

Forever Faithful

“But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus — the work of telling others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love. And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. Let me say plainly that I have been faithful. No one's damnation can be blamed on me, for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants for you” (Acts 20:24-27, *NLT*).

John C. Bowling in *Grace-Full Leadership* relates a story of a sculptor who worked vigorously on carving the head of Abraham Lincoln from a large piece of marble. The woman who cleaned his work area swept around the large stone daily. One day, as the sculptor's work progressed, she began to see Lincoln's face emerging from the marble. She quickly stopped, turned, and asked the sculptor, “Is that Master Lincoln?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“How did you know he was in there?” she asked.

When God looked at Saul He saw the chief persecutor of His Church. He envisioned what could be. He saw the Apostle Paul (then Saul) as one of the greatest missionaries and church planters of all time. How was this possible? He utilized “double vision”—the ability to see both what is and what can be. All great leaders possess this ability. Bowling said, “This double vision helps enable us to keep our sights set on the future as we deal with the daily demands of leadership.” It also enables us to see great potential in others. Stephen R. Covey in *Principle-Centered Leadership* said, “They see the oak tree in the acorn and understand the process of helping the acorn become a great oak.”

H. Dale Burke reminds us that “faith always focuses beyond the present, beyond ‘what is’ to ‘what could be.’” Faith and vision are inseparable.

Walt Disney had a vision for Disney World and Epcot (Florida) that superseded his original Disneyland (California). He passed away before its opening. Walt's widow was asked to speak at the opening ceremonies. The man doing the introduction said, “Mrs. Disney, I just wish Walt could have seen this.”

She stood up and simply said, “He did,” and sat down.

One of the executives remarked to the press, “You know it's precisely because Walt could see Disney World that it's a reality today.” Walt could see each detail of the final blueprint in his mind before the ground was ever broken. Walt was a great visionary. Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus studied ninety top leaders. They discovered they had something in common: they all had a gripping vision.

Receiving the Vision

“And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (Acts 9:5-6).

Saul’s vision began with a knockdown experience on the Damascus Road. He asked two questions:

1. Who are you, Lord?
2. What do you want me to do?

Once he understood the answer to the first, He spent the rest of his life asking the second. He constantly endeavored to be inline with the Master’s will.

Those two questions, lead to three more. These are supplied by H. Dale Burke in his book, *Less is More*:

Destination Question	Where are you going?
Road Map Question	How will you get there?
Value versus Cost Question	What is the cost of making the trip?

Ayn Rand as quoted in *The Power Principle* said, “Throughout history, brave men and women have gone down new paths armed with nothing more than their own vision.” Visionary leaders are pathfinder and pacesetters.

Spiritual vision is a God-sized thing. It takes God’s help to accomplish. It will also take the help of others. “But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:15-16).

Vision is the plan God has prepared for His servant. “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10).

Vision (many times) outlives the visionary. Paul was a recipient of the vision given to Abraham. It was passed from generation to generation. God’s plan to bless the nations can be seen throughout His Word.

“I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to

bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house” (Isaiah 42:6-7).

“And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Acts 3:25, *NIV*).

Your vision will make room for you. It will be identified by others. It will pass their test: “On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews” (Galatians 2:6-10, *NIV*).

Realigning the Vision

Is this aligned with my vision? Everything should pass this test. Ever notice what happens when a driver takes his hands off a steering wheel or handlebars? The vehicle or bicycle will start drifting a bit to the left or right. Realignment is needed to avoid an accident. A firm grip on the steering wheel helps too.

Obedience to the vision is a daily decision.

“To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. Whereupon, O king Agrippa, ***I was not disobedient*** unto the heavenly vision” (Acts 26:18-19).

Repeating the Vision:

Nehemiah understood the value of repeating the vision. He repeated it after twenty-eight days. There is safety in repetition.

Paul Atwater in his article “How to Start Casting a Vision for Your Church” explains that “Communicators get tired of repeating the vision just about the time when people are starting to internalize it.” He also said, “The biggest mistake I have made over the years is failing to reiterate the vision enough. Every time I go back to communicating the vision, my best leaders get fired up. They tell me that they needed the reminder.”

He suggested the following ways to remind people of the vision.

1. Commit to preaching about the vision at set times in the year.
2. Make the vision so simple it can be inserted anywhere in a message. For example, John Maxwell said, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.”

3. Experiment with your own ideas. Atwater uses “Sixty seconds of vision” just before the morning sermon. Repeat key phrases or slogans.
4. Tie the vision to life-change stories.

Nelson Searcy in “Tips on Developing and Communicating Vision” adds: Verbalize clearly. If you can’t say it clearly, you don’t know it completely. If you can’t say it—how do you expect them to say it? Make it short. Here’s an example: “Passing the truth to the next generation!” (Jim Poitras). Simpler still: “Entrust.”

Searcy also made another interesting point: “You cannot lead without a vision of the future. Show me a person with vision and I’ll show you a future leader. (I say a future leader because vision must be cultivated, defined, and cast).” John C. Bowling said, “You tell me your vision, and I will tell you your future.”

Maybe that is one of the reasons God said: “Then the LORD said to me, “Write my answer in large, clear letters on a tablet, so that a runner can read it and tell everyone else. But these things I plan won't happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed” (Habakkuk 2:2-3, *NLT*).

I love that Scripture, except the part that says the vision won’t happen right away. I like the idea of running with the vision. Words like “slow, wait patiently...” are not usually in my vocabulary. I guess that is another reason for repeating the vision. People may forget. I may forget. The good things in life are worth waiting for, working for, and worth repeating.

You can place the vision on banners, bookmarks, and bulletins. Use creative ways to keep the vision alive, and before your people.

