

Your Concrete Weekly Devotionals

October 2017

by Rob LoAlbo

Join us in spirit every Thursday at 9:00 PM, and pray with us for 10 minutes. These devotionals are posted on Facebook every week to assist in that prayer and commitment. For those not on Facebook, below are those posted weekly devotionals. Use them with us as a way to join our prayer group.

We look forward to “seeing” you there!

October 5 – Your Best Life Awaits: Just Be Patient



When my senior student Jackson told me he was going to be applying to the University of Delaware, I was beyond thrilled. He had visited the campus, fell in love with it, and was ready to be a part of the great legacy that had started for me many years ago. As my alma mater, I had frequently talked it up in class, touting its many wonderful assets. I was a Fightin’ Blue Hen all the way, blue and yellow true. As one of my best and brightest students, I was excited for the fact that someone like him would be representing Delaware, as he embodied what it meant to be a UD student. But when the wait-list letter came to him in January, his heart sank and his shoulders drooped, dismayed by the lack of unrequited love from the college.

As the months dragged on and his status of wait-listed remained, he began to begrudgingly look elsewhere for his future as the light on Delaware slowly dimmed. At some time in the spring, he made his way out to the University of Tennessee for a visit, mostly through a chance opportunity, and took a liking to it. It wasn’t what he really wanted, but it was a decent substitute. This fall, he’s reported back to me that he is deliriously happy there and can’t imagine life anywhere else.

A wise man once told me that sometimes life makes decisions for you. The “Jurassic Park” movies have a similar theme: life finds a way. For Christians, we like to suggest that when God closes a door, He opens a window. All three of these approaches are basically surrounding the same idea, that in time, we always end up where we’re supposed to be. The Bible is filled with example of individuals who, like us, were unable to see the planned course of their life, but it was revealed to them in time.

When a group of exiles found themselves discouraged and the light of their hope dimming, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter to them relaying God’s words of encouragement: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (29.11). This verse is usually cited to give encouragement to those who feel lost, letting them know that God has a plan for them. However, it also indicates that the plan is often known only to Him and not to us. That He knows the plan implies trust on our part. We are blind to the course of our life, and we require Him to lay it out to us in due time, and if we trust Him, He will put us where we are supposed to go.

My senior students are panicking right now, as they have no idea where they will be next September. I’ve been trying to keep them as calm as possible, so I let them know that the people who were sitting in their seats a year ago are all somewhere else now, and that they all figured it out. Life found a way, and they all ended up where they were supposed to be. For my current seniors, the only thing that stands between them and the knowledge of where they are going next is time. In time, it will be revealed to them, so there is no need to panic because they’ll end up where they’re supposed to be.

Years ago, after my son was born, my wife and I tried to adopt. We felt that we had the means to help someone who had nothing, so adoption would give us that opportunity. We applied to a Russian adoption agency, interviewed, and were told that we were ideal candidates: we had a good income, we had stability, and we had proven ourselves to be good parents with our son. We went home and planned our life and house for the eventual arrival of our child. The timeframe should have been brief, but after the agency moved our paperwork through several regions over a five-year period and nothing was happening, we began to see the light dimming for us. There were plenty of children in need, but American-Russian relations, when it came to adoption, were being politically strained, and we were caught in the middle.

No matter how hard we tried or how much money we spent, doors were closed in our faces repeatedly. Finally, we figured that maybe God and life were trying to tell us something, so we withdrew our paperwork. We realized that we already had such a great kid, so maybe we should call it quits while we were ahead. Sure enough, two months later, Russia closed the door on all foreign American adoptions, no matter what stage they were in. As such, we embraced the idea of being parents to one child, being able to give him anything he wants (without spoiling him), traveling all over the world, and turning the spare bedroom into a Lego room. Now, we can’t imagine a better life than this one and are grateful for the way it all turned out. God had a plan, but we were blind to the outcome because time is the curtain that separates us from the knowledge of that plan. When God draws that curtain back for us, we realize that we will end up where He wants us to be, sometimes despite our best efforts to the contrary.

Our uncertain future, if we let it, can induce panic, as we want to control where we end up. We need to realize that we don’t have any control to begin with, and that we’ll end up in the right place if we wait on and listen to Him. He’s got a plan, and we need not be worried. In time, we will see the greatness of it, but for now, a little patience and trust will smooth over the journey. Amen.

October 12 – *Finding the Strength to Forgive*



I'm having a hard time forgiving, lately. It's not because I am unable to grant forgiveness when it's asked for. I'm happy to give it out to people who have a humble and repentant heart. I am having trouble forgiving when it isn't being asked for.

