

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Life Verses: 2 Chronicles 16:9
2 Chronicles 16:0

Music has power. I heard that song (*offeratory music*) the second week of November 1982 for the first time. I know because I was in seminary and had the privilege of substituting in an African-American church in Prince George's County in Maryland. It was a tiny church, no air conditioning. Somehow in November, it is still hot in Maryland, and this voice comes out of the choir loft. It was hard for me to preach.

I preached for three weeks in a row. The first week I preached, and I was in seminary you know, so forgive me, I put a 30-minute sermon into about 13 minutes because I spoke so fast. They didn't even have a chance to get involved. The pastor had said, "Oh, they'll love you. They'll carry you. They'll lift you up. Come on. Don't be afraid. They'll talk back to you." Well, they didn't because I was talking so fast, they didn't have a chance to get in, but as I walked back after I said, "Amen," I could hear a woman in the front say, "That's it?" The elder who was my host said, "Next week, brother, next week bring us the meat."

So the next week I put sermon two and sermon three together and went almost 20 minutes. By then they started to get edgy. In the back I heard, "Tell it. Tell it. Bring it." I felt like I was Billy Graham. There were 72 people out there, you know, but it was great. The third week I finally had learned my lesson. I put the whole next sermon series into about an hour and at minute 42, this one lady in the back stands up and goes, "Bring it home! Lord Jesus, help him bring it home!"

Power! The power of memory. That is part of what we are talking about in this series on life verses. We believe that the invisible, unknowable God speaks to us and every once in a while, we get a word from God that sticks with us and works on us, and it becomes what we would call a life verse. It changes our life. I asked the staff if we could spend the summer talking about their life verses, where has God spoken to them so that it impressed them, saying that these would be more personal sermons. It's been great! But the staff said to me, "John, you are so old, you've got to have more than one life verse." So I've got three! I talked a couple of weeks ago about how my life verse when I came to Christ, was 1st Corinthians 15:10,

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

And in two weeks I'd like to talk about the life verse that I would love to have at my funeral from the 29th chapter of Job. But today I want to talk to you about a verse that God has been using to speak to me and work with me for about 10 years now, because it is right in the middle of the battle. Verses that are life verses are there because they bring life. That is why the life verses

people have written here (*on the big letters spelling out L-I-F-E*) is so neat to see. I don't know if you can see them from where you are sitting.

¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:13)

¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.... (John 1:12)

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. (Titus 2:11)

In tiny letters here,

¹⁹ He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me. (Psalm 18:19)

These are *your* life verses. I would love it if at the end of the service today or in the weeks ahead, you would come up and write yours so that we as a community can hear God speak to all of us. I thought that today I would share with you what has become the life verse for me in this season of life. It is from 2nd Chronicles 16.

⁹ The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

I was sitting in the pew, and it was as if God had spoken to me because it instantly jumped off the page into my head, went down into my heart, and I said, "That's me. The eyes of the Lord have searched and found me, and I need strength, and I want to be committed to Him." When I think of those whose hearts are strengthened, I think of those whose hearts are fully committed, who have overcome great obstacles.

We are right in the middle of the Olympics, a phenomenal time for stories. Here is a picture (*slide shown*) of someone who has overcome incredible obstacles. John Orozco, a young Puerto Rican man raised in poverty in Brooklyn. Got his first gymnastics medal at age eight. Then at the podium when he got the medal, he saw a kid crying because he had lost, and Orozco took his medal off and put it around the other boy's neck.

Or my favorite, a man who qualified yesterday for the semifinals in the 400-meter and today will compete (*slide shown*). He is the fastest man in the world on blades because he has no legs. His name is Oscar Pistorius from South Africa. He was born without the fibula bone in either of his legs. His parents had his legs amputated just below the knee. Today he is racing against the fastest men in the world.

I've got to tell you, the next picture is one of the top pictures of all time (*slide shown*). **The power of example.** Oscar goes to a hospital in South Africa to a little girl you can see if you look hard, who has no arms and no legs and he shows her how she can run. This is what the

inspiration of courage, of those who are fully committed, is about. That is what I want. I want to live a non-ordinary life. The Olympics is about all those who win, but I think that there are examples of courage even when we lose. Most of the time most of us do not win, become famous, get rich, and we have to deal with failure. Courage comes to those who lose as well. God strengthens the hearts of the ones who lose.

