but usually in my notebook that has my daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly calendar with a notes section. That is my personal catch-all to make sure I don't miss anything."

"Based on some things you've already shared, I think I need to do something like that, too."

"There are all kinds of ways to do this. The key is to make it accessible, understandable, and custom fit to you. I can show you some of this later."

"That would be great, John."

“Okay, where were we? Right. Then, you seek to link your desires to your passions. This means recognizing your greatest motivations for what you do. Like I said, some people connect their values, while other people make distinctions with their passions. Regardless, if you want to persevere, you’ll need to engage the drive inside of yourself that the Lord has given you.”

“But you think I should reduce that list up to 50 percent? What if it’s still more than the Big Three?”

“Don’t worry about a fixed number. Remember I said that you’re going to have more than three goals per year. The Big Three idea is the big things you want to see happen. The real thing I’m trying to say is that Jon Acuff reminded me that 90 percent of people don’t accomplish their goals because they don’t realistically consider how much it will take to see them through. Each of us only have 168 hours per week and a finite number of resources. We must choose where and how we’re going to invest our lives.”

“Those things are easy to forget, but I think I’m getting it. What do you do with the good stuff you’ve cut out?”

“Like I said earlier, keep it. You might want to revisit those ideas later.”

BREAKING DOWN GOALS FURTHER

“So, are we about done?”

“Almost. The next step is to schedule your goals.”

“You mean like putting them on the calendar?”

“You got it. Most people think it’s wise to break your goals into monthly, quarterly, and yearly categories. This definitely works. However, I have found that they need a little further segmentation.”

“This sounds complicated.”

“It’s not. What typically happens is that the stuff that takes a while usually gets pushed way out versus the goals that don’t take as much time.”

“I think that’s what I try to do.”

“That’s not a bad start, Joel. But what if we placed things in the buckets of ‘reasonably straightforward,’ ‘moderately challenging,’ and ‘upliftingly bold’? Or just ‘straightforward,’ ‘challenging,’ and ‘bold’ for simplicity’s sake? I got this idea again from Acuff. He calls his categories ‘easy,’ ‘middle,’ and ‘guaranteed.’”⁴

“So how, do those three categories work when it comes to scheduling?”

“For starters, it helps refine where you put what.”

“If I’m hearing you correctly, our straightforward goals go into the monthly bucket, our challenging goals go into the quarterly bucket, and our bold goals go into the yearly bucket. Right?”

“Yes.”

“But what do straightforward, challenging, and bold goals look like?”

⁴ Jon Acuff, *All It Takes a Goal: The 3-Step Plan to Ditch Regret and Tap into Your Massive Potential* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 98.

“Straightforward would be like the desire to share your faith a number of times each month or losing so many pounds in a month. These are short-term goals that are simple, clear, and executable over a shorter period of time. To continue this train of thought, a challenging goal might be seeking to start an investigative Bible study on the gospel of Mark with one or more people you’ve shared the gospel with each quarter. Then, a bold goal might be training 50 percent of your folks in evangelism by the end of the year. The bold goal would fit within your Big Three idea. You can be apply this to any area of your life.”

“As you were talking, I was thinking about sorting all my distilled desires and dreams into these buckets and then superimposing the monthly, quarterly, and yearly grid on them. Is this right?”

“Perfect, Pastor. Any way you slice it and no matter what method you use, you need to understand that not all goals are the same and thus take different amounts of energy and time to complete. As you accomplish each goal, you’ll then build momentum to move on to the next.”

“You mean get some small wins under your belt?”

“Exactly. But this sometimes goes against the common way of doing things. For example, I went to a time management seminar several years ago, and the presenter talked a lot about swallowing the big frog first.”

“What in the world does that mean?”

John snickered. “Weird, right? I had the same first reaction. But then he explained that he was referring to tackling the toughest problem first. He waxed eloquently on how much we can procrastinate and therefore need this kind of discipline and structure. But that’s not how we learn or even how we get stuff done. Think of trying to take calculus before algebra. Talk about a discouraging whack in the head!”

“I get it. But I was never good in math.”

“The obvious point here is that we usually have to build up some momentum before doing more challenging things. In this case, getting important things done is easier when you’ve got some wins under your belt.”

