

# Priorities

Reaching the Life  
God Intended

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with

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## **Priorities**

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To our children,

Benjamin Enoch Zhijang Ballard  
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# Introduction

“I don’t want to sound like a nag,” I said.

“Then don’t.” He didn’t smile.

It wasn’t his characteristic, *deflect with humor* comment

“If no one else cares enough to tell you,” I continued, “I do.” I paused, trying not to sound harsh or judgmental. “Here it is. You’ve got to get your priorities straight. It’s that simple.”

Defiance flashed in his eyes. He resisted. Then he softened, exhaled, and leaned forward, palms down on the bathroom vanity.

“You’re right,” he said. “I don’t like it, but I know it’s true.”

I washed the shave cream residue from his face and combed his hair. “Today’s the day,” I said. “Get to it.”

Sounds familiar? Ever had a similar *come to Jesus moment* in your bathroom mirror?

Whether you've had the uncomfortable moment with yourself or someone else, priorities are crucial. No one has unlimited time, talents, or treasures.

## **Time**

We all have the same amount of time. No one gets more than twenty-four hours in a day or seven days in a week.

On top of that, life is fragile. Tomorrow is uncertain. We either use our time or lose our time. Priorities help us invest precious time wisely.

## **Talents**

We all have talents. Some have many, others have few. No one can do everything. We must make choices.

How will you use your God-given talents? Priorities will help you invest those talents in what is most important.

## **Treasures**

Likewise, we all have treasures. Some are wealthy. Some have just enough. Some struggle, always seeming to run out of money before running out of month. Yet even the wealthiest have limited resources. All of us must make choices.

How will you spend your treasures? Priorities will help you invest in what is most important.

Is it easy for you to set priorities or is it difficult? Even those who find it easy face bigger challenges,

- living their priorities,
- evaluating their priorities regularly, and
- sticking with them for the long-term.

## **Personal Experience**

I was fortunate. My introduction to priorities began early.

I attended Parkhill Christian Academy from the middle of my second-grade year through high school graduation. The school's educational system engrained priority setting into my life.

Unfortunately, I was a slow learner. My first several years at Parkhill were difficult. I drifted through elementary and middle school, indifferent to the school's *priority* training. I set the lowest possible priorities then ignored them.

The results were as predictable as the lunar cycle. My grades were poor. I lagged behind my classmates. A common assessment of my potential was "I don't think he'll ever graduate from high school." However, my parents, my teachers, and a principle refused to give up on me.

In the ninth grade, things changed. All the effort and energy those caring adults invested in me finally paid off. The idea of priorities sank in. I learned to set meaningful, measurable, achievable goals. I learned to develop action steps to reach those goals. I also learned to evaluate my progress and make the necessary adjustments to achieve my goals.

Before I realized it, for the first time in my life, I caught up to and excelled from the rest of my classmates. In a single year, I completed the ninth and half of the tenth grade.

The next year, I made equal progress.

Living by priorities began to transform my life. It was a great benefit at the time. Living out my priorities has proven even more helpful through more than thirty years of ministry.

During my first year of high school, my dad was forced to take an early retirement due to downsizing of the company he served for more than thirty-three years. He began experiencing health problems. Then shortly after my second year of high school, my mother died. My dad was devastated. Debilitating depression overwhelmed him. If we were going to make it financially, I had to contribute to the household income.

Because of my academic achievements during the first two years of high school, I was able to cut my school hours to a half day and increase my work hours. I stretched my final year over two years and

graduated with my class. This would not have been possible if I had not learned to prioritize my life.

The lessons I learned about priorities, goals, action plans, evaluation, and adjustment have served me well throughout life. In fact, I still use the principles I learned back in 1982. Over the years, the Lord has allowed me to help others learn about setting priorities. Several have asked me to put the most important lessons into a book. That repeated request inspired the following pages.