Chuck Colson was a senior advisor to President Nixon. He scrambled his way to the top, climbing over the bodies of anybody who got in his way; was the president's hatchet man; was caught in misdeeds; and finally then, was willing to listen to people who talked to him about forgiveness and a new life in Christ. After he had become a Christian and turned his life around, he said, "I'm a new me." But the long arm of the law came and said, "Yeah, but first you're going to prison." So with his one child in jail for marijuana use and his wife battling cancer, he goes to prison, feeling like he has already failed in this new life of faith, and failure was something that Colson did not deal well with. His mentor came to him and said, "Chuck, let me ask you this. Is it better to fail in something that will ultimately succeed or to succeed in something that will ultimately fail? Get on the right side, Chuck." And his stint in prison has changed hundreds of thousands of lives.

So the takeaway for me in "The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him," the takeaway was, do I have the willingness to be used for something extraordinary? Do I have the willingness to not be boring? We can live an ordinary life, but we don't have to do it in an ordinary way. I was so thrilled as I left the auditorium that day that I memorized the verse. I loved it. I wrote it in my journal. And when it came time to talk about another life verse, this one bubbled to the top, but I then realized that I had never really read it in the Bible. I had always read it out of my journal or read it off of what somebody else said. Since I knew I had to preach on it this week, I went to where it is found in the Bible, the 16th chapter of 2nd Chronicles because as we say here, the text without the context is just a pretext. You can make the Bible say anything you want if you take it out of context, and I had done that. I wanted to put it in its context and that, in part, means that we need to understand what was happening in Israel at the time.

The Book of 2nd Chronicles is the story of what happens to the people of God in, what is called, The Divided Kingdom. This is a world class map built with great expense over the course of weeks (*pointing to flipchart*). Let me just help you here. This is the Mediterranean Sea, okay? This is the border of the Mediterranean. This is Israel right in here. Up here is the Sea of Galilee. Down here is the Dead Sea. This is the Jordan River, the eastern boundary of Israel. It goes all the way from the top to the bottom between great empires. All this is the kingdom of David, King David, and later the empire of Solomon, who expands it to its furthest extent. After Solomon dies, his children begin to fight and create a divided kingdom, a civil war.

The twelve tribes were united under David and Solomon, but now the top 10 split off, and only the two remain faithful to the God of the Bible. Here is Jerusalem right there. The two tribes are called Judah. All this is Israel or Samaria, and like brothers and sisters, they hate each other even more than the empires that surround them do. That is what is happening here. In this divided kingdom, names become important so I want to give you a little help with the names. King Asa is the king of Judah. They are down here, the good guys. The other kings are of Israel and Aram, the country to the north, Lebanon now, but Syria then. Damascus, Syria is the capitol of that. So we have Judah, King Asa, good guys. Israel, bad guys. In 2nd Chronicles 16 it says,

16 In the thirty-sixth year of Asa's reign, King Baasha of Israel invaded Judah....

so the guys up north are coming south,

...and fortified Ramah,....

which is a village right on the border,

...in order to prevent anyone from entering or leaving King Asa's territory in Judah. ² Asa responded by removing the silver and gold from the treasuries of the Temple of the LORD and the royal palace. He sent it to King Ben-hadad of Aram, who was ruling in Damascus, along with this message: ³ "Let there be a treaty between you and me like the one between your father and my father. See, I am sending you silver and gold. Break your treaty with King Baasha of Israel so that he will leave me alone." ⁴ Ben-hadad agreed to King Asa's request and sent the commanders of his army to attack the towns of Israel. They conquered the towns of Ijon, Dan, Abel-beth-maacah, and all the store cities in Naphtali.

Immediately, as the King of Israel is being attacked from the north, he withdraws from this town in a panic and still loses the war. King Asa's men followed up and went to the city of Ramah and took all the stones and timbers the enemy had been using and used those to fortify their borders. A great day for King Asa of Judah, the good king, right? He has a brilliant strategy. Then a prophet comes to the King of Judah.

