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HOWARD VANDERWELL

devotional reflections

Living and Loving Life

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and Loving
Life



Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Introduction

I am living. And I am loving it.

When I say that I am living, I don't just mean that my physical body continues to function: that my brain waves show activity, my heart keeps pumping blood, and my lungs continue to process oxygen. Oh, that's certainly part of it, because there was a time—actually three times—when disease invaded my body and I wondered if I'd still be alive on this date.

There's so much more to living than just being alive. I've known scores of people—even Christians—who only seem to be existing. They have no spark, no sense of adventure, no eagerness for each day. They have no big dreams to shoot for, no big goals to work toward, no passions to motivate them, no sense of adventure that makes them want to tackle some big challenges.

They may be existing, but they're not living.

I believe God intends much more for us. God created us to live with a healthy sense of purpose and adventure. He built it right into our psychic DNA. When God created Adam and Eve (and us) in his image, he designed us for a span of days and nights and months and years that would include quality involvements, productive purposes, and a sense of privilege. God intended us to be partners in his work in this world. From the time God knit us together in our mother's womb, the psalmist says, "all the days ordained for [us]" were written in God's book (Psalm 139). Before we were born God was already building the need for good living into our very nature. Anything less diminishes the image of God in us.

Being redeemed in Christ raises our calling to an even higher level. It's hard to imagine God's willingness to give up his only Son for a cruel death on planet Earth, and even harder to imagine Jesus' willingness to experience death for our salvation. But I know God's ultimate purpose. Christ came "that [we] may have life, and have it

to the full" (John 10:10). Now we're new creatures, pardoned of our guilt, brought into an eternal kingdom, and called to serve God in all we do. That's real living! I'm pretty sure Christ didn't make us into new creatures just to have us fiddle the rest of our lives away.

I've discovered that it's possible to learn more about living the more we live. By now I've passed through most of life's chapters and seasons. I've had the fun of being a child and learning new things every day. I've felt the tension of an adolescent working through the struggles of discovering who I am. I've been a young man who married and learned to face life's challenges together with my wife. I've been a young father delighting in seeing three sons grow from tiny babes to grown men. I've been a middle-aged parent who watched those sons make their commitment to the Lord, embrace the young women who would become their wives, and select the profession that would require all their efforts. Now I'm a grandfather of ten who watches all of them carefully, noticing in their lives some of the same patterns, same characteristics, same struggles I had.

I've been a pastor for all my working life. Even though I'm "retired" now, that's still my identity. I'll always be a pastor. A pastor has the astounding privilege of taking a front-row seat at the drama of what God is doing in people's lives. As a pastor I've worshiped with God's people week after week, year after year. I've celebrated baptisms. I've taught children, answered questions, listened to fears, and watched some fail. I've married people, counseled them, watched their families grow, and buried them. I've wept with them, laughed with them, prayed with them, and played with them. I've brought God's Word to them for their salvation, encouragement, nurture, and correction. I've broken bread and poured out juice with them. And every Sunday I've had the privilege of pronouncing God's benediction on them as they go out to continue living their faith all week.

Through all the seasons of my life and my front-row seat in so many other lives, I've seen a lot of living—good living and not-so-good living, wise living and not-so-wise living. I've seen God faithfully caring for his people, loving them, calling them, growing them, waiting for them, comforting them, and challenging them.

I've also discovered that it's possible to learn a lot about living when you fear that you are about to lose your life.

I faced that possibility first in 1972, just a few months after moving to a new pastorate in Lansing, Illinois. During a routine physical examination, my doctor spoke the words that changed my life: "I don't like what I feel in there." He sent me to a specialist who examined me even more carefully, scheduled me for surgery, conducted a battery of tests, and finally rendered the verdict that it was cancer—Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. I had just turned thirty-five years old and was the father of three young sons. It felt like someone had levied a death sentence on me. The next three months involved surgery, continual testing, and radiation therapy. Before too long, I had returned to full strength and resumed all my activities. But I was shaken. There in Room 725 at Rush Presbyterian St. Luke Medical Center in Chicago I first faced my mortality: "I could die from this!" And suddenly my life took on a whole new meaning. It was worth fighting for.

From then on, my schedule included regular physical examinations every few months—until 1984, when I discovered another lump. All the old fears welled up again. By then I had moved to Hudsonville, Michigan, my fourth pastorate. More tests, more waiting, more anxiety, more surgery. More cancer, this time Hodgkin's lymphoma. Fortunately the cancer had not spread to other lymph nodes or organs. Total abdominal radiation was the prescribed form of treatment. That represented only one level of pain. The higher and deeper level was the pain of anxiety, fear, and wondering what a second recurrence of cancer would mean for the future.

Then, just six years after the second encounter, a "routine" examination resulted in a doctor saying once again, "I don't like what I feel in there." More specialists, more surgery, more tests, more radiation therapy.

Three times in eighteen years, two different kinds of lymphoma. I have now lived for more than double my age when the first attack

occurred. I am now in excellent health—and have been cancer free for nearly twenty years.

I dare say I have lived more in the last twenty years than most people live in their whole lifetime. I'm still a husband, a father, a grandfather, a pastor, a friend, and a child of God. But my life has been richer, deeper, and much more of an adventure than I ever thought it could be. More than ever I love living. I know the day will come when God will ask me to lay it down and come to glory with him, but until that day I am loving living.

During my second encounter with cancer, I wrote a devotional booklet called *Proven Promises*. I wrote it for and to myself as a form of personal devotions. I wrote it candidly and honestly out of the emotions and struggles that major disease involves. I wrote it partly in reaction to much of the literature I had encountered, which seemed far too superficial to me. Others who were suffering found these devotionals encouraging, and they were distributed far and wide, giving me the opportunity to come alongside others facing the same battle I had encountered.

