

# *LIVING A GOD-FILLED LIFE*

*MEL LAWRENZ*



# 1

## *IN SEARCH OF THE FULL LIFE*

He stood on the deck of *The Pilar* and scanned the Caribbean swells off the coast of Cuba for the telltale sign of a periscope or the water breaking over the steel skin of a German U-boat. Not many men would purposely equip their fishing boats with bazookas, grenades, and a couple of .50-calibre machine guns in the hopes of confronting enemy submarines, but that's the kind of man he was. His scheme was this: lure in a U-boat to a distance of about 50 yards, wait for an enemy boarding party to emerge onto the deck of the submarine, then rev up the motors, close the gap, begin shooting, and lob grenades down the conning tower. It was a different kind of sport from the marlin fishing that had attracted him to the tropics. But Ernest Hemingway was never satiated by any adventure he undertook. By all accounts he packed ten lives into one.

He was a promising young newspaperman before being wounded in Italy in World War I, and then began writing novels like *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*—while still in his twenties. Bullfighting, big game hunting on African safaris, deep-sea fishing, and war were his passions. He made sure he got close to the action in World War II, landing with the American troops at Normandy as a newsman. He was fully engaged in the most important happenings in the world. He lived in Spain, in Paris, in Key West, in Cuba, and in Idaho. He survived exploding shells in his hotel room, getting hit by a taxi, and a plane crash in Africa.

Yet for the fullness of this life, Hemingway also experienced life as an empty hole, and fought a losing battle with dread and anxiety—the sad payoff of his hedonistic obsessions. His heavy drinking was pure escape and pure abuse. He went through four marriages. He moved in and out of severe depression and was hospitalized to receive electroshock treatments twice at the Mayo Clinic. In the end this Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winning novelist put a shotgun to his head and ended his life. How can it be that a life that appeared so full could be so empty?

### **“My Life Is Completely Empty”**

I've heard it many times over the years, but my heart still sinks when I hear someone say, "my life is completely empty."

It's a significant plea, and one that always makes me stop and think: What is it that I really long for in my life? What will keep me prevent my life just emptying out before my eyes? And this phrase comes to mind: I want to, I need to, live a God-filled life.

When I'm honest I admit that there are so many other competing desires, so many other internal voices, that this longing is easily compromised by my own self-centeredness and by the clamor of living in this world. I know I need ways every day to think about and follow patterns that will keep me in touch with this one unalterable reality: God "fills everything in every way" (Ephesians 1:23).

And he is the only one who can.

The opposite of a filled life is an empty life. Yet for everything that seems to offer a certain "fullness" of life—our work, our recreation, our relationships, our belongings, our adventures—there is only one who can really fill our lives, or fulfill our lives.

Who can put in our hearts a deep and enduring sense of peace? Who can motivate us to truly love? Who can fill our minds with thoughts that will elevate us and make us wiser people? Who can guide our wills so that the decisions we make will be smart and respectable? Who can give us a sense of greatness and nobility in our lives? Who can fill us with strength when we're in the middle of a struggle? Only God.

### **Filled, But With What?**

There's filling, and then there's filling. My days fill up easily enough, but "fullness" is something different. It is a kind of filling that happens at a deeply spiritual level.

Do you know that moment when you're waking up and you first realize what day it is? Perhaps your mind begins to lay out the activities of the day as you're still blinking and yawning. Lately I've been struck how, as I contemplate the day ahead, I have had a strange sense that the day has been spent already. It's Wednesday, so that means study time in the morning (but I know that time will fly by), lunch meeting, worship meeting in the early afternoon, appointments for the rest of the afternoon, and probably more paper on my desk at the end of the day than at the start. The sense of crowding also has a lot to do with the fact that my children are now 15 and 13 and their schedules are getting fuller all the time, my wife and I have more interests and more personal contacts than ever before, I've got more professional responsibilities than I could have dreamed of, and I get about forty-eight hours of ideas for every twenty-four hours I'm allotted.

Now I know I would live in dismay over this except for a word a friend gave me years ago, a wonderfully leveling truth: God has given me, with everyone else, twenty-four hours a day—no more, no less. Yet, I still hear this irritating voice at the start of the day: the day is already spent, and you haven't gotten everything *done*.

