

Ken May

STRENGTH

for Relationships



Guideposts

Outreach.

PUBLICATIONS

Guideposts Outreach

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Introduction

Imagine you've settled into your favorite chair at the end of the day to relax and watch television. You grab the remote and press the power button, but nothing happens. After aiming it from different angles and punching the buttons many more times, you flip the remote over and remove the battery compartment cover. Only one of the two required batteries is in there. The other has been removed by someone for some reason. One battery will not work; to be effective, they must work together.

We function the same way. God made us to function in relationships. Therefore, we would be wise to focus on principles that help our relationships to thrive. So whether your primary relationships are with friends, siblings, spouses, children, significant others or whoever, this booklet gives you 31 thoughts for how you can nurture your relationships. With God's help in applying His principles, you can find strength for all of your relationships.

—Ken May

A Great Gift

*In your relationships with one another,
have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...*

PHILIPPIANS 2:5

What gifts have you received that meant the most to you? The most significant gifts you have received throughout your life have likely not been the most expensive but rather the most thoughtful.

When I was a teenager, I really wanted an electric guitar, but my family didn't have the money. At Christmas, my best friend surprised me when he gave me one. It was inexpensive and buried in his closet, but to me it might as well have been played by Jimi Hendrix. The thought behind it gave it value. My friend paid attention. He knew what was important to me and did something about it.

You can give great gifts to your loved ones in the same way. The monetary value isn't important. Most needs are met by paying attention to what matters to the other and doing something about it. To give this kind of gift, you must focus on the other person's needs above your own. The result makes the sacrifice worthwhile.

God loves us with a sacrificial love, and as we have freely received it from Him, we should give it to those closest to us. You can give highly valuable gifts without spending a dime. The part of yourself you put into the gift is what gives it that value.

Control Over the Uncontrollable

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

JOHN 14:18

You're standing on the bank of a swollen river. As you stare at the turbid water, the ground beneath your feet crumbles, hurling you into the tempest, and the current sweeps you away. This is what it can feel like when the words or actions of a friend drown you and carry you away in a current of cruelty. You are vulnerable, in danger, not in control.

But as you struggle against the rapids, something chops the air above you. A rope descending from a helicopter dangles in front of you. Grasping it, you've gained control.

When a river of hurt feelings carries you away, forgiveness is the rope you grab that gives you control over the uncontrollable. It's tempting to carry a grudge, but holding onto bitterness only hurts the one holding on. You didn't control the circumstance when you were hurt, but you do control the choice that leads to your healing. Forgiveness doesn't mean you forget the offense. It doesn't mean the hurtful action was okay. It simply means you choose to begin the process of letting it go.

If you seek it, God will help you begin the process of forgiveness—and when you do, you gain control over uncontrollable circumstances.

From Building Blocks to Bonding

So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

MARK 10:8

Interconnecting logs. Interlocking plastic pieces. These raw materials became my forts, drag racers and spaceships as a child. After completing a project, I soon broke it back down and recycled it into something else.

As an adult, I find myself building permanent things, the most important being my relationship with my wife. I built my childhood creations with little effort because the blocks were easy to see and grasp, but building a relationship presents more of a challenge. What are the building blocks that form a bond between people?

Bonds emerge from shared experiences. My wife and I were married in college. Those early days were rough financially. We ate countless 10-cent packages of noodles, and not because we considered them gourmet cuisine; we played a lot of paper football for entertainment, and not because we didn't like the titles playing at the movie theater. But struggling through those lean times drew us together.

Later in life our shared experiences involved caring for aging parents. Family trips. Sitting in a closet together enduring a fierce storm. Volunteering together. Worshiping together. These experiences still form the bond between us.

God fashions our hearts to grow close in this way, and the bond with your spouse is a building project that never ceases. Continue adding the building blocks of shared experiences and see what incredible creation results.

Relationship Tips from an Ant

Go to the ant... consider its ways and be wise!

PROVERBS 6:6

The ground moves perpetually at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, because it's covered with ants. Depending on where you sit, you soon jump up, slapping and scratching at your legs. It's easy to forget the ants are just gathering food for the winter. Ants are nuisances at picnics, but they can help you with an important skill for your marriage: survival.

