

Introduction

It has been my privilege and pleasure to serve the people of Otterbein Church in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania for more than 36 years. Thirty-five of those years were spent serving as the Director of Music and Worship. One of my responsibilities was to direct the Adult Choir. This group of faithful and enthusiastic lead worshipers became my closest friends and ministry partners. It was, indeed, a joy to serve alongside of them as we shared the Gospel in music nearly every Sunday morning and many special occasions.

Each Wednesday evening by the time rehearsal began, I made the effort to have a short, printed devotional on each member's seat for them to read when they sat down in the choir loft. Usually the goal was to take a scripture and relate it to a true life experience, often my own, in a way that would give insight into how we can live out our faith in a practical, relevant way.

For the most part, these devotions are a collection of those writings that were given to the choir each Wednesday. Some are humorous. Others, a little more serious. A couple were written 15 years ago (maybe more) while others were just completed this year.

These are not typical devotions, and they do not have a specific theme, save for the emphasis on the need to become more like Christ. They were not written with the intention that they be read every day, although that certainly is the prerogative of the individual.

Though each devotion is based on a passage of scripture, they are not intended to replace a person's daily reading and study of God's Word. They are offered with the intent of stimulating personal introspection and spiritual growth in the life of the believer.

May you see yourself in some of these articles, and may God enlighten and encourage you on your way to becoming more like Jesus, which, after all, is our goal as followers of Christ.

Dedication

This collection of devotional writings is dedicated to everyone who has served and ministered alongside one another in the Adult Choir at Otterbein Church during my more than 35 years as Director of Music and Worship. Your commitment to presenting the Gospel through music was an inspiration to many, myself included, and served as an excellent example of faithful service to the Lord. Only eternity will show how many people will join us in Heaven, worshipping around the throne, because of your commitment and dedication to singing the Gospel. My thoughts regarding you are the same as Paul's prayer for the Christians in Philippi:

Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. —Philippians 1:3–6

About the Title

I chose to title this book, *Alongside*, because that is how I view Christian service and the Christian life. Our pastor, Michael Newman, frequently reminds our church that, "God never intended for us to live the Christian life on our own." Indeed, God wants us to be in communion with each other, walking alongside our brothers and sisters. Experiencing the joys and sorrows. The triumphs and failures. The birthdays and funerals. The gains and the losses. Indeed, we need one another.

God met that need by sending His Son to walk alongside human beings and share life's experiences with them. He even prophesied through Isaiah and instructed Mary that Jesus would be called Emmanuel, God with us. Just as Jesus walked alongside His disciples, we also are called to walk alongside each other.

I have made it a priority in my ministry to end each email or letter with the complimentary close, "Alongside." The intended purpose was to communicate to the choir, praise team, orchestra, cast members, or church members the need to see themselves as part of a team; not individuals. I wanted them to know we were in this together; working as one to achieve the goal of proclaiming the Gospel and serving God.

It was also my intention to communicate that they were not doing something for me. Rather, we were shoulder to shoulder and I valued their participation and commitment as equals. The word "alongside" was a succinct way of expressing that conviction.

As each of us grow in our knowledge and understanding of God's Word, we will discover the joy and significance of serving the King *Alongside* one another. God bless you as you experience His greatness, goodness and grace.

Alongside,

Dave

Day 1—Better Than Cooperstown

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. —Ephesians 2:8,9

I recall a very enjoyable and memorable trip my wife and I took to New York for a few days. Our destination was Cooperstown. As most of you probably know, Cooperstown is the home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. Let me just stop and admit, I am a baseball nut. My uncle gave me my first ball glove at the age of five, and it sparked a passion in me for the game that has never gone out. Thanks Uncle Eddie.

Now, back to Cooperstown. I was so excited to see the place where so many of my childhood heroes are enshrined. I was eager to read the plaques, view the uniforms and see Doubleday Field. I made sure to find all the players from my favorite team, the Baltimore Orioles. I located Earl Weaver, Jim Palmer, Frank Robinson, Eddie Murray, Cal Ripken and my childhood hero, Brooks Robinson. I saw gloves, bats and spikes of the all-time greats like Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, Ty Cobb, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Jackie Robinson and so many more. For me, it was the trip of a lifetime.