We all know how easily a day can get filled up, but the question is: will it be filled with what is good? Will it be filled by God?

### **What Does It Mean to Be God-Filled?**

There are a few common things we can do today to make sure we open our eyes to God's presence: moments of prayer scattered throughout the day, reading from the Bible, getting out in the fresh air to walk and meditate on issues that will make a difference not just for today but for many days to come. But it's not up to us to insert God into our days. It is not that we take some God-filled container and pour God into our day. It doesn't work that way, because he is not that kind of God. Living a God-filled life does not mean that we schedule God for an appointment or two and feel satisfied that we did God the favor of squeezing him into a very busy schedule.

No, this is a great mystery, and the greatest adventure any of us can take up. It all begins with this reality: God "fills everything in every way." That means that God created everything, he is present at all places at all times, and he is the unrivaled master of the universe. Psalm 24:1 says: "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Since I live my life on this earth, then I know that his fullness must be all around me, and beneath me, under me, beside me, and in me. It is not up to me to fill my life with God, but rather, I need to open my life, by faith, to his fullness, which comes through Christ. How this happens involves a lifetime of lessons and a training of spiritual vision so we see both God's large and subtle movements.

When I think about this I immediately know what a child I am. My thoughts and conversations so easily stay in the shallows of concerns for my food and clothing, schedules and entertainments, aches and pleasures. It is not hard for me to ignore God. My dinner and my friendships are so much easier for me to manage, and they make no demands for my allegiance. It is easier to put on a neatly pressed shirt and pants than it is to straighten out my attitude. Talking to my wife is in many ways easier than praying to God--I don't need much faith when the person I'm talking to is standing there in the kitchen with me.

And yet--to ignore God for long requires a heart made of stone. There are those questions not answered by television, newspaper, or a family member. God puts out a spiritual beacon of sorts which attracts us like bugs to a porch light. Going without worshiping is like not seeing the sun for days on end. Not talking about God is like being locked in a room of stale and spent air.

The Bible says that "from the *fullness* of [Christ's] grace we have all received one blessing after another" (John 1:16), and that is because Jesus "came from the Father, *full* of grace and truth" (1:14). Now stop and think about that. Aren't these two spiritual qualities--grace and truth--a complete summary of all we could hope to possess. I have often said that there is nothing more I could hope for in my marriage than that it be full of grace and truth. My kids? I pray that they will come to adulthood with a trained instinct to love and to live in reality. I think about the church I serve. Is there anything I could hope for more, than that people find in that community a treasury of grace and truth?

Here is John's point. We receive "one blessing after another," because of the fullness of Christ which fills the lives of those who attach themselves to him. If you or I had walked with Jesus we would have seen one act of mercy after another, absolutely integrated with one truth pronouncement after another. He excoriated the Pharisees but met with one of them, a seeker, under the cloak of darkness. He graced the woman at the well with his patient words, and also confronted her immoral pattern of life. And when we speak with Jesus, we can count on this: his mercy will flow toward us, and he will expose every sin we try to hide from him.

God's greatest desire for us, the good plan of a loving Father, is that we "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the *fullness* of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Here is a pile of words that speak of fullness. "Mature" means complete, lacking nothing. "Whole measure," indicates being full to capacity. "Fullness of Christ" means that what God wants to fill our lives with is the very character of the Lord.

Jesus himself has all the fullness of God dwelling in him (Colossians 1:19), and consequently, if our lives are connected with Jesus, we have fullness in Christ: "For in Christ all the *fullness* of the Deity lives in bodily form, and *you have been given fullness* in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority" (Colossians 2:9-10). John Calvin wrote of this passage: "'you are made full' does not mean that the perfection of Christ is transfused into us, but that there are in him resources from which we may be filled, that nothing be wanting in us."

What you and I need to do each day is not just fill up our time and empty out our energy, falling into bed at night merely spent. A full life comes from having the gateways to mind, heart, and soul open to the person and work of Jesus.