⁷ At that time Hanani the seer came to King Asa and told him, "Because you have put your trust in the king of Aram instead of in the LORD your God, you missed your chance to destroy the army of the king of Aram. ⁸ Don't you remember what happened to the Ethiopians and Libyans....

the other enemies of Judah,

...and their vast army, with all of their chariots and charioteers? At that time you relied on the LORD, and he handed them over to you.

Then our verse.

⁹ The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. What a fool you have been!

That's good King Asa, king of Judah. How would you like to be the prophet today?

From now on you will be at war. ¹⁰ Asa became so angry with Hanani for saying this that he threw him into prison and put him in stocks. At that time, Asa also began to oppress some of his people....

Three years later,

¹² In the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Asa developed a serious foot disease. Yet even with the severity of his disease, he did not seek the LORD's help but turned only to his physicians. ¹³ So he died in the forty-first year of his reign. ¹⁴ He was buried in the tomb he had carved out for himself in the City of David. He was laid on a bed perfumed with sweet spices and fragrant ointments, and the people built a huge funeral fire in his honor.

For many of them, he had been a successful king. Doesn't that change the way that you look at the story, at this verse of mine? It changed it for me. As I read this verse now, King Asa started with a heart fully committed to God, but then it sort of gets leached away. He doesn't want to be faithful. He wants to be successful, and because he chooses to be successful, he is not strengthened by God. He dies far from God because he was afraid. Henri Nouwen is a Catholic priest. He said,

Most of us live in two houses that are side by side. We are meant to live in the house of love, to live in the house of love surrounded by people who love you back. You are able to love your enemies, to be gracious, to forgive, to live without fear. Whether you are rich or poor, you are contented in the house of love. But most of us leave the house of love and move next door into the house of fear. We live in the house of fear because we care so much about what other people think. We want to be successful. We want to get ahead.

It is a dog-eat-dog world in the house of fear, and most of us are like King Asa. We live in the house of fear because we trust in the house of science or the house of politics or the house of power or the house of success. We become reasonable people and that, I think, is the lesson for us here. I need to realize that what pulled good King Asa's heart away from God is tugging at mine and, I believe, pulling your heart away from God. What pulls our hearts away from being fully committed so that God can strengthen us? I believe it is mostly fear. We are afraid. We are afraid to commit ourselves to an invisible God because we will look weird. We'll be out of step, or we'll lose or we'll fail.

I believe that Asa does not commit himself to God because of his pride. People who are fully committed to God stand up in front of others and say, "I have no clue. Only God knows, and I want to learn what God knows." Over and over, they come to people and say, "I messed up. God has forgiven me. Would you forgive me?" Our pride doesn't want us to do that. We get tired of that kind of life. I believe that the lure of the world 24/7 in your life is saying, "If you buy this, if you do this, if you hang with these people, then you will be successful. Don't mess with that God stuff. It does not work." I believe some of you are being pulled away from God right now by success, and others of you are afraid because of failure. Then I look at King Asa's life and I say, "What makes it worse? Why won't I stay committed to God?" What makes it worse is, I think, when Asa hears the truth, he resists it. We resist inconvenient truths.

Now I know this is not true of you, but if my wife were to come up to me and say, "Honey, I think when you told that story, you embellished it to the point where it was mostly fiction and not truth." I would immediately turn to my wife and say, "Oh, darling, thank you so much for pointing that out. I will change my wicked ways immediately." Likely or not likely? I am Asa and get angry when I get confronted with the truth. He doesn't let it save him. More than that, you and I develop a habit of trusting our physicians; believing that there is more power in the stock market than in the God of the universe; believing that our friends somehow know better than our God

does; believing that if we just shade it a little bit, we don't have to trust God the same way.

