

Blessed Transgressions

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Take the Next Step: The Time is Now



By Michelle Viscuse

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It is time to take the next step. Looking back, that is what it has felt like all along – step after step after step.

Every step was a big step. Saying the words, calling the counselor, showing up for the appointment, signing up for group therapy and conferences, standing up and sharing my testimony: each and every step was a step of faith that was HUGE at the time.

Isn't that what God is calling all of us to do? Take the next step? Even if we are full of fear and not equipped?

Just like Peter. He took the next step when Jesus called Him out onto the water.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?"

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (Matthew 14:25-33)

What is your ghost?

They were afraid because they thought it was a ghost.

What is your ghost? What are you afraid of? Can you even name it? Why does it terrify you so?? What keeps you from taking the next step?

My ghost is loaded with lies from the past that tell me to just be quiet and pretend all is well. It's loud and screams, "What are you doing? This is too risky and iffy, and NO ONE really cares."

Is God asking you to take the next step?

In spite of all of that noise and fear, just like Peter I will ask, "God if this is really you – help me to take the next step. Help make it happen."

He shows up, and the voices die down as my toes inch forward in faith. With both eyes focused on Him, the water comes just over my feet and I am stepping on new water. What is your wind?

When Peter saw the wind he was scared and began to sink. What can blow in with such force that will cause you take your eyes off of Jesus and fill your heart with fear? What is your wind? For me, a bad dream or memory can send me sinking.

The key is to CRY OUT.

When Peter cried out, immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Maybe you too have heard His tender whisper, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" In His arms, you start to recall all of the times He has been faithful to you.

Maybe you recite the scriptures and sing the songs that fill you with faith. Sometimes, He shows you the people He used to encourage you and He reminds you of those who are watching in the boat.

Others are in the boat.

When Jesus and Peter climbed back into the boat, the wind stopped and the others in the boat worshipped Him saying, "Truly, you are the son of God!" Others are watching us take our steps of faith.

They are seeing us bravely move towards Him afraid, and they also see us slip and fall. They hear our cries, and they see Him building our faith and trust. They see Him as we walk out faith in waters unknown.

They see that they don't have to be afraid of any ghosts.

They hear Him calling and they take the next step.

They feel the full impact of the wind and it may even knock them down, but they cry out.

They reach for His hand because they know He is there.


They see others around them looking out into the deep knowing there has got to be more.

Whatever it is that He is calling you to do, He is faithful and will equip you. He doesn't need perfected talent, He just needs a willing heart. He doesn't need us to be ready, He just needs us to be obedient. What is the next step He is calling you to take?

Be brave friend, He is with you. Don't be afraid, and keep stepping.

Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God.

When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! (Hebrews 12:2-3)

Prayer: Jesus, we want to hear you and obey. Remove any distractions and help us to keep our eyes on you. Lord, help us to take the next brave step and trust you with everything. 

Do Intercessory Prayers Matter?



By Chloe Flanagan

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I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one... (John 17:20-21a NRSV)

Sometimes I have a hard time praying for people. It's not that I lack faith or that I don't believe in God's ability to do great and unexpected things when we pray, and even when we don't. But sometimes the past, or how I view it at least, colors my view of intercessory prayer.

When a family member I was close to was diagnosed with cancer six years ago, I prayed for God to heal her more fervently than I'd ever prayed for anything before.

But just two weeks after being diagnosed, she died. Now and then, when I pray for a sick friend, I remember this experience and feel uncertainty, like a heavy weight settle over me.

What effect do my prayers really have, I wonder, if the outcome is settled anyway, and my sincerest of supplications can't change it? Besides all that, faith decrees that God's will prevails, the wisdom of His plans surpasses our limited understanding, and His mercy is steadfast no matter what. So is there really any place for my prayer?

I realize that these questions plague me the most when I adopt a narrow view of prayer.

When this happens, my telling a friend, "I'll pray for you" actually means spending a few minutes presenting God with a request and quickly covering it with a trite prayer creed represented by a single verse like, "Ask and ye shall receive" that I've managed to derive from a profound Scriptural concept.

But when I think about other past experiences, such as the challenging seasons in my life that I've shared with friends who gave me constant support, or the difficult periods of extended illness, grief, or depression that others

have, in turn, shared with me, I realize that prayer can be so much more.

