

HABIT TWO

Recognize Learning Opportunities

“... in all things God works for the good ...”

Romans 8:28

In this chapter, you will read about how God “parents” us. All parents like to be proud of the children they have birthed and carefully nurtured. Our heavenly Father is no exception.

As with earthly families, Satan likes to divide and conquer. By making us think we are experiencing a unique and exceptional difficulty, he hopes to weaken us. God has a good purpose in His training program. Knowing this encourages us to resolve to learn what we can through each experience. No matter how trying, we can move on as improved and enriched persons. Either we must steel this resolve or Satan will steal it. It strengthens us to know others have faced our problems and that life-enriching lessons await us. By examining types of experiences similar to ours, we can recognize important patterns and the way God uses them to develop us.

In this chapter, we will identify some additional kinds of learning experiences. Some of these experiences are my own, while other lessons were learned through observation and reading. This chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all types, but rather a large enough sample for you to realize the many ways God can teach us. Reviewing these will help you be more analytical and fruitful in evaluating your own experiences. Each experience falls under a different part of the magnifying glass of

Scripture. For, in fact, it is Scripture that provides the standard by which our experiences are to be interpreted and evaluated.

A Sense of Destiny

You are very special to God. He really has a special plan for your life. An awareness of your destiny comes from experiences that lead you to believe that God is involved in your life in a personal and special way. Significant acts and people, providential experiences, or the unique timing of events can hint at some future or special significance to a life. When studied in retrospect, they add conviction to a growing awareness of our destiny. One's name and its meaning, a prophecy, family heritage, a parent's prayer, a significant contact, parents' sense of the child's destiny, a miracle related to one's birth, a mentor, or special preservation of life can all contribute to a sense of God's special purpose for your life. My recovery from sickness, plus input from grandparents who saw something spiritual in my young life, gave me a sense of destiny from an early age.

In Chapter 1, you read about my experience with rheumatic fever. During that sickness and recovery, the prayer to be a good missionary at age six, and going on that prayed-for hike on my seventh birthday, not only contributed to my strong childhood belief in the power of prayer, but also gave me a sense of destiny. Repeated affirmations from both grandmothers throughout my childhood further developed that belief. I began to look for whatever God had for me. I cannot remember a time when I didn't believe there was something special to anticipate.

Brushes with death can also confirm our sense of destiny. Each time David escaped Saul's angry spear, his sense of destiny may have been "pointedly" confirmed (I Samuel 19:10). Two times in my adult life, I could have died. When I was a young man, I was swimming alone in Lake Heritage near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. I should have never gone swimming alone in such a deep, wide lake, but it was even more foolish to try to swim across it. When I became tired and abandoned hope to cross the lake, I turned around to return to shore and fought for my life for the next 20 minutes. I thought I was near heaven's gates although I focused all my efforts on taking another gasping breath and making more strokes with weary arms and legs. Finally, I reached very welcome mud and rocks. As I lay gasping and vomiting on the shore, life took on a new meaning. I

realized that God had spared me to continue my earthly phase for some purpose of His.

My second nearly deadly episode occurred in Taejon, Korea. While killing termites, I came into contact with lethal poison and became violently ill — one drop of that stuff can kill a cow! The doctor even told Char he thought I was dying. I miraculously lived through the hours of dry heaving and anti-poison medical treatments. As the seriousness of my near departure settled in on me, it revealed that God had a further purpose for my life. Paul may have had a similar sense each time he escaped death though his escapes were far nobler, it seems, than mine.

In the summer of 2000 in Northeast India, a group of about 110 pastors, their wives, and Bible college students gathered from five states in India and neighboring Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Nepal for leadership training. When talking with them about a sense of destiny and the preservation of life, I asked how many of them had experienced close brushes with death — 22 of them had! It was my joy to

encourage them to reinterpret the meaning of their experience in view of an eternal purpose. God allows these experiences to teach us that He has a purpose for our lives. Just knowing that gives us courage and expectancy. God has some special people in His army, and He signals to us that He has a divine plan through unique experiences — sometimes brushes with death.

