



re-flex-ions

"Cheerfully Allowing God to Change Me"

Mission Trip Devotional

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YOU ARE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE

Day 1

Character is best developed in *difficult* circumstances.

Take a minute to read *Philippians 2:13, 14*, and *James 1:2-4*.

In 1939, Hollywood produced *The Wizard of Oz*, a box office bomb that barely made enough money to cover its budget. However, the movie became one of America's most well-known and beloved musical dramas, featuring several unforgettable characters, such as Dorothy, Toto the dog, Scarecrow, Lion, Tin Man, the Munchkins, and the Wicked Witch, as well as a host of memorable songs like, "Over the Rainbow," "The Witch Is Dead," and, "The Yellow Brick Road." Nominated for six Academy Awards, *The Wizard of Oz* is now a fixture of American movie magic.

The film was adapted from a novel written by L. Frank Baum, in which he described the adventures of a curious, strong-willed Kansas girl who was running away from home. In one of the opening scenes, she was whisked away by a tornado to the mystical Land of Oz. When she realized that she was somewhere unfamiliar, she uttered those famous words, "Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore." Once she gathered her senses, she set out on an adventure, made new friends, and saved the merry citizens of Oz from a wicked witch. In the process, she and her friends were changed. Scarecrow got a heart, Lion found his courage, Tin Man got a brain, and Dorothy, of course, realized that "there was no place like home."

What do musical Munchkins, wicked witches, and the wonderful World of Oz have to do with you? You are on a mission trip. For the

next several days, you will be far away from home, traveling to an unfamiliar land, living among unfamiliar people, eating unfamiliar food, sleeping in an unfamiliar place, and doing unfamiliar things. Simply put, you are not in Kansas anymore.

Mission trips are adventures, often difficult and challenging. Not only is everything unfamiliar to you, but also things typically do not go as planned. In fact, most mission trips are marked by unforeseen obstacles and unexpected delays. Schedules get changed, then changed again. Thoughtful agendas are rewritten and pre-trip decisions are rerouted in the moment. The bottom line is that God's plans are seldom your plans. He has in mind what He wants to accomplish, and it may or may not be what you intended. That's okay, as long as He is glorified, and the mission continues.

Because mission trips usually turn into unscripted adventures, they are great for building character in the lives of participants. God is about the work of transforming His followers into the image of His Son, a task that is quite impossible when living a life of comfort and convenience. *Character is best developed in difficult circumstances.* Challenges most readily reveal one's weaknesses and areas of needed improvement. Challenges also provide on-the-job training, numerous opportunities to practice and improve. Therefore, even though everything is unfamiliar on a mission trip, that's okay. Embrace the unfamiliar, because it is in the unfamiliar that God will test and strengthen you.

Therefore, an essential character quality on a mission trip is flexibility. How would you define flexibility?

Here are some other definitions to consider. Flexibility is...

- The ability to bend without breaking
- Smoothly adapting to situations or surroundings
- Not clinging to ideas or plans that could be altered
- A willingness to change without getting upset
- To go with the flow

For the sake of being on the same page, as well as to make it easy to remember, let's define flexibility this way — cheerfully changing.

Why is practicing flexibility important on a mission trip? What would the trip or participants be like without it?

Why is practicing flexibility important in life in general? What would your life be like without it?

Cheerfully changing — those two words seem incompatible. They aren't words that we would normally put together. Very rarely are people cheerful about change. Change can be difficult, frustrating, hurtful, even depressing, especially when it is unintended, unexpected, or uncontrolled. Over the next few days, we will expand our understanding of flexibility, learn from the experiences of others, and discover what God has to say about it.

For now, know that God is working to change you. "It is He who is at work in you, both to will and to act for His good pleasure. Therefore, do all things without grumbling..." (*Philippians 2:13, 14*). His "good pleasure" is for you to look more like Christ (*Rom. 8:29*). But it is nearly impossible to change you into His image through your easy, problem-free life. That's why, in the big scheme of things, trials are good things. Though you may not like to endure trials, it is through trials that you develop Christ-like character (*James 1:2-4*).

If God uses challenging circumstances to mold you into what He desires, then doesn't it make sense that you would embrace those challenges and be cheerful about them? While that sounds right to say, it is difficult to do. Change is hard. Trials are no fun, yet what you become on the other side of change is always for the better. Your God is able to use difficult circumstances for your good and His glory. Why then would you not be cheerful about change? Why then would you not hurry to be flexible?

How flexible are you? What would it take for you to become a more flexible person?

Are you willing to be cheerful as God changes you?



MUSCLES

Day 2

In order to *grow*, you must first be willing to *stretch*.

Take a minute to read *Genesis 12:1, 4; 22:1-3; and Hebrews 11:8, 17.*

When I was in seventh grade, my P.E. coach divided the guys into groups, put us in the weight room, and let us loose on the machine stations. Testosterone and competition took over. We each tried to outdo each other in weight, form, and repetitions. By the end of the year, I noticed something that I hadn't seen before — muscles.

Muscle growth is an interesting process. When you lift weights, you are actually stretching your muscles so far that they tear a little. When your body repairs the torn fibers after a workout, it rebuilds the muscles to be larger and stronger than they were before, in order to withstand more weight in the future. In other words, you would never grow any muscles if you didn't stretch and tear them.

The same concept can be applied to your faith. Without tension or trials, your faith will never grow stronger. Instead, your faith will always remain flabby. When God allows you to experience a test, a trial, a difficult circumstance, He is stretching you, “tearing you,” in order to develop a stronger, more durable faith. In other words, *your faith will never grow without being stretched*, and you cannot be stretched without “weights” or pressure.