Your relationships have seasons, just like the world you live in. The ant prepares for winter, and winter will come for your marriage. Nourishment abounds in spring and summer, but you must have a surplus to make it through the winter. How do you fill your storehouses? You don't leave the nurturing of your relationship to chance—you plan it.

You can accomplish this in many ways:

- Establish a date night. It doesn't have to be expensive. Walking a nature trail can be a great date. Buy a new board game at the dollar store and spend an evening playing it. Even if it's terrible, you've nurtured your relationship.
- Attend a local marriage seminar.
- Together, read a book about better communication.
- Find recipes on the Internet and cook together.

The possibilities go on and on. Consistent activities create reserves of energy that sustain you in the lean times. The same instincts God put into the ant will sustain your marriage. Nurturing your relationship will feel good now—and help fill your storehouses for the winter.

Fairness Even When You Fight

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs....

EPHESIANS 4:29

From time to time we hear of people getting into trouble for using inside information to know when to purchase or sell stock. In recent years, several famous people have made headlines for such activity. Through various connections they gain special information before it becomes public knowledge, and they use that knowledge to give themselves an unfair advantage.

We also take advantage of our spouses when we use our inside knowledge during an argument. We know things about our spouses that the average person doesn't know. We know where our partner's insecurities lie even if they aren't visible to others. We know what buttons to push and exactly how to push them to get a desired response.

Possessing this knowledge isn't unfair; it's a by-product of the closeness of the relationship. But when we use that knowledge for leverage when we argue, we are guilty of unfairly using inside information. We can deal underhanded blows to gain the upper hand. We can create an unlevel playing field by going for those issues we know will cripple our spouses.

Be fair. Watch your words carefully so you stick to the subject when you argue. Always reflect the love of God by not unfairly using your words and inside knowledge.

Garden with God

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

GALATIANS 5:22-23

Did you know you are supposed to have stuff growing on you? God's fruit grows on you when you let His characteristics show in your life, characteristics such as love, patience, joy and many others. The people around you benefit from the fruit you produce.

You can probably think of many people in your life who could benefit from that fruit, but have you considered how your leaders and supervisors could benefit from it? Before becoming a chaplain in the Army, I was a civilian pastor. I loved it when church members who had gardens brought large sacks of things they harvested and left them in my car. It would have been easy for them to forget I had needs, too, even though I was a leader. But they didn't forget, and they shared their fruits and vegetables with me.

We can often forget that people in positions of leadership still have basic human needs. They still need to have fruit—God's fruit of goodness, peace, love, kindness and more—shared with them.

When we follow God faithfully, He produces fruit in us. He doesn't grow that fruit so we can hoard it. He grows it so we can share it. Share God's fruit with your leaders. Share it with everyone.

No Mothballs in the Flower Pot

Love your neighbor as yourself.

MATTHEW 22:39

Once, Mom and I planted an ivy. I don't know much about horticulture, but I had learned from experience that ivy is difficult to kill. However, within a few days, ours was wilted and brown. As we emptied the soil from the flower pot to try again, we heard a suspicious rattling. Removing the water reservoir from the bottom of the planter, we discovered that mothballs had somehow made their way into it, escaping our notice. We learned an important lesson—mothballs create unfavorable growth conditions.

Your relationships also grow only in the right conditions. Many things spoil these conditions—sarcasm, jealousy, manipulation, ingratitude, selfishness. But it's not enough to merely remove these infectious ingredients. Add qualities that cultivate growth—care, concern, compassion, a listening ear, sincere interest, a loyal heart. Ask God to show you areas where you need growth, and He will do that in a gentle way.

To see your relationships grow, discover the things that may be tainting your soil, and replace them with things that sustain growth. Create the right conditions for growth, and you will see new sprouts among your family and friends.

Fill the Cookie Jar

[Love] is not self-seeking...