Players are admitted to the HOF by a panel of sports writers who examine their career achievements and vote on whether their career statistics measure up to a level of being worthy of a place in the hallowed halls.

Over the last 20 years, there has been a debate regarding who should be admitted. The debate centers around the fact that many star players have been found guilty of taking drugs that unfairly enhance their ability to play the sport at a higher level. Therefore, their records and achievements are viewed as illegitimate. This has affected who the voters deem “worthy” of gaining entrance into the Hall. Forgiveness is something they may never receive because it is believed they committed baseball’s “unpardonable sin.” Because of that, their record will never be clean, and they are shut out.

That makes me think. Aren’t you glad God doesn’t treat us like that? Do I hear an “Amen!”? First of all, God doesn’t require that we collect enough good statistics before we can be admitted into Heaven, His Hall of Fame. In fact, He tells us that we can’t earn it. It’s impossible to build up enough “stats” with God to earn Heaven. The only way we can achieve eternal life with Him is by His marvelous grace. Ephesians 2:8–9 makes it clear when it says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Plus, God does not point to our failures in life and slam the door in our face. No. He welcomes us in, not because of our good deeds, but because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross when He paid the price for our sins and rose victoriously from the dead. We must wholeheartedly believe in Him, ask forgiveness for our sins and live to follow Him. By placing our faith and trust in Jesus, God assures us that we will be saved.

To have a place in Cooperstown you need to know you are one of the best, a champion. To have a place in Heaven’s Hall you need to know the BEST, Jesus, the Champion of all champions.

To enter Cooperstown, you must get enough votes to be declared worthy of enshrinement. If that happens, one day you will hear your name read as an inductee into the Hall of Fame, and you can take your place beside the greats of the game. To enter Heaven’s Hall you don’t need a lot of votes because only one vote matters. When He reads your name from the Book of Life you become an inductee into

the Halls of Heaven, and you worship at the feet of the Greatest of greats and mingle with the all-stars of the faith.

I'm looking forward to entering Heaven's Hall of Fame someday. Not because I am famous, but because He, Jesus, is the One worthy of all honor and praise. None of us will celebrate our greatness in eternity, because none of us are worthy of praise. Only Jesus deserves that.

When we get to God's Hall of Fame, we won't just be visitors. We will be residents for all eternity. And when our time comes to enter, it won't be because of anything great we have done. No. It will be because the Champion of champions, the All-Star of all-stars, made it possible for us to be called children of God (John 1:12). That will be a great day, and it can't come soon enough.

Father, thank you for the promise of eternal life. We look forward to being there with You someday. Also, thank you for lifting the burden of trying to earn our way to heaven. Your gift of grace, through the giving of Your Son and the forgiveness of our sins, frees us from guilt and fear. It causes us to rejoice and express our gratitude and praise to You. We express our thanks and worship in Jesus' name, amen.

Day 2—Do The Next Right Thing

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. — Philipians 3:13–14

I enjoy sports. I loved playing them as a kid, and I like watching them on television as an adult. Along with baseball, I especially like watching college basketball. There are many opinions on how we over-emphasize the importance of athletics in our country.

It may be true that too much emphasis is placed on sports in our society. But if coached and emphasized in the proper way, athletics has much to teach an individual about how to live life honorably, respectfully, courageously and decisively.

As this is being written, it is the month of March. This is the time when college basketball teams and fans go crazy over the 68-team tournament that will decide who will be crowned the #1 team in the country. It is such a spectacle that the three-week event has been nicknamed “March Madness.” Indeed, it is.

The other day I was watching a press conference with a coach and two of his players who had just won a game that gave them the right to enter the national playoff. They had built up an almost insurmountable lead in the first half, but in the second half the other team came roaring back to almost win the game, falling short by one basket.

In the press conference one of the players of the winning team was asked what he was thinking when he saw their lead slipping away. His response to that question will always stick with me. He said, “Just do the next right thing.”

Wow! That is a profound statement for that young man to make. Somebody, more than likely the coach, has taught the men on that team to not concentrate on what has happened in the past, whether it was a success or failure. Instead, stay focused, make good decisions and “Just do the next right thing.” Don’t look back and allow a past failure, or a success for that matter, to consume your thinking. Instead, they have taught them to concentrate on what to do next. Looking forward will help you ignore the mistakes of the past and create new opportunities for success and soar to higher levels of accomplishment.