Your interest in this book indicates that you want to discover habits that lead to the fulfillment of your destiny and potential. Assuming this desire was placed there by God, you may also understand your own divine destiny. You can find Bible characters whose experiences and the interpretations thereof give you clues for interpreting your own life. Samson's mother and father surely had told him of the supernatural visit by the angel that preceded his birth (Judges 13:3ff). Samuel's parents must have told him of Hannah's commitment before his conception that should she bear a son, she would give that son to God's service (I Samuel 1:11ff). Didn't Sampson and Samuel

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have a clear sense of destiny as a result of birth-related revelations and God setting them apart from their siblings for a purpose? Do you suppose that sense of destiny gave them strength? Have a vision and humbly seek to fulfill it.

God is sovereign. He knits us together in our mother's womb (Psalm 139:13-16) and arranges for each of us to be born in the place and time of His choosing (Acts 17:26). If we believe that, we also believe that the skills he has placed in each of us, in the cultural and historical settings of His choice, are meaningful too. What can we learn from this? The local, regional, national, and international circumstances surrounding our births were of His making. What would happen if we habitually evaluated what we learned through those circumstances God controlled for our unique development? You are in no less a learning process than Daniel was. Daniel was a statesman; not full-time professional clergy *per se*. You may not have been born a Hebrew and carried to Babylon as a deportee to be trained to serve in a foreign court, but you have your own story. God has a dream for you and has unique plans to make it come true. Can you imagine the Master Craftsman smiling as He moves through His "workshop," leaning over His works of art, carefully and lovingly using His "tools" of lakes, termites, and "coincidences" to bring out the best colors and brightest shine from His precious ones — you are one of those precious ones!

Eventually, today's experiences integrate with your other life experiences so that they all fit together. This long-term convergence of accumulated lessons coupled with a sense of destiny prepares the mature believer to serve effectively later in life. Your sense of destiny ties all your other learning experiences together, giving them a common thread and overarching theme consistent with God's unique plan for you. Too many younger Christian workers don't realize this and never reach this more fruitful stage. Stay with it. It gets better — much better.

People Who Have Influenced You

Another tool God uses is the influences He has placed in our families. Family members are important for personal growth because, as C.S. Lewis points out in *The Four Loves*, we don't choose them; we must learn to love them. There are significant personalities, situations, and perspectives in our homes that play a part in our increasing influence as Christians. John the Baptist had the influence of his godly parents and the Essenes (who were the holiness separatists of his day). Their combined

influence on his life's work is a good example of how early influences shape a Christian worker.

What are you learning from your present social context? A neighbor? A roommate? A classmate? A colleague at work? Do you think that the people around you just happened to be there? What if God placed those people in your life to teach you something? If so, do we miss part of our training if we resist the lessons we could learn through these relationships? Spouses are usually the most significant other person in our lives, but other family members also play a significant role.

We can be selective about what and from whom we learn.

My grandmother visited us each summer and always did a massive housecleaning job. This is why she was there when I had rheumatic fever and during my recovery period. God used her encouragement, love for missions, and prayer to shape my life. I have also had to learn meekness, self-control, patience, and to not fight back from my relationships with other family members. Each of these was a part of my life and God used them to work on me. What if every likable and unlikable member of your family was placed there by God to be an instrument for your development? Are we yielding to the process or resisting it? When we commit ourselves to learn from every relationship, life becomes a continual practice field. Every relationship and conversation becomes an arena for developing the fruit of the Spirit.

What about abusive situations? How will the child or grandchild of abusive relatives react? Is there something to learn from the experience of escaping or avoiding abuse? These are hard questions, but our sense of the sovereignty of God forces us to draw some lessons from them. As a teenager, I appreciated the affirmation I received from my tennis coach in high school. However, being a victim of his inappropriate sexual advances provided several unique lessons. One was that though I learned tennis from him, I was free to reject his sexual orientation. Another took me years, but I did finally discover something very important — that I was not guilty of sexual sin just because I had been a victim. And, thirdly, I learned the need to strengthen my own sons and other youth so they would be strong enough in spirit to resist unwelcome advances.