Once you grasp this concept — that stretching produces growth — you will begin to see how important flexibility is to your faith. Remember, our definition of flexibility is “cheerfully changing.” To be changed into what God desires, you must be stretched, and most

people do not like to be stretched. It's inconvenient, it's hard, and it's even painful at times. However, remember "the testing of your faith produces endurance" (*James 1:2-4*).

What is your typical attitude towards trials and difficulties? How do you normally respond to God's faith tests?

If you've ever played a video game, you will understand that the levels increase in difficulty. The second level is always harder than the first level; and the last level is always the most difficult. It would be foolish to design the game otherwise, where you start by facing the most challenging level first, right? Instead, you build up to the last level by facing incremental challenges. God works in the same way. He will allow you to experience an inconvenience now, to prepare you for a difficult challenge later. *He will build your faith one stretch at a time.*

Take David, for example. When he told King Saul that he would face Goliath, the King told David that was a ludicrous idea, for he was just a youth. However, David replied, "I have killed both lions and bears while protecting my sheep. This Philistine will be like one of them" (*1 Samuel 17:33-37*). David recognized that the Lord had allowed him to face lions and bears, in order to prepare him for the challenge of facing a giant! God is doing the same to prepare you for the challenges ahead. Before He gives you a major faith test, He allows you to endure faith quizzes!

Knowing that God works to build your faith incrementally, how should you view the challenges in your life?

What does getting “stretched” look like, and who does the stretching? Pressure can come in all shapes and sizes. Challenges can arise from anywhere. Sometimes difficulties arise from situations you are facing. At times, your spiritual enemy is allowed to test you. Other times people can stretch you by adding to your workload or by changing your plans. You can even stretch yourself by the decisions you make. We will consider all of these in time, but today, consider what it looks like when God is the one stretching you.

God has in mind what He wants you to be and to do, but to get you to that place, He must stretch you. Remember, *that which stretches you is meant to help you grow*. The things that He allows into your life are meant for your good and not for your harm (*Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8:28*). He has a plan for you, a great adventure that He wants you to experience. All you need to do is follow His lead one step of faith at a time.

God took Abraham and his barren wife from their hometown to a foreign country, to make them into a great nation. That transition did not happen overnight. For Abraham to be in a place to accomplish these things, He had to trust God one decision at a time, from moving to Canaan, to going to Egypt during a famine, to separating from Lot, to having a child in his old age, to letting Hagar and Ishmael go, to sacrificing his son. Abraham had to be flexible as God challenged him with these huge faith tests.

One thing is for sure, life is never boring with God. Sometimes the Christian life is viewed as boring and simple. That couldn't be further from the truth. Someone who is living a boring Christian life is not really living the Christian life. To live the Christian life is to surrender your life to Christ, to His desires, His goals, His pursuits, and His leading. If you say yes to God's leading, your life will be an adventure, and you will end up doing things, going to places, and becoming what you never thought possible. Noah, Joseph, David, Jonah, Daniel, Esther — were their lives boring? Absolutely not. As they were stretched by God, their lives were marked with unbelievable feats!

Do you want to be all that God wants you to be? If you say no, then have you really surrendered your life to Christ? If you say "Yes, I want to be all that God wants me to be," then get ready, because you are going to be stretched, and that's good. Whatever it is that God asks you to do, respond by saying yes. Say yes to God's will for your life, and watch what God does with you! You will be amazed!

Finish by reading *Matthew 4:18-22*, and *Luke 9:23-25*. What challenges did Jesus give to His disciples? How did they respond? What challenge is here for you? How will you respond?

That which stretches you is meant to help you grow.



CONTROL FREAKS

Day 3

It is when you *release* control to God and *trust* Him with your life that you experience true *peace* and *rest*.

Take a minute to read *Psalm 46:1, 2, 7, 10*, and *Proverbs 3:5, 6*.

Over the next several days, we will consider five “I Will” statements regarding flexibility. They are practical ways to exhibit this quality in your life. I’ve listed them here.

- I will release control and avoid being stubborn.
- I will trust my authorities and submit to their leadership.
- I will refrain from getting upset when plans change.
- I will look for and expect good when change occurs.
- I will accept change without compromising what is right.

Have you ever been around a control freak? It is that person who tells everyone what to do all the time. He cannot allow anything to happen without his permission or outside of his control. A control freak is no fun to be around. He is bossy, demanding, overbearing, intrusive, and obnoxious at times. He is also a stress ball, who transfers anxiety to everyone in his presence. You can sense the tension and feel the panic, and you recognize that you too are becoming overly stressed because of him.

What is the rationale behind a control freak? Simple, he has deceived himself into thinking that he can only have peace and rest if he is in control, if he has a hand in all circumstances, all decisions, and all outcomes. Events that occur outside of his control, he thinks, will spin out of control. Those events will prove to be unproductive or

harmful. Basically, a control freak has two problems. One is with fear, a lack of confidence in others' ability to make good decisions; and the other problem is pride, an attempt to take God's place and call the shots.

Have you ever struggled with control of your life, of activities around you, or even over others' lives? Why or why not?