While I have not included everything I have learned about priorities in this little book, I have included what I believe to be the most important. The lessons came from two sources primarily: First, they came from God's Word. The Bible teaches us more about priorities than any other book. Second, the material represents my personal experience living out the biblical principles. Of course, as stated above, my foundation for discovering biblical priorities was laid back at Park Hill Christian Academy.

I pray that as you read these pages, the Father will help you evaluate your priorities. I also trust He will help you adjust your life to live out His priorities for you. Once the adjustments are made, the real work has just begun!

We all are tempted to ignore our priorities. So we will also consider how to continue living our priorities even when it is difficult. Further, we will note the

blessing of faithfully living God's priorities for our lives.

One suggestion as we begin: prioritize reading and applying one chapter a week for the next five weeks, ask God to show you what He wants you to learn, then read a chapter. Think about the chapter. Pray about the chapter. Reflect on the chapter. Ask the Lord what He wants you to do about it. Respond in a way that pleases Him. In order to help you reflect and respond, an application section will conclude each chapter.

Let's get started.

# Chapter 1

## Examining Your Priorities

I am not only the founding president but also a professor at Northeastern Baptist College in Bennington, Vermont. It isn't my favorite part of the job, but giving examinations is one of my responsibilities. Also, I have made it my personal responsibility to take exams regularly.

Students tend to forget much of the examination material as soon as an exam is over. We call that "downloading" or "dumping." The material studied goes directly from the brain to the test paper, and there it remains to be remembered no more.

I will admit to some personal experience with *downloading* a time or two in my four years of college and seven years of graduate school. However, I take a particular examination on a regular basis, and I never want to forget the questions or my answers. This exam has been very helpful in numerous ways.

Today I invite you to take the same exam. You do not need to study ahead of time.

Also, your answers may differ from anyone else's. They should be personal and individual. We are not trying to make a passing grade but please God. We are discovering where we've come from, where we are, and where we're going in life. Today I invite you to examine your priorities.

*Exam Instructions:* Fold a blank piece of paper in half. On the left side, write the top five to ten priorities you desire for your life. Carefully examine your list. These should be your aspirational priorities. They state the way you aspire to live. When you are certain your list reflects the priorities you truly desire, set it aside and read this chapter. Later we will return to the list.

Right life priorities lead to successful living. Unfortunately, we all struggle with priorities.

Many never stop to list their priorities. They have priorities (everyone does, realize it or not), but their life is unexamined. It is as if they are walking through the dark room of a fun house. They bump into other people and things. They hit brick walls, bounce off, and continue groping in the dark.

Others list their priorities but rarely examine them. They never ask if they are actually living those priorities.

For example, most Christians believe our churches need revival. We believe the nation needs an awakening. Yet few consider their life priorities in light of that belief.

The problem is not new. God's people have always struggled with life priorities. We believe right. We want to do right. Yet somehow, we fail to align our lives with God's priorities.

What happens when God's people have misplaced priorities? What does God do about our misplaced priorities? In other words, how do you know if you have gotten off track and drifted away?

A vivid example is found in the events surrounding Haggai's prophecies. God gave His people a clear priority assignment. They understood. They were neither in the dark nor in doubt. Yet their priorities were misplaced.

God dealt with the problem in three ways. I believe we'll see a similar pattern in our lives today.

## **Confrontation**

Some historical perspectives will help us.

Eighty-six years before Haggai came on the scene, the southern kingdom of Judah went into captivity. From the time Israel divided into two kingdoms, the southern kingdom followed a pattern. They would turn to the Lord for a period of time, usually during a godly king's reign in conjunction with

a Spirit anointed priest or prophet's ministry. God's Word was proclaimed faithfully, and God's people obeyed.

During those times, God blessed the nation. They were prosperous and protected.

Inevitably the leaders died, and spiritual drift set in. Personal priorities began to replace God's priorities. The people turned away from the Lord. Though the Southern Kingdom maintained outward religious rituals throughout their history, the Lord Himself charged, "Your heart is far from me."