I've got to tell you, this is so true of pastors. I don't want to say that we are the worst at this, but we should know better. I can't tell you how many meetings I have been in about stewardship in the last three years where all the strategies and plans and communications are about "How can we get 3 or 4 or 5 thousand dollars more out of these people? What's wrong with them?" And, of course, I start the meeting and end the meeting with a prayer, so God is there to bless my plans, right? This is not something you struggle with alone. I think that every one of us is called to a journey through life, a sacred journey, and there are points of tension between being fully committed to God and fully committed to success. That is why this verse became so important to me. Because back then, it was like God slapped me in the face and said, "I want CPC not to be successful; I want CPC to be dangerous. Can you do that?" And I said, "Well, tell me a little more." God said, "I don't want you to be the big, growing church on the hill. I don't want you to be the friendly church. I don't want you to be the cool church. I want you to be the church where people come in and meet Me, and they go out *different*. And then, John, I want you to live the life that you are calling other people to live instead of becoming King Asa, competent, sophisticated, and tarnished in the soul."

That has been the battle for me these last ten years. What is it for you? In your sacred journey, in this season, where do you need to become fully committed to God? Where do you need the strength of God? Is it in your marriage? Or if you are like 40 percent of the people who are hearing this after divorce or death or singleness, do you need strength from God to have a meaningful life now? In your career, whether that is in retirement or in the workplace or at school, don't let anybody tell you that the faith thing starts after you graduate from college. It is now. Don't let anybody tell you that your grandparents are too old to do this. It is now. If this is the Kingdom of Heaven, where is God asking you to serve, to bring reconciliation, or to offer hope, or to do something crazy for God that nobody else might ever notice?

This passage became my verse seven, eight, ten years ago at a conference that I go to every year. It is called the Willow Creek Leadership Summit. We are going to go there this week with about 60 people, and we have got another 30 people watching it by satellite over in Bloomington because it seems to me that when we go there together, God speaks to us. One line in this talk I heard was,

⁹ The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

And it hit me. How does God strengthen us? How could God strengthen you as you walk out of here? I think the way that that starts is that God chooses unlikely people. You are the head of the Olympic team. You want to find a champion. You have a choice between someone who is 6'4", has a wingspan of about 17 feet, has won 22 gold medals, is the greatest swimmer in Olympic history or you could choose a 5'1", 64-year-old woman named Agnes. Which way do you go? God chooses the unlikely one. Agnes Bojaxhiu became known as Mother Teresa. She was born in Albania, and this is how she described herself. She said, "By blood, I am Albanian. By citizenship, an Indian. By faith, I am a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world. As to my heart, I belong entirely to the Heart of Jesus."

The rest of the talk at Willow Creek was a study about leadership. I've studied a lot of leaders

but few have touched me more than Mother Teresa, because in her life, the eyes of the Lord searched the earth for those fully committed to Him and found one. Seven billion people on Planet Earth and when God finds even one, He brings strength and power to them in very small ways. Sometimes big ways, but usually in very small ways.

Early in her life, Agnes made some powerful vows and had the courage to write them down. She made two. Her first vow was this: to give God absolutely anything He might ask for, to refuse Him nothing. If God gives Himself fully to us, should we answer with just a fraction of ourselves? How could we? So she said, "God, I commit myself to You." Many of you believe, many of you have been forgiven, some of you obey. How many of us are committed to following Christ?

The second vow built off the first. She said, "I will do His bidding *without delay*." Little practices, little sacrifices, little choices, little fidelities, today. If you were God for the day, who would you pick for your work? Michael Phelps or Mother Teresa? Right now the radar screen of heaven is lighted up looking for anybody who will turn to them and say, "Help me, God." I believe God could tap you on the shoulder. I believe God still rocks the world. What do you do when God calls? On the balance between God's assignment and the other side of the scales, of money and ego and comfort, the approval of friends, the wisdom of this world, which way do you go? If I said to you, "I can give you a vision that is from God that would rock your retirement, would you say, 'Uh, send it in the mail.'" Or would you say, "Yes!" If this vision said, "You will need to lay down your life," would you do it? On my good days I want to say, "Yes!"

After reading her vows, I started to see why God would raise Mother Teresa up. God spotted her willingness. Fully yielded. I meet leaders all the time, my age or younger, and one of the things they have in common is, they all feel they would like to be leading something bigger. They are surprised God has not given them more success. They are more obsessed with leading a bigger deal, than yielding to God. If you were God for the day, would you pick somebody who is going to start leading *when* or now?

