

In the movie “The Shawshank Redemption,” two characters who are in prison talk about being institutionalized. After years of having no options, no control, and nowhere to go, they are conditioned to have no dreams, no initiative, and no will, being completely dependent on the institution to make every decision for them. After years of this tyranny, they are unready for freedom and face the possibility of parole with fear and reluctance. Being physically free, they find the challenge of the mental and emotional components of freedom overwhelming. Because God has set us free from sin, we also can find the attitude of freedom including the mental and emotional aspects just as difficult to deal with. Let’s spend some time this week thinking about the freedom God has given us, learning the proper attitudes and emotions to have toward this freedom, and remembering the progress we have made in the journey toward paradise.

Day 1

### Acting With Purpose

The first step in changing our lives and living out the freedom that God has for us is to act with purpose. This may seem counterintuitive because we tend to think of freedom as doing anything we want, the ability to have no purpose. However, real freedom is the gift of being able to act toward the reward of fruitfulness. Freedom is the ability to be able to pursue what is best for you, and to be able to enjoy the reward of achieving what is best for you. God has laid out reality in such a way that what is truly best for us is to pursue His kingdom and glory, in this pursuit there is great reward. The worst thing we can do with our freedom is to use it to indulge in indolence, in having no pursuit. If we configure our life in this way, we will find the demands placed upon us by life, of having to do what is necessary to maintain our life and relationships with others as nothing but an unwanted burden, and as a result the enjoyment of freedom will be replaced by unending tyranny. Act with purpose, take joy in having a journey to live. Plan each day according to your purpose. Review where you are at, where you have come from, where you are going. Each day ask yourself, what is the next step on my spiritual journey, how do I take that step today?

Verses: 1 Peter 2:9; Acts 13:36; Colossians 1:16; Ecclesiastes 3:1; Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 6:33

Prayer Topics: Pursuing purpose, focus, getting rid of distractions, removing things that get in the way of our purpose, consistency in acting on purpose

Day 2

### Hunting vs. Shopping

When I hunt rabbits, I come back empty handed at least 50 percent of the time. When I hunt big game, I have a 33% success rate, but when I hunt squirrels, I bag something 90% of the time. I prefer squirrel hunting. I like having a higher success rate. While striking out in hunting doesn’t destroy me emotionally, it isn’t my favorite. I think of all the things that are productive that I could have been doing with the same amount of time. On a one-week big game hunt, that equals a considerable opportunity cost. When I go to the grocery store, however, I come back with something more than 99% of the time. I am a pretty good shopper. Most of us, most of the time, would greatly prefer to be successful, to have our endeavors be fruitful. Life is, however, much more like hunting than shopping. Life is complicated, and when we try to act with purpose, when we try to take the next step on our journey, many times we will fail. We will often get unexpected results, and many times we will be completely baffled about what went wrong. The secret to making progress is to expect to not make progress a good percentage of the time. Don’t give up. This is how the world works. If making progress on your spiritual journey was easy, everyone would be doing it. Think of the unexpected result as an opportunity for unexpected growth,

as you learn a mysterious but helpful lesson about something you thought you understood but didn't. If you think of your journey as a set of surprise lessons that are really gifts in disguise, it will help you to persevere during those times when progress is elusive.

Verses: 1 Chronicles 16:11, Job 42:2; 2 Chronicles 15:7; Romans 12:12; Lamentations 3:22-24; Philippians 3:13-14

Prayer Topics: Patience, Perseverance, Emotional Maturity, Trust, Faith, Ability to handle disappointments

Day 3

Your Journey and The Journey

We have been working this week on making progress in our spiritual journey, and yesterday we thought through what to do when we aren't making any progress. This brings us to the question of why God allows us to go through those difficult and frustrating times when we really are trying, but nothing seems to be happening. This can be especially difficult if you have spent any considerable amount of time as a Christian not pursuing spiritual growth or seeking God's kingdom. You may wonder why God is not rewarding your decision to take your faith more seriously. You are finally trying, why is there no reward? At least sometimes the answer is because we haven't thought through the difference between the journey and our journey. If I am going on a journey to Kansas, I think about getting to the destination, not about my state of growth along the way. But if I am seeking God's kingdom, my state of growth is the journey. When we think of the kingdom of God, it's easy to think of a physical place like heaven that we are traveling to. But the reality is, the kingdom of God is inside of us, therefore in this instance our state of growth is linked to the destination. It would be like if you could only get to Kansas if you really believed there was no place like home. Because of this, things like suffering, challenges, and setbacks don't mean we are not making any progress, and may in fact lead to great progress as we learn to trust God in the midst of difficult times. It isn't always about getting things done.

Verses: Proverbs 3:5; Psalm 56:3-4; 1 John 4:18; Isaiah 26:3-4

Prayer Topics: Faith, Trust, Spiritual Insight, Priorities, Submission,

Day 4

Grace To Self and Others

How do you make progress on your spiritual journey? Take the next step. How do you take the next step? Don't stop taking steps. Although this sounds simplistic, it really is true that the way to make progress is to not stop making progress. This simply means don't give up. And how do you avoid giving up? Have grace for yourself and others. This doesn't mean pretending sin isn't sin. It also doesn't mean excusing every behavior in yourself and others. It means applying the reality of God's grace to yourself when you fail, no matter how many times you fail. And it means doing the same for others in your life. In your self-talk, do you speak gracefully? Do you talk to yourself the way God does? Or are you speaking to yourself the way Satan, the accuser, does? When you think about or talk to others, are you gracious? Or do you become accuser to your brothers and sisters? If you tell yourself you will never make any progress, if you tell yourself you are worthless and will never amount to anything, eventually you will believe yourself and will stop trying. If that happens you will have done Satan's job for him, accusing yourself when you could have been encouraging yourself. You are a new creation, the old has gone and the new has come. That is what God says about you. Who will you believe, God or Satan? Whose words will you use? Who will you speak for? Who will you imitate?

Verses: 2 Corinthians 12:9; Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 4:16; 1 Corinthians 15:10

Prayer Topics: Grace, Forgiveness, Kindness, Truth in speech, Confidence

Day 5

Celebrating Progress

How do we make progress in our spiritual journey? Remember and celebrate when you have taken a step. Our minds are fascinating things. Our neuro-chemical reward systems function to give us feelings of joy and happiness when we are making progress toward our goals, and the more important we believe the goals to be, the more our brain rewards us. The problem is, most of the time we don't recognize when we have made progress. We don't break the journey down into steps and really think about when progress has been made, and therefore we miss out on the opportunity to rekindle the motivation to keep going on the journey. Think about where you have come from. Have you made any progress? Are you more Christ-like in any way? Have you become wiser? Have you become more patient? More loving? More discerning? Have you at least learned some things you shouldn't do? Those lessons are often costly, don't minimize them or let them go to waste. Have you gained experience? Celebrate. Keep the momentum going.

Verses: Psalm 150:1-6; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Luke 15:23-24

Prayer Topics: Joy, Celebration, Lessons, Learning, Discernment,