### ***Syncretism***

A syncretized religion was introduced. It suggested one could have the best of both worlds; one could serve God and idols; one could maintain temple rituals, receive God's blessings, and enjoy the pleasures and benefits of idol worship on the side.

### ***Rebellion, Revival Cycle***

God's prophets exposed syncretism for the lie it was. Under a prophet's ministry in conjunction with a godly wise king, God's people awakened. They turned to the Lord and away from idolatry. Revival continued as long as the godly leaders lived. A period of spiritual drift followed, resulting in spiritual rebellion. God's chastening followed then a new prophet, and the cycle continued. Revival. Rebellion. Revival. Rebellion.

As the years passed and the cycle continued, the revivals weakened. The nation's repentance was not as complete as before and their faithfulness not as enduring. Rebellion became deeper as well.

The syncretistic religion, once disdained, began to be tolerated. Then it became acceptable. Then it became popular. Then predominate. What was once feared was celebrated, and what was once celebrated was condemned. Good became evil and evil became good. Sound familiar?

### ***God Responds***

God continued to send multiple warnings through His prophets. Eventually, the nation refused to repent, and God faithfully fulfilled His warnings.

God will not compromise the first of His ten commandments: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:3). Israel's children refused to prioritize their relationship with Yahweh. Therefore, God delivered them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire. The nation went into Babylonian captivity in 606 BC. As promised, their captivity continued for seventy years.

### ***God Remembers***

Still, God never forgot His promises to Abraham, Isaac, Israel, and David. The Lord promised

to raise up a new leader after the seventy years. Not an Israeli leader but a foreign monarch. The leader's name would be Cyrus, and he would send the Jews back to Jerusalem. Cyrus would also command them to rebuild God's Temple (Isa. 44:28).

So it happened. As the seventieth year of Jewish captivity approached, the Persians invaded and conquered Babylon. Cyrus came to power as prophesied. Sixteen years before Haggai published his book (536 BC), Cyrus issued a decree for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

Be encouraged. God's Word will always be fulfilled.

### ***Jews Returned***

The Jews returned to their homeland with great excitement and anticipation. Most had not seen Solomon's Temple; they were born in captivity. A few, however, had seen it. They remembered the temple's former glory. No doubt they told the younger people about it.

For those who settled in Jerusalem, the devastation was overwhelming. The walled city was in ruins. The temple they were to rebuild was nothing but rubble. There was no gold, silver, or wood. A few scattered foundation stones remained, but they were covered with debris.

The people arrived in country with a God-given priority and action plans to complete their as-

signment. They began to work, but opposition soon arose. Enemies petitioned the Persian king to stop their work. They claimed the Jews were organizing a rebellion. To make matters worse, the available resources were being used up quickly. It was certain the Persian king would not send more aid. Since the task was hard, the resources were few, the opposition was intense, and no help was on the horizon, the work ceased.

No doubt the delay concerned the Jews at first. The elderly must have warned them that misplaced priorities led to the nation's original demise and the temple's destruction. They never completely abandoned the idea of rebuilding the temple. They just procrastinated.

### ***Delay Justified***

For a while, the topic came up often. "We must rebuild the temple. God promised He would send us back to do it, and He did. We're here. Let's do it."

Everyone agreed. "You're right. It has to be done. It can be done. But..."

Rebuilding was perpetually postponed; it was not a priority.

A common saying ended every reconstruction conversation: "The time has not come, the time that the LORD's house should be built."

God understands. You and I face many challenges. Many things distract, discourage, and derail us

from fulfilling His purpose for our lives, our families, and our churches. He knows we are facing opposition, limited resources, and hard work. Even so, He expects us to make His priorities our priorities. When our priorities are misplaced, He confronts us. And so it happened in Jerusalem.

