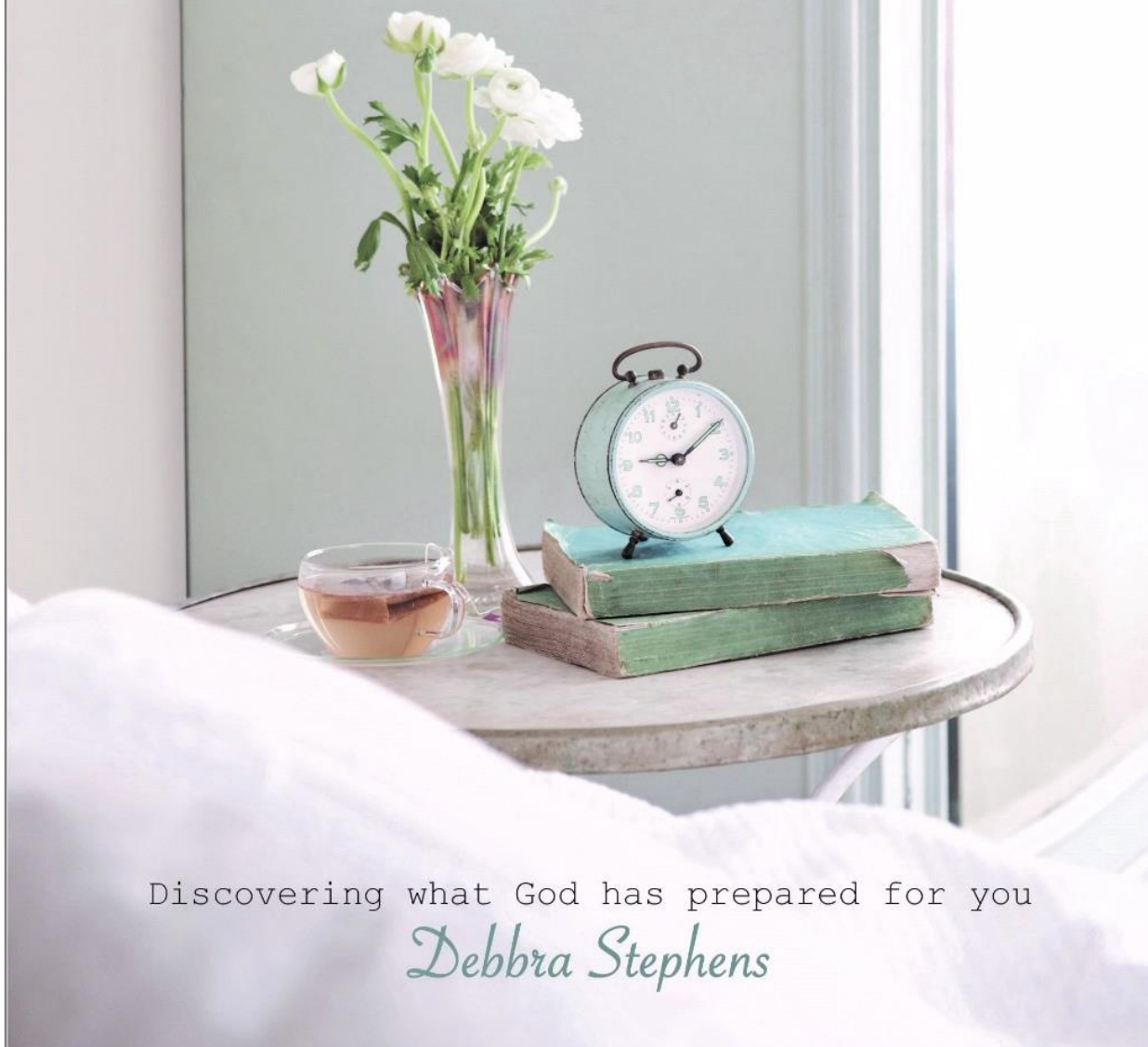


*Companion  
Blog Posts*

# Prepared



Discovering what God has prepared for you

*Debra Stephens*



## **God's Preparing Hand**

When he made the statement, he was speaking from first-hand experience. He personally knew it was factual truth—to the very core of his being.

From the confines of his house arrest in Rome, Paul could look across the landscape of his life and see the hand of God at work . . . preparing him.

God wants every Jesus-follower to see it—because it makes a mountain of a difference. So, guided by the Holy Spirit, Paul penned the most precise words of our faith when he wrote, “We are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10 ESV).

Paul endured much: seclusion, starvation, shipwrecks, and stonings. He knew extreme hardship, persecution, imprisonment, and rejection (see 2 Cor 11:23-33). His autobiography, housed in 2 Corinthians 11-13, culminates in his defensive charge to “test yourselves” (2 Cor 13:5).

And when you do?

You will find you are, indeed, prepared for whatever circumstance God has allowed.

Know why?

The answer to that question is also contained in 2 Corinthians 13:5: “**Christ is in you.**”

Paul knew the source of his sufficiency (2 Cor 3:5-6).

