

John the Speediest

For some men, it's all about the race. Just stay on the interstate for any length of time and you'll see lots of guys who seem to be fanatical about getting to their destinations before you do. At gas stations, I see them hurrying their wives and kids along as they watch cars whizzing down the road as they're returning the gas nozzle to the pump. All the while they're thinking to themselves subconsciously, *Look at that! They're beating us!*

Inside the story of the resurrection, we get a little glimpse of man's deep desire to be first-man-there.

John is telling the story of Jesus' glorious resurrection and in John 20:4. He records the triumph of the empty tomb and as a side note he also remarks about who got there first. It seems worthy of a sports announcer like Darrell Waltrip. *"In the inside lane—Simon Peter in the sandals and beard. On the outside lane, John the Beloved, AKA the other disciple also in sandals and a beard. Boogedy, Boogedy, Boogedy!"*

John records the results for all eternity in verse 4: *"The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first."* But that's not quite enough. John underscores who came in first and second time in verse 6: *"Then, following him, Simon Peter also came."*

We get who got there first and it was not Simon Peter. But John continues to make sure you understood in verse 8: *"The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first..."*

So John the Beloved is also John the Speediest. I can just imagine Peter reading the Gospel delivered straight from Patmos where John had been exiled. As Peter thought of the incredible world-changing resurrection, he must have smiled at the tiny subplot of the Jerusalem 1200 meter dash and the much, self-heralded triumph of John the Speediest. Somehow

John managed to get the bragging rights in his permanent record.

Grace on a Family Tree

One of my friends loves Jesus. That sounds commonplace doesn't it? It becomes less pedestrian when I tell you that his Mom died a drug addict and his father was a devout atheist. My friend was gloriously saved at the age of 10 at a Vacation Bible School event and never looked back. This. Makes. No. Sense. They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree but this apple fell off the tree rolled down the hill, was picked up by a pilot and flew across the ocean! (Figuratively speaking, of course.) And believe me, I don't have the enough white space here to chronicle the entire sordid tale. His story is a monument to the fact that God can save anybody He wants to save, no matter how messed up the family tree.

The New Testament begins with a family tree that had a number of ugly branches. Matthew 1 tells us that in Jesus' lineage are a number shady characters including a prostitute, daughter of incest, an adulterer, a lying brother, lots of cautionary tales and ultimately an scandalous unwed pregnancy. It's almost like God wanted to say from the start that this Gospel is all about grace and not about our upbringing. God isn't as interested in your family history. He's interested in what happens next. And when it comes to transformation, what happens next is glorious. He flips the script with grace. It's His specialty. Never count yourself or your family out because of what happened yesterday. It's an insult to the power of God when you do.

Stick with the Plan. Keep it Simple Somehow

The high school football coach was being heckled mercilessly in the first quarter by all the player's dads. He just kept calling the same running plays over and over again. The coach, who happened to be a member of my small group, told me his plan the night before. He was going to run the ball, over and over again because he knew the front four of the opponents team was strong but they didn't have the conditioning that his offensive line had. He said, "It's just a matter of time." The crowd harassed the coach relentlessly as the running backs eked out a ground game in the first quarter two or three yards at a time. No passes. All rushes. But by the 3rd quarter, the defensive line had their hands on their hips. They were gassed! And the two-yard gains became 20-yard gains in the fourth quarter as they rolled to victory easily.

Whether it is growing our retirement plan, growing a Small group, or devising a strategy to lose weight, we must plan. Often the plans are not exciting. They drone on respectively and require consistency, patience and a relentless nature of doing things (or not doing things) day after day after day. It's not thrilling. It's doesn't make your heart beat faster like a reckless short-term plan often does, but it works. The writer of Proverbs reminds us that diligence always trumps recklessness. Let's make sure that we're consistent with our plan so that the 4th quarter and the victory celebration will be that much sweeter.

What's your game plan? Allow me to share mine. It's such an easy plan. I still have to look at it every day or I'll forget it. (And yes, I often do.)