1 CORINTHIANS 13:5

It's late and the house is dark. As you lie in bed staring at the ceiling, your stomach rumbles. Your attempts to return to your dreams have failed, so you think, why not? You maneuver slowly through the dark shapes in the house, finally reaching the kitchen and the cookie jar. Your mouth waters. You open the lid. Crumbs. Someone took the last cookie and didn't refill the jar.

Relationships are filled with give and take, but a relationship that is all take and no give is like constantly finding the cookie jar empty. We take when we insist on our own way. We take when we cancel appointments. Even honest mistakes fall in the category of taking.

There will be some taking in a relationship, but we must give more than we take. Otherwise, the other person's cookie jar is only crumbs. Giving is allowing the focus to be on someone else. Giving is changing our plans to accommodate the other. Giving is responding to another's mistakes with graciousness.

God instructs us to focus on the needs of others. In this way, everyone's needs get met. When we look out only for ourselves, everyone takes and no one gives. No one fills the cookie jar. But when each person loves selflessly, the cookie jar never runs out.

What Brings You Back

Love is kind.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4

My wife wants to know why I constantly pull my old pair of cargo shorts out of the drawer when I have several new pairs. I understand her consternation. I've had my cargo shorts for about seven or eight years. The bottoms are frayed. Holes are growing where the pockets are attached. They are faded. And the style... let's not even go there. But they are broken in. They feel great. I have great memories of them; we've been through a lot together. It's really quite simple—I wear them because they are comfortable and make me feel good.

Certain relationships draw people back for similar reasons. There is something there that makes them feel good. One such quality that attracts people is kindness. It's natural to desire kindness. It makes us feel good, and we seek out that which makes us feel good. So people are drawn to relationships where they find the comfort of kindness. If you want to build strong bonds, make sure you have plenty of kindness in them.

Kindness takes the form of greeting other with a warm smile, pausing long enough to genuinely listen, helping without expecting anything in return, and so much more. The comfort others find will make them go right past all of the other options in the stack and choose you.

First, Do No Harm

Love builds up.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1

I grew up watching doctor TV shows like M*A*S*H, Trapper John, M.D. and Quincy. When the characters in those shows faced an ethical dilemma, you often heard someone remind them of their oath: the Hippocratic Oath. It comes from ancient Greece, from Hippocrates, who is considered to be the father of medicine. A key part of that oath was swearing to do no harm. The physician swears that his or her actions will always contribute to the betterment of the patient.

We need to have a personal oath like this to guide our words to our children. Our words can cut like a knife, or they can bring recovery like a prescription. They can hurt or they can heal. When our words are harsh and unkind, they put distance between us and our children. When our words are born of love, they draw us closer.

God teaches us that love must always edify. In the same way a doctor's actions should always be for the good of the patient, our words should always seek to build up our kids. Take a personal oath today: When it comes to your words, first, do no harm.

Speak to Listen

Everyone should be... slow to speak....

JAMES 1:19

I remember my first major training exercise with my first battalion in the Army. It was December in Fort Riley, Kansas, and it was cold in the tent where all the leaders of the battalion crowded to receive a briefing regarding our training mission. After the company commanders were told what their role in the mission was, they had to explain it back to the battalion commander. This is called a back brief. The purpose was to make sure they fully grasped the details. It wasn't enough for the lower-level leaders to have listened; they had to demonstrate comprehension. In a way, it was using words to prove they had listened.

Listening is more than sound waves hitting your ears. You also have to comprehend. Maybe in your relationship with your supervisor you frequently fail to meet his or her expectations. Try the method of the back brief. A leader will not often ask for this in a less formal setting, but that doesn't mean you can't offer it.

When your boss gives you a job, say something like, "So this is what I hear you asking me to do..." and then summarize the instructions. This provides an opportunity to clear up misunderstandings before the job starts, and clarification like that improves relationships.

Listening is more than just picking up sound waves. It's grasping what is being communicated. Confirm what you are being told. Use words to listen.