*Do you?*

All he suffered had purpose...preparing purpose. Each trial he endured prepared him for the next one. Each blow made progress in chiseling away God's masterpiece.

Sculptors have been quoted, saying: “I just chipped away everything that didn't look like my subject.” God knows what you are to look like. And He will masterfully chip away everything that is not part of His unique masterpiece.

It is a lifelong process that requires trust . . . until the work is finished.

You, too, are His workmanship...because He is working in you.

God's preparing you through life's circumstances is only the first half of the Ephesians 2:10 equation, though. He is preparing you—creating a masterpiece in Christ—for what He has prepared **for** you.

The other half of this timely truth is in doing what He has placed before you to do.

God does a good work in us, to do a good work **through** us.



In *Prepared* (available from *21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian Publishers*), you will learn about the amazing life of the apostle Paul, God's prepared servant. When you study the Scriptures and closely examine his life, I think it becomes evident that all he endured helped to prepare him for the next challenge he would face. And, looking back over his life, we see how they all worked together so he could do the work God had prepared in advance for him to do.

Through the study, you will also examine ways God is working in your life.

How is He preparing you?

What means is He using to grow you and mature your faith—helping you to become a Christ-like masterpiece?

And what work is He preparing for you?

That awareness can help you realize that there is purpose behind everything you experience. There is a good it can serve. Those experiences may be readying you to do the work God has prepared for you.

It can all be used by God—to bring glory to God...and a blessing to others.

While the way may be hard, the preparing is certain.

And who doesn't want the confidence that comes with feeling prepared?

God is in the preparing business. He is preparing you . . . because He has something prepared for you—that you might walk in His prepared way.

## The Essence of Preparedness

Since the old adage about the importance of laying a firm foundation before you build has been proven true, we'll begin with the basics of the concept of Prepared.

In Week One of our study we established the essence of Prepared by looking into the foundational elements of our faith. Because that's where it all begins.

We had to first understand

- Who prepares us—God.
- How we're prepared—in Christ.
- Why we're prepared—Ephesians 2:22.

And Saul made his grand entrance, as our primary model of all things prepared. It is his life we will study, as we see the precepts of our faith lived out.

When you look at the life of Saul before called by Jesus, it becomes clear that all he experienced prepared him for the work he was called into. His education and training, even his ethnicity and his citizenship, were all elements used by God.

God had something prepared for Paul. But first He had to prepare him for what He had prepared for him.

And when you look at the course Paul's life took after conversion, you see the ways and means God used to accomplish just that.

It was 11 years before Paul would be ready to take his first missionary journey—the prepared work for which God had been preparing him.

So don't lose heart, dear Christian. If it seems like you've been waiting or working a long time, it may be God's preparing ground. Allow Him to do His work in you—so you'll be ready when the time comes.

## Two bits of good news that really should make your day

You can read something and feel pretty good afterward. And then there are things you can read that make you feel ridiculously exultant!

Because, there's good news. There's really good news. There's great news. And then there's over-the-top, extraordinarily fantastic news.

I fear there are those who don't view the Bible that way. I think some shy away from it because they think the Bible is intended to impose guilt. Yes, there are passages that can make us feel bad—because they cut deep with conviction. But there's no doubt about it, the Bible **assumes** guilt. The Bible does not exist to provide condemnation for being a sinner; rather, a solution for us as one. It reveals a remedy for all of us rebels . . . a merciful pardon for each of us lawbreakers.

The Bible shows us the way God has made available to restore our relationship with a Holy God . . . so that we can be used by Him. More than revealing shame, I believe the Bible is meant to reveal salvation.

Even considering those difficult passages, I can't imagine missing out on the grace and glory.

And Ephesians 2:1-10 is all glory and grace!

In fact, in speaking at a women's event recently, I told them that I call it my *Hallelujah Chorus*—because every time I read it I shout "Hallelujah!" afterward.

Ephesians 2:1-10 is the before-and-after of every Christian. And I do mean **every**! Before any personal sin of your very own, it's what we **all** once were.

There are certain things I once was, but there are things we **all** once were.



There is great encouragement in that, isn't there? More importantly, there is commonality in that—commonality that should breed unity . . . *and shared empathy!*

"Once-was" is the great equalizer—making it the great unifier.

We can't look at the person sitting next to us and say they were once in darkness and dead in their sins. No! Because the very same thing can be said of us. Of me.

So, let me ask you: Are *you* a once-was?

Are you the *only* once-was?

No! We are all a once-was.

Our stories share that same once-was paragraph.

And, for those in Christ, we also share the grace of "but God."

The "but-God" of Ephesians 2:4 culminates with the beautiful truth that God has made us a masterpiece.

Now let me ask you: Are you a masterpiece?

The irony is this: You can't become a masterpiece without first being a once-was. But the grace of God takes the raw . . . the messy . . . the broken once-was and recreates us, in Christ, into a masterpiece.

Be sure to note, however, that once-was is past tense—it's what you **were**. A masterpiece is what you **are**.

Masterpieces are meant to be noticeable. Not up on a pedestal, mind you. But certainly not veiled either. There are many things that serve as veils. Like fear, lack of confidence, sin and contention.