The opposite of flexibility — changing cheerfully — is resistance to change, or stubbornness. The Bible is full of inflexible people who were stubborn and resistant to change. Remember Jonah? Or how about Pharaoh in the exodus account? Ten times he refused to allow the Israelites to leave, and in the process, because of his resistance, he destroyed his own country, lost his son, and drowned his army. Pharaoh was a control freak. How about King Saul, who resisted the fact that David was God's anointed king of Israel? Because of his resistance to change, he spent his days in anger and turmoil, chasing after David, trying to kill him, and eventually forfeiting his life and the life of his son Jonathan. Or how about Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who exerted great control over every individual in his empire? He was so prideful that he drove himself to become a crazed animal (*Daniel 4*).

Every control freak, including you, needs to understand two basic principles. First, *you are not in control. God is.* Attempting to control your life or others' lives is simply idolatry. You are exalting yourself to God's position and assuming His authority. That is ultimate pride, and that is a sin. You are not siding with God, but against Him. He is your opponent; and with God opposing you, you will never win, no matter how hard you try (*1 Peter 5:6*). In fact, you too will become a beast, in time, like Nebuchadnezzar. Listen to what the great king had to say when he realized his foolishness, "I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes towards heaven, and my reason returned to me. I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him, for His power is everlasting. All the people of the earth are as nothing to Him, but He does according to His will, and no one can stop Him or say, 'What have you done?'" (*Daniel 4:34, 35*).

Are you guilty of idolatry or self-worship? Have you tried to assume God's position and take control of your life? Why is this foolish thinking? How will releasing control to Him be a benefit?

If you are a stubborn control freak, you believe that only progress can occur if you are in charge. However, the truth is that, as a control freak, you are a hindrance to change and a hamper to progress. Instead, you must humble yourself and release control to God. Then, you will find incredible freedom, which leads to the second principle.

The second principle a control freak needs to understand is that releasing control to God, and trusting Him with life, is the path to true peace and rest. As a control freak, you tend to think that you will only have peace if you are in control. However, vying for control only leads to turmoil and worry. It is releasing control and trusting in God that allows you to relax and enjoy life, even when change occurs. That is why the psalmist wrote, "Be still and know that I am God" (46:10). The literal interpretation of "be still" is "cease striving," or to "stop competing." God is good and He is faithful. He can be trusted. When you trust Him, you will find peace (*Isaiah 26:3*).

So then, you and God are on a two-person bicycle. Which one of you is driving? Who is at the controls? Are you in the front seat, trying to steer, or are you in the back seat trusting His lead? Explain.

Do you know your God? Do you believe that He is in control? Do you trust Him? Let go of the controls and, instead, find rest.



GOD'S GIFT

Day 4

God has placed *authority* figures in your life for your *benefit*.

Read *Romans 13:1-5; Hebrews 13:17; and Colossians 3:17, 22-25.*

Yesterday, you learned that in order to become more flexible, you must first release control of your life to God and avoid playing God yourself. However, while God is the ultimate authority in your life, He has established other authorities over you as well. These men and women have been set in place for your good, not to make your life miserable.

Take a minute to identify those people in your life whom you are expected to follow. Who are those with authority over you?

In your mind, what are some of the benefits of having these authority figures in your life?

An important principle to learn, in regards to authority figures, is this: *to become a good leader yourself someday, you must first become a good follower.* Often, leaders can be the world's worst followers. However, although they get impatient, and angry, and often despise following others, it is exactly what they need. You too need to learn to follow well. You may have great aspirations of leading others someday, but you will not lead anyone until you first master following.

Those who have authority in your life were established by God for your good. Therefore, submitting to them has benefits for you — protection, guidance, wisdom, experience, a role model, accountability, obedience, discipline, and self-control. Also, as you learn to submit to earthly authorities, you will learn better how to submit to your heavenly Father.

In regards to learning flexibility, authority figures can play a key role. Not only must you release control to God and trust Him with your life, you must also release control to your leaders and trust that they know what they are doing. Leaders can often derail your plans, increase your workload, change your role, or ask you to do unpleasant things. Learning to follow someone else's lead is not easy. It demands a great deal of selfless flexibility. However, a flexible follower is well on his way to becoming a valuable leader.

Do you consider yourself to be a good follower? Explain.

I coached volleyball for 13 years. As a coach, I loved being around good athletes, but often I found that great athletes are not very coachable. They tend to think that they are God's gift to the sport, and they already "know everything," so there's nothing I, or anyone on the team, could say to make them any better than they already are. Players in this category are deceived by their pride and will never be truly successful.

As much as I enjoy being around great athletes, I gravitated towards players that were coachable, though they may not be as good as others. Why? Because those players have learned the value of following. They've learned to submit to authority. They realize that coaches (authority figures) are God's gift to them, to help them improve their game and learn life lessons. Therefore, those players are moldable. They can be taught. They want to improve. They are hungry to get better. That made me want to invest in them, to push them as far as I could. That kind of follower will go far. He or she will glorify the Lord, humble themselves, and bless their leaders. That's the kind of follower you should strive to be.

How do flexibility and following leaders go together?

Submission is voluntary. It's a choice. Individuals are equal in God's eyes, created in His image, yet He has established some to be in authority over others. While those in authority are to serve those under authority, those under authority are to submit to those in authority. A good example is a family. Males and females are equals, yet God has vested males with authority to be the leaders of their marriage and family (*Eph. 5:22-25; 6:1-4; Col. 3:18-20*).

Though wives and children are no less important than a husband or father, they are called by God to submit to his leadership, to defer to him voluntarily. Thus, wives and children must practice faith and flexibility and follow his lead.

