

FORTY DAYS WILD

Training Camp for Spiritual Growth

40 Days Wild
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FORWARD

(by Karl Haffner)

Is there something you can do to facilitate the process of change in your character? Transformation is possible. It's not only possible, it's the primary goal of spiritual life. Listen to this statement from the book *The Life You've Always Wanted*: "The primary goal of spiritual life is human transformation. It is not making sure people know where they're going after they die, or helping them have a richer interior life, or seeing that they have lots of information about the Bible, although these can be good things. Let's put first things first. The first goal of spiritual life is [transformation]" (p. 24).

But how does this happen? How can we know that tomorrow you and I will be more like Jesus than we are today? Well I can assure this: nobody drifts into life transformation. Nor does it happen by just trying really to honor our resolutions to change. There is only one avenue to transformation and that is through training. We do not grow spiritually by trying hard to be spiritual; it happens through training.

A successful adventure with God tracks closely with the same principles of success for runners. What are these secrets for success? Let me give you three time-tested secrets that runners have long known about. These secrets are as old as the authors of Scripture who allude to them.

Training Wisely

The first secret of success for runners is training wisely. Listen to the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27:

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.

Now the people in Corinth were quite familiar with athletic events. After all, it was in Corinth where the Isthmian Games were held—which were second only to the Olympics. No doubt the original readers of this letter would have connected with Paul's imagery of a runner. Paul observes that successful runners go into strict training.

Similarly, any world-class Christian understands that transformation happens only through training. Regularly participating in the spiritual disciplines will inevitably result in transformation. These spiritual disciplines include, but are not limited to, things like Bible study, prayer, fasting, worship, and service.

Pacing Well

The second secret of successful runners is pacing. Elite runners understand the importance of pacing well. Joe Henderson, an editor for Runner's World magazine makes this observation about pacing: "Pace, a word we've heard since our first days as runners, is a more complex term than it might seem at first. Consider this: When you split the word 'pace' in half and add four letters in the center, you spell 'patience.' Which is what pacing is—an exercise in patience.

Some years ago I was walking to the starting line of the Portland Marathon and noticed a church. Chiseled in concrete on one wall was this verse from Hebrews. "Let us run with patience the race that is set before us" Hebrews 12:1 (KJV).

It struck me what sage counsel that is for marathoners. Listen once again to Joe Henderson: "A marathon demands patience, as gratification is delayed. The race doesn't start on marathon morning, but months earlier with the commitment to train. Along the way you spend more training days patiently holding back than pushing hard." He goes on to describe the necessity of patience on race day. Elite marathoners know that pacing is everything.

The same is true spiritually. We've probably all been inspired by a sermon or an event and have determined to get spiritually disciplined. We start by reading ten chapters a day, journaling our prayers, spending time in solitude and so on, but it doesn't seem to last. Transformation doesn't happen in a night, rather in a lifetime. So I encourage you to run the race with patience. So stay focused in your training. Keep praying. Keep attending worship services. Keep reading Scripture.

Finishing Strong

The final secret of a successful runner is finishing strong. Again the apostle Paul employs the language of running in 2 Timothy 4:7 when he declares these immortal words: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

40 Days Wild is a training regiment for those who long for transformation in their life. If you train in the spiritual disciplines today then you too will break the tape at the finish line at the sunset of your life saying with Paul, "I have finished the race." Finishing strong is absolutely dependent on what you do today.

As long as you have life, keep running: train wisely, and pace yourself well, so someday you too can finish strong and declare before God, "I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

by Karl Haffner

INTRODUCTION

Still dripping wet from His baptism Jesus trudged along the muddy banks of the Jordan straight into the desert for a forty-day retreat into the wild. Why 40 days? There is a theme running through Scripture that suggests 40 days is a time for change. When God sent 40 days of rain to flood the earth, it was a time of complete cleansing and regeneration for humanity. Both times Moses received the 10 Commandments from God he spent 40 days on the mountain. Elijah spent 40 days of searching intensely for God after the incident on Mt. Carmel. In the book of Jonah God gave Ninevah 40 days to change their wicked ways. After His resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days with His disciples preparing them for the work of the gospel before He ascended into heaven. The fact that Jesus went to the desert for 40 days to prepare for ministry only further underlines the importance of being deliberate about change.