Continuously reminding ourselves of the blessings noted in verses 1 through 9 should help us own the masterpiece . . . and keep our veils in the closet.

So I have two things for you today, friends:

- Let others know that the Bible is their friend. It's God's great gift of grace to us.
- Read Ephesians 2:1-10 often—and be sure to shout "Hallelujah!" every time!

## **A Thing or Two About Uncertain Times**

It was a day like any other.

He headed off to work early, having to go out of town on official business.

He neared his destination when he was suddenly cast down to the ground.

Blinding light pierced his darkness; but he needed to be kept in the dark to eventually see it.

In his waiting he wondered . . . and reasoned.

He spent three long, sightless days in foreign surroundings. And all those scriptures and benedictions memorized in his youth whirled on repeat—round and round they churned in his confused mind.

One thing he knew for certain: he was a man-on-a-mission, at the top of his game, when he was stopped cold in his tracks.

If only he could see! Then he could put the pieces of this bewildering puzzle together and change his circumstances.

When the scales finally fell from his eyes, he saw the light—and, eventually, the hand of God at work in his life.

Those senseless days—unable to see . . . *understand*—finally started to make sense.

Have you ever been there? Stuck in the dark? Unable to see what God was doing in your life?

## **In your waiting and wondering, do you tend to worry?**

When my nephew, Mitchell, found himself waiting to start a new job, his wise Aunt Yvonne remarked, "Channel your worry into preparedness."

When we can't see what God is doing or why—in the midst of bewildering circumstances—it is imperative to keep trusting . . . keep praying . . . keep seeking . . . keep renewing your mind with God's Word.

Corrie ten Boom wrote: "If you want to hear God's voice clearly and you are uncertain, then remain in His presence until He changes that uncertainty." That, dear one, is wisdom.

Paul may not have realized it at the time, but those days crouched in blindness proved to be a major turning point in his life.

Sometimes uncertain circumstances are meant to bring about a turning point. For Paul, that turning point was repentance.

Paul needed to experience a turning point—and that included a stint spent in uncertain circumstances.

God prepared Paul through those uncertain circumstances—proving useful later when he would face uncertainty time and again. There would be many times when Paul would need the faith to fully rely upon God when he couldn't see the way ahead.

When you can't see what God is doing—and things don't make sense—consider the possibility that it is a turning point, where God is preparing you for a purpose.

## **In**

In . . . a lot of good can come out from something that's been *in*.

You can't enjoy a cup of tea unless the leaves have been steeped *in* boiling water.

A crocus bulb won't grow and bloom until it's been buried *in* dirt.

And you can't bite into a crunchy pickle until it has first been soaked *in* salty brine.

Why, look at all the "ins" Paul experienced. He was heaped *in* suffering, weakness, seclusion, and battle (mostly spiritual battles, of course). And in each experience, his faith was further prepared by God.

I'm sure you've found yourself *in* some pretty fine messes, too. I know I have! But I didn't always learn the first time around. So, sometimes, I found myself right back *in* the same jam. Kind of like pasta. If it's not quite done, you toss it right back into the boiling water.

Which brings Jonah to mind. While God gave Jonah opportunity to think about his choices, it took time in the belly of that big fish to bring about a change of heart. Albeit temporarily! Which proves: once prepared does not necessarily mean always prepared.

There are plenty of positive occasions in the Bible where the people of God glimmered in the fire (like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3).

Consider 2 Corinthians 6:4-10...

“Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

And yet they were “always rejoicing.” They felt they were “possessing everything.” Notice carefully: they were called “servants of God.”

But wait!

Servants of God don't suffer, *right?! No!* None are exempt. If the only, beloved Son of God, His Suffering Servant, was not exempt, we can claim no such exclusion.

But a faith that can attest to the fruit of suffering, as Paul (see 2 Cor 1:9-11) and David (see Ps 119:71), is a faith exquisitely prepared by God *in* suffering.

The same can be said of battle.

The Christian's faith is both prepared *in* battle and *for* battle. We are prepared in battle by learning to depend upon God as our Shield...our Defender...our Mighty Warrior. And God prepares us for battle by providing all we need to fight the spiritual forces of this dark world.

You see, there is a becoming in each and every child of God in Christ.

We are becoming more like His Son.

We are becoming His ready servant.

We are becoming His masterpiece.

There is no doubt that, because of this sin-broken world, bad things happen to good people. But God can use suffering as an instrument for our becoming. And He can, and does, redeem it for good.

Whatever circumstances you find yourself *in*, dear one, you can be assured God is *in* it with you. Confidently believe His power is made perfect *in* weakness.

## **The Mark of Aspiration**

Many and varied are the life aspirations of man.

Some revolve around love or money . . . or both.

Some are achievement-driven (like, fame).

Some are career-based.

But many are based upon experiences (like, travel to exotic places).

Aspirations are essential to living a focused life.

They provide direction.

They provide purpose.

They are often goal-oriented.

Parents often have a definite idea of what their children's aspirations should be. (Our Heavenly Father included.)

Sometimes, early on, parents decide what they want their children to become. What we don't usually find at the top of a mother's list, however, is that of servant.