“I really like this. This is so helpful, John. I want to go home right now and get to work!”

“I love your enthusiasm! You are well on your way.”

“But...”

“What makes you say that, Pastor?”

“Just call it a begrudging appreciation for your thoroughness. For some reason I know you have a little more to share.”

Both men laughed so as to dissipate any tension that may have existed between them.

THE SUPPORTING ASPECTS OF KEY HABITS

“Once again, recognizing your supreme patience with me, let me ask you that second question I was talking about earlier.”

“Why not?”

“Have you ever worked hard at accomplishing a goal, then felt a little let down once you got to the end of it? Kind of like the feeling you might get the day after Christmas?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. That’s one of the reasons I’ve almost given up on goal setting altogether. It’s just that it felt overrated.”

“Me, too. Here’s the thing. If accomplishing goals is the bottom line, then if we don’t get them fully done or if we totally miss, we will feel as if we’ve wasted our time. There’s got to be something underneath our goals and to-do lists that makes the journey worthwhile, or we will eventually give up on it, just like you said.”

“What in the world would that be? I thought that after we understand how God works and how we are to respond, pinpoint what we feel that He wants us to do, nail down our good desires, and then link them to our core values, all that’s left would be to put them into a goal format. What am I missing?”

“Well, first off, you did a great job summarizing the first few steps in goal setting.”

“Thanks, John, but I feel that this conversation always has one more turn to it.”

John laughed and nodded reassuringly in an effort to keep him from disconnecting from the conversation.

“That is somewhat true, Joel. But I promise we’re near the end of this particular model of getting things done.”

“Good! Otherwise, I feel like we would be here till the wee hours of the morning.”

“I hear you. Let’s see if we can work on wrapping this up quickly. Our next step is to provide the undergirding for what one might call a ‘renewing course of development,’ regardless of a particular goal. Some might call this your tactics. Others like Duhigg,⁵ Clear,⁶ and Buchard⁷ refer to these as keystone, atomic, or high-performance habits. These men, as well as a few others, offer some deeper ideas and practices on this subject. I highly recommend reading their works on this topic.”

“Are they secular writers?”

“I don’t know anything about their spiritual orientations, but I have no problem reading the works of people like this because all truth is God’s truth. A key verse that helped me in college when it came to what I exposed myself to was 1 Thessalonians 5:21, which says to test all

⁵ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2014).

⁶ James Clear, *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

⁷ Brandon Burchard, *High Performance Habits: How Extraordinary People Become That Way* (Carlsbad: Hay House, 2017).

things and hold on to what is good. If you find people violating and mocking God's truths, you might want to steer clear. Anyway, building habits like these sets us up to be more fruitful.

"For instance, when you think of spiritual disciplines, you wouldn't tell people to do them for the sake of doing them. You would say that these are things we need to practice in order to love God and others more effectively."

"You're right, John. I have seen these disciplines become an end unto themselves, and I began to dread doing them."

"I agree, Pastor. These are habits that, when regularly and effectively done, put us in the position for success because they represent the architecture for building a fruitful life. Or as some have said, it's the trellis for our vines, like Collin and Payne talk about."⁸

"That's a great book."

"I agree. The principle really works in all areas of our lives, not just in our approach to discipleship. The idea behind having atomic, high-performance, or keystone habits is that if we do them right, they can be multipliers for our lives. For instance, if you're a reader of all types of subjects, you can speak into much more than just ministry topics. To be honest, business guys like me often feel like we're limited in what we can talk to preachers about, especially

⁸ Marshall Colin and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mindset That Changes Everything*, (Youngstown: Mattias Media, 2021).

if they've never done anything else. I hope that doesn't upset you."

"It doesn't. I actually agree with you."

"That's a relief. I mean, we would come to pastors for help with things like our spiritual journeys and help in our marriages, but maybe not for issues with our work. The real point I'm trying to make is that the habit of reading sets you up for fruitfulness in so many ways. Otherwise, we can get stuck in one area with a limited amount of understanding, which can cause us to become 'doing machines' based on our previous levels of expertise. Through that, we might become more efficient, but there's a possibility we won't really grow as people. For instance, have you ever met anyone who was a task master?"

"Oh, yeah. My first boss out of college. I worked at a hardware and tractor company. I did everything he wanted, but I mostly sold tractors."