That is how God wants us to live our life. He’s like the coach who is encouraging us to not look back at our failures but to look ahead to the possibilities and opportunities He is giving us to succeed and be a blessing to Him and others.

Here are some scriptures that remind us how God sees our past and anticipates our future.

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.
— Psalm 103:12–13

Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. — Hebrews 10:17

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. — Philipians 3:14

God is always calling us to move forward, to not look back.

We will never be able to totally forget our past, but we must not dwell on it or allow it to control us. I have heard it said that there is a reason the rearview mirror is much smaller than the windshield on a car. It's there just to remind us of where we have been and make us aware of something coming upon us that we want to avoid. But the windshield gives us a clear, and much larger, view of where we are going. It helps us appreciate the beauty of the journey as well as avoid obstacles and potholes along the way. The lesson for us is, if we spend too much time looking back, we won't be able to see where we are going and are certain to experience and cause pain to ourselves and others.

If you find yourself overly concerned with your past and the mistakes you have made, God wants you to know that you can move beyond any feelings, memories or thoughts of failure, sin or shame. Be encouraged as you read these scriptures to understand this truth more fully.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. — Jeremiah 29:11

"...anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! — 2 Corinthians 5:17

for though the righteous fall seven times, they rise again, but the wicked stumble when calamity strikes. — Proverbs 24:16–17

As you approach this day and the days ahead, concentrate on the importance of "doing the next right thing." What has happened in the past should not control your future. Dwelling on it will only cause you to repeat the mistakes of the past and prevent you from enjoying the journey God has planned for you. Don't look in the rearview mirror. He doesn't. Instead, look forward to what God has planned for you; to give you a "future and a hope."

Father, thank you for not reminding us of our past, but leading us forward to life and peace when we keep our eyes on You. Help us to always "do the next right thing" as we forget what is behind and "press on toward the goal" of becoming more like You and dwelling with You forever in Your eternal Kingdom. To You be all honor and praise, amen.

Day 3—Never Lose the Wonder

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

—Romans 5:6–11

These words are taken from a song by Vicki Beeching entitled, "The Wonder of the Cross":

*May I never lose the wonder, the wonder of the cross
May I see it like the first time, standing as a sinner lost
Undone by mercy and left speechless, watching wide eyed at the cost
May I never lose the wonder, the wonder of the cross*

I love this song. I love it because it brings me back to the focal point of my faith, the very place where the price for my sins was paid, where Jesus rescued and ransomed my soul from an eternity separated from Him.

In the 57 years that I have been a believer in Christ, I must admit I have often allowed myself to become calloused to the "wonder of the cross." It isn't often enough that I am left "undone," "speechless" and "wide-eyed" at the sight of Jesus paying the price for my sins on the cross. For me, those words strike directly to the "wonder of the cross."

Growing up in church, I heard thousands of sermons about God's grace and sung thousands, maybe ten thousand, hymns on the same subject. In my profession as a minister of music, I was always on the lookout for the song that could best express the power and depth of God's love for rebellious and sinful mankind. Because I have heard the message so often and presented it to others to my utmost ability, the cross and its message doesn't always affect me the same way it did when I first experienced forgiveness of my sins. Maybe you feel the same way.

Do you remember that day? The day you were, "undone by mercy and left speechless"? When you understood that Jesus hung in your place on the cross? Was there a time when your eyes were opened to your sinfulness and Jesus' holiness; that He sacrificed His life for yours? Out of your need for a Savior, did you ask God to forgive you of your sins? If you did, at that moment guilt, fear, sadness and hopelessness were washed away! They were replaced with forgiveness, love, joy and hope!

This song begs us to revisit the scene when the Son of God was battered, beaten and bleeding. It's not a pretty scene, but don't close your eyes. Remain "wide-eyed" and dare to "see it like the first time, standing as a sinner lost." Don't shrink away from the brutality and injustice of what He went through. Take it in. Jesus asked us to remember it because He went through it for us. Modern theologian, R.C. Sproul said, "The most obscene symbol in human history is the Cross; yet in its ugliness it remains the most eloquent testimony to human dignity."