We can be selective about what and from whom we learn. Sometimes we learn what to do by the good examples in our lives. Sometimes we learn what not to do by the bad ones. There is evil at work in the world, and we must pray strongly against it. We are not to blame God for evil, whether in our relatives or in others. People make choices, and some of them are bad. Petition God to work against the evil that He, too, hates. In those cases, we need not submit unconditionally to the evil persons involved, but in submission to God. Seek to find His purpose in the circumstances and learn from them.

Skills

God gives us the skills we need to do the job He calls us to do. I am grateful for the fine language teachers who took pains beyond class time and the call of duty to hone my language skills. We experienced many ministry opportunities in Korea and China because we could speak the local language. An eternal and timeless God creates us in our mother's womb with certain native skills. He then calls us to work where those skills are needed. Our native skills themselves are therefore a hint at God's purpose for our lives. What about your basic skills? Some of them are native to you and others are acquired. Some of what you are as a person stems from the values you learned in developing those skills.

During the foundational phase of your life, what did you learn that God could use in a later period? God worked in Paul's life as he was learning the Old Testament at the feet of one of the best teachers of his time. This preparation took place before Paul was an obedient believer and illustrates how God may have worked in your past to develop your abilities before you knew Him. The skills you have can hint at what God wants you to do, whether in government, business, church, industry, or teaching.

Tests of Integrity

Every one of us occasionally has an experience in which we are morally tested without anyone else knowing about it. There are occasions when we could be dishonest or err where no one would know. God deliberately gives us those kinds of experiences so we will grow in our integrity to make sure our values and actions are integrated.

I once accidentally double-scheduled myself. One appointment was with a lady who wanted to meet me to learn about ordination in a church organization. The other appointment was with a consultant of whom I wanted to ask several questions important to me. The first appointment I *accepted*, and the latter appointment I *initiated*. I had to decide which appointment to cancel. Failing to find the lady at home by phone, I left a message on her answering machine. I also left a packet of literature with a note explaining the ordination process at my office door and left to keep the appointment I preferred. When I returned to my office, she had taken the packet. I was relieved. I later spoke with her by phone and gave her some more details not included in my note I left with the packet. I was further relieved. My obligation to her was fulfilled. However, because I selfishly canceled the appointment I should have kept to keep the one I preferred, my conscience bothered me. In my heart, I know that I should have canceled my preferred appointment and kept the one less desirable to me — the one with her. From the outcome, I learned that to say I want to serve others and then act in a way that served me is inconsistent. In the future, I hope to be less selfish and more inclined to think, speak, and act with consistency.

At the heart of any assessment of godly character lies the concept of integrity, the strict consistency between the thoughts, words, and actions of an individual. God uses integrity tests to evaluate our heart-intent and to integrate inner convictions and outward action. He uses all this as a foundation from which to expand the Christian's capacity to serve. Without integrity, our potential can never be realized because people will not trust us. Joseph had it. David could lead men because he had integrity. Men trusted him. Daniel and his three friends also demonstrated integrity. God wants to develop it in each of us.

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Learning to Listen to the Still Small Voice

What about the ability to obey the voice of the Holy Spirit? This is a unique category of learning experience in which God tests a believer's response to revealed truth. Obedience is often learned

early in life and then relearned from time to time. The result for those who respond positively is usually enlightenment with more truth. For example, we learn that some “opportunities” are interruptions and some “interruptions” are opportunities. Discerning the difference, seizing the opportunities, and not being side-tracked by interruptions are some part of the obedience-learning experience. I have about three seconds between the time someone knocks on my office door and the time I open the door. During these important three seconds, I usually quickly pray that God will help me kindly avoid an interruption or seize the opportunity that awaits me on the other side of the door. Sometimes He answers one way and sometimes the other way, but in either case, I want Him to be the One to decide. Thinking through these issues forces me to openly welcome opportunities to encourage students as they prepare for their life’s work — even when they have not made an appointment.

A Ministry Task

When we recognize our assigned task as a God-given opportunity, we often need to intentionally stop viewing tasks as simply tasks. In the new perspective, you can learn something new about helping people. We are ultimately accountable to God, though accountability to people is also significant. A growing believer recognizes this fact and desires to please the Lord in every ministry task. On the human side, these tasks may appear to be natural, routine, or even boring assignments, but they are tasks from God. “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things” (Matthew 25:21). I was invited to speak to a missions club and was ready to speak to a room full of people. When I arrived, only two people were present. Even though I was disappointed with the turnout, I still did my best.