"I didn't know that about you. Did you like it?"

"On one level, yes. But I always felt that no matter what I did, it was never enough. This drove everyone at the shop crazy. Folks would just quit. Others would stay, but as some say, 'quit in place.' I wouldn't call it a toxic work environment, but we had to put up with whatever was one level below that. When I now think about it, he was a lot like the tools and machines he sold: highly efficient but cold and impersonal."

"Have you ever thought about why he was this way?"

“Not really. But I guess at first blush, I would say that he wasn’t a very happy person.”

“Beyond spiritual issues, what can you think was behind his unhappiness?”

“Well, he just seemed stuck.”

“What did that look like?”

“He always harkened back to the good ole days when he first started the business. He talked about how hard it was. He’d share about the ways they learned what to do and what not to do on the fly, as well as how they’d worked through hard times to build a successful business. He then would invariably complain about having to use technology to keep his business up-to-date, and that would make him the last person in the shop to learn stuff.”

“So, would you say that he stopped being on a developmental path?”

“For sure. Wait. I see what you’re saying now! He only had certain habits for a while and then put them on cruise control. When competitors started doing better in our market by implementing new technologies and looking at different products to sell, he was ill-prepared to make that move. He could feel himself losing the firm grip he had on being number one in our market for equipment sales and became more bitter, controlling, and just plain hard to be around.”

“Man, what a picture Joel! I don’t mean to be personal, but have you ever been that way toward anyone else?”

Joel smiled in a self-defensive manner, as if to minimize the sting of that last question.

“Yeah, I can think of times when I’ve pushed people at church to get things done. I’ve maybe even done that to my wife and kids, especially when we were getting ready for vacation.” He then seemed to be jolted in a self-revelatory manner by his last statement. “Good gracious, John! When I think about it, I’ve been a task master more than a few times. I know I’ve practically ruined some vacations because of this. Why do you ask such challenging questions?”

“Oh, I guess it’s because I’ve been the chief sinner in this.”

“You? You seem so calm. Like a guy who goes with the flow.”

“Trust me. Becoming more peaceful is a result of practicing several habits. Like I said earlier, there was a time when I was so unbearable that I almost lost my family. I was trying to get my business off the ground and was working around the clock. I looked cool, calm, and self-assured on the surface, but I was a hot mess on the inside. It was then that I discovered something: I needed to be less driven and more led in my life.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“Oh, in a number of ways. But for our discussion, my focus was more on getting things done than on establishing processes for getting those things accomplished. Think of it as a journey-versus-destination comparison.”

“Like if you don’t enjoy or see the blessings in the journey, you are less likely to appreciate the destination?”

“That’s right, Joel. I was so driven at one time that my laser focus on my objectives blinded me to the things going on around me. It would be like going to see the Grand Tetons without stopping to appreciate the scenery at Yellowstone on the way.”

“Man, that really speaks to me because of what I said earlier about being a total jerk on the vacations we took back in the day.”

“Yeah, my problem was that this mindset covered pretty much all areas of my life. Even my walk with God.”

“That’s interesting, John. Can you explain that?”

“Yeah, my Bible reading was all about getting through it in a year. As a result, my prayer time was limited to asking things from God instead of worshiping Him and enjoying His presence.”

“I hate to say it, but I think I’m there right now.”

“Don’t worry, Pastor. Practically everyone I know has fallen into the trap of *doing* rather than *experiencing*.”

“How did you get out of it?”

“I decided that I needed to set up my habits to not be ends unto themselves. Once I started looking at them this way, I began to see my spiritual disciplines as launching pads into an ongoing love relationship with God, versus things I had to do in order to mature as a believer. Habits are essential, but they are more ‘get-to’s’ rather than ‘have-

to's.' This added a real developmental aspect to both my journey and my destination. This is the glory of the grind."

"Give me an example."

"Okay. Let's revisit losing weight. When I got my head and heart straight about good reasons for doing it, I started building some habits. I sought to totally avoid processed foods, especially sugar. I ate only vegetables, fish, fruit, and chicken. I drank at least a gallon of water a day. I did fun, varied workouts six days a week, even if they were only 15 minutes a day. I did a replacement meal with high protein, high minerals, probiotics and prebiotics, and of course, very low sugar and a host of other things I won't bore you with."