When I left school in June and headed into my summer, I'd just had a colleague lie to me, betray my confidence, and

attempt to undermine my authority. He was clearly in the wrong, and I was clearly in the right. Anyone who knew the situation would agree. I tried to open the lines of communication between us, so I quietly and safely sent an email that said we should get together and talk. He never responded or approached me. In fact, we spent about two weeks not talking and never resolved it. We started last year's school year as friends and went into our summers very far apart from one another.

We returned from our summers, and when he spoke to me, he acted as if nothing had happened and that we were all good. I wasn't sure how to respond, so I tried to go with it as much as possible, but inside I was not over what had happened between us. I felt that there was still so much unsettled air between us. Since this person was someone I have to work with on a daily basis, I didn't want to start something up again, but inside I was still angry. So, what does one do when the offending party moves on but the offended party isn't ready to, especially when it's people in our everyday lives?

It's easy to dismiss a person's wrongdoing when you can avoid them. We don't feel forgiveness needs to happen if we don't usually run into them. Out of sight, out of mind. People who have little to no impact on us can be ignored. Hence, the person who cuts us off in traffic is a major offender until we turn the corner and they are out of sight. A person talking during a movie only bothers us until the credits are rolling. But someone we see often and has a large role in our lives, how can we move forward and let go of our anger when the situation has not been resolved?

But isn't forgiveness a sign of softness, where we allow ourselves to be a doormat where others can tread upon us without consequence or admission of guilt? Author and pastor T. D. Jakes has said that, "We think that forgiveness is weakness, but it's absolutely not; it takes a very strong person to forgive." Granting forgiveness when it is undeserved or unasked for is of course difficult, so much so that it takes strength and struggle to be able give it. We seem to have an inherent need for others to admit that they were wrong and sorry, so to deny that need takes strength, whereas to embrace unforgiveable self-righteousness is easy.

Take the example of the prodigal son, a boy who demanded his inheritance, squandered it away on indulgent living, only to find himself broke and destitute to the point of groveling back to his father despite the way he had treated his father in the past. What is most significant to note in this passage isn't necessarily the son's return but the way the father treated him when he returned: "So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15.20). Without even being able to utter a word, the father took his son into his arms. He required no admission of wrongdoing, no asking for forgiveness, not even a "sorry." The father had already forgiven the son well before this moment and was ready to rejoin him whether the son was sorry or not. He chose to love his son regardless of the way he had been treated, a sign of great strength.

So, it came as a strong test for me this past weekend when my own nine-year-old son said some very bad words in anger to a friend of his when that friend was visiting our house. Horrified and ashamed at him for his behavior, my wife and I reprimanded him, and we could see that he too was horrified and ashamed. I so wanted to stay mad and punish him severely for his choice and teach him a hard lesson, but I watched as my wife afterwards took him into her arms and spoke kindly and gently to him, illustrating the way the prodigal's father mustered up strength and embraced his wayward son. Their examples taught me the strength it takes to choose love when anger and resentment reside in our hearts, so I embraced him, too.

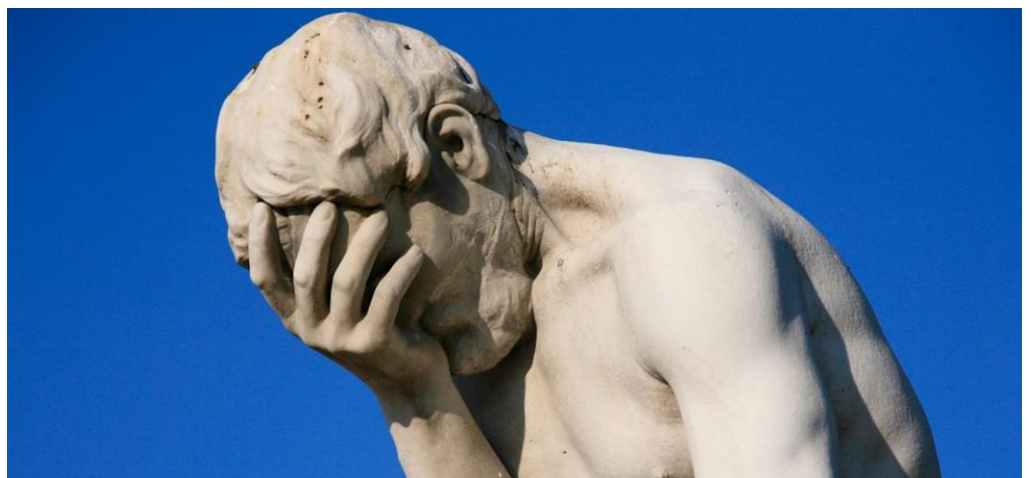
Christ's response to us is the same, that despite the way we treated Him on the cross or the way we treat Him daily, He chooses to love us despite our words and actions. His great strength to do so models for us how we are to release our anger and resentment and instead choose love. This week, when you come across others that you have resentment for due to unresolved issues, pray for the strength to choose love. Choose to let go of your anger, and He will lift your burdens from you, helping strengthen you towards a greater ability to forgive. Amen.