Much of worship involves remembering. The memory of Jesus on the cross makes a deep imprint on our soul because it reminds us of how much God really loves us. No passage of scripture says it more powerfully than today's scripture, Romans 5:6–11. I encourage you to read it again and allow these phrases to pop out at you. "When we were utterly helpless... while we were still sinners... while we were still his enemies." In spite of all that, Jesus went to the cross for you and me. And He did all this so you and I could be "friends of God."

Today, take time to reflect and worship at the cross. Allow the "wonder of the cross" and what Jesus did there to recapture your heart and soul just like the first time you realized He died for you. Imagine you are at Calvary as it happened, knowing then what you understand now.

Indeed, may we never, never, never, lose the wonder of the cross.

Father, may I always stay in awe and wonder of the cross. Jesus, You gave Yourself while I was still helpless, Your enemy, and a sinner. Your love overwhelms me. Thank you for paying the price for my sin and making it possible for me to be called a friend of God. I am humbled by the price you paid for my redemption, and I desire to always walk in the wonder and realization that I owe my life to You. In Your precious name I pray, amen.

Day 4—Ab Workout

Doing abdominal workouts are very popular these days. In fact, it is probably accurate to say many people are obsessed with developing the perfect six-pack. Each year they plop down hundreds of dollars on gym memberships or the newest ab rocker or gut buster machine that will help them look like their favorite actor, athlete or advertisement.

The folks who are dedicated to working their abs and keeping their bodies in top physical condition are ab-normal. See what I did there? Abs...ab-normal. Get it? Moving on.

Why are they abnormal? Because most “normal” people will not work hard enough to accomplish that rock-hard midsection. They (me included) are satisfied to be able to pinch an inch, or more, of flab around their belly.

We tend to think of abnormal as a negative term, don’t we? In this case, we should not. After all, if someone is abnormal it just means he is not like most people. But does that make it bad to be abnormal? No. In fact, being abnormal can be a very good thing. After all, abnormal people are often the ones who accomplish great things.

Think about it in these terms. Normal people **live in the world**, but abnormal people **influence the world**. Normal people **study** history while abnormal people **make** history. Normal people **have a job** because abnormal people **create jobs**. Normal people **follow the rules** while abnormal people **make the rules**.

Abnormal people are not better people. Not at all. There are just fewer of them, and the world needs both types.

As believers, we need to ask ourselves, “Does God want us to be normal or abnormal?” If we look at Scripture, we will realize that walking in the steps of Jesus will cause us to look abnormal in the eyes of the world. God doesn’t want us to look or act like the rest of the world. In fact, He wants us to stand out. Be different. In Romans 12:2, Paul says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

“Do not conform.” In other words, be abnormal. Don’t approach life the way the world does. Avoid the trap of trying to fit in with those who don’t believe. A Christian who fits in comfortably with the world may look normal to those around him, but he is abnormal in the Kingdom of God. It isn’t possible to be like the world and be a true follower of Christ. Instead, we must allow God to change the way we think. We must be willing to be abnormal by the world’s standard. Maybe it could be said this way: “If we are normal by God’s standards, we will be abnormal by the world’s standards.”

If we are going to be “abnormal” we need to work on our “spiritual abs” just as hard as those guys and gals who produce Beachbody workout videos. Here is a list of “spiritual abs” that, if we will work on them, will help us develop a strong “six pack.”

Abandon—Walk away from past sinful behaviors and ways of thinking. What God has in store for us is much more valuable than what we leave behind. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!”

Abhor—Hate wickedness and ungodliness. Instead, love God and the Truth in His Word. Romans 12:9 says, “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.”

Abstain—Refuse to participate in sinful or destructive behavior. Choose to do what is right. 1 Peter 2:11 says, “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.”

Absorb—Like a sponge, soak in the Word of God so that it saturates our lives and flows out to others. Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Abide—Always stay connected to the Lord. Desire Him above all else. Cultivate a close relationship with Him. John 15:5 says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Absolute—Be committed and undeterred in your faith and reliance upon Christ. Be willing to identify with Him even to the point of personal sacrifice. Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

How strong are your abs? Are you ready to get to work developing your spiritual six pack? Be mindful, if you do, you will be considered abnormal. You won't look like a lot of your friends or possibly even your family members. But that's okay. God never called us to be normal because our goal, as followers of Christ, is to resemble the Savior more and more. That is what God considers normal. Let's shoot for that as we work on strengthening our “spiritual abs.”