In 2002, I retired from the pastorate but with the growing conviction that God had rescued me those three times so I could continue to serve him. I am now a staff member of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship at Calvin College and of Calvin Theological Seminary. In both capacities I have the privilege of serving the church, staff members in congregations, and people who are preparing for the Christian ministry by providing counsel and producing materials in the area of worship. I pray that I may satisfactorily fulfill God's intentions to use me for the sake of his church.

This book represents my further reflections on how precious living is and how to make the most of it since *Proven Promises* was written more than two decades ago. I hope you'll think of these devotionals as extended pastoral conversations in which we open our hearts to each other as we search for the richest and most satisfying ways in which to use the years God graciously and providentially gives us.

I'm living and loving it. This book is designed to pass on to you some of that love for living.

Suggestions

for Using These Materials

This book is organized around eight major themes—each with a brief introduction and ten devotionals on each theme. I hope they will stir your own reflections. Here are some suggestions for using these materials:

- Read a devotional each day and enter a time of reflection on your own experiences.
- Write some of your thoughts and reflections on the same theme. Consider using a notebook or your computer to journal your own reflections.
- At the end of each meditation you will find three related Scripture passages (Reflecting on God’s Word) for further reading. Decide whether you’d like to read all three on the same day or select one each day to read for further reflection. As you read each passage, add your own reflections in your journal.
- You’ll also find questions and suggestions that will aid your personal reflection (For Further Reflection). You can use these for personal reflection or as the basis of discussion with your spouse, family, or a small group. An accountability group with friends would be an excellent setting to reflect on such matters.

As you read and reflect on the themes in this book, may God feed your spirit and deepen your love for life. Above all, may you “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

Heart Health

I went to my doctor the other day—again. There are stages in life when we seem to go to doctors more often.

Some of those visits are problem-oriented—something doesn't seem right so you want that checked out. Other visits are “check-ups.” There's no identifiable problem, you're just getting a general exam. I'm a firm believer in annual check-ups because two of my occurrences of cancer were detected in routine physical exams. I had no symptoms at all.

Usually I go home from such exams with a sense of relief, happy to have been pronounced “healthy for my age” by the doctor. At the same time, I can't help feeling that the exam has been very incomplete.

The only things my doctor considers are the things he can learn from poking and probing and listening; only the things that can be measured by blood tests and urine tests and x-rays. But I'm so much more than a blob of functioning physical mass. It makes sense to me that some prefer to use the term *wellness*, which encompasses far more than *health*.

I know people whose bodies are functioning very well but I don't consider them healthy at all. I know others whose bodies are not doing so well but—in spite of that—they are living well.

Health is so much more than the physical state of the body.

Good health involves our attitudes, our faith, our values, our goals, and our purpose in life. People who are healthy have embraced a renewing rhythm in life. For them life is more than what can be measured by the clock or the calendar; it's more than the results of blood tests or x-rays.

So let's spend some time in the coming days thinking about our heart health. If you are willing to be honest with yourself, you might just be ready to give yourself the best exam you've ever had.

1. Healed and Whole

If I allow myself to stop and think about it, the threats that surround me every day are pretty frightening.

I read recently that we have more bacteria on our body than there are people in the United States. Really. Apparently there are 229,000 germs per square inch on frequently used faucet handles, 21,000 germs per square inch on work desks, and 1,500 on each square centimeter of our hands. What's more, the workplace (where I'm writing this) is the worst hiding place for such germs. If you're feeling a little queasy right now, I don't blame you. It's a wonder any of us escape the deadly diseases that are just waiting to strike. It's a wonder any of us are able to function.

And as if that's not enough, think about the miles we drive daily, each trip with the potential of accidents. Think about the temptations that have their hooks in you, the deadly desires of your fallen heart.

All of which leads me to believe that good health is a daily miracle. Let's call it the miracle we all take for granted.

I can make a list of the major diseases from which I've been cured. But I can't begin to remember and number all those that didn't seem so big: everything from ear infections as an infant to last month's encounter with the flu. How about you? Some of the healing we experience takes place through the natural protective functions of our bodies, some with the help of medications or other focused medical care. But all of those healings were given by God.

No wonder David describes God as the one who "heals all [our] diseases" (Psalm 103:3).

In Proverbs, the book of wisdom, Solomon counsels his son with these words: "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones" (Proverbs 3:7-8).

Is God really that interested in our total health? And does God refuse to draw as sharp a line as we do between our physical health and all the other dimensions of health—emotional, mental, spiritual,

and relational? Does he make a direct connection between wisdom, humility, fear, and health? If so, then medical attention is only one part of our wellness program.

Perhaps we make a serious mistake when we think that most of our healing comes through medical attention.

Perhaps, instead, I am whole

- when I am humble before God and not wise in my own eyes.
- when I live with a holy fear of the Lord.
- when I have found a purpose for living that matches God's plan for me.
- when I discern right from wrong.
- when I serve others.
- when my relationships with others are marked by grace.
- when I am filled with the power of Christ's resurrection.
- when I live with the clear conviction that my life counts.
- when . . .

Go ahead—you add to the list!

Reflecting on God's Word

Deuteronomy 5:25-33

Isaiah 58:6-12

Luke 7:18-23

For Further Reflection

1. What is the shape and character of the total health that Christ has made possible for you as a redeemed person? Write some of your thoughts down in your journal.
2. In what ways have you experienced healing from the hand of God in recent years? It may be easy to forget these as time moves on. Recall them and thank God for them.
3. What is the greatest obstacle to your personal wellness at this point in your life? Identify it and ask for God's help in resolving it.