"So, with all of this in mind, how did you keep the weight off?"

"I could point to discipline, but discipline is not enough. I needed to visualize how habits set me up for greater fruitfulness. From people I talked with or listened to, I learned that the various habits I needed to implement had to transcend the worthy goal of losing weight. They all came down to being healthier. And beneath that was the deeper goal of living a more vibrant life, which in turn helped me to be a better husband, father, friend, and servant of Christ."

"I see. So, once you lose weight, you don't just jettison those bedrock habits. They become part of you."

"Yes, but this doesn't make it easy when you first start. If you practice habits long enough, they are less arduous and can become enjoyable."

“I get it now. That’s one of the things that’s been missing for me. I thought that hard-nosed discipline was all that was required, and when something didn’t get done, I felt like a failure. But with what you’re saying, if I create these strategic routines or habits, I’ll have a greater chance at accomplishing even my bold goals.”

“That’s right. So, let’s say you want to improve your preaching. Apart from the needed anointing of the Holy Spirit, there is a craft aspect to preaching that can be either ignored or engaged. This involves being a better expositor as well as a better communicator. Now, you’ve got your goal. What kind of habits would you need to develop in order to do this?”

Joel paused for a few seconds, weighing his words.

“I suppose I would need to listen to other preachers I admire and try to dig more deeply into what makes them effective. Go to conferences. Read books on the subject. I would maybe listen to podcasts featuring people I consider great communicators but who aren’t preachers. I would then apply these principles to my preaching in a way that fits who I am.”

“Excellent. There are only two other things that are essential for these actions to be formed into habits. First, they have to be done regularly.”

“That seems pretty obvious.”

“Well, yes, but you’d be surprised by how many folks don’t initially do this. Let me explain. To drill this down into the habit realm, I would pick a day each week to work on these things. For real habits to happen, you’ve got to

schedule them rather than hope they happen. No development occurs without fighting for the time to make our habits become part of our daily lives. Otherwise, it will be hit and miss, and this will dramatically reduce your chance of seeing your more challenging goals get accomplished.”

“Sounds like this is the real hard work of goal setting.”

“It is, but it’s worth it.”

“What is the second thing I missed?”

“You’ll need a person or persons who are asking you hard questions about your journey.”

“Accountability?”

“Yep.”

“What does this mean for me in preaching?”

“One way would be to set up a sermon review team. This would be a group of folks who listen to your sermon with a more critical eye toward your ongoing improvement. They would be supportive people who serve you by pouring gasoline onto your good practices and helping you snuff out your bad ones.”

“Man, that is challenging, John! I guess there’s no shortcut to growth, huh?”

“No, sir. But doing the work of carving and polishing is, over time, what allows us to create works of art throughout our lives.”

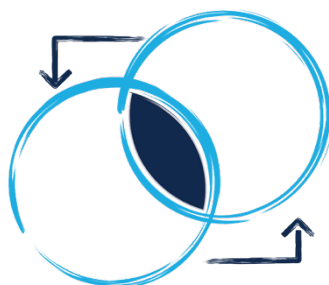


WORKBOOK EXERCISES

Chapter 6: Exercise 11



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Chapter 7

INVESTIGATION: CHECKING YOUR PROGRESS

John waived down their waitress and asked for the bill. Joel tried to grab it from John, but he pulled it back just in time.

“Hey, John, let me take care of that. You have helped me so much today. It’s the least I can do.”

“I was planning on paying for it today anyway. You’ve been such a blessing to me that it’s the least I can do.”

“Okay, well, are you going to send me all of this in digital format?”

“I sure will. But hey, before we leave, there’s just one more thing I need to share with you.”

“And I thought I was almost home free,” laughed Joel.

“You are. But this last element is very important.”

“Go ahead, sir!”

“In the last part, we talked about all that implementation involves. I would say that this is the toughest part of accomplishing goals.”

“I can see that.”

“Well, the last part is not as hard, but it is kind of sneaky.”

“Sneaky?”

“I guess that’s the best word for it. What I mean is that a lot of times, this step is forgotten because of all the hard work that’s preceded it.”

“I’m intrigued. Go on.”