When I see trash on the floor or sidewalk, I try to remember this principle as well and pick it up. God does promote. The successful completion of the former assignment is the criterion by which He gives us new assignments. Barnabas’ trip to Antioch recorded in Acts 11 may have seemed like a mundane task, but he did it faithfully and well. He became the mentor of the Apostle Paul! Are you faithful in the small opportunities?

A Test of Our Faith

God often leads His children through a series of increasingly difficult tests of their faith. This involves some issue in which our awareness of God's reality and faithfulness are tested. These learning experiences build confidence for trusting God with even bigger issues later. Every time we pass through one of these experiences, we are better prepared for the next one.

Char and I served as pastors in a small church in a rural part of western Ontario, Canada for several years. During that time, I consented to allow a gentleman in the church to take the position he wanted as teacher of the adult Sunday school class. Several days later while in prayer, I realized I had made a mistake. He had not yet begun his new responsibilities. As kindly as I could, I apologized to him for my error and told him someone else would teach that class. As a result, his attitude toward me and my leadership changed entirely, and he began to oppose me. In the process of working out his bitterness, his family and three other families decided to leave our church. One afternoon after visiting one family that had been led astray, I parked my car in the garage under a wing of the church building and wept. How could an innocent newborn sheep we led to the Savior, whose life and family had gloriously changed, and whom we had so lovingly and carefully nurtured, be so suddenly alienated from us and destructively injured? Through an error of mine, the enemy had some victory. However, the setback did not cause us to quit.

Not too much later, our supervisor visited us and offered us another church. I felt it would only be escaping a problem. Until this was settled and the church was clean, we decided we should not leave. I had no idea that the tenacity and perseverance God was developing in me was preparing me to weather the storms we would face in Korea. As I look back on the tears of our Canada years, I realize they prepared us for the future. We toughened our ability to persevere by staying with that church and seeing it grow in spite of the families that defected. We would have never been able to hold steady through the Korean storms had we not come through "easier" ones in Canada. This test of our faith was also a test of our commitment. Through it, we learned how committed we were to stay in the ministry. In Korea, we faced even more devastating defections, betrayals, and disappointments. We stayed the course through those, too. Tests like these can strengthen the developing worker's willingness to be used in whatever way God indicates. It

involves an inward private agreement between the actively growing Christian and God. When something in us dies, something else lives even more vigorously. Yet we don't know this about ourselves until God has brought us successfully through a series of faith and commitment tests.

Formal Training

This book emphasizes the practical, experiential, and spiritual habits God wants us to develop to become highly effective Christians. It does not primarily champion book learning but nevertheless, book learning is a major part of traditional or formal training. It is one possible way God develops a person. Because God may direct us to study formally, we should also think about formal training in this chapter.

Book learning, classroom work, and academic degrees are not the only ways or even the best ways to learn how to minister. They will certainly not produce ministry on their own. They do, however, make good additions to spiritual qualities. Learning only by experience swings the pendulum too far away from intellectual development. The acquisition of ministry skills refers to learning skills that aid one in ministry — professional or nonprofessional. Taking a course in a school or attending a Christian leaders' seminar for training may help us develop new abilities that enlarge our Christian service potential. Learn how to handle conflict, prepare sermons, organize committees, or implement change, and then watch how God will use — or not use — your new skill.

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In January of 1977, after only three and one half years into a five-year missionary term in Korea, I went on my annual January three-day fast. While walking through the frozen rice paddies just west of Taejon near the hot springs of Yusong on the second morning, the Lord placed in my spirit a realization that I should return to school. At that time, I had a Bachelor of Theology degree. The idea of studying more was a new idea, but I knew it was from the Lord. I realized that the best thing for a missionary to study was missiology. The most likely place to do it was the

School of World Missions, located about a 20-minute drive from the furlough home in which I was scheduled to stay for a year. That specific guidance from God changed the direction of my ministry. Studying missiology increased my effectiveness as a missionary and specifically influenced my subsequent career as a missiologist training missionaries. We should not learn just from books, teachers, and formal settings. However, our experience can be complemented by them. Your training should not be only experiential or only formal training. Both are needed.

