



Every Man's

A Bible for Every Battle
Every Man Faces

BIBLE

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Living by Faith

NO NAME IN THE OLD TESTAMENT shines more brightly than that of Abraham.

The apostle Paul referred to Abraham as “the spiritual father of those who have faith” (Romans 4:11). Hundreds of years after Abraham’s death, Levite worship leaders lauded him as one who “had proved himself faithful” (Nehemiah 9:8). God himself called Abraham “my friend” (Isaiah 41:8).

Who was this man who willingly left a comfortable life to homestead in a strange land? And why did God promise to bless the whole world through him?

Abraham grew up in pagan Mesopotamia. During his early adult years, his father, Terah, took Abraham (then called Abram) and his young bride Sarai, westward toward Canaan. They got no farther than a town named Haran, however, and settled there, on the banks of a tributary of the Euphrates River.

Many years later, God called the 75-year-old Abraham to “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Abraham immediately got up and “went without knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). Because Abraham trusted God and obeyed him, the Lord gave Abraham an astonishing promise that continues to bless and shape the world today:

“I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.” (Genesis 12:2-3)

Despite Sarai’s inability to have children (11:30), God promised Abraham that his descendants would become as numerous as the stars in the night sky—and Abraham “believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith” (15:6). In this way Abraham became the chief biblical example of a man who banked his whole future on the Lord’s promises. In the apostle Paul’s words, Abraham “was fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises” (Romans 4:21).

Abraham is the chief biblical example of a man who banked his entire future on God’s promises.

Did this make him perfect? Did Abraham’s strong faith keep him from ever stepping out of God’s will? Far from it. The Bible forthrightly tells us, for example, that fear of a powerful ruler drove Abraham to lie about his relationship to his wife—not once, but twice (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18).

Abraham and his wife also struggled when God seemed to delay keeping his promise. After ten years went by and they still had no son, they agreed to “help God out” by using a surrogate mother named Hagar. Nine months later, Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn son—but it was not God’s intention to honor his promise in this way (16:1-16). Not until another 14 years passed did God enable Sarah to have a son, Isaac, and so the promised child was finally born to a man who “figured his body was as good as dead” (Romans 4:19).

Abraham, perhaps more than any other Old Testament figure, shows us what a life of faith looks like. When we live by faith, we “share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith” (Galatians 3:9).

THE POINT: Faith means believing—and acting—on the promises of God.

The Only Life Worth Living

PERHAPS IF MORE MEN became familiar with the life of Jacob, they'd gain a better perspective on what life with God really entails—both the highs and the lows.

On the high side, Jacob proves to us that God loves to shed his grace on the most undeserving. Think of it: God chose a man who was worthy of the lamentable name he was given (Jacob means “he deceives”) to build a nation God would call his own. God worked so tirelessly and graciously in Jacob’s life that this man finally turned a corner, exchanging a career of deception for a life focused on the Lord. Through the family line of Jacob, Jesus Christ came into the world to become the Savior of all humanity.

On the down side, Jacob shows us that the methods God uses to turn us into godly men often cause tremendous pain. God demonstrates through Jacob that he cares far more about transforming us into people who resemble his Son than he does about making us comfortable.

Jacob entered this world grasping the heel of his older twin brother, Esau (Genesis 25:24-26). As a young adult, Jacob bought his brother’s rights as firstborn (25:29-34), and then through trickery secured from his father a blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau (27:1-40). Fearing Esau’s threats of vengeance, Jacob fled to the tents of his uncle

Laban. In Laban Jacob found a man every bit as capable of deception and manipulation as he. Laban tricked Jacob into laboring for 14 years in exchange for the privilege of marrying his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. During his time with Laban, Jacob fathered 11 sons and a daughter and became quite wealthy.

When he finally left his uncle to return home, Jacob again resorted to deception in an attempt to avoid Laban’s wrath (chapter 31). Finally, even though many years had passed since he had cheated Esau out of their father’s blessing,

Jacob still feared his brother. So he constructed an elaborate means of appeasing Esau, depending largely on bribery (32:1-21).