To defer to someone means to yield your desires, your ideas, your preferences, and to accept his. It is to submit, or to bend your will, to the will of another (flexibility). Thus, flexibility is, in itself, an act of selflessness or service. You are putting others' decisions, ideas, or leadership above your own (*Phil. 2:3, 4; Eph. 5:21*).

Leaders, or authority figures, are God's gift to you, to protect you, to teach you, to be an example for you, and to guide you. You would do well to appreciate them, to respect them, and to comply with them. That is good and pleasing to God. But, what if your authority figure is not a good leader? What if he or she is unfriendly, unpleasant, or unreasonable? What should you do then?

Read *1 Peter 2:17-20*. What is God's answer to these questions?

Demonstrate flexibility and allow your authority figures to do what God has called and empowered them to do. Allow leaders to be a blessing in your life. Release control to them and go with the flow. Remember, you are not God's gift to them. They are God's gift to you.



GRATEFUL OR GRIPEFUL?

Day 5

Your *response* to change is a *gauge* of your spiritual *growth*.

Take a minute to read *Psalm 19:14* and *Philippians 2:14*.

We've all been there in line at the store, when a mother walks up with a spoiled brat, who begs for a piece of candy or a toy. When the mother denies his demands, he throws a hissy fit, a temper tantrum, a violent display of anger or displeasure, to embarrass the mother with negative attention. Perhaps, he raises his voice, even screams, or maybe he throws himself to the ground, punches his mother, kicks the candy stand, or cries uncontrollably. Sound familiar?

I wish that I could say that only children act this way, but I've seen plenty of immature adults demonstrate this kind of behavior. I've been to many little league games where parents were yelling at referees, cussing at coaches, even screaming at each other. I've seen a coach deck a ref in the face at midfield, only to be thrown out of the game, slapped with a lawsuit, and given a restraining order! Yikes!

It is a common theme these days, in all of sports, for players, coaches, and fans to whine, gripe, or complain about missed or made calls. What is it about sports that people think they have a free pass to be so obnoxious and annoying? What is a referee supposed to do when someone gripes about a call either way? Professional players and coaches are no better, racking up an ungodly amount of penalty flags, technical fouls, and ejections. We've also seen docile drivers turn into distempered devils, as they give into a fit of road rage. In other words, hissy fits are not just for children. They are displayed by brats of all ages.

What about you? Have you ever thrown a fit because you didn't get your way? Is it good to always get your way? Why or why not?

Circumstances have a way of bringing out the worst in us — our anger, our selfishness, our impatience, yes, our true nature. It's not that circumstances make us this way. We often have a victim mentality. We believe that we are the way we are because of our surroundings, our environment, or our circumstances. But circumstances do not make us what we are. They only reveal the kind of person that we are already. The anger, selfishness, impatience, and unforgiving spirit are what we are really like on the inside, and they only serve to highlight how much room we have to grow into the image of Christ. Our response to change is a gauge of our spiritual growth.

Circumstances are unpredictable. We don't know what a day holds, but our response to those circumstances is a deliberate act on our part. We may not be able to control our circumstances, but our circumstances do not have to control us. We do not have to respond in anger when something does not go our way. We do not have to get angry, but rather we choose to get angry. To boil over, every time circumstances are not to our liking, is to prove that we have neither flexibility nor self-control. When plans change, ideas are rejected, or advice is not taken, these are opportunities for us to demonstrate the progress God has made in our lives, what difference Christ has made in molding us into His image.

What is your natural reaction when plans change, or when circumstances are out of your control?

In order for you to practice genuine flexibility, you must develop a couple of other character qualities — patience and self-control. Neither of these characteristics is natural. As a fallen human being, you are born selfish and impatient, having no self-control. These qualities are developed over time and are fruit of God's Spirit working in you (*Gal. 5:22*). For example, as you pray for patience, God gives you opportunities to practice patience. As you pray for self-control, He gives you circumstances in which to demonstrate it.

To demonstrate patience is to bear up under pressure, pain, suffering, or difficult circumstances. Patience is to surrender control of what is happening to God and, instead, to trust Him while you wait, to provide the strength and grace to endure. To demonstrate self-control does not mean that you get to control the situation, but that you do not allow the situation to control you. Instead, you respond in such a way that your mind, emotions, body, and tongue do as Christ would, that no thought, action, reaction, or word would bring dishonor to Him.

You may have outgrown hissy fits and temper tantrums, and that's good. But inflexibility often rears its ugly head through quiet complaining, murmuring, grumbling, or griping. While you may not show your discontent, it is evident on your unhappy face, in your rolling eyes, your disgruntled attitude, and your negative words.

Paul offered some straight-forward challenges for us. For example, he wrote, “Do everything without grumbling or complaining” (*Phil. 2:14*), and, “In whatever circumstance you find yourself, learn to be content” (*Phil. 4:11-13*). He always wrote of being thankful and content, as opposed to being ungrateful and unhappy.

The enemy will tempt you to complain in the midst of difficult circumstances or minor inconveniences. But complaining is unnecessary and unhelpful. It is offensive to God, evidence of an ungrateful heart, and it is poisonous to team morale.

What are some of the negative side effects of complaining? How does complaining hurt not only you, but also those around you?

Your patience and self-control will be tested on this mission trip, by common delays, unusual circumstances, natural occurrences, and even by the day-in day-out quirks and closeness of your teammates. Thus, a mission trip is the perfect place for God to arrange situations for you to practice flexibility. How will you do?

Just remember to be grateful, not “gripeful.”