### **Beyond Adventure**

This is all about the most significant longing any of us can have—a yearning not merely for adventure, but much more than adventure. It is about God's own longing for us. He looks at us, knows what he created us for, knows what we are capable of. God wants us to have fullness in our lives; and he brings it about, not by filling our schedules, but by filling us. But with what does he fill us? The biblical answer, loud and clear, is love. Somehow when God's love is able to flow into our consciousness and experience it is translated into the muscle tissue of character. And should that surprise us? Are we hungrier for anything more than love?

Listen to the yearning in the words of the apostle Paul as he prayed for fellow believers: "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may *be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*" (Ephesians 3: 17-19). We need to have the power to grasp the knowledge of the love of Christ (that is, to really own it)—to know how wide it is (reaching all around the world), how long it is (stretching from eternity past to eternity future), how high it is (elevating us to the qualities of heaven) and how deep it is (penetrating down to the darkest pits of our lives).

Our lives may be filled with activity (whether important or trivial, urgent or casual) and with people (from those in the inner orbit to the crowds we just bump into along the way), but fullness has to happen inside. Any person could go on safaris, hunt U-boats, and meet heads of state, but have an empty heart. Now is the time to do something about it, not when emptiness leads to desperation and hopelessness. The fullness of Christ is available, but it must be "grasped," and to do that, we need "power." Any one of us can take the prayer above and make it our own:

*Lord, I pray that I would have roots as strong as a magnificent tree going deeply into your love, and as strong as a building built on the foundation of your love. Please give me the ability to take in, to understand, to apply, and to own the reality of your love which is wide enough to get around my whole life, long enough to last my whole life and beyond, high enough to elevate me to the stature you desire,*

*and deep enough to fill the unseen pockets of decay and emptiness in the hidden parts of my life. Please fill my life and fulfill my life because I know—I know—I cannot do it on my own. Amen.*

It takes a lifetime to begin to grasp the reality of these truths, but we don't need to wait our whole lives. In any given day, we can open ourselves to the fullness of Christ, and live a God-filled day. And when we live one God-filled day after another, we will enjoy (by God's gift alone!), a God-filled life.

Now there are things that we can do that will open our lives to this fullness of God. And that is the purpose of this book. When we have a sustained commitment to certain spiritually rich patterns in our lives we will be exposed repeatedly to the grace and truth of Christ; and we will be profoundly shaped by them.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

1. Think of a typical day or week in your life. At what points are you most aware of God, and least aware?
2. Complete this sentence: I need God to fill my life in these ways (for instance, "I need God to help me not be so fearful"):
3. What circumstances in life tend to empty or drain you (for instance, a degrading work environment)?
4. Think about someone you know who has a vivid sense of God's presence and activity day by day. What do you think he or she is doing that provides that promotes that awareness of the fullness of Christ?
5. What is the difference between just talking about God, and really living a God-filled life?
6. If one way of looking at the fullness of Christ is that he was "full of grace and truth," come up with some specific examples of where he demonstrated grace (love, mercy, generosity) and truth (living authentically and explaining reality to people). For instance, the feeding of the 5,000 was an act of grace because he knew the people were hungry, and an act of truth because he taught how he was the bread sent from heaven.

## 2

### ***LIVING BY PATTERN***

It was twelve years ago, but I still remember how nervous I was as my wife and I sat at a heavy walnut table at the office of the home builder. The lady on the other side of the table removed the rubber band from the rolled-up architectural drawings which she then rolled out flat on the table. They still smelled of the alcohol used in the process of making blueprints and felt cool to the touch. And there it was, a two-dimensional drawing of the home we were going to build, and on successive pages, different views perfectly drawn: side, back, side, section, basement. Were we really going to do this? Were we in over our heads? Could we really raise our kids in a thing that was just lines on paper, an idea in the head of a designer?

In the weeks that followed I went time and again to the site where our home was being built to see one sub-contractor after another come with that same set of blueprints bearing our signatures. Whether it was a carpenter, a mason, an electrician, a plumber, or anyone else, they simply looked at that plan—that pattern—and did what it told them to do exactly where it told them to do it. And when it was completed after eight weeks, every wall, every counter, every door, and even every electrical outlet was placed exactly where the plan said it should be. An idea became a reality.