### ***Misplaced Priorities***

Sixteen years passed. The returned Jews had not managed to remove the rubble or complete the temple's foundation. Rebuilding was rarely mentioned anymore. When it was, some said, "I agree. We'll do it...when the time's right. But not yet. When God removes the obstacles, we'll begin."

### ***Haggai's First Sermon***

Haggai arrived on the scene. He confronted the people with God's message. "This people say, 'The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house be built.' Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying, 'Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this Temple to lie in ruins?'" (1:2-4).

The Lord did not sugarcoat His message neither did the prophet. Haggai delivered what He received.

The Jews never removed rebuilding the temple from their priority list. But it was an aspirational pri-

ority, not an actual priority. They never scheduled or implemented their action plans.

During those years, however, they were not idle. Despite the hard work, opposition, and lack of resources, the people found ways to plant crops, develop businesses, and build their own houses. In fact, they built *paneled houses*. The Hebrew word is *capchan*. The old King James Version translated it, *ceiled*. The word means “to be covered over with a nice finish.” We might think of covering the walls with an expensive wainscoting or carefully milled wood panels.

### ***Misplaced Priorities Succeed***

Nice houses were not the problem. The problem was that while they built nice houses for themselves, the temple lay *in ruins*. Misplaced priorities can succeed. They are achievable.

Jerusalem’s returned residents had a priority problem, not an obstacle problem. Yes, there were challenges to rebuilding the temple. But despite the challenges, they accomplished their actual priorities—building their own houses. The Lord’s work was moved down the priority list. “The time has not come to build the Lord’s house.”

God did not allow His people to continue in their misplaced priorities. He confronted them.

I’m personally familiar with the problem and the confrontation.

### ***My Uncomfortable Confrontation***

It was a beautiful September morning in the fall of 2009. After a great morning devotional time with the Lord, I headed to the church to begin a busy week. My worship time spilled over into the thirty-minute drive to the church. I sang praises to the Lord as I drove down I-93. Getting off at exit 5 in North Londonderry, I was not ready for the time with the Lord to end. I pulled off the highway and spent more time praying and singing praises to the Lord.

After a little while, as I merged back into traffic, I said, “Father, thank you so much for all You have done and are doing! Thank you for my wife, my son, the church, and all that you are accomplishing in this town.”

Immediately, an old but familiar thought popped into my mind, *Mark, you are too comfortable*. The Lord had used the same thought to prepare me to move to New England almost twelve years earlier.

I did not like the thought. I said, “Lord, it’s about time I enjoyed a little comfort. Cindy and I have put in our time of sacrifice. Father, we came here with nothing and we still have nothing. But finally, we’re receiving consistent paychecks. Lord, we have a son now. We have new responsibilities. We can’t even contemplate another *uncomfortable* move. Lord, I like being just a little comfortable.” Then I pushed the thought from my mind.

In that one moment, I went from praise and submission, to adjusting my priority list. I did not remove *obeying God* from my priority list. I just shifted it down a bit. My comfort and my family's comfort moved ahead on my priority list. In that moment, my priorities were misplaced.

The Father always *confronts* misplaced priorities. It wasn't constant. It wasn't even daily. But several times throughout the month, the Lord gently brought me back to that moment. He reminded me of my misplaced priorities. Each time, I offered a few excuses and put it out of my mind. But God's confrontation intensified.

Throughout October, the internal struggle grew. The Father reminded me of many things He had done over the years to prepare me for that specific moment in time. Each time the confrontation grew, the Lord's conviction became more difficult to ignore. The issue came to a head during the final weekend of October.

The Lord made it abundantly clear that He was calling me to leave the comfort of a secure pastorate and step out in faith to start Northeastern Baptist College. While the battle within had gone on for well over a month by this point, I had not told my wife, Cindy, about my struggle. Why? Every time God called us to step out in faith to less or no salary in the past, Cindy was supportive. When I shared such a struggle, Cindy said, "Well, I don't know how we'll make it, but if God is calling us, we must do it. He will

provide somehow.” Those words encouraged me in the past. This time, the thought of hearing Cindy say it scared me. So I kept the struggle to myself.