Heal with the Help of Friends

*When Jesus saw their faith, he said,
"Friend, your sins are forgiven."*

LUKE 5:20

Would you cut a hole in a stranger's roof to help one of your friends? Jesus saw this happen. Four men brought their paralyzed friend to Him, but when they got to the house where everyone had gathered, the crowd blocked them from entering. So they climbed on the roof, cut a hole and lowered their friend to Jesus. I have often tried to picture the reaction of the owner of the house ("I said make yourself at home... let's not get carried away!"). Here is the basic fact: The paralyzed man got better because his friends had the faith to carry him to the right source.

Your friends who are dealing with emotional and spiritual wounds may not have the strength to get to the source of healing on their own. You can help them. That may take the form of praying with them and reading the Bible with them. It may be encouraging them to attend church with you. It may be helping them find a competent counselor to help them process their circumstances.

It is very, very important to note that you cannot do the healing for them. Only they can do that. You cannot even give them the desire to heal. That must come from within them. But when they decide they want to heal, you can support them with your faith and strength.

You Can't Text Your Way to Closeness

Have equal concern for each other.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:25

What happens when you create a life without smartphones? Recently, I went on a military training exercise to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California, and leadership enforced a no-cellphone rule. I saw an amazing thing happen during the breaks in training when soldiers were allowed to rest. When the phones went away the cards and games appeared. Without electronic distraction, they actually looked at each other, talked and interacted. I would say those soldiers left that training exercise feeling much closer as a group.

I don't mean to suggest that technology is inherently evil; after all, God doesn't specifically mention cellphones in the Bible. Technology has neither a good nor bad moral value, but there is a godly principle involved in the way we allow technology to affect our relationships. We are to hold each other in high esteem. We can't do that when we ignore someone in the room and instead pay all of our attention to a screen.

Texting may give the illusion of closeness because it is so immediate, but it doesn't really bring us close. Only time spent face-to-face with someone, with no electronic distractions, will achieve a true bond.

Talk with Versus Talk "At"

Everyone should be quick to listen....

JAMES 1:19

We have all had that supervisor or leader who talks at you rather than with you. Certainly, there are times when a leader must be direct. He or she must stand before those being led, and the conversation will only be one-way. But when that is the only communication strategy the leader ever employs, it frustrates those who follow. This communication principle also applies to the relationship between parents and children. As parents, the last thing we want to do is build this feeling of frustration in our children.

Few people listen well naturally. Most of us must educate ourselves about proper communication techniques. This is why God instructs us to be quicker to listen than to speak.

So what is the difference between talking with versus talking at? Someone who talks with you speaks, but then pauses to evaluate what you have to say. Someone who talks at you will sometimes never seem to take a breath. When you talk with your children, they will feel enriched, invigorated and respect you more. If you constantly talk at your children, they may feel unempowered and unheard, or even tune you out completely.

This is not to say you will never have to have one-sided conversations with your kids. Sometimes they need to be directed, but such exchanges cannot make up the bulk of your communication. Sharpen your listening skills, then plan to make time every day to talk with your kids.

Extinguish the Fire

*A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*

PROVERBS 15:1

Not long ago I received a frantic call from my wife while I was at work that our gas grill was on fire. It sits next to the house, but its wheels are broken so she couldn't just roll it away; the only way to move it is to pick it up, which is a little hard to do when it's on fire. I reminded her that we keep a fire extinguisher under the kitchen sink, and she used it to put out the fire.

Fire extinguishers work because they deprive fire of its fuel, oxygen. You can use the example of the fire extinguisher when it comes to dealing with interpersonal conflicts, because arguments in your relationships burn like fire.

There is probably no relationship as rife with the potential for arguments as your relationship with a sibling. Those people you grew up with remain a big part of your life, and at times you might find yourself arguing with them just like you did when you were younger.

God gives us good instructions about arguing. Just like the fire extinguisher deprives fire of oxygen, soft answers defuse arguments, and they die for lack of fuel. Taking the intensity out of an argument keeps emotions in check. It prevents hurtful things from being said. It allows solutions to be found. And it helps us share the love of God with those people we love the most and who get under our skin the best—our siblings.