Stick with the plan:

1. Give at least ten percent.
2. Save at least ten percent.
3. Always take one day a week to rest.
4. Continue to date your wife.
5. Don't talk about people behind their backs.
6. Work out 6 days a week.
7. Journal at least one day a week— even if it's just a few sentences.
8. Meet with an accountability partner.
9. As much as you can, eat unprocessed food.
10. Meet God daily. Find a place, read the Word, work your prayer list.

I know it is pretty basic, but I'm a basic guy. It's not a complicated playbook, but the more I keep running it, the more I frustrate the opponent. If I'm faithful to it, I will need no Hail Marys.

Don't Drive Like Jehu

What is it about driving that turns a normal guy into a crazed lunatic? We've all seen it, haven't we? But I think I have some clues: Men love races and the road is subliminally set up like a race. There's a destination. There are green lights, red lights, stripes, places for pit-stops and every journey ends with an imaginary finish line. It is so in my blood and I'm not NASCAR guy. I'm at the gas pump and I want the family to finish using the facilities because I look at

all the cars on the road and somewhere deep in the synapses between the cerebral cortex and the hypothalamus gland, a voice is whispering as I watch them whiz by, "They're all beating you!" Where did this voice come from? Did I watch too many Dukes of Hazzard reruns? Do I secretly adhere to the creeds of Ricky Bobby? Was I traumatized by my brother's victory at the Super Speed Go-Cart Derby?

Most guys that I know talk to the other vehicles. I see them. Is this therapy? Does it really help? We know they can't hear us but that doesn't stop us from blurting out the snarkiest observation we can think of. I thought it was just an American deal until I went on a mission trip to Guatemala. They were just as annoyed and perhaps even more assertive than American drivers.

I think it all started with a guy in 2 Kings named Jehu. If you want a picture of road rage, look no further. Whenever you find Jehu in the narrative, he's either racing around the Northern Kingdom in his tricked out chariot with the spinning hubcaps or he's shooting his arrows all over the suburbs. He actually ran over wicked queen Jezebel with his chariot. He was so notorious in his chariot that people around town thought reckless driving and Jehu were synonymous. Note the following passage:

Again the watchman reported... "The driving is like that of Jehu son of Nimshi—he drives like a madman." 2 Kings 9:20

When you get behind the wheel think about Mary on her donkey, not Jehu in his chariot. We'll all be a lot safer and sleep a little sounder. And if someone tells you that you drive like Jehu, that's not a compliment. That's a warning! You might need extensive counseling.

My Mom

My mother made it to Heaven this past year, but she left an indelible mark on my life. Growing up, I thought my mother was the strictest, most penny-pinching woman on the planet. As an adult, this theory has been confirmed. I used to think this was a flaw more than a virtue. I was wrong.

Mom was prepared for every crisis. The apocalypse, the great tribulation and the nuclear meltdown never happened but they did, the world would have turned to her and they would all receive stacks of canned hominy, frozen vegetables and enough toilet paper to go around. But not the two-ply toilet paper. Much too expensive...

I remember our weekly runs to the bread surplus store to get expired cinnamon bread at half price. If it weren't for the commercials I wouldn't have even known that McDonald's served French fries until I was over the age of accountability.

I can still hear her say, "I'm so glad you were born but after all those labor pains, I should be the one to get the presents." Yes, birthdays were celebrated and gifts were given. I knew she was joking but there was an imputed virtue in the middle of this humorous proverb—no one should get rewarded for just showing up on earth. We had to find our own jam and figure out how to play it well.

Along with her skill of saving, she mastered the art of discipline. She didn't have to lay a hand on me. Her laser-focused glare could singe my eyebrows from 600 yards away. I used to complain that Mom made me go to bed earlier than any other child in North America. The only acceptable places to be after 8 p.m. were church or bed. Screen time wasn't an issue

in our house. My big brother and I stayed out of the house for hours because we knew if we weren't studying, she'd have a list of activities on hand that involved brooms, scouring pads and variety of household cleaning chemicals. Of course, I was way too busy for this, so we usually braved the elements and rode our bikes like we were training for the Tour De France.