BETTER THAN GOOD

Day 6

God often changes our *good* plans for His *better* purposes.

Take a minute to read *Philippians 1:12-23*.

Perhaps the best picture of flexibility in the Bible is the Apostle Paul. Here is a man who surrendered his life to Christ, released all control to Him, and followed His lead wherever that might take him, even to imprisonment, torture, and death. God was always changing his plans, re-routing his journeys, and upending his intentions, yet Paul did not whine, grumble, or gripe about it. Instead, he allowed God to do whatever He wished. Paul happily deferred to God's will.

If anyone had reason to complain, it was Paul. "Five times," he wrote, "I received thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, and three times I was shipwrecked. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers and robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wild, dangers on the sea, and dangers among false brethren. I have been in hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, and in cold and exposure" (*2 Cor. 11:24-27*). Ultimately, Paul ended up imprisoned in Rome for preaching the Gospel, awaiting trial before Caesar himself.

Though Paul would rather have been free to walk about preaching and planting churches, he was content to be in prison. Even then, he recognized that while having his freedom would be good, his imprisonment was even better. How is that possible? Paul answered that question in his letter to the church at Philippi.

Part of Paul’s purpose in writing the letter was to comfort the Philippian believers regarding his circumstances. Even in prison, he was able to continue his ministry, encourage fellow believers in Rome, write letters to churches, and share Christ with everyone who would listen (28:31). In that, Paul wrote that his “circumstances had turned out for the greater progress of the Gospel” (v.12-14).

What would consume your thoughts if you were arrested and put into prison? What would be the last thing on your mind?

Typically, when we encounter a major life shift or a change in plans, we view them in a negative light. But notice that Paul viewed his imprisonment in a positive light. The difference is that Paul recognized the providential hand of God working behind his circumstances, to provide him with opportunities to glorify Him and to reach others for Christ. Rather than sulk and think, “Woe is me,” Paul recognized that God had arranged it so that he could meet, talk with, and witness to people whom he would otherwise not have the chance. In other words, how would Roman guards ever hear about Christ unless a Christian was imprisoned? How would Caesar ever know the truth about Jesus unless a Christian stood trial before him? In other words, God often changes our good plans for His better purposes. He orchestrates events for His good and glory.

Though changes may not appear good to us, we must understand that God has good purposes for them. We might ask, “How can I use these changes to glorify Him?” Or, “Whom will these changes allow me to meet, talk with, or witness to that I would normally not get

to?” Or, “What *fortunate* outcome will be produced from this *unfortunate* circumstance?”

Are you recognizing changes in your life as obstacles or opportunities? Are you taking advantage of all situations for God’s glory and better purposes? Are you rejecting His divine orchestration in your life, or rejoicing over it? What you view as accidental is really intentional, intended by God to help you grow in Christlikeness, and to give you opportunities to reach others for Him. Learn to embrace His good purposes in your life and rejoice over the fact that divine changes will be used for “the greater progress of the Gospel.”

The ultimate change of plans here on earth is death. Describe Paul’s view of life and death in the passage you read today (1:19-26).

Whatever his fate, Paul’s “earnest expectation and hope” was that “Christ be exalted” (v.20). His goal was not that he lived, but that he glorified God. For Paul, life or death meant very little, but doing right by God was of utmost importance, “that he not be put to shame in anything.” However, notice that Paul wrestled with “not knowing which one to choose” (v.22). In his mind, both were preferable, for “to me,” he said, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (v.21). Paul’s view of life and death is instructive here. For most people, to live is gain and to die is loss. In other words, life is good, and death is bad. But for Paul, it was quite different. While life was good, death was “very much better” (v.23). He did not fear death, but welcomed it.

In Paul's mind, to remain on earth was to live *for* Christ, to honor Him and to make Him known to everyone; but to depart from this world was to live *with* Christ, in His presence, by His side, with a host of believers in the halls of heaven. Today, we tend to hold onto this earthly life in such a way that reveals our misunderstanding of what is to come. We act as if we were leaving behind something better for something worse, when, in reality, we are leaving behind something "good" for something "very much better."

This life, as "good" as it might be, pales in comparison to the life that is to come, when we will meet our Savior, when we get to worship Him like we've never done before, in His presence with all the saints, when our faith will be turned into sight, when we will receive our glorified body and stand complete in our sanctification, when we will experience joy unspeakable with no fear, no sadness, no trials, and no tears, when all mysteries will be made known, and when we will receive our rewards. Oh how much we have to look forward to! That is the life that is waiting for us. That is the life to be preferred. Therefore, what do we have to fear with death? If we are prepared, if we have put our trust in God, then "death has no sting and the grave has no victory" (1 Cor. 15:55), rather it is the door through which we must pass to enter into the second, more desirable life.

What is, or has been, your view of death? How would viewing death as Paul viewed it change how you would live your life?

Are you living for what is good or for what is better?



MORAL INFLEXIBILITY

Day 7

To be flexible means to be willing to *change*, not to *compromise*.

Take a minute to read *Daniel 6:3-17* and *Acts 24:16*.

I was fortunate to be a four-sport athlete at a 6A high school, earning a full scholarship to be quarterback at an NCAA Division I university. It was (and still is) one of the most difficult experiences of my life. I could handle the workouts, the three-a-day practices, the drills, the meetings, the academics, and the pressure; it was all the junk that came with college athletics that was challenging – the accessibility of alcohol, parties, pornography, sex, and trouble, not to mention the excessive foul language, belittling, hypocrisy, corruption, and the “winning-is-the-only-thing-that-matters” mentality. Being ten hours from home, I was on an island with no mentors, one friend, and a heavy depression. I was a fish out of water, and I was dying.