On Friday night of the final weekend in October, we held a one-night revival service at our church. A friend came to preach the service. The next day, he was to lead a pastoral counseling training seminar for some of the pastors in our association. He would again preach at our church on Sunday.

My friend, Marvin Jones, preached a great message on Friday night. Repeatedly, throughout the sermon, I said, “Amen!” The Holy Spirit spoke to me. “What about you? Why won’t you surrender to my call?” The confrontation intensified.

As I arrived to set up for the Saturday seminar, I thought, *At least, I’m safe today. Marvin is teaching these guys about counseling.*

At some point during every session, however, Marvin stopped his instruction. He said something like, “This has nothing to do with the topic at hand, but men, I believe the Lord wants me to say something to you.” He chased an apparent rabbit trail but he was hot on my trail. He spoke directly to me, though he didn’t know it. I couldn’t wait for the day to end.

Saturday night, I told Cindy, “I think the Lord is calling us to step out in faith and start a Baptist college to train students to impact the Northeast with the gospel. Cindy, we have no money. This will be the most difficult thing we have ever done. If we attempt

this, I have no idea how we will survive, much less open a college.”

Cindy replied, “Mark, I don’t know how we can make it either, but if God is calling us, we must do it. He will provide somehow. Just be sure God is calling. If He is, let’s do it.” The very response I feared!

During Marvin’s sermon on Sunday morning, I did not utter an “Amen.” In fact, I don’t know what my friend preached. Through the entire service, God confronted me. I could think of nothing else until I surrendered. Finally I bowed my head and said, “Yes, Lord. I surrender to Your will. Please forgive me for prioritizing my comfort over Your will. With Your help, we will start a Baptist college in New England.” And so, we did.

Is the Lord confronting you with misplaced priorities today? If so, the confrontation will not go away. Stop reading now and surrender your priority list to God.

The path may be difficult. Opposition may rise. The resources may be few or even nonexistent. But following God’s priorities for your life is always the best path.

When God confronts His people with misplaced priorities, a decision must be made. We either adjust our priorities to match His priorities or we continue to do our own thing. It is crucial to understand that when we refuse to realign our priorities, God does not surrender to our wills. He does not change His mind. Rather He moves from confrontation to correction.

## Correction

When God confronts us, as we continue in our misplaced priorities, He corrects us. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China and founder of the China Inland Mission, once said, “Every work of God has three stages: first it is difficult, then it is impossible, and then it is done.”

Taylor followed the Lord’s priorities for his life despite extreme challenges. He constantly lacked resources, but he turned to the Father in prayer. He asked Him to meet his financial needs, and He did. The wisdom expressed in a simple sentence, “First it is difficult, then it is impossible, and then it is done,” speaks volumes.

Human wisdom says, “It is difficult, so I won’t start,” or “It was difficult and now it’s impossible. I quit.” Such was the case with the Jews who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. When the difficult work faced serious opposition and a lack of resources, they quit working on the temple. God confronted them, but they still said, “The time has not come, the time that the LORD’S house should be built.” Therefore, God moved beyond confrontation to correction. Haggai described the Father’s corrective measures.

You have sown much, and bring in little;  
You eat, but do not have enough; You drink,  
but you are not filled with drink; You clothe

yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes. "You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?" says the Lord of hosts. "Because of My house that *is in ruins* while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, the earth withholds its fruit. For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of *your hands*." (Hag. 1:6, 9-11)

Not every trial is rooted in misplaced priorities, but some are. Some trials are caused by disobedience. Others, like the trials the Jews encountered when they first returned to Jerusalem, come from the enemy.

Though we live in the age of grace, we are not exempted from enemy's attacks. Satan and his demons launch spiritual attacks, intended to keep us from accomplishing the work to which God called us. If we surrender to trials and jettison God's priorities, things only get worse.