And then God stepped in.

In one of the stranger accounts of God’s direct intervention, Jacob wrestled all night with someone he first considered only “a man” (32:24). Toward daybreak this man “touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it out of its socket” (32:25), leaving Jacob with a limp. Only after the man blessed him did Jacob realize his adversary’s identity. He called the place of his wrestling match Peniel, meaning “face of God,” and said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared” (32:30).

From that moment on, Jacob’s life started to change. He gradually traded his life of deceit for a life of commitment to God.

Given this history, it seems fitting that God would change Jacob’s name to Israel (“God fights,” 32:28; 35:10). His new name would remind him that the God he had fought against would now be fighting for him. Jacob’s struggles were far from over, but his struggles against God had come to an end. A life of faith is a life of struggle—but it’s also the only life worth living.

Jacob gradually traded his life of deceit for a commitment to seeking God.

THE POINT: A life of faith is a life of struggle.

A Colossus Meets God's Love

THE FIGURE OF MOSES towers over the landscape of the Bible like a colossus. Only the names Jesus and David appear more often in Scripture than his. So what makes him so special?

You could ponder how Moses' mother spared his life by placing him in a reed basket and floating him down the Nile River, where the pharaoh's daughter found him (Exodus 2:1-10). Moses' name recalls the moment when the princess lifted him out of the water; *Moses* sounds like the Hebrew for "to lift out."

Or you could mention how he spent the first 40 years of his life as a privileged scion of royalty, until the day he lost his temper and killed an Egyptian overseer who had abused a Hebrew slave. When his secret got out, Moses fled to a desert region called Midian (Exodus 2:11-15; Acts 7:23-29).

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grace.

Or you could contemplate how Moses spent the next 40 years of his life in God's wilderness classroom, receiving a very different sort of education from the kind he had enjoyed in Pharaoh's palace. He married a local girl and started a family, far from the land of his childhood (2:21-22).

Or perhaps you remember the "burning bush incident," when Moses received a personal commission from God to rescue the Israelites (3:1-4:17).

Then again, maybe you recall how God used Moses to send 10 fearsome plagues on Egypt to convince Pharaoh to "let my people go" (5:1-12:50); or how Moses held his staff over

the Red Sea at God's command to open "a dry path through the sea" (Isaiah 43:16); or how he gave his nation God's holy laws (Exodus 19:1-20:17).

With all the staggering events of Moses' life, however, we should never forget that he was human. He often grew weary of his role and was repeatedly disgusted with his constantly complaining countrymen (see 5:22; 14:11-12; 15:24-25; 16:2-3; 17:2-4).

One day this revered lawgiver—who had urged his people to obey God wholeheartedly and who frequently reminded them of the consequences of sin—disobeyed God. The Lord told Moses to "speak to the rock over there, and it will pour out its water" (Numbers 20:8). But Moses, fed up with the Israelites' constant rebellion, struck the rock with his staff in a fit of temper. Water did pour from the rock, relieving the thirsty people. But Moses had to live with the consequence. "Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel," God told him, "you will not lead them into the land I am giving them" (Numbers 20:12). Moses died at the age of 120, just short of the borders of Canaan (Deuteronomy 34:7).

And yet, his story doesn't end there. Moses exhibited God's demanding holiness by giving Israel the law, but he also demonstrated God's amazing grace. Centuries later, a living Moses was allowed to enter the Promised Land—when he and the prophet Elijah brought Jesus a touch of heaven just before our Savior began his march to the cross (Mark 9:2-4).

Colossal? Without a doubt. But Moses would gladly point you to the truly colossal: God's boundless mercy and love.

THE POINT: You never get so big that God's love is not bigger still.

Stocking Up on Courage

NO ONE GETS through life unscathed. Tough circumstances can erupt at any moment—from any direction. That's why, from time to time, we can all use timely words that urge us to strength and courage. General Joshua, commander of Israel's military forces during the conquest of Canaan, received encouragement from a number of sources, including God himself.