Father, help us to be willing to look a lot less like everyone else and pursue the goal of looking more like your Son every day. In Jesus' name, amen.

Day 5—Broken and Spilled Out

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. —Luke 7:36–38

As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful.—2 Timothy 4:6, 7

Our first scripture took place at a dinner party in the home of a Pharisee where an uninvited woman, probably a prostitute, somehow gained entry to the house. Normally, she would not be welcome, but there she was. Maybe there was a large crowd of people, and she entered unnoticed. It doesn't matter. She was there at the feet of Jesus, and her act of loving worship opened the door for Jesus to teach everyone a valuable lesson.

In his book *All In*, Mark Batterson says, "This act of worship ranks as one of the most beautiful and meaningful statements of faith in all of Scripture. She knew the Pharisees stoned women like her, but that didn't keep her from pushing all of her chips to the middle of the table. She used her most precious possession—an alabaster jar of perfume—to make her profession of faith."

Both the alabaster jar and the perfume (nard) were very expensive items. Nard is an herb that is grown in the Himalayas. Alabaster is a semitransparent gemstone and, according to Batterson, "was probably a family heirloom."

By worshiping Jesus in this way, the woman was saying to the Master, "Everything I have of value is yours. I am willing to give you everything I have. She did not use just a little bit of the perfume. No. She poured it all out. And she didn't save the alabaster jar so it could be refilled. No, she broke it as if to say, "Enough! I am starting over. It begins right now. I'm giving you every precious last drop of me. I'm leaving the past and any remnant of that life behind. I recognize You, Jesus, for who You are, and I worship You as I bow at Your feet and give You the best and all that I have."

There is a really important message here for all of us. Do you know what it is? If we are going to honestly say we love God, we need to be willing to surrender everything. Not just our possessions, but also our reputation. Just like the woman, it doesn't matter who we have been or what we have done. Jesus doesn't judge us on our past. And none of us are invited guests when Jesus is present. He welcomes us all into His presence because He loves us and has a marvelous purpose and future waiting for us when we surrender our lives to Him.

You see, each of us have in our possession a priceless, perfumed fragrance bottled up inside of us that is waiting to be released as our expression of love and recognition of the Savior. We have talents, resources and time to pour at the feet of Jesus, just like the woman's nard in the alabaster box.

There is a song that I love, first recorded by Steve Green, entitled *Broken and Spilled Out*. It expresses a desire to be just like that expensive jar of perfume that was broken and spilled out in honor of the Lord.

Broken and spilled out, just for love of you, Jesus

*My most precious treasure lavished on thee
Broken and spilled out and poured at your feet
In sweet abandon let me be spilled out
And used up for Thee*

Jesus saw the woman's selfless act of sacrifice and her deep love for Him as an act of faith. His response was to assure her, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." She gave Him the best she had. He rewarded not only her sacrificial gift of perfume, but also her faith.

Can we say the same thing about ourselves? Are we giving our very best to God? Are we like the woman? Can we honestly say there is nothing we would withhold from the Lord? Or do we consider our life to be our own, deciding which portion we allow God to have while holding on to the portions we don't want to surrender or allow Him to see.

If we truly love Christ and desire a close relationship with Him, we must make the choice to give God complete accessibility to every corner of our lives. When we do, He will fulfill His purpose in us. In the process we will find ourselves being "poured out and used up" for Him. By doing that, we will identify with Christ and Paul and all who have given everything to follow God's will for their life.

You are an alabaster box containing a very fragrant, very expensive gift that you, just like the worshiping woman, can pour at the feet of Jesus. All you need to do is release what's inside of you and offer yourself completely to Him. Maybe you are a believer but have been holding back from surrendering everything to the Lord. Maybe you have never trusted Christ as your Savior. This could be the day you surrender your life to Him and receive forgiveness for your sins.

