

Lesson Five

Prepare – Plan Ahead

The day has finally arrived! The blackberries are ripe, I have time in my schedule, the weather hasn't reached disaster levels, and I know there are berries to be picked. So I begin to gather the supplies I'll need for a successful trip to the berry patch. Of course I need a container for the berries. I prefer the cardboard oblong containers that you get when you buy fresh produce. The weight of the berries is more evenly distributed so all the ones on the bottom aren't smashed by the weight of the berries above. If it's a hot day, I fill a large water bottle with ice and then cold water to prevent dehydration. After my first expedition, I have found it very helpful to bring a small set of pruning shears – the type used on rose bushes, and a first aid kit, including tweezers. By far the most important item I can bring with me is bug spray. Mosquitoes and flies are immediately drawn to my perspiration and they continually buzz around my eyes, ears and mouth. Of course they only do that when they are not busy biting me! I place all of these items in a bag with some spare plastic bags, tissues and paper towels. Now that I have my supplies, I also need to prepare physically with protective gear. I wear long pants and sturdy work boots. I cut the feet out of an old pair of thermal socks and I wear those on my arms. I take work gloves with me, but I find it hard to pick the berries with them on, so I keep them for climbing and moving branches only. I roll my hair into a bun and I finally feel that I'm ready to brave the bramble!

Going out into the world each day requires similar planning. Not only do we need to ensure we have all of our necessary items: purse/wallet, keys, cell phone, grocery list, etc. We also need to prepare ourselves for the people we will come into contact with that day. Even if they are people that we are accustomed to and know well, we need to ready ourselves for any new situations or conflicts that may arise during the day and our reactions to them.

Whenever I have a particularly stressful day ahead of me, I spend time in the morning talking it over with God. I let Him know my concerns, my shortcomings and where I really think I need His help. Sometimes the conversation takes place before I even get out of bed. Other times, I discuss with Him while I'm driving with the radio off. If I'm alone, I talk out loud. My main concern is to represent Jesus and my faith well. I don't want to be held up by others as the bad example of a Christian. Remember, someone is always watching us for our reactions; Christian or not, friend or foe. We are Christ's Ambassadors and we must conduct ourselves accordingly.

One of the best ways I remind myself of my responsibility is to pretend that Jesus is sitting right there with me all the time. He is the third person in every conversation. A friend from one of my bible study groups was a labor negotiator. Her job was very stressful because she was the mediator in employment disputes when all other methods had failed. She shared with us that before going into any mediation meeting she would stand outside the door, bow her head and pray, "OK, Jesus, I'm here. I'll just wait outside while You go in first and prepare the way." She was very successful in her resolutions.

Ephesians 6:11-17 lists the “armor of God,” the tools He has given us to arm ourselves against the daily attacks of this world which enable us to survive and hopefully fuel our light to lead others to Him (Matthew 25:1-13). In Ephesians 6:11-12, Paul clarifies exactly who our struggle is against. It isn’t the difficult boss, the bad diagnosis or even the rude driver that cut us off on the highway. Our struggle is against Satan himself and the influence he has on this world. Satan wants us to be discouraged, impatient, wounded and afraid. He is most delighted when we are angry, sullen, vengeful and hurt. Thankfully, God knows our limitations and has provided items to protect us, once we recognize that we need protection! Because our battle is in the spiritual realm, we need protection of a spiritual nature.

Verse 13: “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” Be encouraged, you have the strength to accomplish all God has set out for you. He is with you and He will never leave you. This is why we need to remove the barriers that prevent us from trusting Him. We need to be wholly committed to Him and the purpose He has established for us. When God told Abram to leave Haran (Gen 12:1-4), he did it! There were no questions, no maps, no end game in sight. Think of it – if God told you to pack up and leave your home today and live in tents for who knows how long, would you do it?

Verse 14-15: “Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and your feet fitted with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” The belt of truth, God’s Word, is not a flimsy dress belt that

accessorizes your outfit! No, it is the giant Heavy Weight Champion belt with the huge buckle. It's conspicuous! It is blatantly obvious to us and to all who see us. If we infuse ourselves with God's Word, learn it, take it into our minds and hearts, read it every day, God's teachings will be obvious to us when we find ourselves in a difficult situation. If we apply God's word to our lives in these circumstances, it will be evident to all. The breastplate of righteousness protects our vital organs – lungs, liver, kidneys, but mostly our **heart**. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "don't you know that it's what comes out of a man that makes him unclean, not what goes into a man?" Matthew 12:7-11. Our hearts control our motivations which influence what comes out of us: impatience and anger or compassion and mercy. Jesus makes it clear that our hearts must belong to God. The breastplate of righteousness, knowing God's will, helps us to protect our hearts and behave according to His teachings. Our "feet fitted with readiness" enable us to be obedient because we are ready to carry His message to all. By living His teachings and making His influence on our lives obvious, we illustrate how to focus on heavenly things and not the troubles of this world. By not reacting as others do, we call attention to ourselves which may open doors to carry the gospel. "Be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have," 1 Peter 3:8-17 reinforces Paul's teachings to live God's Word, make it obvious, and be prepared to answer when asked how we can: "forgive **that** way," "keep our cool **that** way," "remain joyous through adversity **that** way." This is our opportunity to point others to the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

In verse 16, Paul instructs us to “take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” What a vivid picture of the daily spiritual battle we all face. Satan doesn’t toy with us. He is shooting at us with flaming arrows meant to harm, scar or even destroy us. One of my favorite Martin Luther quotes is, “sing a psalm and spite the devil.” Reminding ourselves of God’s strength and our faith in Him to save us helps us to combat and deter these flaming arrows.