You might think that a burly professional soldier, trained from youth to be the personal assistant of the commander in chief (Exodus 17:9; 24:13; Numbers 11:28), would have no need of spirit-lifting words. Yet he did need them, and he received them often, especially as the time grew near for him to take over the leadership of the nation of Israel. Note who spoke the words of encouragement that Joshua so badly needed to hear:

1. *Moses* often helped Joshua to take heart. At least twice the Lord commanded Moses to "encourage" his young aide (Deuteronomy 1:38; 3:28). So Moses told Joshua, "Do not be afraid . . . , for the LORD your God will fight for you" (3:22). And later he repeated, "Be strong and courageous! . . . Do not be afraid or discouraged" (31:7-8).
2. *God* urged Joshua to act bravely by trusting deeply. In an official commission to the general just before Israel entered the Promised Land, God told Joshua, "Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).
3. *The Israelites* also joined the encouragement parade. After Joshua called the nation together to prepare to enter Canaan, the people replied, "So be strong and courageous!" (Joshua 1:18).

Every man needs large doses of both strength and courage, especially when preparing to tackle some daunting challenge. Joshua found the bulk of his courage through his close, growing relationship with God. He accompanied Moses to the top of Mount Sinai to receive God's laws (Exodus 24:13). He remained in the Tent of Meeting after Moses met there with God (Exodus 33:11). The Spirit of God lived in Joshua (Numbers 27:18), and so he was "full of the spirit of wisdom" (Deuteronomy 34:9).

Joshua found the bulk of his courage through his close, growing relationship with God.

All of this fortified a man to whom God said, "No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live. For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you" (Joshua 1:5).

Before long, Joshua himself became a man of encouragement. After the campaign of occupation had begun, Joshua said to his men, "Don't ever be afraid or discouraged. . . . Be strong and courageous, for the LORD is going to do this to all of your enemies"—then he destroyed those whom God had marked for death (Joshua 10:25-26).

Learn how to give and receive encouragement. You'll find it's contagious.

THE POINT: Everyone needs godly encouragement.

Two Qualities of a Spiritual Standout

YOU PROBABLY ALREADY know David as the greatest king of ancient Israel. You know that he was the author of dozens of psalms. You might know he was a talented singer and musician. He was all these things. But he was something else, too: The Bible tells us that David was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14).

What did David do that made him so special to God? Was he perfect, able to keep a total check on his baser urges? Hardly. David had an explosive temper and could act rashly (25:1-35). He became a fierce warrior who never flinched at eliminating his enemies (2 Samuel 8:1-2).

And David also had quite an eye for the ladies. While most Bible readers know of his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), fewer recall that his first six sons were born to six different wives (2 Samuel 3:2-5).

What, then, made David a man after God's own heart? How did he become the apple of God's eye (see Psalm 17:8)? Two things seem to stand out.

When confronted with sin, David confessed his fault, turned from his offense, and sought forgiveness.

First, David loved the Lord with all his heart and always tried to put God first. Twice during the agonizing years when King Saul tried repeatedly to kill him, David had a golden opportunity to eliminate his tormentor. But he refused. Why? He explained: "The LORD forbid that I should do this to my lord the king. I shouldn't attack the LORD's anointed one, for the LORD himself has chosen him" (1 Samuel 24:6-12; also 26:11). David honored God above all, including himself.

Second, when confronted with sin, David habitually confessed his fault, turned from his offense, and sought forgiveness (1 Samuel 25:32-35; 2 Samuel 11:27-12:23; 24:10-14). Unlike his predecessor, Saul—who typically denied his guilt and then blamed others for it when backed into a corner—David humbled himself and could say to

God, "Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4).

What made David a special man of God was a humble heart that freely admitted its faults and continually sought after God. Do you want to be a man after God's own heart? Then seek these two qualities in your life.

THE POINT: A heart for God wins God's own heart.

The Highs and Lows of Faith

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME you took a walk? Your trek probably took you over several kinds of terrain: some uphill, some downhill; some concrete, some gravel; one part with the wind at your back, and another with gusts blowing in your face. Not every piece of your walk felt exactly the same.