“The question I would ask is this: How do you know if you are tracking in the right direction?”

“I guess when I accomplish my goals.”

“That is ultimately right for sure. Anything else?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“What if I were to tell you that you need a tracking process to make sure you’re moving in the right direction and doing so in good time? Especially when it comes to the challenging and bold goals.”

“How would you do that?”

“There’s not just one way of doing it. But it’s got to be something you can keep track of over time.”

“Like a project management kind of thing?”

“Very good, Pastor! I’m impressed that you know this kind of thing. The short answer is yes. There are apps and

software that can help with this. You can even do something as simple as creating a grid with timelines and way-points. The key is that you create it and use it so that you know how you're doing."

"Okay, but this sounds like a little more work than you let on earlier. Don't you have to figure out what those way-points will be?"

"Yes, but when you map it out one step at a time, it becomes easier. Say you want to learn a new language. This is going to be more of a bold goal, and it might take you longer than a year to accomplish."

"It's interesting that you mention that. I have thought about it for a while, but I wasn't sure how to go about it. Honestly, it seemed to be too big of a hurdle to get over."

"I can understand why you would feel that way. But let me see if I can make it simpler. The first step is to write out the goal. Describe what kind it is, as well as its matching time frame. Write down the corresponding value that supports this goal. Identify key habits that you need to put in place. And finally, create a list of tasks and their timelines that you'll need to keep up with in order to see this goal come to pass. Some examples of support materials are books or online resources. They can give you some models to operate from so that you can create your own system. Using the current example of learning a new language, you might find a platform that helps you to work from the ground up on things like basic pronunciation, vocabulary, and even grammar. A tutor could also help you build out

this process. If your goal is to have a certain level of proficiency in reading or carrying on a conversation, you will know how to build this.”

“I think I’m seeing something here. Do you sometimes find that you may create a goal and even some habits, but when it comes to measuring it, you end up drawing some blanks?”

“You got it. When this happens, we need to revisit the goal.”

“Yeah, like what about improving my preaching?”

“Great example. Let’s go back to the sermon council example. This can be a bit hard and subjective. You could measure it by the number of positive comments you get from your congregation, but that can still be nebulous.”

“Not only that, but at times, it can feel very discouraging.”

“I’m sure. I can’t imagine how tough that is from Sunday to Sunday, rarely getting positive feedback.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve learned to be more focused on being faithful when it comes to delivering the Word of God than in my joy being contingent on how people feel about my sermons.”

“That’s very admirable, Pastor. But what if there were a better way? Why not create a rubric that your sermon council would use to help you gauge your growth from week to week?”

“That sounds even more dangerous,” laughed Joel.

“I hear you. But stick with me. What if they helped you create areas to be measured in like faithfulness to the text,

understandable point of application, and so on. You could have them review every sermon and meet with them once a month to get their assessments. You could even compare this data against where you would like to be in the future.”

“Now, that is very interesting. I could get behind that.”

“Sure, and no matter what you score—because the process is ultimately developmental—you will be getting better.”

“Gotcha.” Joel sat there gathering all the pieces together. “What’s another ministry example, John?”

“Okay, let’s go back to evangelism. Following the same process of naming goals, what are the supporting values, habits, and steps you’ll need to take if you want to accomplish the goal of training 50 percent of your congregation in evangelism?”

“I don’t think I can create that, John.”

“Let’s take it one step at a time. We first named this a yearly goal. What value could you use to support this?”

“I think the power of the gospel.”

“Yeah. How would you describe that?”

“Um, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and that in it, the righteousness of Christ is revealed.”

“Go on.”

“And the good news of Jesus’ perfect life, substitutionary death, and glorious resurrection can change people’s lives.”

“That is a great start. Now, how about the habits you need to see that goal through?”

“I guess I first need to share my faith regularly and share those experiences with my congregation.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Gosh, this is hard. Praying for those who don’t know Jesus?”

“Excellent. Anything else?”

“Maybe reading more about it?”

“Great. So, you have sharing, praying, and reading. Those are habits that can stick with you for a lifetime yet still fit into your yearly goal.”

“So, from there, I then complete the tasks we mentioned before?”

“Exactly. You’re well on your way to constructing what you might call a project sheet.”

