

Setting Goals for our Faith

Third of six sermons in the “Daniel Plan” series¹

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- 1 Corinthians 9:23-26 ²³ All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it. ²⁴ Don't you know that all the runners in the stadium run, but only one gets the prize? So run to win. ²⁵ Everyone who competes practices self-discipline in everything. The runners do this to get a crown of leaves that shrivel up and die, but we do it to receive a crown that never dies. ²⁶ So now this is how I run – not without a clear goal in sight. I fight like a boxer in the ring, not like someone who is shadowboxing. (Common English Bible translation)
- Jeremiah 29:11-12 ¹¹ I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for. ¹² Then you will call to me. You will come and pray to me, and I will answer you.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Setting a goal in our faith moves us toward God's purpose for our lives.

In the way we run our churches and the way we worship, we Presbyterians have a reputation for being pretty straight-laced, “by-the-book.” Writing to the Christian church in Corinth, St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that “all things should be done decently and in order,” and some wonder if, for we Presbyterians, that phrase has been tattooed on our hearts. Indeed, the Presbyterian rule book is called the Book of Order. Every year the Presbyterian national headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky sends each minister a publication called the “Presbyterian Planning Calendar,” so sure are they that we ministers are going to plan things to be decent and orderly and aren't simply going to just sit back and see what happens.

If we're hoping to effect some changes in our lives, we're going to need to make plans. And if we make plans, we're going to need to know what results we want our plans to produce. Whether you're looking to improve the quality and vibrancy of your physical health as many are now doing through The Daniel Plan, or you're seeking to strengthen your relationships with your family or friends, or your looking to improve your finances or employment situation, or you're looking to deepen your engagement with God... whatever in your life you'd like to change, you need to set goals.

Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in northern California recalls talking to a world famous psychiatrist. Rick asked, “In all of your practice over the years, what has been the most helpful thing you've given to people that has made a difference in their lives as they were seeking change?” The psychiatrist answered, “There's no question about it: I've discovered the most helpful thing I can do for people in a personal or relational problem is help them to set personal goals.”

So this morning I have five succinct point I'd like to make about goal-setting in our lives.

1. Goal-setting is a spiritual discipline.

Now I know, some may wonder if it actually shows a *lack* of faith if we try to plan how our faith is going to develop by setting a target or goal. I can understand that thought process: “If we have faith, shouldn't we just trust God to use us as God chooses?” Well, simply drifting along in life without a goal for what we want to do would be like planning to use a hot-air balloon to get you to

¹ This sermon is indebted to the Rev. Rick Warren's “Daniel Plan” sermon series for a number of the illustrations and points presented here.

your wedding. It'll get you *somewhere* at *some* point, but who knows where and who knows when, and will you even know where you are when you get to wherever it is you got taken to?

Setting a faith goal is a spiritual discipline. It's a spiritual discipline just like reading and meditating on scripture. Setting a faith goal is a spiritual discipline just like giving money for church work, or like fasting for spiritual enlightenment, or like dedicating yourself to engaging in worship, or like "keeping the line open" with God (better known as "prayer"). Setting a faith goal is an act of dedicating yourself to becoming the disciple that God is counting on for God's plans to be fulfilled.

2. Goals focus your energy into power.

Earlier this month I had a new experience. I watched a track meet. Actually, I worked the track meet, helping to measure the distances for the shot put event. Standing right there at the circle where they launch that eight- or twelve-pound shot I got to see a wide variety of techniques of spinning and twirling and whirling and throwing. Many produced mediocre results. But there were a few contestants who were able to take all that energy created by the crouching and spinning and expanding and exploding... through their technique they focused that energy and generated significantly more power than the others did.

Setting a goal for yourself functions in much the same way. It focuses your efforts so that you're not going every which way. It directs your efforts toward one desired aim—whatever it is you're trying to achieve, because let's face it, you don't have time for everything. A lot of people don't know the difference between what's urgent and what's important. The urgent is almost never the most important thing. What's most important in your life is the stuff that's easiest to set aside: *you want to spend time with God, but you set it aside for what's urgent; you want to spend time with your family, but you set it aside for what's urgent.* The urgent almost always pushes the important out of the way. So urgent doesn't mean it's most important. It just means it's urgent. A lot of "urgent stuff" isn't going to matter tomorrow. So goal-setting is a spiritual discipline that focuses your energy to give you power to accomplish something mighty.