While it may rank at the bottom of the list by culture, it is, in fact, a high and lofty ideal.

The beauty is that being a servant is always realistic. It is always others-focused. And it works well in every arena (whether it's the family arena, work arena, or social arena). It nicely compliments all other ambitions and desires. It's timeless. It doesn't require any special education or skill set. And it meets you right where you are, wherever you are.

You see, you can be a servant among other things because it is as much an attitude as it is an action.

And that attitude is humility.



My YiaYia was very much the servant. She loved her family well. And the older I get the more I admire her for all the sacrificial ways she served her family.

When I was younger, I adopted society's feminist mentality. It was the era of Gloria Steinem, Ms Magazine, and bra burning protests. Many women of my generation determined to redefine the roles of women. And so I set my sights on a professional career and overcoming the archaic stereotypes for women.

It was all about me!

And I have spent even more of my life trying to reverse that mindset.

Scripture clearly reveals God's heart in the matter. God desires for us to become like His Son . . . as one who serves.

Week Six of *Prepared* focuses on the fact that God prepares us **for** something. (Several somethings, actually.) One of them is to serve others.

Servanthood has no aspirational equal.

We learn from Paul's pen that he became a servant of the gospel by the grace of God and the working of His power (Eph 3:7).

It is the same for us.

He also teaches us that we are not to serve reluctantly or half-heartedly. Rather, we are to "serve wholeheartedly, as if [we are] serving the Lord" (Eph 6:7).

Paul's zeal in serving the Lord was unquestionable. As he served the Gentiles, he served the Lord. And vice versa.

God prepares His people for purpose. And being a lowly servant is life's ultimate purpose that deserves our highest esteem.

As does the Christ Who set the mark.

## **Works—it's so much more than meets the eye**

I'm not always cooperative.

I was worse when I was younger.

When I was feelin' the love from my family, I'd do just about anything . . . without being asked, even.

But if I felt offended, under-appreciated, or over-looked, they dared not expect one thing out of me! (Except a bad attitude, of course.) I'd get all rebellious and conduct my own sit-down strike.

Come to find out, those works I were to do amounted to much more than meets the eye. Even though, at times, I felt it was merely busy-work and hardly mattered.

My mindset was antithesis to what God expects from members of His family.

He wants us to be like the Thessalonians Paul commended.

“We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith,  
your labor prompted by love,  
and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.”  
(1Thes 1:3)

The faith of the Thessalonians expressed itself in works. Because of their faith in Jesus, even in difficult times, they served God. It wasn't just when they had that warm and fuzzy feeling they labored in the Lord. No! Their works were done in repentance, faith, love, and hope.

There have always been loads of questions about works. There is so much more to it than meets the eye. Many of those questions we explored in Week Seven of *Prepared*.

One of the main, more personal, questions is *what*. What am I to do?

I know what it's like to come into a group at church that's busy serving and you're just not sure where to start or what to do. You feel like a fifth wheel! But if you just jump in with willing hands, you'll soon feel connected and part of the team. The more you offer to help in various ways, in time you'll discover your gifts, talents, interests . . . passion, even.

There is great joy and satisfaction that comes from serving. Because in serving you come to realize that you're part of the kingdom. There is a place where you belong and are needed. And you have a valuable contribution to make.

The grace of God, in Christ, saved us. And the grace of God made us family and gave each of us a work to do.

It's not just busy-work. It matters.

It doesn't have to be a grand feat—showy, or extra-ordinary. It's more personal than that. Often it's just between you and God. That doesn't make it less significant, by any means.

If you're stuck, start with prayer. Reach out to someone at church. No doubt, God has something just for you.

You can count on Him to prepare . . . and provide—more than meets the eye.

## **Prepared to Hope**

God gave the soul of man what it needed most . . . from the very first moment it needed it—hope.

He gave it by way of promise.

He gave it by way of His Word.

And with each promise, man could look forward—confident in God as their hope, as the Source of all things hoped for.

Down through the ages, He fulfilled promises along the way—lending further assurance to what His people hoped in that was yet unrealized.

God further rewarded hope with the coming of His Messiah—bringing deliverance, redemption, forgiveness, and eternal salvation, all as promised.

And He cemented hope with the Resurrection.

So our hope—alive and sure—in the things promised and yet to come has no cause to flinch nor flounder.

No! God has prepared and accomplished many great and wondrous things for us to hope. For it is a hope infallible—proven and true.

And not just in the twinkling gleam of bright, carefree days. But in fires and storms, dungeons and prisons . . . crosses. It has caused the human soul to soar . . . in the pit, the cave, the valley, the ash heap.

In homes, schools, courtrooms, hospitals and gravesides we can hope.

In the state of this world, in a state of ruin and brokenness, in the face of a daunting task, in fierce opposition—though weary and burdened—you *can* hope!

You can hope beyond your current circumstance . . . to get you *through* your current circumstance.

Hope is greater than your trial . . . to carry you *through* your trial.

Because our hope is not in a something, that's fallible . . . but a Someone.

Our hope is in Jesus.