Mary Axner in “Developing and Communicating a Vision” believes that sharing the vision is the central role of a leader. She said, “As a leader, you have to help people take your vision and make it their own.”

I enjoyed an article entitled “Vision Testers” by Melinda Poitras. She writes, “Vision often causes change no-one else can even believe possible (or even want, for that matter)...No good change comes without opposition. There are going to be people who criticize you, make fun of you, and more likely than not, try to stop you.” Sanballat became incensed and ridiculed the wall-builders, throwing insults in their faces. Melinda points out their apt response. They prayed. And, they kept right on working. They knew they had a good work to accomplish. Nothing could stop them. Sanballat and a few others even tried attacking them, but they “trusted in God, knowing that everything would turn out alright, and it did.” Nehemiah remained aligned to his vision!

Another word for “realignment” is “focus” Vision provides focus. Unfortunately, we can not set our vision on “auto-focus.” Obtaining and maintaining correct focus doesn’t just happen. It takes realignment and refocusing. Otherwise, our vision will become blurred. Paul advised that we stay in focus: “keep our eyes fixed...” Jesus pursued His vision with focus: endured the cross, scorned shame, and fulfilled His purpose: providing salvation for all who believe. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-3, *NIV*).

Reviving the Vision

Revival refers to bringing something back to life. Do not allow your vision to die. Breathe new life into it! Wake up your dreams!

“But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14).

Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, is a native of Ghana. He recently returned home a hero. Billboards project his picture, the United Nations logo and proclaim, “Welcome Home. You have made Ghana proud!”

In 1997 Kofi Annan addressed MIT graduates and told of his own experience as an MIT student. Walking along the Charles River in his first term, he reflected on survival in the midst of over-achievers. The answer came to him, “Follow your own inner compass....Listen to your own drummer. To live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to go there.” (Sales 1997) Kofi Annan was able to realign himself with his vision throughout his forty year tenure with the United Nations.

H. Dale Burke said, “When your memories are more exciting than your dreams, you’ve begun to die.” It’s time to revive your vision!

I like talking about the future. I plan to live there. Bill Allen in *Built to Last* said, “Boeing (*great airplane builders*) is always reaching out to tomorrow. This can only be accomplished by people who live, breathe, eat and sleep what they are doing” (*italics added*).

We need to be consumed by the vision. We should possess a burning desire or passion to see the vision come to pass. There must be fire in our souls.

Realizing the Vision

Realizing your vision will be costly. It will require many things.

Commitment: It's a daily decision and struggle. "Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone desires to be My disciple, let him deny himself [disregard, lose sight of, and forget himself and his own interests] and take up his cross and follow Me [cleave steadfastly to Me, conform wholly to My example in living and, if need be, in dying, also]. For whoever is bent on saving his [temporal] life [his comfort and security here] shall lose it [eternal life]; and whoever loses his life [his comfort and security here] for My sake shall find it [life everlasting]" (Matthew 16:24-25, AMP).

Sacrifice: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Romans 12:1-2).

Willingness to change: "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:22, NIV).

Discipline: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:21-27, NIV).

Willingness to improve/continuous improvement: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended..." (Philippians 3:12-13).

Contentment: "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11-13).

Faithfulness: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1-2).

Hard work: Good things don't just happen. You get what you have planned and worked for. Stephen Covey in *Principle-Centered Leadership* refers to the law of the farm: "The quick easy, free, and fun approach won't work on the farm because there we're subject to natural laws and governing principles...The only thing that endures over time is the law of the farm: I must

prepare the ground, put in the seed, cultivate it, weed it, water it, then gradually nurture growth and development to full maturity...There is no quick fix, where you can just move in and make everything right with a positive mental attitude and a bunch of success formulas. The law of the harvest governs.”

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:7-10).

Rejoicing the Vision

The close of Paul’s life found him in a damp, dark, dirty prison cell. Yet, he was not discouraged, defeated, or demoralized. He remained faithful!

“As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me — the crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that great day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his glorious return” (2 Timothy 4:6-8, *NLT*).

James Dobson and Gary Bauer in *Children at Risk* share a story that illustrates the point. A Sunday morning terrorist bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut left hundreds of Americans killed or wounded as they slept. A few days later, the Marine Commandant visited some of the wounded soldiers in the hospital. Among them was a Corporal that was severely wounded in the incident. He had so many tubes running in and out of his body that he looked more like a machine than a man. As the Commandant visited him, he motioned for a piece of paper and a pen. Racked with pain, he struggled to write a brief note. On it were two simple words—“Semper Fi”—the Latin motto of the Marines meaning “forever faithful.”

Here is a glimpse of the end result of Paul’s vision: “After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9-10).

Surely Paul heard those treasured words, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful...Come and share your master's happiness!” (Matthew 25:23, *NIV*).

Paul was faithful to his vision. He passed it on to the next generation. Eventually it has been passed to you and me. May those that follow after us find us forever faithful.

"O may all who come behind us find us faithful, may the fire of our devotion light their way. May the footprints that we leave, lead them to believe, and the lives we live inspire them to obey. O may all who come behind us find us faithful."(Jon Mohr)

Study Questions

1. What is double vision? _____

2. Saul's vision began with what two questions?
1) _____
2) _____

3. The questions mentioned in answering question two above lead us to three more questions. What are they?
1) _____
2) _____
3) _____

4. What is vision? _____

5. Explain how vision (at times) outlives us. _____

6. Express what is meant by realigning with the vision. _____

7. What was Paul's vision? _____

8. What happens when a leader repeats the vision on a regular basis? _____

9. Identify three ways to remind people of the vision.
1) _____