While I was developing a series of devotionals for children, I went online to purchase some visual aids from the Chas. C. Hart Seed Company. I scanned the website hoping to acquire actual mustard seeds to illustrate my talk on faith. I read what the pros in seed growing wrote about the time of growth for the mustard seed. You guessed it: “40 days to maturity.” Even if 40 isn’t a “magic number,” it is still clearly a deliberate amount of time for change to take place. When it comes to spiritual growth, 40 days of intentional exercise of the spiritual disciplines is a reasonable target for starting the journey of transformation.

The most basic element to spiritual growth is the belief that you can grow and you are expected to grow. As a child I watched the tangerine tree in my yard grow to monstrous proportions. Not only did our citrus tree grow in size, but it overwhelmed our family and friends with an astonishing crop of fruit. My pride for the tree swelled from season to season, so much so that I thought the magic of growing fruit trees was simply genetic; I couldn’t lose.

When I grew up and the time came for me to plant my own fruit trees in my very own backyard, I picked out a tangerine tree to repeat the success of my childhood. I did everything to the soil I was taught to do: Cultivate, fertilize, mulch, protect, pray. After planting the tree in the ground, I continued the rituals week after week. I spoke kindly and gently to the tree as I worked in the yard. On one occasion, I even sang to the tree. But the tree failed to grow.

My patience ran out and I began to scorn the tree. “Silly runt weed! What’s the matter with you?” I chided the defenseless citrus tree. “Every other tree in the yard is doing just fine. You are turning out to be such a disappointment!” I was raking some leaves in the yard near the base of the puny tangerine tree when the rake got tangled at the base of the tree. I reached down to unhook the prongs of the rake and discovered the tag of the tangerine tree was still attached. I glanced at the tag and to my horror I read, “Tangerine... (Dwarf).”

I tried to take back all the horrible things I had said. I looked at the little tree and apologized, “I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize you were never meant to grow.”

Not so with you and me. According to Christ, we are destined to change into His likeness. Consider the promise given by the Master Teacher:

“A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher” Luke 6:40 (NIV). We can grow. We should grow. And the growth we experience is meant to be more than a good feeling from a stirring revival sermon or the occasional chill down our spines at the climax of a well-performed power ballad. Christ promised fruit of an enduring nature:

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit-fruit that will last” John 15:16 (NIV).

Fruit-bearing disciples are not super saints, but they live bent toward a genuine walk with God. Their growth is the result of divine grace at work in their hearts and minds. Their lifestyle are marked by the exercises strengthen the muscles of the soul and their souls are marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit. If there is one reality that is clear about the 40 Days Wild experience, it is this: No one accidentally stumbles toward a godly life or has the way made easier for him by waiting for a more convenient set of circumstances. In the same way your muscles ache after a workout, your spiritual life will be challenged by a similar type of nagging pain. Defy boredom. Confront pride. Speak up. Stay Quiet. Stretch the mind. Exhaust the resources. Resist the spotlight. Lunge out in faith. Remain still in solitude. Beyond your comfort zone is where growth begins. Are you ready?

BEFORE YOU BEGIN...

Forty Days Wild is designed to help you practice the disciplines with a partner, mentor, or small group of people who also wants to become stronger. Partners are recommended because we need someone to hold us accountable and we learn more by learning with others.

The following is a description of two different ways to join the journey:

Pairs.

Pair up with someone who is willing to participate with you for 40 days straight, following the daily curriculum and communicating frequently. Each day you will read a section from the life of Christ and the devotional thought for that discipline, complete the exercise or challenge for that day, and reflect and share with your partner about your experience. Decide on how often you meet or make contact. Be clear about expectations with each other. For instance, you might only meet with your partner each week, but you may email or call each other daily.