It's not something conjured up inside of man when he feels like it.

It's not even named as a Fruit of the Spirit.

A sure hope comes from God alone and steadily flows from all that He has accomplished in preparing the Way for us. It's a hope hard-won by our Victorious Lord—making the soul triumphant. For we hope beyond this life.

Think for a moment of the hope captive Israel had. Through the prophets, God had given them promise of restoration. The anticipation they had in God's fulfillment of those promises carried the children of God through their **years** of exile. Their hope gave them strength to endure oppression and captivity in a land not their own. They had a hope . . . even in the midst of devastation. Think about it. They lost it all! But God didn't give up on them. And they didn't give up on Him! They clung to the hope of God's Word.

And so must we!

Because God's Word of promise prepares our hearts to hope, as we await the coming of our "blessed hope — the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Tit 2:13b).

Why, just look at Lamentations 3:24: "'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I **will hope** in Him.'"

In the middle of this book of lament is a declaration of hope.

All about them may have been charred and singed, but they were "not consumed" by the fire.

There can be sorrow and lament—but hope remains.

We must hope. As Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote, "To live without hope is to cease to live."

Paul knew it. As bad as things got, he continued to hope in the power and presence of God to sustain; for he stated: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8).

We have many examples of those in the Bible who maintained a living hope in the trials of this life—like Daniel, Nehemiah, Peter, Paul . . . even, *and especially*, our Lord Jesus. And if He has a hope that our salvation will overcome this world . . . ***then we can, too!***

## **The Way of Walking**

There are many places to set our feet . . . and many ways to place them there.

There are those who choose to set their bejeweled feet upon the red carpet of notoriety, like the Hollywood elite.

Or those, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who humbly chose to set worn feet upon the dusty roads of poverty in obscurity.

There is a path a Christian is to walk . . . and a way to walk it.

How?

In humility, by the power of the Holy Spirit, garbed in the virtues of our Lord.

*“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone.*

*Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”*

*(Col 3:12-14)*

Those in Christ are to walk the path of holiness in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and love.

It all begins with humility—in recognizing our utter and complete dependence upon an infinitely perfect, righteous, almighty God. In soberly and rightly considering ourselves



truthfully, we are to then think of others more . . . and ourselves less. Humility's greatest opponent rises from attitudes of comparison and envy.

Walking the way of our Lord in compassion is to add another set of footprints to another's rocky path. It reassures the trepid navigator they don't travel the valley floor alone.

Kindness, gentleness and patience are each unique in their own right and yet interdependent. It's hard to be kind without a gentle heart. And it's difficult to be gentle and patient without humility. But it's impossible to express any authentically without love.

Look at the path of obedience and holiness Jesus walked. See where the path He was to walk took Him. And note how He walked it.

The path may take you across the valley, **but** God will be with you.

There are things God values, He cares about the choices you make. He delights in those He dearly loves when they walk

Faithfully

Prayerfully

Joyfully

Thankfully

Wisely

Humbly

Hopefully

Patiently

Lovingly

Our walk, as mostly used in the New Testament, is the manner in which we conduct life.

What manner will you choose to walk this path of faith?

## **Success is in the Finishing**

Mainstream media thrives on rags-to-riches stories AND riches-to-rags stories.

You can't lose when you win both ways.

And we can't either—when we continually consult the sacred pages of Scripture, where stories abound of both those who had a faltering start but finished well AND those who started strong but faltered to finish well.

Let's toss ancient Israeli royalty into the ring to see what we can learn today...

King Uzziah was the tenth king of Judah. He was 16 when he became king. He reigned in Jerusalem 52 years (see 2 Chronicles 26).

Zechariah instructed him in the fear of the God (v5). He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord (v4) and became very powerful (v8). A whole string of impressive accomplishments are found in 2 Chronicles 26:9-15 . . . "BUT" (v16) "after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense."

Subsequently, God afflicted him with leprosy—discipline for over-stepping his authority by usurping priestly duties.

His success led to his failure.

All that God has done for us in the spiritual realm by grace, the accomplished work of His Son, and the ongoing sanctifying work of the Spirit is so that we can finish our earthly days faithfully.

But we must do our part . . . to the finish.

One very real element that can negatively affect that finish is success.

But what do you use to measure success?

Were a worldly standard of advancement used to measure my life, most might conclude I'm not finishing very well (at times, myself included). Looking at my life, you'll find not much has changed over the course of the past 15 years. My life (materially) looks much the same. I have no more money today than I did then (or ever!). I have no acquisitions. I don't have any valuable possessions. I'm working the same job I was almost 10 years ago, without advancement. It's as though I'm treading water—busy, but going nowhere. Sometimes I feel stuck. And see no change on the horizon. Externally . . . materially, that is. But I've kept the faith. Hope is alive. And God is at work . . . internally and eternally.

I've suffered the same lapse of good judgment and wisdom as Uzziah. The only difference (to date, that is) is repentance. And, as long as I keep turning when I veer, and keep looking to God and His people for guidance when my gaze gets diverted, I will finish.

So, why can I claim success (and I do)?

Because it is His success . . . by His grace.