#### **Planets, DNA, and Habits**

All of life is built on patterns. In the natural world bees form their honeycombs, robins piece together their nests, trees add ring upon ring, geese migrate north and then south, planets loop around the sun, all in progressive and wonderfully consistent patterns. Some patterns seem to be purely the joyful expression of the exuberant Creator: the waves of sand in the desert or waves of water of the ocean, the orderly and vivacious bands of color of the rainbow.

In human life there are many patterns, like the microscopic strings of DNA, a different kind of blueprint, which said that your hair color might be auburn or black, your height might be five feet or six, your nose might be slightly crooked to the left or to the right, and your cholesterol level might be 180 or 300.



And then there are chosen patterns, the behaviors that shape our character, that form our reputation and determine our satisfaction in life. How many hours do you sleep at night? Do you smoke cigarettes through the day? Do you pray? What are your patterns in how you speak to your spouse or kids? How do you respond to stressful circumstances? What do you do when you feel very angry? What kind of reading do you do? What are you expecting to happen when you go to church? What are your habits in talking to your mother or father, son or daughter?

This list could go on and on because everything that we do in life with any kind of repetition are our patterns of life—whether they build us up or tear us down. And there's the rub. A good pattern is a progressively building experience, but a bad pattern is a relentless erosion of our humanity like ocean waves pounding a coast. To be unaware of our life patterns is about the biggest gamble any of us can take.

In this book we will first consider "character patterns" (how to develop love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). And then we'll look at "devotion patterns," the acts that draw us closer to God like praying, reading spiritually, and worshiping.

How are these related? I'm somewhat reticent to say that devotion patterns are the things we *do* so that we can *be* people with good character patterns. I'm not sure it's as tidy as that. Our life with God can't be broken down neatly into technique or method leading to results. There's more mystery to it than that. It is oftentimes true that a character trait develops after the training of spiritual discipline, like joy coming from a regular habit of worship and prayer. Then again, sometimes God just lays a treasury of love in someone's heart, character taking a leap forward in the discovery. Oftentimes it is crisis that precipitates a change in character. I've known more than one husband and father, for instance, who suffered serious heart attacks in mid-life and who gained a conspicuous degree of faithfulness and gentleness as a result.

Along the way we will consider relationship patterns that are highly influential, because some people can reinforce in us good characteristics and habits and some can pull us down. And we also need to look at those patterns that are personally destructive, call them "anti-patterns" if you will, because instead of putting our lives together, they smash them apart.

### **Design, Order, and Consistency**

I am enthused about the concept of patterning because it assures me that, if with God's help I choose and practice good patterns, certain qualities will be built into my life:

First, there will be *design*. Every person's life has a certain shape or form to it. Spiritual health and strength is not random, but the progressive building of a sound mind, of proportional emotions, and of a trained will. But who can figure out what that looks like? It takes a designer, and that's what God is doing when he takes our mis-shapen selves and forms us according to the image of Christ. The qualities known as the fruit of the spirit comprise a kind of finely-designed blueprint of what a human character is to be. And when we commit to habits like prayer and worship, we are putting ourselves in God's workshop, not always knowing what the work of the day will be, but being assured that God keeps crafting according to a design in his mind.

Then, there will be *order*. Someone smarter than us needs to help us figure out how all the roles and functions of our lives can work harmoniously and authentically. On any given day I've got to be a husband, a father, a pastor, a neighbor, a friend. I've got to take care of a house, a family, a church. I may need to repair a broken door, mend a relationship, balance an out-of-whack checkbook. I need to know what to keep and sort on shelves, what to give away, what to throw away, what to buy and let into my house and life. I need order!

So this is what God does. He assures us first of all that we don't need to feel hopelessly overwhelmed by all the options and responsibilities in life. Character and devotion (as defined by God) combine to provide an ordering to the day. I know I must begin the day with some quiet moments with God. Praying sorts out what is really important; reading Scripture is like looking at a compass again, giving order and a sense of direction to my mind. I know that we need to, as a family, start the day on the right foot by greeting each other with kindness, and to try to send everybody out the door with a sense of peace and love. I need to try to enter my work for the day with faithfulness to my responsibilities and self-control when it comes to my work habits. And, at the end of the day, when the whole family is a bit worn out, patience will help us get along when frustrations or conflicts come up.

The simple alternative to order is chaos.