Give the Benefit of the Doubt

*The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge,
for the ears of the wise seek it out.*

PROVERBS 18:15

Teaching my kids to be honest was very important to me. When I convinced myself they lied, I fired away with cross-examination worthy of an attorney in the highest court. The smallest detail that seemed to contradict their story was all the proof I needed to swiftly deliver the sentence. However, many times I later discovered they had been telling me the truth. I realized I had to change.

You tend to find what you look for. If you are convinced of the facts before you start investigating, even the smallest bit of evidence that seems to match your presuppositions will blind you to the full story. Jumping to conclusions like this damages relationships.

When you think you have been wronged by a family member, a neighbor or co-worker, before you accuse that person, pause and take a good look at the facts. Do you have the full story? Are your accusations based on real evidence? Once accusations leave your mouth, they cannot be taken back. If they are found to be false, they can inflict severe damage.

Think about how God deals patiently and mercifully with us even when confronting us with our mistakes. Then seek to show the same kind of compassion to those around you by not jumping to conclusions.

Invest for Future Returns

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

EPHESIANS 2:10

My wife and I ventured into container gardening this year. This type of gardening is ideal for people like us, living in suburbia with a small backyard, because you grow plants in buckets. It's an investment in the future because whether you start with a seed or a seedling, you have to wait a while to see the fruit. You get to see the wonder of nature as the plants grow and produce.

Investing in your relationships is a lot like gardening. We invest through our actions, and God tells us He has many such actions planned for us. These actions are also known as good works. When we show appreciation—just one of many good works—it's like planting a seed in our relationships. In time, we will see a return on our investment as those seeds grow. We rely on each other to practice good works so that needs will be met and God's love will be spread. Imagine what our relationships would be like without good works. When we plant seeds of appreciation, we harvest the fruit of goodwill and stronger bonds.

Fulfill the many good works God planned for you. And today, pay special attention to planting the seed of the good work of appreciation.

The Danger of the Silent Treatment

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

JOHN 3:16

If you're like me, you really dislike calling technical support when you encounter a technology issue. It seems I always get stuck waiting on hold for long periods of time, which leaves the status of my relationship with the support person in question. Is she really there? Did she hang up? Will she talk to me again? Am I stuck in silence not knowing if I will ever get the resolution I seek?

When we give the silent treatment to our loved ones, we are putting them on hold and leaving them there with the status of the relationship in question. Imagine this type of frustration and ask yourself why you would ever intentionally inject it into your relationships. We use the silent treatment to communicate displeasure, but it communicates in a passive-aggressive way, not in a healthy way. We can learn much healthier ways to communicate.

We can take an example from the way God relates to us. He doesn't leave His love for us in question. He communicates it for us clearly so we never have to question its presence. Strengthen your relationships by never leaving the status of your love in question. Don't put your loved ones on hold by using the silent treatment.

God Made Us All Different

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed....”

LUKE 10:41-42

The two cars I have right now start very differently. With one, I have to turn the key and immediately release it. The ignition system then takes over and stays engaged until the car starts. With the other, I keep the starter engaged. I have to hold the key down until the engine starts. I have flooded both carburetors by not starting them according to their own characteristics. I couldn't force the cars to work contrary to their own uniqueness. I had to learn the patterns of each car and adjust myself to them.

Perhaps you relate to people in a supervisory role. Maybe you lead groups in your occupation or in volunteer organizations. To have effective relationships with people you supervise, study how God made them and adjust yourself to their patterns.

Try Jesus' way: Mary and Martha were very different in their personalities, and the Lord approached them differently. Likewise, you may have one person who responds well to verbal encouragement, while another works best when given clear instructions and then left alone to accomplish the task. You cannot lead both people effectively with the same approach.

God made us all unique as individuals. To have effective supervisory relationships with people you lead, take time to note the wonderful way God has made each of them and lead accordingly.

Upgrade Your Relationship

*His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning....*

LAMENTATIONS 3:22-23

No matter how technologically savvy you are, it's always challenging to learn how to use a new cellphone. I get comfortable with this button doing this and that button doing that. When I get a new phone, everything is different and I have to relearn it all. The constant upgrades are frustrating, too. Every time I turn around I get a message telling me to upgrade to the newest version of the operating system.