Because of what He has accomplished in my heart . . . in my mind . . . in my soul.

Because of the little victories over temptations to pull me away.

Because I'm still His.

And He is mine.

And I can declare His praise and testify of His good deeds into a dark and hurting world.

But, more than anything, it is because of redemption.

And redemption is divine success!

There is a paradox to finishing successfully in the Kingdom of Christ. And we see it modeled in many of our Lord's greatest disciples.

Paul started his career as a highly-educated, successful religious leader. He was persecuted, imprisoned and eventually executed. But his life was a great success because it is one that was redeemed. The same goes for Peter.

I consider all those who finish in Christ, filled with faith, hope and love—even with nothing else to their name—as living a successful life.

So what can we learn from King Uzziah about being successful and yet living a life to the finish that brings God glory? Keeping.

1. Keep from becoming prideful by remaining humble.
2. Keep ourselves from self-exaltation by keeping God exalted on His throne and giving Jesus reign over our life.
3. Keep trusting Their sovereignty and goodness.
4. Keep contented with what God has assigned to me and not greedily overstep my bounds.
5. Keep an attitude of repentance by keeping my life aligned with the will of God.

Your story, dear one—whether rags-to-riches or riches-to-rags—is one of success when it is redeemed by God and melds into His grand and glorious story of the Kingdom and His Christ.

## **To Endure or Not To Endure—Is There Any Question?**

Endurance, it's the ability to withstand difficulties. Baker's Evangelical Dictionary defines endurance as "continuing commitment in the face of difficulty."

*"God measures our progress by our capacity to endure."*

*Charles Stanley*

We've all heard many inspiring, heroic stories of people enduring extreme situations. My mind often goes to the world of sports when it comes to endurance because of the intense training they undergo in order to compete. But what about the mundane, everyday burdens of life? Where does our capacity to endure the daily forces of this world come from? What is the source of inner strength for a believer to withstand, not only hardship, but continual pressure from culture? Or what about those grueling times of waiting?

Let's allow the Bible to answer our probing questions—so that when the question about our endurance arises, we'll be prepared . . .

### **Endurance comes from God**

*"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement  
give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,"*

(Rm 15:5)

In Paul's prayer for the Christians in Rome, he gives praise to God as the Source of their endurance. The storehouse of strength of our all-sufficient, all-powerful God never wanes, tires, or depletes.

## **Endurance comes from Scripture**

*"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us,  
so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures  
we might have hope."*

(Rm 15:4)

Every word recorded on the pages of the Bible teach us and inform our faith. There we learn about the character of God, the will of God, the plans, purposes, and promises of God. And seeing all He has done in faithfulness, in relationship to His creation, helps us to trust Him and encourages us to hope. Hope and trust are two key ingredients for our endurance.

## **Endurance is a result of prayer**

*"We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power  
so you will have all the endurance and patience you need."*

(Col 1:11 NLT)

Paul prayed the Colossians would be strengthened by God's glorious power and might, so they would have great endurance. He also prayed they would "live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way." God's provision for their endurance in response would be an answer to that prayer, as well.

The growth of the church speaks to God's grace in their endurance. And Paul's intercession petitioned God for just such a grace. It's worthwhile to note that this is a great prayer for us to borrow on behalf of the church and missionaries everywhere.

## **Endurance is inspired by our hope in Jesus Christ**

*"We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith,  
your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope  
in our Lord Jesus Christ."*

(1 Thes 1:3)

The Thessalonians were being commended for the fruit of their faith, love, and hope. And the fruit of their hope in Jesus? Endurance! Hope in our Lord is a compelling force in our life in Christ. I dare say, we can't flourish without it.

## **Endurance is aided by the attitude of the heart**

*"A merry heart makes a cheerful countenance,  
But by sorrow of the heart the spirit is broken."*

(Prv 15:13 NKJ)

The Contemporary English Version states that "sorrow can crush you". Personally, I find it really hard to be strong when by heart is sad and my spirit crushed. Discouragement and despair are sure roadblocks to endurance. There are many reasons God warns us to guard our hearts above all things. Just one being: a broken heart makes countenance weak—a real threat to endurance. Remembering the presence and promises of God keeps our spirit from becoming defeated by worry.

So we see, God makes us able to endure and graciously provides for us to do so. He helps us to bear up under the weight of things . . . for as long as it takes.

To endure or not to endure? When it comes to answering that question there isn't any special knowledge required, just this: turn to God, Who is able—no matter the

circumstance that requires endurance. Then there is no question about your ability to endure.



*Almighty Lord of heaven and earth; Grant me grace to accept this difficulty; strength to bear the weight; patience to see it through. Keep me from the sin of self-pity and let me not grow bitter. You are my Source for endurance, You have provided Your Word as encouragement and Your Spirit to empower me. Guard my heart, renew my mind, and rekindle my hope. In Jesus mighty name, Amen.*



## More on Ephesians 2:10

Yes I know, I wrote 200+ pages on Ephesians 2:10 . . . and I'm still writing.

Add to that 60 Prepared Daily posts, another dozen blog posts, plus Facebook videos.