October 19 – *When Life Deals You Bitter Disappointment*

It's been said that if you want to make God laugh, tell him about your future plans. We are trapped in the present, with no possibility of seeing exactly what is coming, and for God who exists outside of time, He has a better sense of what our lives look like. So, when we get our hopes up for what we think is coming, or have certain

expectations for our day, it can sometimes be quite foolish of us to think we know for sure what's coming, which sometimes comes in the form of overwhelming, crushing, disappointment.

Take this past Monday, for example. With the beginning of a three-day



week for me, things were looking good, I had several big plans for some great ideas in motion, and I was hoping to see those plans move forward on this day.

First, I had emailed a great technology idea to my new tech director last week, but hadn't heard from him since. Being time sensitive material, I approached him when I happened to run into him in the hallway. Since we hadn't yet met face to face, I introduced myself and asked him if he had a chance to read my email. Not remembering what I wrote, I refreshed his memory only to see a look of horror come across his face with the realization that he had ignored me. (He suddenly recalled how sick he had been last week and was unable to answer his emails.) After a moment of me talking, with him trying to get away as quickly as possible, I came to realize that he had no intention of following through with my idea.

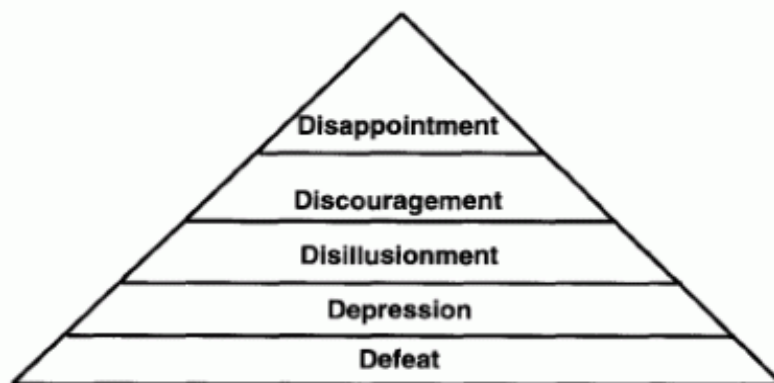
Shortly afterwards, an examination of my first paycheck revealed some discrepancies not in my favor, and of course, no one was answering the phone over at payroll.

Next, I received an email I had been waiting for regarding a school program I had been working on for the last three years, something near to my heart. I was bringing in a guest speaker I had met a while back, someone who impressed me with his take on teenage depression and suicide. It was a message our student body desperately needed to hear given the events of the past few years. Things had been falling into place, until I got the email from my principal who wrote that not only was an influential parent organization not supporting the program financially, they were opposed to it. As such, we were going to have to move to cancel it.

Of course, I received this news on my way to a wake, where what was supposed to be a five-minute visit turned into almost two hours because of the line. And if you've had the kind of day I had, you'll know that a funeral home isn't exactly the cure for depression and disappointment.

To add insult to injury, as I got home and got the mail, I found a jury duty notice waiting for my signature.

Life can be pretty cruel sometimes, never letting up even when you're down. Just when you think you can't take any more kicks in the stomach, another is waiting for you around the corner, and the road to total defeat is a slippery slope. In fact, psychologists have identified what they call the wedge of disappoint, consisting of the following five D's:



Mapped out like a triangle, when we allow each one into our mind, it wedges the door open a little more for the next one, which if we allow it to, eventually opens us up wide enough to allow for utter defeat. So how

do we recover in the face of soul-crushing disappointment, avoiding the trap that leads to defeat? Our answer lies in Moses.

Having grown up in royalty, Moses had been given great privilege and opportunity by the pharaoh's daughter. His future looked promising, but when he witnessed an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew, he acted to stop it. "Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand... When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian" (Exodus 2.12, 15). In a moment, Moses lost everything he had been accustomed to for his entire life, a disappointment to say the least. He could have spent years wallowing in pity over the life he lost, letting it consistently haunt him at every turn. Instead, he saw this as a new chapter in his life, one which included meeting his wife Zipporah and having a child, speaking directly with God and receiving His commandments, and leading a nation to the promised land. He embraced his disappointment not as defeat but as a sign of the next part of his life. He knew God had a plan that He couldn't see, so losing his privileged life might have been immediately crushing, but through time, patience, and resting in the knowledge that God would take care of him, Moses became hopeful.