So it was with the returned exiles in Jerusalem. They reacted in fear. The difficult work, opposition, and lack of resources defeated them. They should have pressed forward in faith. Instead, they took the

resources they had and tried to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

“We will build the temple,” they said, “but not now. When God gives us all the silver and gold we need, we’ll act. Until then, it’s clear the time has not come.” As a result, all their attempts at self-protection and comfort failed.

They sowed seed but little grew. They focused on cozy, warmth, comfort, but the cold seeped into their bones. They earned money and secured it in a money pouch. When it was time to pay for a transaction, they discovered a hole and an empty pouch. Opposition was nothing compared to God’s correction.

Every time God’s people prioritize personal comforts over His commands, things get worse not better. We think we are protecting our families, our church budgets, and personal security. In reality, we are acting in fear and inviting God’s correction. He wants us to keep His priorities as our priorities. He wants us to

- obey;
- walk in faith, not fear; and
- trust Him to provide what we lack.

When we choose fear instead of faith, He corrects. So I’ve learned.

### ***Accommodating Fear***

In the summer and fall of 1994, I adjusted my priorities to accommodate my fear. It did not go well. Still, God was gracious. He corrected me and taught me a valuable life lesson.

While in seminary, I pastored a small country church in North Carolina. Cindy and I loved the people, and they loved us. Despite the congregation's petite size, God worked. Several came to faith in Jesus. We enjoyed the ministry. We would have been contented to spend a lifetime, reaching that community.

One Tuesday, a seminary friend urged me to go with him to talk with the visiting representatives from the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. They were on campus recruiting students to spend the following summer starting churches. The program offered church planting field experience and eight hours credit toward the Master of Divinity degree.

"We both planted churches before coming to seminary," my friend said. "We should go talk to them."

I was not interested, but my friend was relentless. He continued to bring it up throughout the day. Finally I said, "Look, I'm happy at my church. I have no intention of leaving it."

My friend seemed to accept my answer but asked me to go with him. He was interested. I agreed.

During the initial conversation, the representative asked if I was interested. My response to her was the same as to my friend. Eventually the conversation turned back to me. My friend explained my previous church planting experience. Before leaving the building, the Home Mission Board representative convinced me to at least pray about the possibility.

At home that night, I shared the experience with Cindy. She said, “Well, Mark, we should at least pray about it. If the Lord leads us to do this, we should. We will just have to trust Him to provide. He’s never let us down before.” We prayed that night and again the next morning.

Back on campus the next day, I spoke with the representative again. This led to several conversations with leaders from various states and associations. Eventually the Lord confirmed that we were to participate in the summer program. We were assigned to a town in Florida that had no Baptist church.

Next, we faced the difficult task of telling our church. I believed the Lord called us to resign, spend the summer planting a church in Florida, then return to seminary in the fall for my final year of the Master of Divinity program.

Friends asked, “What will you do at the end of the summer?”

We had no idea. I was certain, however, that the Lord had led us to resign and step out in faith, trusting His plan for us in Florida and beyond. Advice

flowed in from all directions. Our church did not understand. Our friends did not understand. Even family members questioned our decision. The consistent advice was “Take a leave of absence from your church in North Carolina. Come back at the end of the summer and pick up where you left off.”

On our final Sunday with the church, the chairman of the deacons told me they needed to have a business meeting at the conclusion of the service. I expected they planned to form a pastor search committee.

“We are called to order,” he began. “One of the deacons has a motion to bring before the church.”

Another deacon said, “Mr. Chairman, I make a motion that we refuse our pastor’s resignation and give him a leave of absence for the summer. He can go start a church in Florida and return in the fall to serve as our pastor.”

The motion was seconded. They voted by standing affirmation. It was unanimous.

I sat there in shock. I did not know what to say. I was overwhelmed with their love and support. All the advice I had received came flooding into my mind. From a human perspective, there was only one possible response. I had to say *yes*. But deep inside, I was convinced this was not God’s leading. I did not know what to do.

