Be WHAT?

Be not afraid, be strong, be not discouraged, be anxious for nothing, be transformed. How are we supposed to obey God's seemingly impossible commands?

During a recent sermon, our pastor was teaching through Jesus' healing of a leper, who threw himself on Jesus' mercy and implored Him:

"Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean."

And He stretched out His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately the leprosy left him. (Luke 5:13)

I was struck by Jesus' command, "Be cleansed."

Huh?

How does a leper, afflicted by an incurable disease that isolated him so terribly, just . . . "be cleansed"?

How does one obey a command like that?

Further, how does one obey similar seemingly impossible commands, such as:

- Be not afraid.
- Be strong.
- Be not discouraged.
- Be anxious for nothing.
- Be transformed.

It makes me smile to think about the one answer that all these "Be _____" commands have in common:

We can't do it. Jesus wasn't kidding when he said in John 15:5, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you abide in Me and I abide in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from Me

you can do nothing."

What we CAN do, *all* we can do, is to open ourselves up to the grace and power of God, giving Him access to ourselves, and inviting Him to do the work, to make the changes.

How was the leper cleansed? Jesus took his leprosy into Himself, I think, exchanging His health and "leprosy-freeness" for the man's horrible sickness. Jesus' holiness and perfection destroyed the leprosy the way bleach destroys mold and mildew. The point is, Jesus did it.

"Be Not Afraid"

I understand there are 365 commands to "be not afraid" in the Bible, one for each day of the year. When we are beset by fear, how can we stop being afraid? How do we just turn it off?

We can't. But Jesus can.

Just as He reassured Joshua in entering the Promised Land that He was with him and would never leave him or forsake him (Joshus 1:5), Jesus promised us before leaving earth to go back to heaven, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

The last two medical procedures I had done, I was scared. I was so scared I was literally shaking. I couldn't turn off the fear, but I could (and did) remind myself that Jesus was with me, He had me, He was in charge and taking care of me. That's what I focused on, and that's what shrank the fear.

I get that; as a mother, when my young kids were scared, I would reassure them with, "I'm here, I'm here, Mommy's here with you."

"Be Strong"

As a polio survivor whose entire left leg was originally

paralyzed and has been very weak my whole life, I can truly appreciate the apparent craziness of this command. It's like my brain telling my frail and lame leg, "Hey! Be strong!" Ain't gonna happen! So why would God give us this command?

We see the full story in Ephesians 6:10, which literally says, "[B]e being strengthened in the Lord and in the strength of His power." The verb is present passive imperative, which means we are told to move out of the driver's seat and let the Lord drive. Let Him be strong in us; let Him pour the power of His might into and through us.

It's like allowing ourselves to be hooked up to a "Jesus IV" so that His power and strength flows into our veins.

It's like buckling ourselves into an airplane seat, sitting back, listening to the mighty jet engines roar to life, and allowing the pilot to hurtle us down the runway, gaining speed, until the plane takes off and we are soaring through the skies. Somebody else does all the work.

The way to "be strong" is actually to be strengthened by a power and force not our own, by receiving and trusting in God's strength and not trying to be strong in our own strength.

"Be Not Discouraged"

This command is often paired with the command to not be afraid, which makes sense. In the Old Testament, God linked His command to "be not discouraged" with the powerful promise of His presence and power for His people. Since God is not only powerful but also sovereign—He has everything under control and will work everything together for our good if we love Him and are called according to His purpose, Romans 8:28—we can jettison discouragement and be encouraged.

I love this passage in 2 Chronicles 32:7—

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him.” I’m pretty sure the apostle John had this in mind when he wrote in the New Testament, “Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world (meaning Satan).”

And how encouraged was the prophet Elisha’s servant who “had risen early and gone out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was circling the city. And his servant said to him, “Alas, my master! What shall we do?”

So he answered, “Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”

Then Elisha prayed and said, “O LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.” And the LORD opened the servant’s eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15-17)

We can choose to be encouraged over discouragement if we remember that there is a spiritual reality in the heavenly realms that our physical eyes can’t see, another reason to trust God.

“Be Anxious for Nothing”

The twin terrorists of anxiety and depression have a chokehold on many people today, especially in the wake of the pandemic. Yet we are told in Philippians 4:6 to “be anxious for nothing.” I’m so glad there is a comma and not a period after the word *nothing*, because the antidote for anxiety is right there in the text: “but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

I think Paul had meditated on his friends’ notes of the Sermon

on the Mount, where Jesus challenged His audience's worry about the basics of life in Matthew 7:25-34. His perspective was to trust His Father, who cared far more for people made in His image than lesser parts of His creation that He also cared for.

The antidote for anxiety is to tell God what we're concerned about, but not to stop there: also focus on and deepen our understanding of just how loving, kind and generous the Father is toward us.

Wise people have defined anxiety as "fear of loss." When we focus on and trust in God instead of the things we are afraid of losing, the anxiety will shrink.

"Be Transformed"

Romans 12:2 says to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds." We can't transform ourselves, we need to give God permission to change us from the inside out. It really starts with recognizing the need to BE transformed in the first place, with the humility that begins to see how much we fall short of Jesus' command to "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Oh look, there's another "Be _____" command! Be perfect! Yikes! How can we do that?

By being transformed.

How do we do *that*?

By asking for it. By inviting the Holy Spirit to make us like Jesus and His Father. By responding with repentance when He convicts us of sin and righteousness, which is His job (John 16:8). By "taking off" the old thinking habits and behaviors that are displeasing to God, and "putting on" the new habits and behaviors that align with the heart and character of God—which we learn about as we get to know Him in His word.

And we take off and put on with the Spirit's empowering, not our own efforts.