“Wow, this a lot more than I anticipated. I hope I can remember all this stuff.”

“Don’t worry. Like I said, I will send you a PDF that has these tools in it.”

“That helps a bunch. Anything else?”

WHEN THINGS GO SIDEWAYS

“Sure. You remember earlier when you asked what to do if things happen that blow up your plans?”

“Yes.”

“Well, here is a good point to talk about that. There are times when this happens and for all kinds of reasons. When it inevitably does, you deal with the challenge at hand first. It could mean that some or a lot of your plans

have to, at least temporarily, go by the wayside. That's life. But your efforts are not a waste if you look at the habits you've developed as an aid to help you grow."

"Would this fit into the **flow** aspect of the model you showed me earlier?"

"Absolutely. In fact, it would be good to look back at the **flow** statement you came up with as an anchor to hold on to when things go sideways. We embrace planning because, at any level, it's how we get things done. But like I said, we hold onto these things with a somewhat loose hand. This reminds us that God is in charge, and we're not. This allows us to embrace stewardship and adaptability at the same time."

"This is amazing, John. God's providence has definitely been involved in us meeting today."

The two men got up, and John moved to the front counter to pay his bill. Then, they walked out to the parking lot.

Joel was the first to speak. "John, I can't thank you enough. I really want to apply all that you've taught me today."

"The most important thing, Pastor, is for you to own your process. You, of course, could use some, all, or none of what I've shared today. It's not about my process. It's about you abiding in the way of fruitfulness."

"Trust me, John. We will be talking more about this."

The men shook hands, got in their cars, and drove off.

WORKBOOK EXERCISES

Chapter 7: Exercise 12



<https://replanthub.com/thewayoffruitfulness/>

EPILOGUE

The parking lot at Faith Baptist was almost full on a blustery Saturday morning in November. Four greeters wearing T-shirts that read “Imagine More!” (Ephesians 3:20) were welcoming people and pointing them to the registration desk. There, inside the Family Life Center was a hodgepodge of men, women, college-aged students, pastors from across the state, associational mission strategists from other regions, and even a few State Convention folks.

They were there because they had heard how transformative a course that first started at the church had been. Fifty percent of the members at Faith had gone through it, and it had brought renewal to so many individuals that people in town started to talk about it. Then, it spread to other churches and a couple of neighboring states.

As per these types of meetings, everyone seemed to be enjoying average coffee, hot biscuits, and an assortment of pastries that would send people at a Weight Watchers meeting into an apoplectic fit. The vast amounts of caffeine and calories that were being consumed didn’t seem to

bother anyone there. In fact, those gathered there seemed incredibly animated for individuals who had committed their whole Saturday to a meeting at a church.

Back in a side classroom, Joel Birch and John Tyler had just finished praying with some volunteers who would be moving around the room, helping people answer questions at each table. These folks were wearing the same T-shirts as the greeters, the food staff, and anyone else who was helping. The people who had just left the classroom were individuals who had already gone through the course called “The Way of Fruitfulness” and had been reaping good things from the workshop in their lives. As these folks filed out, Joel and John stayed back a minute to chat.

“This is amazing isn’t it, Pastor?”

“I’ll say. And to think it all started with a speeding ticket, some pecan pie, and lots of sweet tea.”

Both men laughed remembering the meaningful conversation that was shared at a diner two years before.

“When I started applying the principles you taught me, I felt like Paul when the scales fell from his eyes. I didn’t realize how truly inconsistently and haphazardly I was living my life until we took that deep dive on that fateful Friday morning.”

“You know, Joel, it changed things for me, too. I would have never guessed that you and I would be teaming up for—what is it now—12 workshops?”

“Actually, 14, if you’re counting today.” John laughed and shook his head in disbelief.

“Seriously, John, God has used you in such tremendous ways in my life that I can’t thank you enough.”

“I would say the same thing to you, Pastor. You’ve helped me to find a niche in ministry I could have never imagined.”

“Well, let’s stop this sloppy *agape* before we’re turned into a pile of emotional mush!”

Both men grinned and walked into the Family Life Center of the church. John sat on the front row while Joel moved up to podium.