Intercessory prayer is an opportunity to become a spiritual companion on someone else's journey. It is to enter into their experience, identify with their specific struggles, and share in their heartaches.

This type of prayer demands more. It calls me for a heart open to others' pain and willing to persevere in hope, even when resignation and cynicism are natural responses. Most of all, this spiritual companionship brings unity to the relationship, the unity that comes from bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).

But I think the chief advantage of this type of prayer is that it helps me seek the presence of Christ in every step of a given situation and to pray that all the people involved will recognize it. We may learn about God's goodness when we are healed of a sickness, but the lessons learned along the way are even richer.

We see Christ's compassion in the faces of hospital staff and visiting friends, or perhaps we come to know the grace that is all sufficient during long, pain-filled nights when no one else is around. These lessons bring close-

ness and oneness with God.

Is there any richer blessing I could ask for a friend?

When the subject of the soon to be crucified Christ's Gethsemane prayer turned to His disciples He said, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world," (John 17:15).

He didn't ask for any easy solutions for those He loved. Instead, He asked for their protection from evil (v.15) and for their sanctification (v.17).

He also asked for one more precious gift: that "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (v. 21). He prayed for unity: unity with God and unity with one another. Such is our model for intercessory prayer.

In His name, let it be. 

Spiritual Warfare 101: Resisting the Devil



By Sam Vaartjes

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Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)

You know this verse, right? You've read it millions of times? But do you know what it really means? How it can be practically lived out in your life?

I didn't ... at least not until last week, when I had a conversation with someone about this verse... particularly in the context of spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is a tricky topic to navigate in the christian world, simply because people have different understanding and beliefs about it. Without going into it too much, this is what it comes down to...

#1: Satan is the enemy of God and therefore you, as God's child.

#2: It is his goal to come against God and the work He wants to do through you in this world.

#3: But because of Jesus' death on the cross Satan has been defeated!

So never fear! As a child of God you have already won! God calls you a conqueror and you can be victorious over anything the enemy tries to throw your way! All you need is trust in the One who defeated him, and the knowledge of how to resist his plans (James 4:7 shows us the way!)

I would always read that verse without truly knowing what it meant. How do I submit to God and resist the devil? What does that even look like?

After spending time with a pastor from my church, I can now understand this verse and oppose what the enemy is trying to do in my life. One of the ways he functions is through the mind, so we'll be focusing on this area for now...

How to Resist the Devil

By looking at the opposite of what it means to resist, we can understand what we must avoid. The opposite of resisting is agreeing with, therefore in order to agree with the devil we listen to the lies, the doubts and the thoughts in our mind that are contrary to God.

The things that cause us to question the goodness of God and even attempt to undermine your identity as a child of God. (Once you become aware of this, you realize how often the enemy tries to come against you, even in subtle ways, every single day).

So if this is what agreeing with the devil looks like, how do we oppose his work, and resist him?

With the Word of God of course!

This is What You Do

Whatever area in your life the enemy is tormenting you in (depression, worry, stress, fear, body image, sickness, etc.), go to God's word and find verses that show you what God says about it.

What is His opinion on the matter?

You then take these verses and use them as ammunition against the enemy. Every time he tries to come against you, you speak out the words of God. As a result he will have to flee.

Why does the devil have to flee?

As a child of God, you hold all the power and authority of God in your words. Because of this, the enemy has no choice but to flee in fear... he knows he can't stand up against God and the incredible power that lives inside of you.

The words of God are some of the most powerful weapons you can wield against the enemy.

At first this might seem hard to do, but believe me it's so worth it! I have only been doing this over the past week but I can say that little by little my mind is changing to see things through God's eyes. And it's getting easier too! If you continue in this, it will eventually become a habit that forms a natural part of your every day life.

Over time you will see your mind be renewed and con-

formed to Christ's mind. You will begin to see things the way He does, and you will walk victoriously in the power He has given you. Once the enemy realizes that your immediate response is to go to the word of God when he tries to hassle you, he will start to leave you alone.

He doesn't want to push you further into a deeper love and knowledge of God.

How Can You Practically Live This Out?