Maybe that's one reason why the Bible often refers to "walking" with God (Genesis 5:22-24; 6:9; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 3:4). At times, the walk is exhilarating and pleasant, like marching down a gradual slope with the wind at your back. But other times can be discouraging and even nasty, like plodding up a steep hill with a howling gale fighting your every move.

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The prophet Elijah knew very well the highs and lows of a life of faith, and his life illustrates for us how swiftly our walk with God can change.

Elijah suddenly appeared on the scene in 1 Kings 17, predicting that a severe drought would scorch Israel because of its sin and the sin of its king, Ahab. The drought would last three years and end only when Elijah gave the word.

At the end of the third year, Elijah challenged 450 prophets of Baal—the false god of Ahab—to a contest atop Mount Carmel. He invited them to sacrifice to their god, as he would to his. Then he proposed an interesting test: "The god who answers by setting fire to the wood," he declared, "is the true God!" (1 Kings 18:24).

Every kid who ever attended Sunday school knows how the contest turned out. Baal remained silent and dead as stone (which he was), while the God of Elijah sent fire from heaven to burn up not only the prophet's sacrifice, but also the wood, stone, and water used in the demonstration. The people fell on their faces when they witnessed the great miracle, and Elijah then executed every one of the false prophets. By any measure of success, this was a big one. Elijah was riding high!

But it didn't last long.

As soon as Ahab's wicked wife, Jezebel, found out what Elijah had done to her beloved pagan priests, she sent him a chilling message: "May the gods strike me and even kill me if by this time tomorrow I have not killed you just as you killed them" (19:2). Great fear seized Elijah, and he fled for his life.

He sank into a deep depression and told God, "I have had enough, LORD. . . . Take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (19:4).

Imagine! The same prophet who, just a few hours before, felt flush from a dramatic victory; the same man of God who faced down the king of Israel—fell into a spiritual tailspin after receiving a single threatening message from the queen.

We don't have to wonder at Elijah's stark turnaround, for we often experience spiritual reversals of our own. A genuine walk with God features all kinds of terrain—but the destination is well worth the trials along the way.

THE POINT: Not every part of our experience with God feels the same.

A Man of Prayer and Ammunition

NEHEMIAH MADE UP the second half of the dynamic duo that God used to encourage and organize the downtrodden Hebrews who had returned from exile. While Ezra the scribe focused on the spiritual needs of the repatriated Jews, Nehemiah concentrated on their physical and political requirements. He especially worked at rebuilding the ruined wall that had once protected Jerusalem.

Nehemiah knew how to get things done and possessed a keen mind for practical issues.

Nehemiah gained permission from King Artaxerxes to return to and rebuild Jerusalem in 445 B.C. He had faithfully served as the king's cup-bearer—a trusted personal adviser—and therefore had gained not only the king's permission but also a personal military escort, letters of introduction to local authorities, and a substantial amount of costly supplies.

Like Ezra, Nehemiah enjoyed a close walk with God. He also knew how to get things done and possessed a keen mind for practical issues. He quickly discovered that many of the non-Jewish residents of the land (peoples who had been transplanted there many years before by the conquering Assyrians) opposed his plans to rebuild. He instituted several strategies to overcome his enemies' hostility:

- He assigned small groups of naturally related workers to labor on specific parts of the wall—often assigning families to workstations right next to their own homes (Nehemiah 3).
- He led public prayer meetings to counter the ridicule and cruel mocking suffered by his colleagues (4:1-5).
- He took extra protective measures when he heard of violent plots against the work, even assigning half of his men to round-the-clock guard duty (4:6-18). He would have understood and approved of the World War II chaplain's exhortation to "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition."
- He purposefully deprived himself of the comforts allowed him in his official capacity as governor, so that he might fully identify with his people and assure them of his wholehearted support (5:14-19).
- He recognized treachery and countered dangerous plots with straightforward talk and behind-the-scenes prayer (6:10-14).

Through Nehemiah's visionary leadership and hardnosed example, the wall around Jerusalem went up in just 52 days. "When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it," Nehemiah reports, "they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God" (6:16).