Finally, I spoke. “Thank you. You are so gracious, and we love you. I cannot give you an answer. Cindy

and I need to pray about this. I do not know what the Lord has for us in the fall. He only showed us that we were to resign and go to Florida for the summer. We will pray and I will contact the chairman of deacons with our answer by Wednesday night.”

The pressure continued to build.

On Wednesday, I called the chairman, “I still don’t know what the Lord has for us in the fall. All the advice I have received tells me we should accept the church’s gracious offer. We have decided to accept with one condition. We do not know what the Lord has in store. We may stay here only a few weeks or months or it may be for the long term. We simply do not know. I want to be sure the church understands that.”

“That works for us,” he said. “Go with our blessing. Come back and be our pastor.” While the decision eased the pressure of the moment, deep down I knew that we exchanged the Lord’s leading for comfort. We exchanged His priority for the preference of others and we did it out of fear.

The summer went well. In ten weeks, we visited every home in the small town, started a children’s ministry, a weekly Bible study, and prepared for the launch service of the new church. God blessed the work tremendously.

A couple weeks before our time in Florida ended, we received a phone call from a church in Virginia. They had received my résumé. The interesting thing

was I had not put out a résumé since before becoming pastor of the church in North Carolina. The résumé had a phone number from several years earlier. When they could not reach us, they moved on to other résumés. But my name kept coming back to the search committee. They tried to find us again. Once again, they could not track us down and they moved on. The Lord continued to bring my name back to the prayerful committee. Eventually, they found our number in Florida.

Two days later, we had a conference call interview. It went well. We hung up the phone, and I looked at Cindy. “Cindy, that is where God wants us to be, and I have blown it by agreeing to return to North Carolina.”

Sure enough, the chairman of the committee called later and wanted to know if I would consider coming to Virginia for a second interview and to preach in view of call. I shared our situation and said, “I really do not know what God is going to do with this, but I need to be true to my word and return to North Carolina.”

“Why don’t you all pray about it, and if the Lord leads, call me in a month or two.” He agreed.

The return to our church in North Carolina was a joyful reunion. The Lord provided a furnished house for us to rent.

Before long, we were busy with my last year of seminary and serving the church. However, we were

miserable. The Father's correcting hand was upon us. He met our basic needs, but life was hard. We loved our church family, but we knew we were not supposed to be there.

At night, I sat on the front porch, looking out over a field as the sun set and the stars and fireflies appeared. I prayed, "Lord, I blew it. You have put me on a shelf. You will never use me to lead this church forward, and I have missed out on the church You had for me to lead. Father, please be merciful to me."

I was certain we would never hear from Virginia again. However, our God is gracious, full of mercy and compassion.

One night, our landlord came down the dusty road to our house. "You have a phone call up at the big house," he said.

We could not afford a phone. We had given our landlord's number to several people in case we were needed. I went up to his house and answered the extension in his garage.

The chairman of the pastor search committee from Virginia said, "We have prayed, and we believe you are God's man for our church. Would you please come speak to the committee in person and preach in view of a call?"

The Father graciously gave us the opportunity to adjust our priorities. We surrendered to His leading once again.

Before long, we were living and serving in Vir-

ginia. Amazingly, this church became what I call “my Philippi.” Though we have served in many capacities over the years, this church remains special to this day.

As the Church of Philippi was Paul’s partner in the Gospel for life, so Deerfield Baptist Church became our partner for life. Even today, a member of Deerfield serves on the board of trustees of Northeastern Baptist College. Several members have been on mission trips to serve with us.

God had a plan that will last for a lifetime. I almost missed it because I acted out of fear, trying to watch out for my own comfort. Our gracious Father forgave me and put me back on the path of following His priorities for my life.