Third, if there is intelligent patterning in our lives, there will be *consistency*. We can't live by changing the moral rules of life as we move from one season of life to the next. Tuesday and Thursday may be very different days in my life, but I can't change my priorities every day of the week. Our desire to find a proper sense of the normal is our innate need for the principles of our lives to have a discernable consistency. The alternative is chaos, which some people accept

because they can't imagine life being any other way. But there is something better than shooting across the landscape like a tornado tossing bits and scraps of life into the air.

If we go to worship just when we feel like it we will miss the consistency of this rhythm. If we pray only on days when it is convenient or when we feel "spiritual" we will miss the cumulative effect of a continual dialogue with God. Patterning is a focused commitment to making a few habits and character traits the normal, the daily, the consistent.

### **Patterning in the Bible**

The idea of patterning appears in the Bible from beginning to end.

On Mount Sinai God gave Moses many specific instructions about what he wanted him to do. One set of instructions was... a blueprint.

These directions for building a kind of traveling worship-center, the Tabernacle, included specific designs (for a tent, a table, a lampstand, an altar, an ark), the materials to be used (gold, silver, animal skins, acacia wood), and instructions on how this worship-center would function. Moses received these orders, clear and crisp. God had a plan, and he insisted on it: "See that you make them according to the *pattern* shown you on the mountain" (Exodus 25:40). Four times in the Old Testament, and twice in the New (Acts 7:44; Hebrews 8:5), it is stated that this place of meeting with God, designed by God as a spiritual masterpiece, was built exactly according to pattern.

Design. Order. Consistency.

Patterning is a vivid theme in the New Testament as well. In Romans 5:14 Adam (the first man) is called "a *pattern* of the one who was to come" (that is, Jesus Christ). In other words, Adam as the original, perfect man, and Jesus as the unalterable perfect man, are patterns of the way things are supposed to be with us. (Although what Adam became was a sort of anti-pattern.)

The apostle Paul urged some to model their lives on the good patterns of other respectable people ("take note of those who live according to the *pattern* we gave you," Philippians 3:17). He also warned against following some of the anti-designs to be found in this world ("do not conform any longer according to the *pattern* of this world, but be transformed..." Romans 12:2). Paul also urged people to follow patterns of truth ("what you heard from me, keep as the *pattern* of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus," 2 Timothy 1:13).

The idea of patterning is that if we follow the designs that God has described in great detail, if we follow those blueprints and keep steady with those rhythms, then we will experience life with a fullness and soundness that only comes from God—just like building a home according to the plans of a master architect. And beyond that, our lives can actually become patterns that others can follow.

Are you willing to pray a prayer like this?:

*Dear Lord, I need your help! When I forget about you my life is like a reed in the wind, blown this way and that by so many pressures and passions in me and in this world. I need you as the builder of my life. I need you to put together the pieces of my life into the design that only you know so that I will be built up into a person who is sound and good. Show me the parts and show me the whole. Help me to follow. Amen.*

#### FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

1. What are the most influential habits (good or bad) in your life right now?
2. What are two patterns that you know you need to develop right now?
3. What people do you respect as having some design, order, and consistency in their lives, whom you can observe and imitate?
4. Describe some situations where one person's life was a model and an inspiration to someone else. How did that happen?
5. What specific instructions for life do you believe are most important for you to focus on in your life (particularly, instructions found in the Bible)?
6. Sometimes God's designs for our lives come as a surprise or revelation. Have you had such an eye-opening experience, and if so, what was it?

### 3

## *IF YOU WERE INVISIBLE*

There is a story of a shepherd named Gyges who found a magic gold ring which had the power to turn him invisible. He discovered its power quite by accident when he was sitting with some fellow shepherds and twisted the ring so that its bezel was to the inside of his hand. Twisting it back again, he re-appeared. Then human nature took over. Gyges realized that with this power he could go anywhere and do anything, and so he moved into the royal court, seduced the queen, attacked and murdered the king, and took over the throne.

When Plato the Greek philosopher wrote of this fable in *The Republic* he was making a simple point: we would quickly discover the true character of a person if that person had the power to turn invisible. We find out what kind of people we are, in other words, by noticing how we behave when no one else can see us.