Gift Discovery

The combination of gifts God gave you includes natural abilities, acquired skills, and spiritual gifts. During the course of your development as a useful Christian, you may discover a gift you did not realize you had. Over the years, I have thoroughly enjoyed graduate study programs, though I didn't discover this gift until age 33. The first 12 years of my ministry consisted of 8 years in pastorates in North America and 4 years training Korean pastors in an institute-level Bible school in Asia. When we went home to the U.S. for our first furlough, I began my first graduate studies. After 12 years of ministry, imagine the joy of discovering the excitement, stimulation, and usefulness of graduate studies.

You may have gifts you have not yet discovered. Try a variety of service situations. If you have served only in the church, try serving outside of it. If you have never traveled abroad, consider contacting a missionary friend or organization, and visit the mission field. We don't completely fulfill the great commission by these visits. However, visits serve the broader interest of more permanent missionary service because they can be good missionary recruitment tools. The discovery of your gifts — especially the discovery and the confident use of your spiritual gifts — is an important part of your development. The discovery of your giftedness and how you grow is a continuous and exciting adventure. You may surprise even yourself.

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The Mentor

Have you ever met someone who lived and served in a way you wanted to duplicate? This was not a coincidence. A person with a serving, giving, encouraging attitude — the mentor — sees leadership potential in someone with similar gifts and potential yet to be developed — the protégé. The mentor leads the protégé toward the realization or even identification of her potential. Some people are exceptionally gifted at recognizing potential in others. They naturally take a personal interest in selecting and guiding their protégés. As I look back on the half dozen really important mentors in my life, I can see that some of them found me, and I found some of them. I subsequently read what my experience had already taught me — that the relationship can be initiated by either party.

In my senior year, the dean of students in the small Bible college from which I graduated asked me to serve on the yearbook staff. I listened rather uninterestedly, thinking of all the reasons why I could not serve. After all, I was a student pastor with pastoral responsibilities and couldn't be too involved in extracurricular activities. At the end of his sales pitch, he said he wanted me to be the editor — now that was challenging! At his recommendation, I served in this capacity and believe we produced a quality yearbook that year. It was all very exciting — chairing the committee meetings, meeting students from both day and night schools, meeting individually with each member to review their tasks and show how they all fit together, meeting the representative of the publishing company, and, probably most of all, working closely with the dean of students whom I admired. I believe it was a developmental opportunity determined by circumstances far beyond my control.

That experience led to further familiarity with the dean of students. Later, he asked me if I would serve the Bible college by going on a singing and preaching tour the summer after graduation. We were to promote the Bible college. As a result, I traveled all over the eastern part of the United States, preaching in churches and youth camps.

As the car owner, I learned the importance of communicating the financial details in advance of making a trip as a team. As the speaker for the group, I experienced confirmations of the need to pray with disciplined regularity. The dean of students has had a profound influence on my life then and over the years. I thank God for this mentor — a tool in God's hand — to correct and

develop me. Now in his retirement, I still learn from his example of gracious mannerisms, self-deprecating humor, and patience in interpersonal relationships.

Contextual Issues

Some of the things the Lord uses to train us are more contextual — related to the cultural, political, economic, or social context in which we live — than relational. Providential factors in local, regional, national, and international situations affect spiritual growth and the increase of our influence. These are factors over which we have almost no control. We have a great learning advantage when we can

recognize them, see the hand of God in them, and intentionally, positively, and constructively *use* them rather than merely react emotionally to them. Situations some people think are mere coincidental circumstances are actually disguised “tools” in the loving Master’s skillful hand.

In the summer of 1965, a small rural congregation just 70 miles north of our Bible college needed a pastor. I was asked if I would fill in several Sundays. This led to the invitation to serve there as a student pastor. During the year I served as their pastor, the monthly average attendance tripled — from 8 to 24 attendees on Sunday mornings. My whole senior year, I learned about depending on God, loving people, confronting people with extreme gentleness, as well as the difficulty of being unmarried in the ministry. The opportunity to serve as a student pastor complemented my classroom learning. It taught me more of the issues of leading a church such as keeping church financial records and loving without partiality.