One of the greatest things my mom did growing up was to force me to fail. She didn't just want me to feel the thrill of victory. She knew that I had to learn the agony of defeat. I still remember the day she yanked the training wheels of the bike without telling me. If she saw a fear or weakness in my psyche, she would push me in that direction. This kept me from the sin of cockiness. She knew that I had no sense of direction- none whatsoever, so she'd send me on errands that would surely get me lost in the streets of our town. With no hand-eye coordination, she signed me up for piano lessons which I enjoyed about as much as I did cleaning the grout- both of which were daily activities. I can't play anything today, but it gave me the chutzpa to run toward the things I really enjoyed doing with an even greater passion.

Mom isn't with us this year but she programmed me for success in so many ways and whenever I get too big for my britches, I still feel her influence over me. I still tithe at church, watch my language, eat my vegetables, try to do more than what's expected, and, yes, I still put the seat down on the toilet.



She also parented three of the greatest people on earth, my dear brother, Mark and my two awesome sisters, Melodye and Melinda.

I guess you could say I was sheltered as a child, and I am so thankful for it.

Silence: It's Not Just Golden

I was alone the night a violent thunderstorm hit our town and the electricity went out. At that moment I was watching a football game, scanning twitter and listening to music. When darkness arrived in a split second I realized that the battery on my iPhone was almost gone. A brief moment of panic ensued.

How could I possibly know whether the big men in golden helmets and tights would take the oblong ball across the field before being tackled by the big men in orange helmets! (These are important things in 2018.)

I realized that in a matter of minutes I would be thrust into the lifestyle millions of people enjoyed in the 1800s! The silence and lack of media connection was unnerving at first. It was then that I sensed the presence of God speaking to me about my addiction to noise. After 15 minutes I had rediscovered the beauty of silence. These days, silence is something we have to fight to achieve, but it is definitely worth the fight. The National Center of Biotechnology stated in a study that two minutes of silence is more relaxing than listening to "relaxing" music, based on changes in blood pressure and blood circulation in the brain.

However, this is not new knowledge for people of the Book. The Bible urges us to experience silence as a spiritual discipline. Every day we are faced with the choice of constant communication, noise and blather or intentional, Jesus-focused silence. Don't wait for a power outage in order to spend time in silence. God might be trying to tell you something but all

the ambient noise and entertainment leaves you deaf to His voice. I believe we would be astounded by all God wants to say to us and yet He never gets a chance because of our preoccupation with news, messages, conversations and entertainment.

“The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.” Blaise Pascal

Indeed, silence is something we must continually and actively seek. It’s not the default these days. The white noise of politics, entertainment, social media, viral videos, large crowds, streaming music, and binge-watched dramas clutter our minds and heighten our already over-stimulated minds. Meanwhile there is a whispering voice that speaks and yet is rarely heard,

The most powerful buttons in your home are the on/off ones.

The more we turn off the noise, the greater opportunity we have to hear from God. Most spend their lives watching fake people live fake lives on rectangular screens. It inhibits us living the real life God beckons us to live. Today, it takes discipline. Lots of discipline, but the pay-off is priceless.

Silence isn’t just golden, it is godly.

The Power of a Broken Life

Annie Johnson Flint’s life declares the greatness of God in the midst of confusion and pain. She was orphaned as a baby.

She lived in a home that bordered on poverty and spent her days as a caregiver to her adopted mother who suffered from a number of strokes. In midlife, she also fell ill and spent most of her remaining years crippled, bed-ridden, dealing with depression and suffering from chronic pain. How could God glorify Himself in all her unanswered prayers, suffering and depression?



While most would look at her life and ask this question, Annie focused on all God was doing in the midst of every challenge she faced. She didn't hide her pain. Instead she chose to be an encouragement to the small community around her. Because of her faith, God gave grace to her. Believers have continued singing her testimony for well over 100 years. In one stanza, her life became a wellspring of encouragement to those who face adversity, pain and the anomaly of illness:

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;
To added affliction He addeth His mercy;
To multiplied trials, His multiplied peace.*

*When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.*

*His love has no limit; His grace has no measure.
His pow'r has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!*

So often, we're enamored by success, security, beauty and prestige. Our economy is alien to the equity of Heaven. Our self-made narratives are houses of cards when they stray from the truthful, painful process of brokenness.