Not only do we need to protect our hearts, but also our minds. The helmet of salvation in verse 17 is the perfect tool. Eve was tempted in the garden because she believed that God didn’t want the best for her. We must refresh our minds – transform them – and not conform to the pattern of this world (Romans 12:2). Our focus needs to be on the eternal and God’s perfect, pleasing Will. We know we will have troubles here on earth; we need to develop the ability to know and recognize that they are temporary. These troubles refine us like fine silver from the dross (Proverbs 25:4) and shape us to better serve God and His purposes. God doesn’t waste anything and every experience we have prepares us to fulfill His purpose for us.

Not only do we need to guard ourselves from attacks, but sometimes we need to be ready to defend and protect ourselves. Matthew 4 records Jesus’ testing in the wilderness and each time He is tempted; He responds with God’s Word. It’s important to remember that attacks can sometimes come from areas we least expect.

Our most reliable form of defense comes from our immediate access to our Savior at any time through prayer. He stands ready, willing and able to come to our rescue if we only ask.

One of my favorite hymns is “What a Friend we have in Jesus”. The lyrics, “oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we did not carry everything to God in prayer” comfort me and remind me of what to do when I don’t know what to do! It can be easy to discount the power of prayer because we generally feel the need to **do** something to earn our salvation, but nothing could be further from the truth. Christianity is different from every other religion in this aspect because Jesus reaches down to us and offers us a free gift that we can never earn. We cannot save ourselves. We can never be good enough. We can never take back all of our harsh words, white lies and selfish tendencies. It is only through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that we can be made righteous enough to be accepted by God and our sins forgiven. Accepting His gift is our only hope. Once we accept His gift and profess that we believe He is God and only through His sacrifice are we saved, our sins are separated from us as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12) and remembered no more. When God looks at us, all He sees is Jesus. But in our “works” oriented world, Satan wants us to be skeptical. He tells us that this solution is too easy, that Jesus’ sacrifice was not enough and we need to add to it. It diminishes Jesus’ power and the importance of His love and gift to us. Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us we are saved by grace, a gift of God, and not earned by works so that no man may boast. Satan wants us to doubt. He wants us to feel defeated, worthless, guilty and ashamed. Jesus lifts our chins, wipes away our tears and tells us “all is forgiven, my child – let your heart be troubled no more.”

Think of the thief on the cross next to Jesus. He did no works, he simply believed and Jesus told him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise," Luke 23:39-43. If Jesus made it this easy for us to receive forgiveness and salvation, why would He then make Himself inaccessible to us? Why would we need a priest to intercede on our behalf? Is this logical? No. Jesus is with us always and we can cry out to Him in our time of need, praise Him in our times of joy, and share all of our thoughts, dreams, tears and weaknesses. He knows them all already anyway. By discussing things with Him, we build our trust in Him and increase our reliance on Him. We begin turning to Him first, not last.

If you are sincere in your repentance and desire to grow closer to God, others in your life are going to notice. They will be watching to see if you are sincere. I will warn you, expect to fail. We all fail. Have your apologies ready and humility standing by! Take hope, we can increase our rate of success by preparing ourselves for adversity and immersing ourselves in God's Word.

Assessment and Further Thought

Do you feel prepared to deal with life's daily challenges? If not, why not? What would it take for you to feel prepared?

What areas of your life do you feel most challenged? What is the specific challenge?

Discuss your challenge with your "cord of three" partner from chapter 3 (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12) if you have one and with Jesus. Can the three of you devise a course of action to help you cope with your challenge better? Role play the situation and your reaction if possible.

Prepare your apology now, so that it will spring to your lips when needed. Do not let the devil gain a foothold (Ephesians 4:26) by allowing situations to fester. Remember, an apology is most meaningful when accompanied by true repentance. Practice below.

Verses for study and encouragement

Luke 12:11b-12 - Do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say

Matthew 25:1-13 - The parable of the ten virgins

Job 19:25 – I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end He will stand upon the earth

Philippians 4:4 – Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Psalms 119:105 - Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, You know the areas of my life where I am stretched and challenged the most. Please prepare me to deal with difficult situations and preserve my witness for You. Help me to infuse myself with Your Word daily and to pray continuously so that I will always be prepared to respond to Satan's flaming arrows in a manner that honors and glorifies You. Forgive me when I fail and enable me to humble myself, apologize and start over again.

Amen

Additional items for prayer