Once again, the initiation was out of my own control, but God used it as a growing point in my life. My faithfulness there and my speaking tour during the summer after graduation led to other opportunities. I was invited to serve as associate pastor and youth leader in one of our denomination’s larger churches in the East at the time. God was using an organizational,

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contextual situation to develop me. I was learning how to be faithful in whatever assignment He gave.

Now, what about you? What, in your circumstances, can you begin to look at in this new light? Do you believe God is in control, even when you are not? What are you to learn from it?

A Paradigm Shift

A paradigm is a mental framework in which we order our thoughts — a system for evaluating what goes on around us. Sometimes catastrophic events force us to enlarge or adjust our thinking so radically that we experience a “paradigm shift.” These are changes so dramatic that to prepare us for them — or even make us willing to receive them — God has to use extreme measures. Paradigm shifts are often precipitated by a crisis — a turning point. In a crisis, the shift of paradigm is God’s goal. Without this perspective, we see only the difficult part of the crisis, while they are actually God’s means to God’s end — our development and His glory. God uses one or more difficulties to reveal a major, new perspective on Him or our service to Him. The new perspective results in a sense of release as though we had been bound by narrow conceptual limits. The new perspective is a joyous discovery that enhances our learning ability although the process is usually quite difficult. Through the paradigm shift, we are freed to see things in a new way. We may experience a lesson that takes us considerable time to process. In time, we become cognitively aware of what we learned and can put it into words. An adult’s conversion to Christianity is one kind of paradigm shift. Paul’s conversion, as recorded in Acts Chapter 9, is probably the classic and best example.

My largest paradigm shift came through a major ministry crisis I experienced in the spring of 1979. A segment of our church in Korea rejected my leadership. Through my crisis and the fast connected with it, I learned discernment, relearned the power of prayer, and gained insights about spiritual warfare. I also learned that even when I am right, if my attitude is wrong, I am wrong. I would never have been open to deeper truths had I not experienced such extreme circumstantial pressure at the time.

Learning through a crisis requires a correct response to the intense pressure God uses to test us and teach us dependence. The correct response requires a teachable spirit. A willful intent

to move deeper into the heart of God in the early stages of a crisis can carry us through it. The end result is a stronger servant with a deeper experience of God's love and greater spiritual authority. How we respond to a crisis is key. In fact, our response is the issue — our response to the crisis is more important in God's plan than solving the crisis. How we grow in it is the central issue.

Involvement with the Unseen World

The unseen world impacts the visible world. Economic, political, social, family, ministry, and other life problems are deeper, more complex, and dramatic than what appears on the surface. A

growing Christian will learn to discern the impact of the unseen on the visible. Our service has two levels of activity. The first depends on sensitivity to “behind the scenes activity” of the spirit world, which can enable a Christian to influence visible situations. People are not the enemy; Satan is. He uses people as “tools,” but we should not fight against the tools. We are to fight against him and love the tools. In this case, the tools are also captives that need to be delivered. The second level of activity is carrying out in the physical arena what has already been dealt with in the spiritual realm through prayer. When the first is done well, the second is easy.

Our response to the crisis is more important in God's plan than solving the crisis.

In Elijah's day, there was a three-year famine. The famine appeared at the physical level, but there was a lot of dramatic activity going on in the unseen world. The clash of spiritual forces culminated in a showdown on Mount Carmel as Elijah, the prayer warrior, publicly called on God to send fire. That showdown was a “power encounter.” Spiritual warfare and power encounters teach us to discern the root causes in the spirit world for problems that appear in the natural world. The real battle is spiritual and is fought with spiritual weapons. When we win, not only is the battle won, the soldier is also developed. This could be restated: not only is the warrior developed, the battle is also won. These are two important results, and God is concerned about both.

Remember the four families that left our church in rural Canada? We continued to regularly fast and pray our way through those difficult months. We felt that the real battle was the invisible spiritual war which prompted the families to leave the church. We kept on praying and God answered! During this time, several influential young people were saved, and they became active evangelists among the youth in our community. A businessman and his wife began attending our church and added many fresh ideas. All this occurred during the same time we were experiencing terrible conflict and opposition. Because we kept praying, God rewarded our faithfulness and added increase.