Nehemiah never saw the slightest inconsistency between a strong faith and a practical, get-things-done attitude. He made frequent use of both prayer and ammunition, in that order. Whenever his fellow Jews started sliding toward discouragement, he found concrete ways to pick up their spirits and keep the work moving. And what kept him marching ahead? He gave that answer himself to an adversary who disingenuously requested a meeting: "I am engaged in a great work, so I can't come. Why should I stop working to come and meet with you?" (6:3).

THE POINT: A practical mind paired with a genuine faith can accomplish great things.

Don't Look to Egypt

ISAIAH, CONSIDERED BY MANY to be the greatest Old Testament prophet, had a long public ministry that spanned the reigns of at least four kings of Judah (Uzziah through Zehkiah, about 740–680 B.C.). Because Isaiah enjoyed such easy access to each of these rulers, some believe that royal blood coursed through his own veins.

Jewish tradition suggests that in the end, the wicked King Manasseh spilled Isaiah's blood by sawing him in two—a tradition some believe finds support in Hebrews 11:37. But no one knows for sure.

What made Isaiah so great? Like most of the prophets, Isaiah uncompromisingly called people to faith in “the Holy One of Israel” (one of his favorite names for God). He lived during a time of great material prosperity and greater spiritual apathy. Isaiah

thundered against his countrymen's slide into spiritual decay and warned that God would never wink at their sin. He often spoke of coming judgment—Assyria for Israel and Babylon for Judah—but he also looked much further into the future. He prophesied that even through his judgment, God would preserve a remnant for himself and would ultimately bring his people back to the Promised Land.

Most significant of all, Isaiah proclaimed that one day God would send a Redeemer, the Messiah, who would lead his people into a time of unparalleled joy and health (Isaiah 52:13–53:12; 54).

Yet Isaiah spent much of his career speaking not of distant events, but warning of current temptations. Time after time he warned rulers not to look for political and military help from the major powers of the day, but to depend upon God

for protection. “What sorrow awaits those who look to Egypt for help,” Isaiah declared, “trusting their horses, chariots, and charioteers and depending on the strength of human armies instead of looking to the LORD, the Holy One of Israel” (31:1; see also 20:5-6; 30:1-7; 39:1-7).

Isaiah hated the thought that any true follower of God would intentionally turn from reliance on the Lord to look for help from more “tangible” and “practical” sources. Most of the kings of Judah rejected Isaiah's advice, but his prophecies proved to be accurate nevertheless.

Too often we shake our heads at the foolishness of the Hebrew kings while at the same time imitating their errors. How easy to claim allegiance to God, even as we form partnerships and make alliances with ungodly sources in an effort to cover our backs.

Instead, we ought to act on the promise given through Isaiah: “Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set my face like a stone, determined to do his will. And I know that I will not be put to shame. . . . Who among you fears the LORD and obeys his servant? If you are walking in darkness, without a ray of light, trust in the LORD and rely on your God” (50:7, 10).

That's good advice for ancient kings—and for us! But God's promises will do us good only if we act on his commands.

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THE POINT: God calls us to rely on him alone.

Jesus' Self-Portrait

WHAT MORE CAN BE SAID about Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world? Countless books and millions of words have described his miraculous birth, sinless life, death on a cross, resurrection from the dead, and ascension into heaven.

Without doubt, the best words about Jesus are the ones he spoke about himself. At least a dozen times, Jesus gave us a memorable “hook” on which to hang a cherished picture of him. Consider these 12 statements of Christ.

I am the bread of life (John 6:35, 48). Do you hunger for something to fill that empty place in your soul?

I am the light of the world (8:12; 9:5). Do you ever feel like you're walking in pitch blackness? Do you long for a light to blaze a clear trail before you?

I am the gate (10:7, 9). Jesus described himself as the entrance to a sheepfold. We, his beloved sheep, have to go through him to find green pastures and safety.

I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14). When we feel lost, Jesus searches for us and finds us. When we wander away on purpose, he disciplines us, yet he never stops loving us. The apostle Peter especially delighted in this image, remembering his Lord as “the Great Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4).

I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). Too many people settle for mere existence; Jesus conquered death and invites us to share in his victory.