Small Groups:

Team up with four to eight other people and meet once a week to share, study, pray, plan for the next week, and encourage each other on the journey.

Basically, you train in one discipline a week. For instance, the first discipline is prayer, and while there are only five days of devotions and exercises for the discipline of prayer, the group is free to be creative and take more time on one aspect of prayer over another throughout the week. At week nine, when the group is practicing the discipline of secret goodness, there are only three days of readings but the practice of the discipline of secrecy can happen each day.

THE SMALL GROUP EXPERIENCE

The study guides for small groups in the forty-day adventure are not magical. The questions, quotes and suggestions are man-made. The “magic” or “power” of any small group experience is not in the study guide or the style, but in the determination and desire of the participants. Anyone who seeks a study guide that is “the best” will seek in vain—the power is not in the study guide but in the way the participants approach the Word and the purpose of small group ministry.

The truth about small groups is that they are not easy, but they are worth the extra effort. They require you to be honest and open when you don't feel like it. They urge you to study and discover God's Word when you least feel like studying,

but need to most. The small group can foster tremendous spiritual growth, not because of words on a page, but because the exercise is as valuable to you as eating, drinking and breathing. Nothing has changed in God's Word. So when it seems dry, it is usually because we are dry. And it is when we are empty that we need it the most. But the act of growing is not always an emotional "yahoo"—it is the continual pursuit of God in good times and in bad. The small group is like a marriage, so determine ahead of time your commitment to each other and your response to each other when the going gets difficult.

Forty Days Wild comes with room to journal your thoughts and reflections as you walk every day, seeking ways to grow in Christ. The following is a list of the ten exercises we will participate in on the forty-day adventure:

Prayer

Bible Study

Service

Being Alone/Quiet

Worship

Fellowship

Confession/Submission

Secret Goodness

Fasting/Purity

Sacrifice/Faith

Each discipline will contain a short introduction, followed by a series of devotionals inspired by the life of Christ. In addition, there are some questions for personal reflection and response with activities for active learning and implementing the discipline for that day. The activities will focus on getting the individuals and groups to experience the spiritual disciplines actively and thoughtfully, and most importantly—consistently.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Warning! The devotions are not magical! The ideas and stories about the disciplines simply provide “grist for the mill” or “something to chew on.” I have only expounded on the disciplines as they have appeared in my life or in the experience of fellow travelers. I use a saying frequently, “There is a difference between devotion and devotions.” Devotions are pieces of time we check off our list of things-to-do. Devotion, on the other hand, is a quality that describes a continual, personally motivated commitment to a cause. I would ask that you go beyond, or even around, my thoughts if they get in the way, to practice the disciplines that will enable you to grow. Consider the curriculum as a primer to grease the pump of your spiritual walk, but ultimately, you make it work by the training you do. Blessings!

Troy Fitzgerald

COMPONENTS

Introduction: Each chapter begins with an introduction that defines or describes the particular discipline contained in that chapter.

Life of Christ: A narrative clip from the gospels showing how Jesus models the discipline or something Jesus said about the discipline.

Devotional Reading: Stories and experiences that stir up our hearts and minds and prompt a thoughtful approach to the discipline.

Into the Wild: A challenge or suggestion to experientially live the discipline for that day.

Also, there will be a question that prompts the individuals to reflect and write/journal honestly and openly about their experience.

INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER

The spectrum of prayer can range from the almost knee-jerk cry, “God, Help!” to a communion experience over the years walking with God as Enoch did. It is a bit of an oxymoron to attempt a complete introduction to prayer, but a good start would be to consider the thoughts others have penned on the nature, work and experience of prayer:

Dallas Willard maintains that, “Prayer is conversing, communicating with God.”¹

Richard Foster states, “Prayer catapults us onto the frontier of the spiritual life. Of all the spiritual disciplines prayer is the most central because it ushers us into perpetual communion with the Father....Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us.”²

E. M. Bounds says “What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but men whom the Spirit of God can use—men of prayer, men mighty in prayer.”³