By God’s grace, I survived that hell unscathed. However, there was one incident from which I still bear the scars. Having started my junior and senior seasons, playing through injuries, and getting beat by teams we had no business playing (regularly losing by 50 or more), the coaches wanted to try another quarterback. I was furious. I felt like they had not given me a chance, and I fought the decision to no avail. They had made up their minds.

To help me “save face,” the coaching staff had concocted a plan. They agreed that it would be okay for me to fake an injury. The plan was that I would start the next game, take a hit, stay on the ground, and, eventually, be “helped” off the field. Naturally, another quarterback would come in. “No one would know what we were doing,” one of my coaches said to me. At first, I was mad by the decision. I felt betrayed.

I had worked so hard, endured so much suffering in this God-forsaken place, only to be denied the opportunity that I had waited for. Now, my integrity was being insulted. They thought so little of me that they believed that I would go along with such a scheme. I couldn't believe my ears. I sat in the chair as if I had been tased.

"No one would know what we were doing?" Those words echoed in my mind and cut me to the core. "I would," I said. "I would know what we were doing. You are asking me to lie to my family, to my friends, to my teammates, to everyone watching? No, I won't do that. If you want to play someone else, that's your call. You're the coaches. But don't ask me to violate my integrity." I walked out of the office dejected. It was the lowest point of my life.

Have you ever had a similar experience, when you were asked or expected to do something you knew was wrong? Share it here.

What is the difference between flexibility and compromise?

Was I demonstrating inflexibility or stubbornness by not going along with my coaches' injury deception? Not at all. I demonstrated unselfish flexibility by allowing my coaches to make a mid-season change, despite the personal suffering that I would endure. However, the injury scheme expected me to do something beyond being flexible. They were asking me to compromise the truth for a lie. They were asking me to surrender what was right for what was wrong.

While God expects us to practice flexibility, He would never ask us to practice deceit. When we are willing to abandon what is right for what is wrong, that is not flexibility, but sin. Flexibility encourages one to accept change. It is not flexibility to make changes that are morally wrong. Flexibility never excuses wrong behavior. I could have gone along with my coaches' plan to fake an injury and claimed that I was just "following orders." However, that is not flexibility, but rather it was a violation of God's laws.

Though no one else might have known or cared about it, God would know. He has given each person a conscience, and "moral flexibility" is a violation of that conscience and, therefore, a sin in God's eyes. We are free to compromise and change our plans, our preferences, or our views, but we are never free to compromise God's laws. To do so would be at our peril, and we would suffer the consequences.

Daniel was a young man who was forced to practice flexibility. Taken from his home in Jerusalem into exile in Babylon, he had to change where he lived and how he lived, now without his parents. He and the other boys were compelled into a three-year training program. Thus, he changed the direction of his education. The Babylonians gave everyone a new name. Therefore, Daniel, now Belteshazzar, had to change his identity. Daniel was flexible, indeed, and he had tolerated all of these changes, accepting them as God's will for his life. However, when he was asked to change his diet, to eat the king's food and wine, he balked (*Daniel 1:8*). While that may seem like an easy change to make, Daniel knew that the food was unacceptable by God's standards, and that eating it would be a violation of His law. Therefore, when it came to the food, Daniel would not compromise.

Later, when the king made a law forcing everyone to pray to him for 30 days, Daniel did not change. Was that being inflexible? No, he knew that there was only one God, and to worship a king would be to commit the sin of idolatry. When he refused to worship the king and, instead, continued to pray to God, he was thrown into the lion's den.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had also demonstrated great flexibility in Babylon, but when they were asked to bow to the king's golden image, they refused. Was that being inflexible? No, they knew that to worship the king would be to commit the sin of idolatry. They were arrested and thrown into the furnace.

Today, furnaces and lions' dens look much different. They take the shape of relativism and tolerance. Relativism is the philosophy that truth and morality change. They are relative to each person and/or society. Thus, mankind gets to determine what is right and wrong, as well as what is true. The original meaning of tolerance was to tolerate the opinions or views of others, or to bear the fact that others are different than you. However, the new tolerance is that you must accept all beliefs, views, truth claims, and lifestyles as equal and valid. If you believe that there is absolute truth, only one God, one moral standard, or one way to heaven, you are considered intolerant. In other words, you are inflexible and, therefore, wrong.

Are you prepared to be inflexible and suffer when it comes to certain things? What are the things that you would never compromise?

To be flexible is to be willing to change, not to compromise.



UNITY OR UNIFORMITY?

Day 8

Practicing *flexibility* promotes *unity*.

Read *Psalms 133:1; John 13:34, 35; and Philippians 2:3, 4.*

Have you ever been a part of a team, or a group of people, that was supposed to work together, but that couldn't because of disunity? What were some of the underlying causes of the team's dysfunction?

Have you ever been a part of a team, or group of people, that worked well together? What were some of the reasons why it was successful?

It is clear in the Bible that God’s people are to be noticeably different than the rest of the world. Likewise, a group of Christians — a team, a school, a business, or a Church — is to be noticeably different from other groups. Christian groups are to be marked by their unity, their oneness of faith and purpose, their love. In fact, Paul referred to the Church as a body, having many members but all working in unison.