### **The Stamp of Character**

The word "character" goes back to the word for a stamp which leaves an imprint, like the dies used to make coins. Your character is the very shape of your inner life (your thoughts, motives, values, impulses, responses), which is revealed in the shape of your outer life (your actions, behaviors, speech, relationships). And then this sobering thought: the shape of your character may be stamped on someone else's character, for good or for ill. Is character an issue for public leaders, or athletic heroes or parents? How can it not be?

Your character is never defined by one or two significant righteous deeds or one or two failings. It is the *pattern* of your life that is the shape or the imprint of your life.

It is ironic, isn't it, that at someone's funeral (when he or she really is invisible!), his or her character is often revealed. Now I've officiated at enough funerals to know that people tend to polish the halo of the deceased, and perhaps that's a natural way of giving someone else the benefit of the doubt (especially when his or her last chance is up). But in and through all the conversations, in the eulogies and the sympathy cards, there is an unveiling of character. The form, the shape, of a life is revealed.

### **The Fruit of the Spirit**

What does "good character" look like? Here is a fine list of character qualities for any person living anywhere in the world at any time: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. These are what the Bible calls "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23), and they describe a Christ-like life.

I remember a moment years ago in my office when a troubled husband and wife poured out the frustrations and bitterness in their marriage. They couldn't say what they were hoping for marriage to be, but it certainly wasn't this! So I asked them: "How would you feel differently about your marriage today if you could use these kinds of words to describe it: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control?" They seemed almost stunned, and in a hushed voice, the wife said: "If we had those things, there's nothing else we would ask for." I told them that these were the qualities the Bible calls "the fruit of the Spirit," (I had an inkling that these were brand new spiritual ideas to them), and that "fruit" meant the final result, the spectacular gift, which comes from the presence of God's Spirit in our lives.

There are many ways of describing Christ-likeness. (A superb description comes from the Gospel of John which says Jesus was full of grace and truth.) But I wonder, if any of us had spent a month with Jesus, or a week, or even a day, might we not say that we witnessed in his character love, joy, peace, patience, kindness...?

In the chapters which follow we will take each of these words, each one a treasure, and ask: what does that shape look like in a person's life? And how can my life be formed like that?

### **What Will They Say at Your Funeral?**

Do you want to be known as a patient person, a faithful and kind person? Do you want to enjoy a kind of peace that is like a deep-flowing, cool river? Do you sense that it is long past time to get some real self-control in your life? These are wonderful qualities, the stuff of real character. But they do not consist in occasional heroic acts. At your funeral your son or daughter is not likely to say, "Yes, I remember that one day when Mom was patient. That day when we broke *two* windows playing baseball. It was such a wonderful day! Too bad she was the picture of impatience every other day." None of us wants to be known as a person who is kind about once every other month. We should all know that it's not good enough if people think we are loving and good because of the image we project and the public posture that we take, when in

reality we are empty inside. People may fool some of the people some of the time--but that is not an accomplishment of character. In an age when image is everything, and some have come to think that image is the only reality, we are more desperately in need of character than ever before.

The American revolutionary John Adams sometimes seems eclipsed by his brilliant contemporary Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's face is carved in a sixty-foot section of granite on Mt. Rushmore, after all, not Adam's. But how remarkable was the character of Adams, a man for whom being second president of the United States was just one more vocation in a string of opportunities to serve the public, one step in the journey of a lifetime. He sacrificed the comforts of home for months and years on end by laboring in Philadelphia to frame a new nation and by sojourning as an ambassador in the very alien country of the French. He longed to make a truly important contribution to society, but was not allured by the vanities of public attention. He endured ostracism. He persevered in debating--word-by-word--the important documents of the revolution. Months of work were not too much to make sure the work was done precisely. Any accolades and gains in reputation, had to be the natural outworking of honorable work. And at the end of a long life Adams was able to reflect more on God, and was filled with awe and appreciation even as the loved ones in his life passed away. Incredibly, he died on the fourth of July, the exact day of the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of which he was the driving force. And his dying words were not about himself, but "Jefferson still lives," not knowing that hours earlier, that same day, Thomas Jefferson had died many miles away.

### **Anything Worth Building**

How is character built? It is built by the progressive patterning of a person's life.

There is a traditional saying that goes like this: "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny."