Surround yourself with the verses that are relevant to your current struggles/thoughts. I have mine written on a whiteboard in my room and all over my mirrors. Every time I go past them I speak out the words written on them.

These are some of the verses I have written in my room ...

"The Lord will take away from me all sickness" (Deut 7:15)

"I have not been given a spirit of fear or timidity, but of power, love, and a sound mind." (2 Tim 1:7)

"I am fearfully and wonderfully made, your works are wonderful, I know that full well!" (Ps 139:14)

I pray that this has helped you understand James 4:7 and spiritual warfare a little better. By understanding it, we have a vital clue in knowing how to come against the enemy's plans and live a triumphant life in Christ! 

The Cost of the Christian Life



By Erika DeWitt

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Lately, I have gone through a number of longings in my life, and these longings have lead me into some deep soul searching, during which I have felt all sorts of things--uncomfortable, curious, satisfied.

More than ever before I've come to see that this life I've chosen, this voluntarily belief in Jesus I've held since he first drew me to him and the Father--comes with heavy costs.

When we first become Christians and begin living the lives God has planned for us, we begin to walk a life of sacrifice just as Christ sacrificed for us. In the beginning it's easier to give up and let go of things weighing us down, either because we readily see them for what they are or we're so hungry for Christ...

that we'll do anything to get closer to him. It's okay in the beginning because those things are obviously "bad" and Christ is "good."

But then, after being a serious child of God for some time, he begins asking us, showing us, warning us that some things we're so convinced are good are actually bad, whether they are just not meant for our season of life or at all.

I've experienced this on numerous occasions, my firm belief that something was good, all the while God trying to reveal to me that it would turn into a bad thing--into sin--because he did not mean it for me.

The Christian journey is truly an interesting one, because when we are not children of God, the world is trying to separate us from God's plan, and when that fails and we respond to his call, suddenly, we take the position of the world! **But God, don't you know I have a plan for my life too? God, why did this have to happen? God, why does this hurt so much? God, why is this so hard? God, I just don't understand!**

Suddenly we become just as skeptical as the world after God manages to pull us from the muck and mire and into

an entirely new relationship with him, a relationship that, admittedly, is not always easier than walking our former path.

And so, friends, this is the strange temptation I have disturbingly yet perhaps importantly experienced lately: Should I turn back to my former life and maybe rid myself of all questions and costs, or do I stay with Christ as I've done since I was a freshman in high school?

Some of you might be wondering what lead me to this question and some of the deepest soul searching I've done. Well, there are two answers. The first is a sin between me and God I've struggled with ever since becoming a Christian.

The second is the "good" thing turned "bad" by the fact that it's just not the right season, and my longing for it to come now served as a divide between God and I.

The answers are: selfishness, and marriage.

Really, it doesn't shock me any more that as a human, I have the ability to turn a good thing bad because of selfish desire. Marriage is a time of life viewed as the most wonderful and prized by many women, Christian or not.

It provides not only the chance at true, life-long love, but the ability to have children, a family and sexual satisfaction without baggage. I never wanted to be the single girl who longed for marriage and couldn't be happy without it, but for a while now, I have been, and to the extreme.

I'm going to be twenty-five next year, so lately I've been telling God: **I need to be married NOW!**

But He has not given into my demands, and my former selfish heart was enraged. So many times I have thought I was right and God was wrong. Despite many examples in my past proving God knows best, I have still struggled with selfishness in my love life until recently.

Fortunately, through patience and gentle works, God has helped me to give up my selfishness and see the good works he's doing, even if I'm not married and feeling the pressure.

Giving over one of my biggest hopes and dreams to his plan came with the heavy cost of surrendering my need for control and instead, rely solely on him. Now that I am on the other side, I of course am grateful to let go of the "good" thing I was making sinful, but it took a bit of soul searching to get there.

I also now understand the Christian life is not the easiest one, but by far the most rewarding.

Consider: What divide rests between you and God today? Why is it there? How big or small is it?

Do: Pray unceasingly to surrender it and stay close with God. All kinds of griefs come when we stray! 

Count Down to Christmas!

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unto you is
born this day
a Savior,
who is
Christ
the Lord.

LUKE 2:11



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