I rebelled for a while and refused to upgrade, but my phone quit working. Those upgrades keep it running. In a way, they constantly renew the phone.

God sends His mercies to us new every morning. It's like He daily refreshes His relationship with us. We can learn from that pattern and seek to renew our relationships daily as well. Relationships have a natural life cycle, and they can grow cold and stale. When we regularly seek to do something new in a relationship, it keeps it growing and fresh.

Ask your co-workers to go to lunch with you. Invite a friend to go to a baseball game. Leave a note for your spouse or children just to tell them you will be thinking of them today. Your gesture doesn't have to be extravagant. Even a simple one can be like downloading the latest update, so you can keep things running smoothly.

Walk Away from the Donut

In your anger do not sin....

EPHESIANS 4:26

Donuts are a huge temptation for me. When I am trying to eat a healthy diet, they draw me to cross that line I have set for calorie consumption. If I constantly put myself near the sight and smell of those confections, I'll eventually buy a whole bag—and they probably won't make it home to be shared. Eating all those donuts might make me feel good at the time, but later I'll feel guilty. Most of all, though, I'll know it's bad for me. When you know you'll face a circumstance that will tempt you to cross a boundary, walk away before you cross that line. For me, that means steering clear of the bakery.

Maybe such an area exists for you when communicating with an ex-spouse. Do your best to avoid subjects you know are certain to ignite a firestorm. If it's not absolutely necessary to discuss an issue, stay away from it. If you find yourself in a heated discussion, walk away before it escalates any further. And if you must discuss the subject, make a plan to return to it later when tempers subside. It might feel good at the moment to lash out, but in the end it's not a healthy behavior.

Avoid walking through the bakery so you don't end up consuming an entire bag of donuts. Walk away from an argument before you cross a line in a relationship.

Water the Grass

*Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old they will not turn from it.*

PROVERBS 22:6

The grass in the state of Washington close to Fort Lewis, where I live now, is different from the grass in Oklahoma, where I grew up. In Oklahoma, the grass turns brown and stays that way all through winter, but in Washington, grass turns its greenest during the winter. Oklahoma grass needs large amounts of water, but it can get too much. Washington grass, however, thrives sitting in a pool of water. I had always thought grass was grass, but I learned each type of grass grows according to a unique set of characteristics.

When it comes to relationships with our children, they are like grass. We err when we relate to them all in the same way. They each have their own unique characteristics that require personalized approaches.

One of my children responds to verbal praise. To keep him motivated, I only need to shower him with encouragement. Another of my children responds to gifts. Recognizing her achievements with a trip to the drive-through at the coffee shop connects with her.

As a parent, I have to consider each of their unique characteristics. The way I stay close to each child depends on that child. All grass needs water, but the appropriate time and amount depends on the grass.

Better Results through Patience

Through patience a ruler can be persuaded....

PROVERBS 25:15

My daughter likes to bake. She makes a number of things from scratch—cake, bread, and pizza with homemade crust, just to name a few. When she started making bread, she didn't like taking the time to let the dough rise all the way. She wanted to cut corners, get her hands in the dough and get to the end result. She soon realized that giving the dough all the time it needed improved the end result. Her patience produced better bread.

Patience achieves better results in your relationships, too. For example, allowing time for tempers to cool speeds the process of peace. Sometimes you can try to talk about an issue too soon before you have been able to sort through your feelings. Allowing time in this way can keep you from saying things you don't really mean. If you find yourself mending a relationship, remember that broken trust isn't regained in a day.

Additionally, patience pays off in a relationship when you make allowances for people who are sincerely trying to change. If you see they're serious, it's worth giving them the time. The secret of the advantage that comes from these periods of waiting lies in the fact that it allows God time to change hearts.

When your relationships fail to meet your expectations, it is natural to want to rush the change, but you will obtain better results through patience.

Find Hope in the Hurt

We can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:4

A few years ago while attending a training conference, I heard a woman share a story about her husband, who was in the hospital dealing with intense pain. Before he went into the operating room, he looked at his wife and told her, "If they can't fix what's wrong with me, I don't want to wake up." He hurt so badly he couldn't see past his immediate circumstances. The pain had stolen his hope for a better tomorrow.