This doesn't happen on the platform. It happens in the closet.

I think about Annie Flint's life and I hear her song in the middle of my own questions about suffering. I must trust the same God Annie trusted. He is enough for today's struggles and tomorrow's crucibles. He was enough for her. He is enough for us.

5 Ways to GO BIG Today

I walked into a karaoke ambush! Students and parents alike were singing important musical compositions like- "Call Me Maybe," "We are the Champions," and "Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting" and it was an amazingly fun experience. That is, until the entire room began to chant my name. Every bone in my body wanted to bolt but when a pastor hears students chant his name, he shall not leave. Trust me. It's in Leviticus. I think.



So I bid adieu to my pride, dignity and reputation as I

nervously grabbed the mic. The chosen lyrics flashed on the big screen. The tune: "Achy Breaky Heart." The DJ went for the mother-load of all tacky country songs. The other concerning aspect of this moment was the number of smartphones that seemed to pop up like petunias on a spring day. I said to myself: OK. Go big. If you're going to lose all dignity, lose it with great enthusiasm.

This is the spirit of Paul's challenge to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. Live out your sacrifice to the glory of God. This is the audacity that will change a culture. When it comes to loving God we should, with even greater enthusiasm, "Go big." Take the leap. Forget safety. Forget dignity. Leverage your courage. Say the extra sentence God is asking you to say. Give a little more away. Fight a little harder for the weak and see what happens! What if we lived everyday like this as believers, parents, disciples, coaches, and mentors? It would be a game-changer. That's a fact. This type of holy daring requires vulnerability and a brave heart, but the rewards are far greater than the risks.

Here are 5 ways to Go Big that you can start doing today!

1 We can GO BIG by giving more than we're comfortable giving. Here's an inventory question: Who needs your money, your clothes, your time more than you do? I'm sure several names have flashed in your mind when you read that question. Why not meet at least one person's need. It could change the course of a person's life. Many times a degree of change can help a person go further.

2. We can GO BIG by using words to express love. Who needs to hear that you love them? Next to Jesus, the word love is the strongest weapon in our arsenal against the enemy. Why don't we say it more? Some say, "Well, with all the things I do they should know that I love them without me having to say it."

I'm reminded of the classic Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof." The old couple—Tyve and Golde come to the realization of that their arranged marriage actually gave birth to love.

They sing:

*Do you love me?
It doesn't change a thing
But even so
After twenty-five years
It's nice to know.*

At that moment in the musical we are all in on the actual truth of the song: Actually it changes a lot.

3, We can GO BIG by taking irrational risks for Jesus.

Do you want to hear a sentence that is never said in Heaven?

"I wished I wouldn't have risked so much for Jesus."

When life is over and all the pieces of our lives are neatly tucked away for good. The only thing that's really left are the risks we took and the brave acts we achieved for the sake of Jesus.

4. We can GO BIG by saying that one other sentence.

I'm a fairly good sentence arranger. And I am very comfortable speaking before a larger group. One thing I'm still working on is personal "care-fronting" or "truthing" it. These two coined words from a few more brilliant minds describe the act of saying tough words for the benefit of the listener.

Proverbs 27:6 applies: *Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.*

Me? I don't like the idea of causing friend and family pain but ultimately a true friend will speak truth even if it hurts.

5. We can GO BIG by going small.

Amazingly, one of the characteristic of people who live large in the Lord is the get useless things, needless activities, and corrupt companions out of their lives. It's multiplication by subtraction. The more margin you have in your life, the more room you have for the things you were born to do. You can start today by:

- Cutting a subscription service
- Selling the dang toy (the camper you haven't used in 6 months, the boat, the extra car)
- Get rid of the storage unit junk. (And in so doing the monthly payment for the ball and chain rental agreement)
- Donate your fat clothes/skinny clothes/embarrassing clothes (whatever the case may be) and lighten your closet. I makes your wardrobe decision making every morning a whole lot easier.