Why not break the box today? Give everything to Him. Be like the woman who knelt at His feet and poured out every drop. She was acknowledged for her faith, and God will reward you for yours as well.

Lord, help me to be like the woman with the alabaster jar and hold nothing back from you. Help me to be like Paul and pour myself out like a drink offering until I am totally used up for You. Show me how to surrender completely to Your will, regardless of the cost. In Your name I pray, amen.

Day 6—Never Say Never

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.

—Proverbs 19:21

"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine." — Isaiah 55:8

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who] have been called according to his purpose.— Romans 8:28

It really seemed perfect! I was excited to see the house that may become our next home. My wife had just started a new flower farm business, and we needed to relocate because we needed more land.

We received word of a place that seemed to meet all our needs: almost two acres, a three-bedroom house, large side lot with plenty of room for her gardens, a large detached, three-bay garage with an office that could serve as a floral workshop. It even had a separate driveway leading back to the shop. Perfect—except for the house.

Ugh! When we walked through the door my optimism turned to pessimism. My first words upon entering were, "I will never live in this house." What I saw was a place that needed a complete renovation. Walls removed. Floors redone. Appliances updated. Surfaces replaced. Layout redesigned. Electric rewired. Plus, it had a very "sketchy" well. As far as I was concerned, it was a big, "NO!"

In hindsight, I should have known better than to have uttered those words, "I will never. . ." Why? Because after making lots of renovations, here I am, sitting very comfortably in the living room of that same house eight years later, writing these words. Truth is, I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. In fact, just this morning, I told my wife how much I love our house.

It was foolish for me to say I would never live here. In fact, it is foolish and presumptuous of us to say "I will never" regarding anything in our life. We don't have the understanding or capacity to make that determination because we don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. Only God knows what His plans and purposes are for our lives.

One of today's scriptures, Proverbs 19:1, should make us think twice before uttering the words, "I will never," because it tells us, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand." So, does God want us to make plans? Sure, but this scripture points out that when our plans don't align with God's, it's our plans, not His, that need to be adjusted.

Here's another reason to refrain from saying, "I will never." We don't have the ability to think beyond what our limited knowledge can comprehend. Please don't be insulted. I say that because our decisions are based on a finite understanding of a given situation at a specific time.

Isaiah 55:8 points out that God is not limited in His thinking, understanding or motivation. He declares, "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," and "my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine." Simply put, we don't possess enough understanding to accurately pronounce what we will or will not ever do.

You and I don't always know what is best for us. Let's be honest, we guess a lot. But God doesn't. He knows what is good, actually best, for us. He clearly tells us in Romans 8:28, "in all things God works for the good of those who love him." If we truly embrace the promise in this verse, we have no reason to ever tell God what we will or will not do. His way is always the best way.

Ask yourself, "Have I ever said 'never' to God?" Maybe there was a time you sensed God calling you into the ministry, but you resisted because you thought you weren't spiritual enough, or you weren't willing to surrender your plans for your life. Maybe someone hurt you deeply and because of that bad experience you said in your heart, "I will never" allow myself to be hurt like that again. Maybe you have a fear or anxiety about a certain activity such as flying, speaking in public, or learning how to swim, and you've said, "I will never do that." Can you fill in the blank? I will never _____!

What causes us to say, "I will never"? Here are some possibilities:

We are concerned we aren't up to the task.

We are unwilling to change our plans.

We're afraid we will be physically or emotionally hurt.

We refuse to give up control.

God wants to accomplish amazing things in your life, way beyond what you think is possible (Ephesians 3:20). Don't close the door on what He wants to do. When presented with a new challenge, don't allow apprehension, fear, a desire for comfort or control influence you to miss an opportunity for spiritual and personal growth. Reject the inclination to immediately think, "I will never" and replace it with, "I will pray" or "I will try." That way we remain open to what God wants to do in our lives.

You know, come to think of it, maybe there is just one occasion when we should say, "I will never." Maybe you should even read this out loud. "I will never say, 'I will never' to God again." Yes, in this case, I believe He would approve.

Father, help us to realize Your plans are best for our lives. May we never try to tell You what we will or will not do. Help us to keep our hearts and minds open to Your direction, for it is Your will we desire for our lives. In the name of Jesus, we pray, amen.