“Hey, folks, let’s start getting our seats. I love the energy you have here this morning. It’s amazing to me for two reasons. First, because some of you drove from a good bit away. And that means you had to get up at the crack of dawn to be here at eight.”

Someone from the back spoke up and said, “Thank God for coffee!”

Most of the people gathered there laughed in unison, with a few raising their cups in a Baptist cheer. Joel gave them a thumbs up.

“The other reason,” Joel continued, “is that I know that what we’re going to be talking about today is a subject that, at first glance, doesn’t seem all that interesting. In fact, if you’re like I once was, I avoided the subject of what people might refer to as ‘time management’ altogether. It felt like anytime it was brought up, that my own inadequacies would rise up from my belly to my throat, shutting me down.” More than a few people nodded in agreement.

“But then, the Lord led John into my life. I was equipping him in some leadership stuff, and he ended up equipping me in aligning God’s Word with my values, and even my dreams, to find the path the Lord was calling me to walk on. And I probably should pause and say something to pastors here this morning. While we have the responsibility to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, that doesn’t mean we can’t be equipped by the saints ourselves.”

A few in the audience grinned while some looked a bit concerned, as if Joel were dancing on the edge of the cliff of false teaching.

“Now, I know that a few of you might disagree. That’s okay. But promise me that you will open your minds and hearts to get what I have come to believe are life-changing principles from God’s Word about living more intentionally. With that in mind, let’s pray.”

After Joel finished, he shifted gears in his talk.

“It’s my distinct pleasure to introduce you to a young man who has been a blessing to my life. John Tyler is founder and CEO of a social media company that helps all sizes of companies optimize their use of such tools as coupons to create a loyal customer base. Last year, he was recognized by *Inc. Magazine* as number one of the Top 50 Young Entrepreneurs in our country. He serves several nonprofit organizations in our country and in our community. On top of all of that, he is a freshly minted lay pastor in our church. John is husband to Julie, father to Maggie and Liam, and one of my dearest friends on the planet. Please give a hearty welcome to our presenter, John Tyler!”

The crowd responded with heartfelt applause. When it died down, John nodded with appreciation and began his talk.

“Thanks so much, Pastor, for that kind and probably overblown introduction. What I would add to it is that I’m a sinner saved by grace. The Lord Jesus has revolutionized my life and continues to help me grow that I might glorify Him and help others. Much of what we’ll talk about together today comes out of the lab of my life and the insight of others. You’ll hear me mention ways I’ve blown it and how the Lord picked me up again and again to put me back on His righteous path.

“No one, especially me, has it all together. So, I want you to feel as if we’re in a mountain chalet, gathered around a fire in comfortable chairs, drinking warm beverages, and enjoying each other’s company.

“That’s why the folks in the light green shirts with ‘Imagine More!’ written on them will be offering help in all kinds of ways. This group of wonderful people are made up from individuals from our churches and other fellowships who’ve been through this course and have found it helpful. They will be serving us a working lunch, making sure you have all the materials you need, helping you find restrooms, and working with your tables as you do group exercises. Let’s go ahead and give them a round of applause.”

The participants clapped vigorously, with some pointing out people they recognized in the group

serving. When they finished clapping, John rejoined the conversation.

“This also would not be possible without the encouragement and support of Pastor Joel. It has been a privilege serving with him at Faith Baptist and a real joy to see what God has done through the little bit of insight I’ve shared with him. Can we thank him with a little applause for hosting us and making this happen?”

For some reason, the applause intensified this time, to the point that it embarrassed Joel and he summarily pointed back to the audience to settle down.

“Joel will be helping today in various aspects of leading this workshop as he has many times since we launched our first workshop about two years ago. He informed me earlier that is our fourteenth one, and we have booked several more for next year.”

“Okay, if you turn your notebooks to the introduction tab, I want to show you our schedule for today. But before I do that, if you would please pull out your pre-work we’re going to use in the next few minutes. If you forgot yours, I think you might be able to draw out from memory the Background, Breakthroughs, Breakdowns, Builders, Bent, and Blessing elements from your past. These will serve as our initial launching point for today.”

John stepped back and looked across the audience where people were cheerfully opening their notebooks, chatting with one another, and even smiling back at him.

John's heart was full. He whispered, "Thank You, Lord," as he looked down at his notes and cleared his throat.