Sometimes getting hurt in a relationship steals your hope that things can get better. The pain can be so great that you focus on nothing else. Sometimes it can even make you wonder why God would allow something like this to happen. But God brings good even out of the worst circumstances in your life.

Someday you will stand next to someone whose life is unraveling, and because you have been through intense pain, you will be able to comfort her and help her see that good lies beyond the pain. Being a child of God does not exempt you from difficulty and sorrow, but with God, there is always hope for tomorrow because He will always bring something good out of the hardest of times.

Godliness and a Bologna Sandwich

But godliness with contentment is great gain.

1 TIMOTHY 6:6

What do godliness and a bologna sandwich have in common? Consider two people eating bologna sandwiches. One complains; another says a prayer of thanks. The difference is perspective. If one constantly compares the bologna to a steak while eating it, he will not be content. However, if one focuses on the fact that eating makes him feel full rather than hungry, that simple sandwich can satisfy.

Godliness can be described as God's character developing inside us. As we grow in our relationship with Him, His qualities grow in us. Discontent inspires ungodly traits like self-centeredness and ungratefulness. Changing one's perspective cultivates contentment and removes the barriers that block godliness. Therefore, we sometimes experience God's greatest work in us and our closest relationship with Him when we change our outlook.

Prepare your heart for God's transforming work by choosing to see what you have rather than what you don't have. You are not wrong to desire a steak, but if God has not given that to you right now, choose to be content with the sandwich. The hand of God provides both.

Some of the most peaceful times I remember are eating bologna when that was all I had. The work God did in my life in those times made the sacrifice worthwhile and brought me closer to Him. The godliness that comes through that contentment outweighs the value of a steak.

Pay Attention to the Warning Lights

Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.

EPHESIANS 4:26

You're sitting at a traffic signal and running late for an appointment. You've been delayed twice by slow drivers, and while you wait, a warning light on the dashboard flashes at you. Your car is overheating. You have a choice at this point: You can ignore the light and continue to your destination, or you can pull to the side of the street and call a tow truck. Even though you don't have time for this, you know you should pay attention. Ignoring the warning light could lead to much greater expense and inconvenience down the road.

Anger showing up in your relationships is like your car overheating. You may not have the time or emotional energy to deal with the root issue, but you must treat anger like the warning light on the dashboard. The warning light is not the problem. It tells you a problem lies somewhere in your engine. In the same way, frequent anger is seldom the problem. It tells you there is a deeper issue. An unresolved issue seldom goes away on its own, and ignoring it could lead to greater problems.

Anger destroys the closeness that you need and desire. Even though you may not have the time, ask for God's help to deal with it. Pay attention to warning lights in your relationships. Doing so brings greater peace and deeper bonds with those you love.

The Preservation Power of the Tongue

*Consider what a great forest is set on fire
by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire....*

JAMES 3:5-6

I grew up in an area where there was much farmland. Stretched along the roads were acres of green pastures where cattle grazed and alfalfa and fescue grew. Every year, grass fires destroyed much of the landscape; those fires often resulted from someone leaving a campfire unattended or throwing a cigarette out of a car window. Careless actions caused much havoc, and the countryside could have been preserved through more responsible behavior.

In the same way more thoughtful choices could have saved a lot of unnecessary destruction of that beautiful landscape, more carefully choosing your words can preserve your relationships. The Bible compares the tongue to a small spark that sets ablaze a great fire and does much damage. Careless words destroy.

However, the opposite is also true. Careful words nurture. Just as God speaks words of love and compassion to you, so you should speak them to others. When you realize you are feeling frustrated, preserve peace and harmony by guarding your words. When you see loved ones struggling with sorrow, lighten their sadness with encouragement. The same tongue that hurts can heal. Tap into its power of preservation.