Day 7—Drill Baby Drill

The following is a portion of an article taken from USA Today newspaper in 2006:

Three oil companies announced a landmark test of a deep-water well in the Gulf of Mexico that could swell the nation's oil reserves by as much as 50%. The project, miles below the sea floor, could be the best prospect for new domestic crude oil in 38 years. The test, conducted more than 20,000 feet under the sea floor, set world records for test equipment pressure, depth and duration. Until several years ago, technology wasn't available to drill to such depths and to view oil and gas formations buried below canopies of salt. "It shows there's still a lot of opportunities...," says David Dismukes, associate director of the Louisiana State University Center for Energy Studies.

As I was reading this article, it occurred to me that there are all kinds of parallels in the underwater drilling effort to find "black gold" and our willingness to drill deeper in our relationship with God to discover more of His spiritual riches.

Experts know the Gulf of Mexico is rich in untapped underwater reserves of crude oil. But the question is, will anyone be adventurous enough, spend enough, or do enough research to go and get it. The rewards can be monumental, but the risk and cost can be just as big.

After weighing the risk versus reward, the oil companies realized that if they looked for oil where they have already been drilling, using the same equipment they have been using, they probably won't find many new resources. But if they were willing to go a little further out, develop new tools and go a lot deeper, there is more oil ready to be discovered than they could have ever imagined.

Viewpoints differ on whether we should drill for oil off our shores. Environmental concerns versus our continued reliance on fossil fuels is the subject of much debate in our world. But for now, let's put aside that discussion and concentrate on how this willingness to invest in finding more underwater resources can relate to us personally and spiritually.

All of us have said at times, "I don't know where God is." Or, "My relationship with Him has run dry." Maybe you have said, "I need more of Him, but I just can't seem to find it." How about this one? "I read my Bible and I pray. I attend church regularly, and I have wonderful Christian friends. But I just don't seem to have a real close relationship with God. It's like the well has just run dry."

Could it be our well is dry because we have been drilling in the same area for too long? We've spent so much time doing the same thing in the same way that we are worn out. We're tired and in need of a change. Our routine has lost its meaning. Maybe it is time to do some research and exploration in other areas of ministry and service.

We should always be spending time in the Word, and praying and attending church should always be a high priority. But maybe it is time to get out of our routine and comfort zones of devotion and ministry. Maybe it's time to join a new Bible study or try out a new Sunday school class. If you volunteer at church, it is possible it is time to serve in an area that you have never tried before.

You may need to consider the fact that God is calling you to give to the church in ways you never dreamed possible. It could be that God is ready to revolutionize your thinking as He launches you into a business venture that would be more about helping others than making you wealthy.

Possibly, it's time to finally give in and respond to God's call on your life to go into full-time ministry. It doesn't even matter how old you are. After all, Noah was 525 years old when he built the Ark, and Sarah was 100 when she had Isaac.

For many, it could be that He wants you to completely surrender your life to Him. Ooh, that may be the most costly and difficult one of all. The point is, the possibilities are absolutely and gloriously endless. When we venture out and go deeper with God it is exactly where he wants us because it makes us totally dependent and desperate for Him. And that's a good place to be.

To be sure, in order to experience His rich resources, we can't stay in the shallow water. Like the oil drillers, we must be willing to go deeper to find new areas that will reveal a reservoir of opportunities that will benefit others, develop our spiritual gifts, deepen our faith, depend more on Him, and, in the process, reflect praise and glory onto Him.

When we venture out, we need not fear because Deuteronomy 31:8 says, "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

Is your spiritual life stagnant? Do you feel like you are farther away from God than you were a month ago...a year ago...ten years ago? Maybe it's time for you to ask God to help you explore new depths in your relationship with Him. Who knows what riches and resources you will discover as He leads you into a deeper relationship with Himself. Take some time and ask God, "What can I do? Where can I go? Who can I help? How can I serve?" He will respond and lead you to times of refreshing and deeper spiritual growth.

Father, when we notice our "well running dry," help us have the courage and desire to drill deeper into our unending supply of resources. Find us willing to go, to give, to help, to learn, to serve in ways that, although they may be new and challenging, will help us mature in our faith and bring you glory in our thought, words, actions and intentions. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.