Bounds continues saying “To go through the motion of praying is a dull business, though not a hard one. To say prayers in a decent, delicate way is not a heavy work. But to pray really, to pray till hell feels the ponderous stroke, to pray till the iron gates of difficulty are opened, till the mountains of obstacles are removed, till the mists are exhaled and the clouds are lifted, and the sunshine of a cloudless day brightens—this is hard work, but it is God’s work and man’s best labor.”⁴

Lawrence O. Richards believes that “We learn to pray by praying. But we learn about prayer—and how to take our first steps into the heart of God—by considering prayer as it is illustrated and modeled in the Word of God.”⁵

Much is written by great people on the subject of prayer; yet all that has been written is no substitute for personal conversation with the Almighty God.

DAY 1

WEEK 1

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, **close the door** and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

Matthew 6:5-13

PRAYER

Do people really try “to be” seen praying nowadays? If anything, the current trend is to keep our religion private. The advice from Jesus on prayer is simply, “go into your room, close the door and pray to your father.”

Close the door. It is hard to close the door. Even though you close the door to pray, the clock still ticks. A list of “things to do today” scratches like a hungry cat at the pantry door. Even when everything seems to be in order, you may still simmer with unrest at the nagging suspicion that you are leaving something out. But **close the door**. Tell the world, the patients, the clients, the customers, your teacher, your parents or children not to interrupt you because you have an appointment—kind of a grown up “time out.”

Today’s passage is not about praying in public but about the object of prayer. The focus is on *who* you pray to.

Sitting in a booth at a restaurant, I overheard the conversation of the couple behind me. It was obviously a first date. The “newby” in the booth behind me couldn’t stop talking about himself. I never once heard the voice of his date. Rookie mistake. You demonstrate you are interested in someone by listening attentively. Mark it down men! The way to a woman’s heart may be nothing you say but how well you listen. The same might be true with prayer.

“Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend. Not that it is necessary, in order to make known to God what we are, but in order to enable us to receive Him. Prayer does not bring God down to us, but brings us up to Him.”⁶

Close the door. For prayer to be powerful, it is imperative for you to close the door and enter into an honest conversation where God has your full attention. Have you ever prayed without thinking about God? It’s not uncommon to say the words of a prayer and ignore the One to whom the prayer is directed.

For the third quarter in a row the deacon overlooked me during communion.

“Is this the way the church feels about young people?” I stewed, “Week after week I work and no grape juice! What a sham!” I continued to simmer.

After the service, on my way to hang out with my friends, the pastor grabbed me and said, “Come with me.” He clutched my hand in his and was pulling me through the crowd.

“What did I do?” I thought. My heart raced. I was too scared to ask. He opened the door to his

INTO THE WILD

office, ushered me in to a chair and went back to the door and locked it. Gulp! The lock clicked with deafening finality, just like in the movies. I almost began a premature confession, “I’m sorry about what I wrote in the church hymnal...” when he leaned over his desk and said, “I’m so sorry Troy. I know the deacon passed you again at communion and I don’t want you to miss out on the experience.” He reached back to the little black boxes behind his desk that held what I called “Communion in the box.” Pastor White went through the whole service with me that day (including his sermon) and administered the Lord’s Supper right there on his desk.

Awkward? Yes. But I looked over at the locked door and I knew that for that moment, I was the only member of his church. I had his full attention and he had mine.

Jesus says, “Close the door.” Prayer is not about the time, words, or way that you pray; it’s more about the One you pray to and how you feel about Him. Does He have your full attention?

As you pray today, talk to God about the difficulties and joys you have found in moments of prayer. Invite God to help you close the door on distractions.

Some tips to help with focus:

- Imagine what God is doing while you pray.
- Take a moment to think about what is on your mind and in your heart, going on in your life.
- Make a list of the things you want to talk about with God.
- When you pray, pray out loud.
- Sing a song that focuses your heart and mind on the One you are praying to.

Reflect on the struggle of giving God your full attention in prayer. Why is that difficult? What works best for you? How do you think this will help you deepen your relationship with Jesus in the future?