3. Third, goals stretch your faith.

Actually goals are statements of faith because they declare where you're headed even if you don't know how, exactly, you're going to get there. Here's how you know you're going to stretch your faith: because what you're aiming for requires you to take a risk. Like "Star Trek" you boldly go where you've never gone before. You try something new, trusting that God will guide you in where God wants you to go, assured by faith that God will accompany you.

There's a story in Matthew's gospel describing two blind men seeking out Jesus when he came to town. They called out for him to help them, just as they probably had called out to people their whole lives, asking for a few shekels for a beggar's meal. But when they called out to Jesus, he didn't toss some coins their way or offer them some food from his bag. He asked, "'Do you believe that I can heal you?' 'Yes, sir!' they answered. Then Jesus touched their eyes and said, 'Let it happen, then, just as you believe!'"² Their goal of finding the teacher went beyond simply filling their bellies. He stretched their faith with the result that their sight was restored. Setting a goal should stretch your faith because you're striving for something you can't do on your own—otherwise why wouldn't you have done it already? Your goal stretches your faith because you must call on the power of God to achieve it.

4. Goals build your character.

When you pursue a goal, you don't remain the person you always were. While you're working on the goal, God is working on you.

God's number one goal in your life is to make you like Jesus Christ. God wants you to grow up in character. God wants you to learn to respond to things the way Jesus did—to trials, to troubles, to difficulties, to problems. God wants you to know how to handle criticism, how to handle enemies. God wants you to know how to be kind to people who can't pay you back. God wants you to learn

² Matthew 9:28b-29 New Revised Standard Version

how to love people who are unlovely. God wants you to learn how to forgive the people who have hurt you. That's character. That's becoming Christlike. God wants you to become like Jesus.

A great benefit of setting goals in faith is not necessarily that you reach your goal. A great benefit what happens in you on the journey... what you become on the journey... what changes in you on the journey.

5. Goals give you hope to persevere.

Goals keep you moving forward when you feel like giving up. When you're going through hell, you keep going. And you eventually get out of it. You're walking through it. Though you may feel sometimes like you're walking *through* "the valley of the shadow of death," don't *stay* in the valley of the shadow of death. The goal you're pursuing gives you hope to keep going, to persevere even if you might temporarily lose your way or even if the going gets really, really tough for awhile.

If you don't set any goals for your life, your goal is to stay the same; it becomes the goal by default.

- If I ask you, "What's your goal for your health this year?" and you say, "I don't have one," then your goal is to stay the same or get worse.
- If I ask you, "What's your goal for your finances this year?" and you reply, "I don't have one," your goal is to stay the same or to go further into debt.
- Don't have a goal for your career? Then your goal is just to go around in a circle... the status quo.
- Do you have a goal for your marriage or your relationship? If not, it's hard to see how it's going to get any better.
- What about your goal for your relationship with the Lord? If you don't set one, you're not going to grow any closer to Jesus, are you?

We know we can't seek perfect lives. We don't strive for perfection. But we do seek progress, and to progress you need a goal. If you aim at nothing you're going to hit it. Long term goals keep you from being discouraged by short term setbacks.

Through the prophet Jeremiah God spoke reassuring and encouraging words to a people who had been defeated, taken hostage, and exiled to a completely foreign culture in a faraway land. Jeremiah's words reminded them of their goal of trying to serve God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. Jeremiah wrote, [Hear God's word:] "I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for."³ Jeremiah's prophecy reminded the exiled Israelites of their goal of faithfulness, and that goal gave them strength to survive, to endure, to keep going. Having goals gives you hope.

Jesus didn't begin his ministry by saying to Peter and Andrew and James and John, "Hey, stay where you are. Don't get up." He wanted them to change. He said, "Follow me." Then he lived a life that gave them a goal to strive for. The goal Jesus gave them can be a starting point for us as we set goals for our lives:

- for goal-setting is a spiritual exercise, a spiritual discipline;
- Goals focus our energy into power;
- Goals stretch our faith;
- Goals build our character;
- Goals give us hope to persevere.

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³ Jeremiah 29:11 Good News translation