These are just a few ways you can GO BIG. You have only one life, one chance, one journey. Why not make it big? At the end of your life you will have fewer regrets.

Kids and Permanent Markers

How have we hidden them? On top of the refrigerator, hidden in the top drawer of a dresser, or guarded by Navy Seals in an iron safe and monitored by infrared security alarms. *Somehow* my kids found a way to get them and use them.

We moved into our dream home a few years back. We were all so delighted with all the extra space. It was really the first home Darlene had been able to plan everything from the paint to the carpet to the kitchen island. She was in heaven. We watched expectantly as the last brick was in place and the last roll of carpet had been installed.

As we joyously walked into the home that first morning, I said to my youngest son who had just turned three, "This house is so big you might not be able to find your room!" I should have been more discerning as I looked at his worried little face as he pursed his little lips together and furrowed his brow at that one comment.

I knew something was wrong when I awoke the next morning to the sound of my wife's plaintive wail. I rushed out of the bedroom and immediately understood her sorrow. Our youngest had taken a magic marker and drawn a line from the front door down the foyer, up the stairs, into his room, ending the line with the point of an arrow fixed in place at the foot of his bed. He explained, as best he could, that he didn't want to forget where his room was.

A thick red felt tip pen on eggshell carpet does not help the resale value but it does remind us to pray for our children.

We've had a number of similar incidents. Since we wouldn't let our kids do the temporary tattoos from the cereal boxes—(An attempt to teach Levitical law to them. See: Lev. 19:23-28)—they took turns creating eagles or some other type of winged creatures on each other's bellies. Suffice it to say they found a work-around. At least it wasn't on their foreheads.

They found many other applications and surfaces for permanent markers:

- On the couch to reserve a permanent seat
- On the wall to record important milestones
- On the cat paws (Why? Why Not?)
- On rags (hurriedly cleaning up the marker stains before they got busted)
- On the pages of my Thompson's Chain Reference Bible (One son thought the black and white outlined maps were coloring pages. I actually saw this happen to my Study

Bible while I was preaching with my large print Bible. What a helpless feeling. It's impossible to interject "Jacob, stop that," in the middle of a message about the eternity of our souls.

My greatest prayer these days is that when they are old, God will make a much more permanent mark on their souls. Every stroke of parenting, every opportunity to bless and discipline leaves a spiritual and emotional mark. Daily, I'm reminded of the things we did and the things that we didn't do to aid them on their journey. We made our mark, but if I had it to do all over again I'd make more of them.

One thing is for certain I'm an expert on permanent marker removal and if you need help, hunt me down on Facebook. I'll walk you through it.

If I die, I die.

A few years ago, a friend of mine was diagnosed with throat cancer. It was a devastating diagnosis that ultimately brought him to his knees in utter fear and doubt. Lots of emails went back and forth between the two of us. He had very limited ability during those days to talk but the email thread was extensive. He wrote about the frustrations and fear. He shared his anger and utter lack of understanding. What do you say to a friend who is facing such a burden of uncertainty? I visited with him in the hospital just moments before they wheeled him into the surgeon. When I saw his face I knew there was something different., strangely peaceful about him. He handed me an index card and smiled. It simply read, "If I die I die. -Esther 4:16" I'm sure I must have looked perplexed because he almost chuckled as he looked up at me from the gurney.

It was a strange proclamation but I finally figured out what he was saying to me. He had come to grips with his own mortality and surrendered to every possibility, even the worst-case scenarios. Just as Esther, a young woman who faced her own mortality to face the consequences and dangers of trusting God, Joey was prepared to face his. It was as if he was saying, "I'm trusting God and I'm up for whatever happens." I've often been challenged by that visit in the hospital. So often I get stuck in the mud of worse-case thinking but then I take a page from his playbook (and Esther's) I'll be obedient and trusting. I'll whisper, "If I die, I die!"