However, while Christians are expected to be different than the world, unity is not a goal easily achieved. When flawed human beings work together towards a common goal, there will be problems. People are selfish. They want their own way. People have their own ideas of how to accomplish a task. Besides, each person brings his own set of personality quirks, eccentricities, and imperfections. Each person brings strengths, yes, but also his weaknesses, skills, but also deficiencies, good character traits and, yes, immaturities. Each person brings his own background, upbringing, opinions, preferences, and prejudices. Sinful, diverse individuals working as a team is no small feat, but it can be done.

How is it possible that a group of Christians, with flawed lives, can achieve harmony or unity when working together?

Just as an individual Christian is a testament to God’s saving grace, and the difference that His Spirit can make in a life, so also is a group of Christians to exhibit His workmanship in their unity and efforts. If God can change the desires and direction of one life, then He can do the same in a group. The world needs to see that God’s way is best and that salvation in Christ produces true and lasting change.

The secret to unity has two parts -- how we view ourselves within the group and how we view others. Paul challenged the Philippians to “do nothing out of selfishness or conceit, but, with humility, to consider others better than themselves” (2:3). All disunity in a group can be traced back to the simple truth that too often we act selfishly and consider ourselves better than others. Paul went on to explain that “each person should not look only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” Sadly, groups that experience disunity and turmoil are typically filled with people looking to their own needs, their own desires, and their own ambitions. Such behavior is characteristic of unbelievers, not those with the mind of Christ.

How should you view yourself, in light of working with a group?

How should you view others in the group? What are some qualities that each person should exhibit in order to promote unity?

When Paul wrote to the people in the church of Ephesus, he also challenged them to “be diligent to preserve the unity.” Then, he offered ways to accomplish this goal — to practice humility, gentleness, patience, tolerance, and love (4:1-3). I believe that part of demonstrating Christian tolerance (acceptance) and love with other people is to practice flexibility. It would be nearly impossible to achieve unity in a group if everyone were stubborn and unbending.

Demonstrating flexibility towards others, in regards to promoting unity in a group, requires us to forego having expectations in our relationships. In other words, to get along with other people on a team, we cannot expect them to think a certain way, to act a certain way, or to respond a certain way. Instead, we must release control of them and accept that everyone is different. We must practice Christian tolerance and love and set our expectations aside. To have expectations with people is to demand uniformity. Expectations tend to destroy relationships, and ruined relationships destroy unity.

Explain the difference between unity and uniformity.

Some people feel that they are called by God to fix everyone else around them, to mold them into their image, but that is not a biblical approach to viewing or interacting with people. Instead, you should recognize and respect the fact that every individual is an image-bearer of God, that he or she is reflective of His creativity and, therefore, different than you. To accept others, as they are, is your calling, not to set expectations on them, to control them, or to fix them. You are not called to fix others. You are only called to fix yourself. See your own faults but overlook the faults of others. Give your expectations to the Lord. The less you expect, the less you will be disappointed. The less you expect, the more you promote unity.



MAKING MARGIN

Day 9

Without margin in your life, you are *not free* to be *flexible*.

Take a minute to read *Ephesians 5:15-17* and *1 Timothy 6:17-19*.

When Amy and I first got married, we made many mistakes, mostly in the area of our finances. We both had full-time jobs, no kids, and plenty of money; but neither of us ever had access to big sums of money before, so we spent it irresponsibly. We rented an apartment, bought a new car, used credit cards, bought furniture and clothes, took trips, you name it. We also inherited Amy's college loan payments. Needless to say, within a short time, we were staring at an evil monster named *debt*.

By the time our second year rolled around, we had our first son. Expenses increased with a baby, but when Amy quit working to stay home, our income was cut in half. Instead of using our two-job income that first year to pay off all our debt, we simply rolled that giant snowball into one income and managed to strap ourselves to debt for at least five more years. Nice work, I know. Those years were miserable financially. We truly counted pennies, if you know what I mean, and made every penny count. We had to live very minimally. We couldn't afford to eat out, we didn't buy much, and what we had was given to us by way of gifts and donations. We felt like the poor people in our family. Everyone else had to make plans to accommodate our lack of funds. We even struggled to give to other people, to charities, and — gasp — even to the church!

To make more money, I took on more responsibilities at school. I coached multiple sports, taught more classes, even worked during

the summer months. While I made a few more dollars, I also made myself sick with exhaustion. I was not only tight with my money, but I had become tight with my time. I strapped myself to so many “spinning plates” that I had no free time for myself, my family, my friends, or for my church. I was living without any margin.

Define margin? What does it mean to live with margin?

I have since recognized that time and money are precious resources. They are gifts of God, not merely to be used for personal consumption. They are given to us to be given back to Him and to others. I did not understand these truths when I was young. Overextending my budget and my schedule reduced my margin to zero, meaning that I had no space between what I had and what I used. I often described that period of my life as “burning my candle at both ends.” What I mean is that I was consuming myself, and my resources, at such a fast pace that both were headed for burn out.

What about you? Do you have any margin in your life? If not, why not? If yes, then how do you plan on keeping or extending margin?

Living without margin is not only unhealthy. It is unbiblical. Regarding time, Paul wrote, “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, for the days are evil” (*Eph. 5:15, 16*). What did he mean by “making the most of your time”? Did he mean to work more hours, get more done, make more money, or spin more plates, so that you can get more stuff? No, not at all. He explained his meaning in the next sentence, when he wrote, “Understand the will of the Lord” (*v.17*).