I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6). Do you want a close, intimate relationship with God? Develop a relationship with Jesus Christ. As his followers said, “There is salvation in no one else!” (Acts 4:12).

I am the true grapevine (John 15:1). Just as grapes must stay connected to the vine, so we find spiritual health only when we nurture our connection to Jesus.

I am the First and the Last (Revelation 1:17). Jesus created the world, and he will remake it into something new. Nothing was before him, and nothing will come after him.

I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! (Revelation 1:18). How could death swallow up life? It couldn't—at least, not in any final sense. Jesus is the proof.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 22:13). *Alpha* is the first letter in the Greek alphabet; *omega* is the last. Jesus is God, and he fills the universe—and our lives—from start to finish and beyond.

I am both the source of David and the heir to his throne (Revelation 22:16). Jesus once stumped some adversaries by asking how King David could use the word “Lord” to describe his son (Luke 20:41-44). As both Creator and descendant, Jesus himself was the answer to his own riddle.

I am the bright morning star (Revelation 22:16). Jesus Christ shines in our hearts, and when he returns to earth as he promised, he will bring his followers into an eternal, perfect day.

At least a dozen times Jesus gave us a memorable “hook” on which to hang a cherished picture of him.

THE POINT: Through his statements, actions, and life, Jesus demonstrated that he was and is our Messiah and Lord.

From Thunder to Love

TODAY WE KNOW JOHN as “the apostle of love,” but he didn’t start out that way. Had he not allowed Christ to soften his personality and temperament, history might have remembered him in a very different light.

Whenever the Gospels mention John, they usually tie him to his brother, James. The pair ran a fishing operation with their father, Zebedee. John was among the first disciples to hear and follow Jesus Christ (Matthew 4:21-22).

John tended to think in black and white with little gray, and he interpreted any slight as a personal attack. Early on, John’s hot-blooded temperament prompted Jesus to give him and his brother the nickname *Boanerges*, “Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17).

As the time grew near for Jesus to die, the disciples’ travel plans took them through Samaria. But when the Samaritans—who detested the Jews as much as the Jews hated them—heard that Jesus intended to visit Jerusalem, they refused to welcome him. When John and his brother learned of this slight, they snapped, “Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?” John learned an important lesson that day when Jesus rebuked him for his hateful question (Luke 9:51-56).

A combination of personal failures and his Master’s stubborn grace began to transform a “Son of Thunder” into an “apostle of love.”

At another time these “Sons of Thunder” approached Jesus privately and asked him for a favor: They wanted special seats of honor in the coming Kingdom. When the other disciples heard about their secret request, they were less than impressed. Jesus used the ugly incident to teach his followers that honor and positions of spiritual leadership come through service, not through power plays or personal striving (Mark 10:35-45).

As John watched his Master live and work and minister over the course of three and a half years, he gradually changed. Being part of an inner circle of three (with Peter and James), John gained a special insight into the character of his Lord. He witnessed Jesus bring a dead girl back to life (Luke 8:49-56). He saw Jesus robed in light at the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-13). And he joined Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of his Lord’s arrest (Mark 14:32-42).

By this time, John had softened considerably. A combination of personal failures and his Master’s stubborn grace began to transform him. John was the only disciple who saw Christ’s crucifixion—and it was John to whom Jesus gave the responsibility of caring for his grieving mother (John 19:25-27).

John is a perfect example of the power of Jesus Christ to change lives. This hard-nosed, hot-tempered businessman became an example of grace and love—and eventually wrote five books of the New Testament. The next time you read 1 John, remember that a former “Son of Thunder” penned the compassionate words.

THE POINT: God can soften the hardest temperament—if we let him.

From the Mountain to the Valley

THROUGHOUT THE GOSPELS, the apostle Peter continually demonstrates how God loves to use ordinary humans to achieve heavenly goals. Consider just a few of Peter's breath-taking ascents to the mountaintop and harrowing plunges to the valley floor.