There's just a lot to say.

But, think about it: Multitudes (a whole lot more educated than I am) have written volumes over the past 2,000+ years about this same verse!

It's that important.

So if God has communicated something of that significance in just one verse to prompt such output, how much more is to be gleaned from every passage in the whole of the Bible?! Why, just look at the bookstores, catalogs, and libraries filled with exegetical content.

This one verse is packed with riches—riches to build faith and motivate behavior.

When you couple the content of the statement written with knowledge of the writer's experience and the context in which it was written, it packs an even more powerful punch.

I have come to the opined conclusion that Paul's writing of this verse made three dramatic declarations. Beyond the obvious (of writing to the church of the doctrines of our faith), for Paul, personally, it was:

1. A Proclamation of Faith

Paul made a bold statement of what he believed to be true, because God had proven it to be true in his own, personal experience.

## 2. A Confidence-Booster

This truth of God, as conveyed and communicated by the Holy Spirit, gave Paul courage, strength, and assurance. Further, knowing that word (and the Person) to be completely trustworthy enabled him to endure harrowing circumstances. I imagine that whenever he reflected upon these words, he felt confidence rise within.

## 3. A Praise Unto God

With such a statement of unwavering faith, Paul's words were a praise unto the God of his salvation. He confessed he was made new by God, in Christ, for purpose—a purpose God had planned in advance. Humbly, he gave God glory for the fruit of his labor and suffering—recognizing and professing the sovereign wisdom and grace of God at work in and through him.

Ephesians 2:10 can be those same things for you, too!

It is for you to believe, dear saint, that God has made you a new creation, with every spiritual blessing in Christ, for good works He already has for you to do as you live a life holy unto Him. "Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised. For, 'In just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay.'"

Continue to walk in His prepared way, as His masterpiece of Christ's glory.

*(Conclusion of blog series following the study lessons)*



## Personally Prepared

I'm going to part from the norm with today's post, if that's alright with you.

Would you mind terribly if I shared something from my personal journal with you? (It's unplanned and unexpected . . . but that's ok, don't you think?)

Late Tuesday evening, after I had gotten home from Nashville from fetching *Prepared*, I was feeling rather reminiscent (among so many other things!). I pulled out my working binder and revisited "her" story. I came across some of my personal side notes and prayers and began to vaguely remember what was going on in the background of my life as I was writing the manuscript. So I pulled out my journal to put all the pieces together. And it all came rushing in.

What a trying and difficult season that was!

Allow me to give you a frame of reference first: I started writing *Prepared* in March 2014. My job was finished and she was submitted to 21<sup>st</sup> Century for their work to begin in October 2015. The completed work was done and ready to hit the shelves in June 2016. Start to finish was a quarter past two years. And this note I'm about to share? It was written in August 2015—at the pinnacle of my writing season. And all about me was a tumultuous storm.

"You can prepare me through the difficulties of this world  
to bring about good in me, good to others, good for You....

"May these trials prepare me and bring about such a good, Father—that is their  
only redemption. Knowing You are doing just that makes them all worth the  
wrestle."

That is the essence of the lessons in *Prepared*. That is precisely what the study is about—how God takes the bad and redeems them for good. How He can use trials and create a good in us to be shared in His work in the lives of others, as we walk this rocky road. And how they make us ready for what lies ahead.

That's what God taught Paul. Each hardship, each situation and circumstance, all worked together to prepare him for the next thing God had for him to do and endure the challenges he would face in doing them. And thankfully, on a much smaller scale, he taught me that lesson, too. I can honestly say I was personally prepared.

Invariably, God teaches me something significant with each new writing project. I am the student of my own studies. I guess I wouldn't have it any other way. It's almost as if the current topic comes to life and becomes my reality—learning firsthand that very thing I am trying to share. The words on the page enacted about me in the classroom of my life. And *Prepared* was no exception.

As I shared in the study's introduction, God prepared me before I got to writing; but He certainly continued throughout the developing experience . . . and even still.

And what is "being prepared"? It's when God brings us to a place in our faith where we have a confidence that He is with us; that we trust Him to be and provide all we need, no matter what we face.

God has prepared – does prepare – and will prepare you, too. It's all a part of becoming His exquisite masterpiece.

## **A Prepared Work Intended to Become a Masterpiece**

The unique design, stamped on a blank page, lies before you. It is but the point of a colored pencil away.

Your stroke varies—sometimes short and quick, sometimes long and lingering, or light and fanciful. Your fleeting moods are read in the tones you use. Regardless, the finished work is a masterpiece of color and beauty—all by design.

Adult coloring—it's all the rage. One glance at the racks and the appeal become obvious, as most covers are stamped "Stress Relieving" or "Relaxing." Not to mention the creative and captivating designs.

But as I think upon the recent phenom, a spiritual application comes to mind—that of a prepared work.

Did you know God has one just for you?

Do you also know that He prepares you to be able to do that work?

Just as the colored pencil is the instrument provided in order to complete the picture, God provides and uses people and experiences, opportunities and situations as instruments in completing the masterpiece of you. Every aspect of your life, a stroke that adds color, drama, artistry....beauty. They all blend to create a masterpiece from His prepared work in you—so that you are prepared to do the work He has prepared for you.