Prepare for Restoration

*Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau
in the land of Seir, the country of Edom.*

GENESIS 32:3

Recently, I had to repair a hole that was accidentally kicked in the wall. I had to take many steps to prepare the wall to be fixed. I trimmed the hole so there was solid backing for the repair. I sanded the texture around the hole so the wall would be smooth for the drywall tools. I covered the hole with a screen to hold the drywall compound. Then I began the actual repair. I could have immediately started putting the compound on the wall, and I might have even gotten the hole covered, but the result would not have been smooth.

Sometimes our relationships with our siblings need repair, too. So when you find yourself having to mend some holes created by unkind words or actions, there are some steps you should take before you talk to them. Before Jacob approached Esau, he thought about the encounter and formulated a plan. He prayed and wrestled with his own shortcomings. Then when his heart was humble, he approached Esau.

We will all probably have to deal with damage in our relationships with our brothers and sisters. But let us make sure we do all the necessary steps of preparation before we try to repair those holes. The proper preparation will be much more likely to smooth things over.

Actions Speak Louder

Show proper respect to everyone....

1 PETER 2:17

A few years ago, I was with my Army unit on a training rotation at Fort Irwin, California. As we prepared to return to our home station, we loaded our military vehicles on a train, and then had to get on the bus that would take us back to the base camp.

The Sergeant First Class in charge asked us to get in a formation, and there was a group of soldiers being slow about complying. He admonished them to hurry, and one soldier responded with a particularly poor attitude. Every time the Sergeant gave an order, the soldier responded, “Hoo-ah, Sergeant.” But he shouted it in a challenging way, so it came out more like “HOO-AH, SERGEANT!” It was a disrespectful tone, and needless to say, a good relationship did not exist between this soldier and his leader.

Respect in relationships builds bridges between you and the other person. This means the relationship flourishes because of increased trust and mutual admiration. You will find this especially true of your relationships with supervisors. You communicate with more than just your words. Even while technically saying the right things, your tone and actions can communicate a very different message. This kind of implied contempt crumbles the foundations of relationships.

If you want to build bridges with your supervisor rather than burn them, shape every word and action with respect.

Smash the Rumor Chain

First go and be reconciled to them....

MATTHEW 5:24

In my younger years when I worked as a youth pastor, one of my favorite games to play with the teenagers in my group was the rumor game. I sat everyone in a circle and whispered a phrase to the first person, like, “My sister Sally drove a truck over the hills for milk.” The first person whispered it to the second, and so on. By the time it reached the end, the original phrase had become something like, “Sally Hill drove a milk truck over my sister.” Made-up rumors in a game with teens can be fun, but in your office, group or squad, they can destroy morale and teamwork.

In the workplace, rumors grow like weeds in the soil of conflict. When conflict arises between individuals, they run to enlist support. They tell their version of the story that gets whispered to the next person, and so on.

Getting many people involved waters down the truth even further. People choose sides, and before long the conflict threatens the whole team. A good rule is to keep the issue between only those people who were immediately involved. When you experience conflict with a co-worker, show godly characteristics of kindness and fairness by talking to that individual rather than everyone else. That’s how you pull the rumor weed.

Clear the Minefield

*The unfolding of your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.*

PSALM 119:130

The most lethal tactic the enemy used in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was the buried, roadside bomb. Bright minds developed many ways to defeat these threats. Some created electronic bubbles of protection over the convoys. Others used physical instruments like heavy rollers attached to the front of vehicles that would detonate the explosives at a safe distance. But the most effective force of neutralizing those buried bombs was the brave soldiers who drove miles and miles a day looking for and destroying them before they could harm anyone.

In a way, buried issues from your past are like those buried roadside bombs. It's not always easy to see what will set them off, and too often, you don't know they are there until after they have been triggered. Someone does or says something that trips a wire that leads to that old, unhealed wound. You explode and that person doesn't know why—and maybe at the time you don't, either—and it wreaks havoc in your relationships.

Exploding often or getting madder at a situation than is reasonable could be clues that there are some hidden issues of yours being triggered. Pray and ask God for wisdom and healing. You may need to enlist the help of a professional trained in finding these hidden issues, so you can make the roads in your relationships safer to travel.



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