There's an important thread to obeying all these "Be _____" commands: God does the work in us, with our cooperation, as we surrender and submit to Him.

Philippians 2:13 tells us that God is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. He gives us "the want-to and the can-do." He's the one who enables us to live out His commands to "Be _____."

The Christian life is a supernatural life! God does the work, we get the blessings!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/be-what/ on June 21, 2023.

Starting Over: Facing the Future after Significant Loss

February 13th fell on a Tuesday that year, but it seemed like my unlucky day.

My wife of twenty years was divorcing me; it would be final in two days. February 1, my employer had shown me the door—on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my employment. Now, on February 13, I was in my physician's office getting test results. Unaware of my difficulties, he asked, "Have you been under stress recently?" Perhaps he was assessing my emotional state to help him gently ease into the difficult subject he was about to address.

He said I might have cancer.

That evening, a longtime friend called to encourage me. As we spoke, I felt the weight of my world crashing in. Would the haunting pain of spousal rejection ever end? Where would I work? What of my life's mission? Would life itself last much longer? I wept into the phone as I struggled to make sense of the swirling vortex of uncertainty.

Relationships, work and health absorb our time, energy, memories and hopes. Ever had a fulfilling relationship turn to ashes? Maybe you've excelled at work; then a new or insensitive boss decides your services are no longer wanted or affordable. Or perhaps your health falters. Your parent or best friend dies suddenly of a heart attack or perishes in an auto wreck.

What do you feel? Shock? Grief? Anger? Desires for revenge or justice? Discouragement and depression? How do you cope with the loss, and how can you start over again?

Over dinner, a new friend told me he had lost both his parents in recent years. "How did you cope?" I inquired. He related painful details of their alcohol-related deaths. I listened intently and tried to express sympathy. "But how did you deal with their deaths?" I asked, curious to know how he had handled his feelings. "I guess I haven't," he replied. Painful emotions from deep loss can be difficult to process. Some seek solace by suppressing them.

My wife lost her father, then her mother, during a five-year span in her late twenties and early thirties. Focusing on her mother's needs after her father's passing occupied much of her thought. After her mother's death, she felt quite somber. "People who always were there, whom you could always call on for advice, were no longer around," she recalls. "That was very sobering." Over time, the pain of grief diminished.

How can you adjust to significant loss and start over again? I

certainly don’t have all the answers. But may I suggest ideas that have worked for me and for others along life’s sometimes challenging journey?

Grieve the loss. Don’t ignore your pain. Take time to reflect on your loss, to cry, to ask questions of yourself, others or God. I remember deep, heaving sobs after my wife left me. I would not wish that pain on anyone, but I recommend experiencing grief rather than ignoring and stuffing it. This tends to diminish ulcers and delayed rage.

A little help from your friends. During divorce proceedings and my rocky employment ending, good friends hung close. We ate meals together, watched football games, attended a concert and more. A trusted counselor helped me cope. A divorce recovery group at a nearby church showed me I was not the only one experiencing weird feelings. Don’t try to handle enormous loss alone.

Watch your vulnerabilities. In our coed divorce recovery group, I appreciated learning how women as well as men processed their pain. It also was tempting to enter new relationships at a very risky time. Some members, not yet divorced, were dating. Some dated each other. Attractive, needy divorcés/divorcées can appear inviting. After each group session, I made a beeline to my car. “Guard your heart,” advises an ancient proverb, “for it affects everything you do.”{1}

Look for a bright spot. Not every cloud has a silver lining, but maybe yours does. After my divorce and termination, I returned to graduate school and saw my career enhanced. My cancer scare turned out to be kidney stones, no fun but not as serious. I met and—four years after the divorce—married a wonderful woman, Meg Korpi. We are very happy.

CNN star Larry King once was fired from the *Miami Herald*. “It was very difficult for me when they dropped me,” he recalls.

King says one can view firing as “a terrible tragedy” or a chance to seek new opportunities.{2}

Cherish your memories. Displaying treasured photos of a deceased loved one can help you adjust gradually to their loss. Recall fun times you had together, fulfilling experiences with coworkers or noteworthy projects accomplished. Be grateful. But don’t become enmeshed in past memories, because the time will come to. . .

Turn the page. After appropriate grieving, there comes a time to move on. One widow lived alone for years in their large, empty house with the curtains drawn. Her children finally convinced her to move but in many ways she seemed emotionally stuck for the next three decades until her death.

Significant steps for me were taking down and storing photos of my ex-wife. Embracing my subsequent job with enthusiasm made it fulfilling and productive. Consider how you’ll emotionally process and respond to the common question, “Where do you work?” Perhaps you’ll want to take a course, exercise and diet for health, or develop a hobby. Meet new people at volunteer projects, civic clubs, church, or vacations. Consider what you can learn from your loss. Often, suffering develops character, patience, confidence and opportunities to help others.

Sink your spiritual roots deep. I’m glad my coping resources included personal faith. Once quite skeptical, I discovered spiritual life during college. Students whose love and joy I admired explained that God loved me enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die to pay the penalty due for all my wrongdoing. Then He rose from the dead to give new life. I invited Him to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. I found inner peace, assurance of forgiveness, and strength to adapt to difficulties. Amidst life’s curve balls, I’ve had a close Friend who promised never to leave.

One early believer said those who place their faith in Christ "become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"{3} Jesus can help you start all over with life itself. He can help you forgive those who have wronged you.

As you grieve your loss, seek support in good friends, watch your vulnerabilities, and seek to turn the page. . . may I encourage you to meet the One who can help you make all things new? He'll never let you down.

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Notes

1. Proverbs 4:23 NLT.
2. Harvey Mackay, *We Got Fired!…And It's the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), pp. 150-153 ff.
3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

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