Disappointment is common to us all. When it happens, we shouldn't try to shut it down, but instead allow it to run its course to the point that it leads to what comes next in our lives. For myself, I let that banner day end in disappointment, along with some discouragement, but when I awoke the next day, through prayer, meditation, and a little encouragement from my wife, I experienced a renewing of my mind and spirit in preparation for the new day. I could have easily moved on to being disillusioned with the people from the previous day, but instead I chose to be open-minded as to what comes next, which wedged open my mind not towards defeat but towards hope. Allowing the cycle to progress creates bitterness, resentment, and pessimism towards the world and others, yet if we can stop the cycle from progressing towards a damaging outlook on life, we can remain hopeful and open to what God has next for us. With His help and the passing of time, we can keep the door open for God's promises and plan through a healthy approach to disappointment, bringing us joy and peace in our lives, drawing us closer to Him. Amen.

October 26 – *Dreaming Reasonably and Achieving Realistically*

I have a morning ritual where as soon as I get up, I step on the scale. I can't start my day without it. Each and every time, as I await the blinking screen to reveal the appropriate number and correctly assess my weight, several prayers run through my head, as I hope that I've miraculously lost those four pounds while I slept. As life would have it, I am never four pounds lighter than when I went to sleep. Disappointment then sets in, as I begin to feel that I'm never going to lose them, ever.

The other day, as I was waiting for the numbers to appear, I finally came to my senses and realized that I will never lose all those pounds overnight, but I might be a small amount (1/4 of a pound, maybe) lighter than I was yesterday. I ended up resetting my expectations towards something more realistic, and when the numbers came up, I found that I wasn't disappointed, again. My realistic goal lent itself to my achieving a measured but reasonable level of success, which encouraged me to work harder towards larger goals, a practice where if we can replicate it in our lives in other areas, will help us to grow in life and in our faith.



My students are often also guilty of this same crime. I've explained to them that there is frequently a direct relationship between time dedicated to writing their papers and the grade they get: the more time you commit, the better your grade. However, they end up waiting until the last minute to write that paper,

leaving mere hours left before it's due. They write as fast as they can until they reach the end of the page and then hit the print button, all with little planning out of the essay. When they get the paper returned with high expectations for a great grade, they are bewildered and angry as to why the grade is so low, as they often don't connect reasonable effort with reasonable goals. To try and combat this practice, I've been establishing short term goals for them before the paper is due, so that they can achieve smaller goals on the way to their great grade. I have them complete their introduction on one evening, plan out their body paragraphs on another, etc., thus forcing them to work on the paper over a few nights so that they have more reasonable, achievable, more realistic goals to complete.

There's something to be said with tempering a child's dreams and helping those dreams to be realistic and achievable. Many young people feel that they can do anything if they want it badly enough, but the truth is that wanting is not enough, especially when the object of desire is well beyond their reach. We love to tell the younger generations to dream big, but when we step aside and they develop an unreasonable goal that they'll never reach as, it all leads to them being detrimentally disappointed when it fails and unable to pick themselves up from their defeat. Instead of allowing them to develop big but impractical dreams, we should step in and help them to shape those dreams towards something big and reasonable.

As a model for careful and reasonable planning, take Christ's ministry as an example. The purpose of His life was to save the world, yet He didn't try to tackle all of that at once or in a short amount of time. He spent a great deal of His life working on Himself and his skill set, getting His education, and developing His prayer life. Waiting until He was in His 30's, He then started His ministry through hard work and careful forethought: "One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night. At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles" (Luke 6.12-3). For someone who's going to save the whole world, twelve people isn't that many with which to work. Yet, He managed to train, teach, and develop these twelve into a strong handful of preachers who managed to spread the message of Christ's salvation through most of the world over a reasonable period of time. Christ could have taken in thousands and worked with them to spread His message, but He knew not to tackle such a large task all at once with such an enormous group of people. Instead, Christ developed

practicable, possible goals over an unhurried amount of time, thus finding success at a reasonable, developed rate, instead of trying to achieve an enormous goal in a very brief amount of time.

Even today, as smokers stare down at a cigarette and long to quit, the decision to tackle it seems overwhelming given the amount of familiarity and addiction they feel. Very few are able to quit cold turkey without sliding right back into old habits. So, smokers develop plans to close out their practice through a series of strategic maneuvers over a specific time period: small, realistic, achievable goals measured out over a reasonable amount of time. And just like them, along with Christ and His disciples, we too must set practical goals for ourselves so that we can find a measured amount of success over a realistic period of time, thus earning encouragement towards greater accomplishments. Should we try to bite off more than we can chew, we end up discouraged, disillusioned, and defeated because we haven't achieved enough, if any, success. For your next big dream, approach steps that are climbable, not cliffs that are unscalable, by taking a minute to look at your goals and dreams with the eyes of a realist, one who plans carefully and creates smaller goals that lead up to larger ones, thus not crushing your hopes but cultivating them for the next climb. Amen.