To make the most of your time is to do that which is God’s will, God’s work. He knows that you need to work to make a living, to buy groceries and gasoline. But is that all that you are to be doing? Are you just to work for groceries and gasoline? Paul is not talking about making the most of your time with temporal, earthly work, but making the most of your time with your eternal work. Do you understand that God’s will for you here on earth is to work hard regarding those things that have an eternal impact? Working for groceries and gasoline might be necessary in the short run, but are they necessary in the long run? How about working for souls, working at serving others, discipleship, or meeting the needs of the “least of these”? Aren’t these things important too? Yes.

What do you spend the vast majority of your time doing? Does any of it really matter? Does it result in temporal or eternal rewards?

When Paul was writing to the Philippians, he was struggling with whether or not to live or die. He decided living would benefit the church, and it comforted him to know that to live would mean more “fruitful labor” for him to do (*1:21, 22*). What fruitful labor are you

doing? Is your time fruitful or fruitless? What great cause are you pursuing? Is your time spent to gain earthly stuff, or do you have an eternal perspective of time?

When I was young, my view of money was that it was mine, and I would spend it on whatever I wanted. No one could tell me how to spend my hard-earned money. Then, I became convicted by *Psalm 24:1*, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains...” The thought began to sink in that I really had nothing but that it had not been given to me by God. My breath, my heartbeat, my life, my friends and family, and yes, my money and stuff — all were from the hand of God. Everything I have is his, including my money; and it should be used as He would use it.

I even began to realize that God blesses me with more than I need, not so that I can spend more on myself, but so that I can give it away to others, for His ministry needs. When I started giving money away, I noticed that my budget would stretch further somehow than it had before. God was able to do more with 80% of my income than I was able to do with 100% of my income. What are you spending money on? Are you giving it away to gain something like stuff at the store? Or are you getting money to give it away to God’s ministry needs?

Without margin, you cannot be flexible to give of your time or money. Without margin, you are a slave to stuff and temporal things. Does your schedule allow you to be flexible to care for and serve others? Is your money free to be used by Him, or is it tied up in debt? Be determined to make margin in your life, with time and money, which will allow you to be more flexible and, therefore, useful to God.



BEND OR BREAK

Day 10

Those who refuse to *bend* often *break*.

Take a minute to read *1 Thessalonians 5:12-14*.

Today is our last day to reflect on the topic of flexibility. Let's review what we've learned these past few days.

Day 1

Character is best developed in difficult circumstances. God is about the work of transforming you into the image of His Son, a task that is quite impossible when living a life of comfort and convenience. His pleasure is for you to look more like Christ; and it is impossible to change you into His image through an easy, problem-free life. Transformation takes place during difficult times. That's why, in the big scheme of things, trials are good things. Embrace the challenges!

Day 2

In order to grow, you must first be willing to stretch. Without tension or trials, your faith will never grow stronger. When God allows you to experience a test, a trial, a difficult circumstance, He is stretching you, in order to develop a stronger more durable faith. Also, before God gives you a faith test, He allows you to endure faith quizzes! He prepares you for tomorrow by giving you challenges today.

Day 3

It is when you release control to God and trust Him with your life that you experience true peace and rest. If you are a stubborn control freak, then you believe that only progress can occur if you are in charge; but it is releasing control and trusting in God that allows you to relax and enjoy life, even when change occurs.

Day 4

God has placed authority figures in your life for your benefit. You must learn to release control to your leaders and trust that they know what they are doing. Leaders can often derail your plans, increase your workload, change your role, or ask you to do unpleasant things. Learning to follow someone else's lead is not easy. It demands a great deal of selfless flexibility. However, if you are a flexible follower, then you are on your way to becoming a valuable leader.

Day 5

Your response to change is a gauge of your spiritual growth. Circumstances have a way of bringing out the worst in you. But circumstances do not make you what you are. They only reveal the kind of person that you are already. Life is unpredictable. You don't know what a day holds, but your response to circumstances is a deliberate act on your part. You may not be able to control your circumstances, but your circumstances do not have to control you.

Day 6

God often changes your good plans for His better purposes. Are you recognizing changes in your life as obstacles or opportunities? Are you taking advantage of all situations for God's glory and better purposes? Learn to embrace His good purposes in your life and rejoice over the fact that divine changes will be used for "the greater progress of the gospel."

Day 7

To be flexible means to be willing to change, not to compromise. While God expects you to practice flexibility, He would never ask you to practice deceit. When you are willing to abandon what is right for what is wrong, that is not flexibility, but sin. You are free to compromise and change your plans, your preferences, and your views, but you are never free to compromise God's laws.

Day 8

Practicing flexibility promotes unity. The secret to unity has two parts — how you view yourself within the group, and how you view others. Demonstrating flexibility towards others, in regards to

promoting unity in a group, requires you to forego having expectations in your relationships. To get along with other people on a team, you cannot expect them to think a certain way, to act a certain way, or to respond a certain way. To have expectations with people is to demand uniformity. Expectations tend to destroy relationships, and ruined relationships destroy unity.

Day 9

Without margin in your life, you are not free to be flexible. Have you recognized that time and money are precious resources? They are gifts of God not merely to be used for personal consumption. They are given to you to be given back to Him and to others. Are your money and time tied up, or are they free to be used of God?

What has God taught you regarding your own flexibility on this trip?

Flexibility — *cheerfully changing* — is a wonderful character quality to develop. It is God’s way of enabling you to bend with different people and challenging circumstances without breaking in two. Pray that God will continue to work in your life. Then, be flexible enough to allow Him room to work. Allow Him to change you for the better!