Wrestling, as it were, in the spirit world, I discovered several things in my experience of strong intercession and prayer. Fasting weakens devils. We ourselves may feel weak, but in the Spirit, we gain a strength advantage. In addition, clapping hands while praying can help us focus on prayer at times. We concentrate better. It is often an aid to prayer as we symbolically beat the enemy and celebrate the power of God. Praising God is an offensive sound to devils, like the sound of sirens or church bells in the sensitive ears of our canine friends. Picture the scene in the spirit world where demons howl and run away at the sound of praise to God. Praying at the prompting of the Spirit enables us to pray according to the will of God, even at times when we do not consciously know the details about what we should be praying for (Romans 8:26, 27).

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There are two possible imbalances in our attitudes regarding the impact of the spiritual world on the natural world. One is the tendency to blame all conflict and problems on spiritual warfare. We must remember that we live in a fallen world and that bad things happen to good people. Not everything is the devil's fault. The other imbalance is the tendency to see nothing of spiritual warfare in the conflict and problems of life and Christian work. We must remember that there is an unseen enemy who sometimes causes problems.

Even though we may not know which events the enemy initiates, God is at work growing us through all circumstances. He is the chief unseen player in all the drama of life. In other words, every single problem has a spiritual component; and we can learn something from all circumstances, even if just a simple lesson about life processes.

Professional Training or Assignment

Whatever your profession or career, God often works through employers and colleagues to develop your potential. Professional training, assignments, and career-related experiences may be a part of that plan and can serve as a means of promotion. Through your employer or business, God gives new insights to expand your influence and capacity for responsibility. During a given assignment, you learn new skills. You may also gain new insight about what it means to facilitate the work and growth of others. In short, professional assignments can be God's vehicle for making you more useful to both your employer and your Lord.

In college, I was preparing for pastoral ministry. The summer between my junior and senior year, I was asked to take a rural pastorate nearby. I see that assignment as a key part of God's training program for me. It taught me lessons on prayer, fasting, honesty, perseverance, self-denial, focus, discipline in sermon preparation, and ways to love people. Look back now on some assignment you fulfilled in your past, and list the lessons you learned. That helps us identify what God taught us. It is particularly interesting when we see a correlation between what He has taught us in the past and what He is teaching us now.

That year, I traveled to the famous Cathedral of Tomorrow in Akron, Ohio to attend Rex Humbard's annual New Year's Eve service. When I had discussed the trip with some people from the church, I indicated I probably would not go. Later, I changed my mind and went. What I didn't admit at the time—even to myself—was that I didn't want to go with them because they were common country people. While at the cathedral, I met the dean of the Bible college, his wife, and several other people I knew. It was a wonderful service, and I returned home to my rural pastorate. When my congregation learned that I had gone, but not with them, one of the parents of the youth directly confronted me: "You wanted to go; you just didn't want to go with us." I regret that in my pride, I was unwilling to identify with the people to whom the Lord had assigned me. Six months later, some of my youth showed up at my graduation ceremony. Even though they seemed worlds apart from my academic environment, I was genuinely pleased and moved with joy that they were there.

Remember the question: "What am I to learn through this?" In education, it is never wrong for a student to ask the teacher what the point of the illustration is. Our professional assignments are

God's illustrations, and sometimes we need help getting the point. It is better to ask than not to understand the point. His training methods indicate what He plans to do with us. We may even discover patterns, repeats, and review lessons. These reveal what God is really working on in us. If the lesson is important to Him, it should also be important to us. Our pain is wasted if we don't get the point.

It is better to ask than not to understand the point.

Isolation

Like doctors in hospitals who sometimes place special cases in isolation, God sometimes intentionally places his workers in times or circumstances of isolation. He may set a leader aside for an extended time, not because He is *through* with him, but because He is *not through* with him. God may have done everything He can through him unless he experiences further growth and stretching. The "set aside" period is a good time to ask, "What am I to learn from this?" or "What are you saying, Lord?" Then God's purpose for separating us from normal activities can be richly fulfilled. It could be a time of sickness, a suspension from public ministry, a surprise demotion, dismissal, a time of recuperation from an accident, or even a prison term. Recently, Char and I were captivated by a speaker who spoke with great depth for four hours. He shared wonderful insights that he had learned while studying the Bible in his recent prison term! Had his ministry continued with what *looked* like great success, he would have continued with mediocrity. Because he opened his heart during God's isolation process, he had gained much more spiritual insight.