In other words, character traits are built over a long period of time by the sustained repetition of right instincts and their matching acts.

How do you gain patience as a character trait, for instance? How does it progress from thought to action to habit to character to destiny?

Joe knew that he was a fundamentally impatient person. He was used to getting what he wanted when he wanted it. The problem was that, as an adult living in the real world, Joe wasn't getting things his way as he did as a kid. It was not that he had bad values and wanted

the wrong things in life, it was that he didn't know how to wait. As he grew in faith, however, he learned about the patience of God. He learned too about the patience of faith giants like Abraham, Moses, and Paul, men who went to their graves not fully realizing the work of their lives. The only real estate in the promised land Abraham owned at his death, after all, was the grave in which he was laid. Joe realized that his impatience was the cause of many conflicts in his life, and tensions in his home.

His prayer and worship and reading of Scripture became an intentional search for a new paradigm of living. He asked God to just help him gain a more relaxed attitude toward all of life. Gradually, that attitude took root. His habits changed so that he lived life instead of attacking it. His expectations of his kids and wife became more relaxed. He gave up the notion that he knew how many decades he would live and that he had in mind the perfect script for his life. In short, he gained back his life. His family relationships and friendships developed deeper roots. And as a bonus, he slept better, and had more energy, too.

Character traits do develop over long periods of time and through sustained commitment. Is that bad news or good news? I think it's tremendous news. Don't be disheartened that you can't just decide to wake up tomorrow morning and have a completely reformed character. Be encouraged, instead, that the building of character can begin at any moment. Anything worth building takes many faithful steps. And the moment the steps begin, character begins to take shape. For instance, the genesis of real peace for many people began when they took the step to really admit to God the things they thought they needed to hide from God--as if anyone could. One step, but what a giant leap!

Be even more encouraged that God is there to put his unlimited energy into it on our behalf. Here is how he does it. Jesus, as the Son of God, is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation [literally, "character"] of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3). In other words, just as a die is used to stamp a coin, and every tiny engraved detail on the die is exactly reproduced on the coin, so it is with Jesus and God the Father.

### **The Character of Jesus**

Jesus is the perfect pattern of God's own character. He is the same character, the exact stamp of God's character, whether he is visible or invisible.



And this Jesus is the Word of God—God's whispers and God's shouts, his consolation and his confrontation. God has spoken to us, and everyday he is still speaking to us—clearly, consistently, repetitively, faithfully, fully, patiently, lovingly. In the life of Jesus the stamp of God's character was impressed on the world. He is the perfect God, and he is the perfect Man. Every time we talk to Jesus we expose our clay-like nature to his impress. When we see Christ with us in our homes, offices, parks, or malls, when we realize that Jesus is there with us even when we're getting lured into an argument or are tempted to open a lewd magazine, and certainly when we think of Christ in the sanctuary as we sing his praise and in the quiet rooms where we pray. In every place and every way he is there for one purpose, to transform our impressionable minds and hearts into the shape that God will call once again: very good!

It may be true that we learn something about our character when no one else can see us. But here is another way to look at it: when no one else can see us, *only* God sees us. And it takes a huge step of humility and faith-courage to say: Okay God, what do you see?

#### TRY THIS FOR THE COMING WEEK...

1. Make a mental note every time you see someone who displays a quality of good character (even someone in a movie or book or TV show). What, in a word, is that respectable character quality? And why did you notice it?
2. Say at least a sentence prayer in every room or space that you linger in during this week (in other words, make yourself consciously aware of the presence of Christ in every spot you occupy day by day, and notice how you look at your life differently). What difference does it make for you to envision Jesus right there in the room with you?

#### FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

1. Try to think of one person whom you look up to as a person of real character (someone you know directly or indirectly). Why do you view that person that way? What do you think that person has done in his or her life to develop those patterns?
2. What are two or three character qualities you think you should grow in?
3. Read Hebrews 1:1-3 several times over, and in different translations, if possible. What aspects of the character of Christ have made the deepest impression on you?

**This PDF contains chapters 1, 2 and 3 of *Patterns: Ways to Develop a God-Filled Life* by Mel Lawrenz.**

**For the complete work, go to: <http://www.wordway.org/how-to-have-a-god-filled-life.html>**