- When Jesus and his disciples visited the region of Caesarea Philippi, the Master asked, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples spoke of various opinions—none of them correct. But Peter called out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus commended Peter for his insight and prophesied that the church would be founded upon this very confession of faith (Matthew 16:13-19). *Summit!*
- One stormy night the disciples, rowing hard in their boat, saw Jesus walking on the water. They thought he was a ghost, but Jesus quickly set them straight. When Peter recovered his wits, he asked for permission to walk on the water. Jesus granted it (14:22-29). *Summit!*
But when Peter saw the angry waves and heard the wild wind, he doubted, and immediately he began to sink (14:30-32). *Valley!*
- Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain, where they saw his heavenly glory revealed. Moses and Elijah appeared with him (Mark 9:2-4). *Summit!*
Yet Peter was so stunned by the awesome display that he inappropriately offered to build each of the three a memorial "shelter" (Mark 9:5-6). *Valley!*
- On the night of Jesus' arrest, Peter, after insisting that he would never abandon his Lord, denied three times that he even knew him (Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75). *Valley!*
But after Jesus' resurrection, Jesus and Peter shared a reconciliatory breakfast, and Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love for him three times (John 21:15-19). *Summit!*
- On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came, Peter preached a mighty sermon that turned 3,000 to Christ (Acts 2). *Summit!*

Yet some time later, even after he was commissioned by God to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, Peter snubbed the Gentiles in favor of some legalistic Jewish Christians, which earned him a stiff rebuke from the apostle Paul (Galatians 2:11-16). *Valley!*

We all reach summits and hit valleys in our journey with Christ. The trick is not to try to camp on the mountain or to languish in the valley, but to keep moving forward—step by determined step—"until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Throughout the Gospels, Peter continually bounces between spiritual highs and lows.

THE POINT: Summits and valleys come and go, but progress is a choice.

Apostle Extraordinaire

WHAT CAN BE SAID about the man God used to write one-fourth of the New Testament? How can one describe the church's first great missionary? Perhaps the best descriptions of the apostle Paul can be found in the way he described his own role. Aside from the book of Acts, nearly everything we know about this apostle comes from his own letters to the churches he planted across Asia Minor and Greece. Consider the following excerpts:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus . . . (1 Timothy 1:1). Paul saw himself as a man "chosen by the will of God" (1 Corinthians 1:1), sent for a specified purpose, commissioned by Christ to broadcast the Good News. Immediately after his dramatic conversion, "he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is indeed the Son of God!'" (Acts 9:20). He continually risked his life in his apostolic labors (2 Corinthians 11:23-28) and organized churches throughout the Mediterranean world (Acts 14:23). God did many miracles through him (Acts 14:9; 28:8) and Paul wielded great influence, yet as he said to one church, "I want to use the authority the Lord has given me to strengthen you, not to tear you down" (2 Corinthians 13:10).

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Apostle to the Gentiles . . . (Romans 11:13). A significant shift happens about midway through the book of Acts. Up to that point, the church had directed its evangelistic efforts primarily to Jews. But soon after the conversion of Paul, Gentiles increasingly became the focus of the church's witness. Acts 13:9 subtly signals this shift. The verse begins, "Saul, also known as Paul . . ." Until that verse, Luke uses only the name "Saul" when referring to the converted persecutor; Saul was the name of Israel's first king, and it remained popular among Jews in the first century. But from

this point on, the Greek name dominates. Paul himself would write, "The same God who worked through Peter as the apostle to the Jews also worked through me as the apostle to the Gentiles" (Galatians 2:8).

I am the least of all the apostles. In fact, I'm not even worthy to be called an apostle (1 Corinthians 15:9). Paul could never forget that he had persecuted the church and attempted to destroy it (Galatians 1:13). It took a dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus to change the man's spiritual direction. He never forgot the Lord's question to him: "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). This is why Paul could label himself among "the worst sinners" (1 Timothy 1:16).

I am not at all inferior to these "super apostles," even though I am nothing at all (2 Corinthians 12:11). But don't think Paul had an inferiority complex! Even while admitting his sinfulness, he could celebrate his apostleship. So it is no surprise to see him rejoicing in God's work in his life, saying, "If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:31).

THE POINT: To become great, yield to the greatness of God.