At a loss of what that is? Are you trying to make sense of the design? Or what the finished work is supposed to look like? The 12-week Bible study "Prepared" was created to help you discover the masterpiece and the prepared work of Ephesians 2:10. It's running on the presses as you read this post and will soon be ready for release.

In the meantime? Maybe we should take up adult coloring. It may have been prepared for just such a time as this—a masterpiece in waiting.

## **The Good in Hard**

Yeah, so I had this raging bout with the flu. It knocked me down and out for days. It was this hard thing. In the grand scheme of things, it was just a common illness. And it's really the least of the hard I've known—it just so happens to be the freshest...the most recent.

Hard hits and can catch us off guard, though can't it? For the Christian that is under the misguided notion that all hard ends when we come to know Jesus as Savior—thinking in error that He will save us from all trouble—they are the most unfortunate ones that can get knocked off their feet of faith. And, either they land on their knees to cling to Him, or they get knocked down, to never rise on His wings again.

If there's one thing the Lord has taught me through all the hard, it's the sacredness of it—the real blessing of it—because of the great good He can make from it. Because hardship? It knocks us into the arms of God. And dependent upon Him? That's His specialty! That's where the greatest good comes in like a flood. To invite Him in is to be held in His embrace. It doesn't remove the hard, but it adds a meaning and purpose to it because of what He teaches us about Him through it.

For those that expect only good times and blessings from God, they miss the real good that comes from God. Because it's the hard times spent in Him that stretches us, grows us, presses us deeper into Him. It makes the bitter sweet, the ugly beautiful, the hard good.

Take King David, for example. He knew hard. And it drove him into the loving arms of God to experience Him like no other. Difficulties brought depth and dimension, and poverty gleaned riches untold.

Now consider King Solomon, as opposed to the experience of his father, David. God said of Solomon: "No other king in all the world will be compared to you for the rest of your life" (1 Kg 3:13 NLT). He had great wisdom and riches and was esteemed by kings of



every nation. "Nothing lacking," the Bible says; all Judah and Israel lived in peace and safety. Peace and safety. Isn't that the desire a certain worldview produces in us? They didn't serve him well. They were as a hardship unto themselves. Solomon "denied himself no pleasure" (Ecc 2:10). His life was the endless pursuit of pleasure...meaning. He lived the life of plenty and ease—and yet seemed empty...bored. He seemed like a man lost and struggling. And he lost the great blessing of a kingdom graced by God because he repeatedly sinned pursuing a hollow happiness. In the end, he concluded that all is meaningless apart from God. Yet David was a man acquainted with hardship and want. In those times of difficulty he knew heightened communion with God. He became stronger through every circumstance where he found himself most weak and vulnerable.

God uses such times to prepare us (the subject of my next study). He either prepares you for it or prepares you through it. "It" being "hard." I can honestly say that He prepared me by providing in advance what I would need to sustain me. (Another story for another day.)

We are all prone to hardship. The world is filled to overflowing with illness, abuse, injustice, poverty, addiction. But God can be found working in and through these—with grace a plenty. Because, for His child of faith, it is in the midst of these where what you have heard of God becomes what you have seen of God—precisely what Job learned through the testing of his faith (see Job 42:5).

Even the Son of God was not exempt from difficulty or great suffering. He never used His power or authority to eliminate hardship or improve His hard lot in life. He came to suffer with us...*for us*. It is Jesus that takes the hard and turns it to a seed for good. A good that is hopefully used to minister to other companions of hard.

The only redeeming quality to all that is bad is when we respond in a way that invites God into the hardship. It is knowing His presence in it. And, abiding with Him in it, then allows Him to transform our hearts and minds toward that hard thing. Only He is able—and willing—to bring good from the hard. That knowledge forges endurance. For

affliction can be endured knowing it is merely an instrument in God's trustworthy hands to bring about good.

That, and the hope we have beyond the hard in the promised redemption of all things. Our very encouragement comes at the powerful testimony of the saints through centuries of tragedy and great affliction and loss. They strongly and assuredly attest to the blessing God births through suffering. They even go so far as to be thankful for whatever befell them—if only for coming to know the grace of God through such hardships.

God may not prevent the hard. And a relationship with Jesus is no guarantee you will be shielded from it—in fact, quite the opposite is to be expected. But there is a blessedness promised to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, and are persecuted—a blessedness of fellowship with The Suffering Servant of God. There is a sweet taste of grace, for our endurance; and the greater good, having come to know Him better because of it.

It is knowing the power of God to deliver you through it, and not necessarily the power to demolish it, that strengthens. So, when hard hits, we must first turn to Him; welcome Him in; trust Him in it; and press on, abiding in Him.

The hard comes, as sure as the sun rises. And it comes to all mankind, regardless of belief. But good comes to those that endure the hard in the presence of God, believing He is working to redeem it.

And a sure blessedness also comes. Good rises from hard—resurrected, like the Glorious Light that filled death's dark chamber.