If today you find yourself under God’s correcting hand, turn back to Him. If you have exchanged His priorities for your own comfort, repent. Acknowledge your sin. He will forgive. He will use you again. Adjust your priorities and watch how He will move.

## **Commands**

When our priorities are misplaced, the Lord confronts us, corrects us, and commands us to adjust our priorities. Notice how this happened in ancient Jerusalem.

In the middle of his first sermon, Haggai declared, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains and bring wood and

build the Temple that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,' says the LORD" (1:7-8).

The Lord commanded His people to adjust their priorities and get back on track to fulfilling His call on their lives. Notice that the three-part command included action plans.

### ***Available Resources***

First, gather the available resources. This is interesting. A lack of resources was one reason the people stopped working on the temple sixteen years earlier. Now as a consequence, the Lord was taking away their limited resources and comforts little by little. Even so, God called attention to the available resources.

I imagine some of those who had seen Solomon's Temple's thought, "What? Gather wood? Seriously? Doesn't Haggai know that wood isn't enough to do this job? Has no one told him the wood must be overlaid with silver and gold? We have no silver! We have no gold!"

Too often, we focus on what we do not have when God wants us to use what we do have.

If you go to Israel today and stand on the Temple Mount, you cannot help but see the irony in this text. God's people neglected working on the temple for nearly sixteen years.

"We can't rebuild," they said. "We want to. And

we will. When the time's right...but not now. We don't have the necessary supplies."

Then Haggai arrived. "Turn around," he said. "Look, just over there across the Kidron Valley. The Mount of Olives is covered with wood. Stop worrying about what you don't have! Go over there and gather the wood God has already provided."

God did not mention the silver and gold. They did not need it at that point. One needs no wall covering when one has no walls.

Are you struggling with a lack of resources? I understand. Believe me. But are you using what the Lord has already provided? Just as He commanded the Jews, so the Lord calls us to gather the available resources and put them to work in His service now.

## **Work**

The second part of the command is simple: "Get to work! Stop talking about what you intend to do someday. Organize the woodchoppers and wood haulers and go to work." Next after transporting the wood to the site, "build the temple."

Too often, God's children talk about the need for work. We train ourselves in different ways to get to work. We pray about working. We even say, "The need is urgent. We must get to work." But we do not do any work.

God's command is clear. No more delay! Get to work!

## ***Glorify God***

The result of obeying God's command leads to the third part of His command: "Glorify Me!" When God's people stop delaying, gather the resources, and get to work, God is glorified. He said it. "Build the temple, and I will 'take pleasure in it and be glorified.'"

Do you want to glorify God? Of course, you do. Every Christian does. The good news is you can. You don't need an ecstatic experience. You don't need to discover a previously hidden secret. Just do what God told you to do. Get started, and He will be glorified. No magic required, just simple obedience.

## **Conclusion**

Remember that piece of paper you folded in half? It is time to open it again. Look at the list of priorities you wrote on the left-hand side. Examine them. Are they actual priorities or aspirational priorities? Ask the Lord to reveal what your real priorities have been. List those on the right side of the paper. Don't rush. Be honest with yourself and with God.

Three questions will reveal your true priorities. Ask yourself:

1. How do I spend my time?
2. How do I use my talents?
3. How do I spend my treasures?

Where you spend your time, talents, and treasures reveals your true priorities. Jesus Himself said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21).

Take some time to get alone with God and your piece of paper. Honestly compare your actual priorities with what you now understand to be God’s priorities for your life. Ask the Lord to

- forgive you where you have let His priorities slip. He is always faithful to forgive and restore His children.
- help you get on track.
- adjust your priorities to align with His priorities for your life.

Trust Him to strengthen you, help you, and provide whatever you need to live out His priorities for your life. Gather the available resources, get to work, and glorify God!

And now comes the hard part.

## **Application**

If you have not yet taken the test, do so now on the following pages.

ASPIRATIONAL PRIORITIES

ACTUAL PRIORITIES