We must not be afraid when God deliberately creates situations to facilitate a sustained conversation with Him. He wants, needs, and deserves all our attention at these times. In fact, that is the whole point. The isolation removes distractions and helps us focus and listen. The Chairman of Human Resource Development in God's Kingdom is the sovereign God, and He will use isolation for His purposes. If you find yourself in isolation, don't interpret the event negatively. Take advantage of the opportunity to decide now, in advance, to flip it around to determine what God is saying. This habit will change your life. God is more interested in your development than your comfort. He needs our attention; that's the purpose of the isolation.

Accepting Closed Doors and Forgiving People

Earlier I mentioned my talented friend and colleague with whom Char and I worked when we first went to the mission field. He had the use of a car, and we rode bicycles. He had an expense account for handling guests, and we did not. He had a secretary who helped him all day and then lived with us! Yet, in spite of what we saw as inequities, we were handling our lot. We had heard that interpersonal relationships on the mission field were often problematic, and we were determined to serve faithfully. We prayed about it, lived with it, and were doing all right.

God is more interested in your development than your comfort.

One day, however, a visiting lecturer from our denomination came to our house. In pastoral kindness, he asked us if there were any problems we wanted to discuss. He told us he understood that often missionaries languish for lack of a sounding board. He offered his ear and heart for our release and comfort. We gradually slipped into telling him about our relationship with our colleague, the secretary who benefited the colleague but who lived in our home, the car he drove while we rode bicycles, his expense account while we entertained at our expense, etc. Our guest offered to pray with us about all these issues. We felt that his curiosity about the “inside story” regarding our lives as missionaries was satisfied and that was the end of that. We forgot about it.

As soon as that guest left the country, my colleague, who had all the perks, called me up and invited Char and me to his house. We were told clearly that we had violated our mission’s ethics by telling a guest about internal mission matters. We were never again to discuss mission business with guests. Even though Char and I felt we had been misunderstood, we once again lived with it. Over the years, we have learned to forgive and release. We continued serving fruitfully in Korea eight years after that colleague left the field. We, too, eventually returned to the United States but only after we had turned a nationalized church over to the Koreans.

When we returned to the United States, we founded a church in our denomination. During this time, I finished my education,

and we helped our boys start their university and academy careers. After five years, we again sought to serve in our denomination's mission department. We then discovered we were not welcome. We never knew why, but I wondered if it was partially caused by the misunderstanding and awkward relationship mentioned above. Looking back, God has sometimes closed one door to motivate us to enter another door. Because of the closed denominational missions' door, we went to China independently. We learned profound things there about the body of Christ we could not have learned working in a single denomination. The church in China says it is living in the post-denominational era, which is largely true. Now, in an international and interdenominational setting, I train missionaries and pastors from many denominations and non-denominational churches from many countries including the United States. God works best wherever we *obey* Him — whether that is in or outside of denominations.

Misunderstandings do occur, and God uses them to close doors. Through the door-closing process, we must learn to recognize His handiwork and not be bitter toward the personalities involved. He closes some doors because He has others to open. If we whine and cry at the closed door, or worse yet, try to break it down, we will not be ready to cheerfully find and walk through the open doors God has down the hallway. Open doors are more fun to walk through. However, in forgiving those who closed doors, we learn lessons that prepare us to humbly serve in new opportunities. Any closed door could be a hint that God has something else. Bitterness and unforgiveness focus on the past and abort the growth process. Focus on finding that “something else” that God has. It is better to seek a positive interpretation for every closed door.

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Self-discipline helps us avoid complaining. While still in the experience, we should maintain a teachable attitude. We should constantly ask ourselves, “What am I to learn through this experience?” Controlling our attitudes in this area helps as we learn self-control in other areas of our lives. In the next chapter, we examine the important habit of regulating ourselves so we can be more effective and fruitful. Personal discipline and self-control help us become effective and fruitful in many different arenas — some of which are addressed in subsequent chapters.