Agnes goes on a 400-mile train ride for a spiritual retreat and sees a picture of herself serving the poor in the slums of Calcutta and doing so quietly all the rest of her life. She says, "When do I start?" She was ecstatic that God would notice her, that God would actually speak to her and entrust her with an assignment, direct from His sovereign hand. She refers to September 10, 1946 as her inspiration day the rest of her life. She said "Yes," and intended to obey Him without delay. I believe God still taps people on the shoulder and paints a picture in their minds. What do you do when God asks you to step up? Do you eagerly embrace the call? It could be as small as a phone call or as big as a move.

Once Mother Teresa got to Calcutta, the doors didn't open automatically. The next 16 months were a nightmare. Her boss told her to slow down, back off. She was doing a good job teaching. She could not get permission to stop this, so she leads up. One of the most important lessons you and I need to learn is how to lead up to the people who actually have the power, without manipulating them, to model for them and teach them what it looks like. She worked so hard with her superior that the other nuns started to think they were having an affair, that she loved this guy. She finally gets permission to write a letter to the archbishop and writes a letter with passionate descriptions and deep emotion every day for seven weeks. She said, "I am only asking you to not stand in the way." She was going to do this as long as it took. That is one of the other things I learned about this verse. Endurance. As long as it takes. We have to outlast

the opposition. At the end of seven weeks, the archbishop tells her boss, "Let her go, please!"

Some of you are so close, and if you give up now, you will never, never know. How long does it take? It takes as long as it takes. In Calcutta, Mother Teresa jumps into her new calling. She doesn't just sit around and wait for things to happen. She has to find facilities. She has to find money. Build a staff. Hire the right people. She made all kinds of mistakes and, with embarrassment, had to correct some of them and, in pride, not correct others. She had to respond to hostile critics. She had to keep her supervisors informed even though, from my perspective, she was always a woman after my own heart, seeking forgiveness instead of permission. And to the end of her life, she tried to obey for the day.

There were, for her, terrible spiritual dry times. Few people knew until after she died, but she wrote in a journal about this. She wanted more and more of God's presence and grace. She wanted to feel God's companionship but as soon as she got to Calcutta, that warm sense of God saying, "You're doing it just right. I'm right here with you" went away. Every morning she would get up and carry on her calling. One time wrote these words, "Even though I do not feel His presence, I will seek to love Him as He has never been loved."

I don't know about you, but I can't get four red lights in a row without thinking, "God, what's going on here?" Decade after decade, she presses on, not feeling the presence of God. I don't know why you or I go through periods in our lives when we can't feel the warmth of Christ. Mother Teresa did all the right spiritual practices and didn't feel Christ in a way that she longed for, but she kept doing her work. When she unexpectedly became a celebrity, she fought off the temptations and continued her ministry.

And on September 5, 1997, she finished her work. She got called home. September 5, 1997 was a special day for the rest of the world because Princess Diana dies in a car crash that day. But on the other side of the world in poverty and obscurity, a little nun closes her eyes and opens them in heaven and must have heard, "Well done! Well done, good and faithful servant."

As I finished hearing about Mother Teresa, in that sanctuary I prayed, "Lord, I will obey without delay." I wrote in my journal in that room, "God, I'd like to love You today like I've never loved before." I wasn't ready to go with Mother Teresa, "I'd like to love you, God, like You've never been loved before," but I'd like to love God like I've never loved God before and obey without delay. Sisters and brothers, this is changing my life still. I want so much for this church to be successful and admirable and lovable but even more, I want it to be dangerous for God. I want to live that kind of life with you, and in front of you, and for you, so that together we might see that those who commit their ways to the Lord will be visited by the God whose eyes look over all the earth.

The story of King Asa reminds us that we don't commit ourselves to God once, we need to do it again and again so it remains fresh for us. I'd like us to ask God for help today, even if it is just to receive a vision, even if it is just to hang onto our commitment, and that we might ask God how we could obey today so that God, not Jesus, but God can take care of the rest.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for the sobering reminder of King Asa's life. Starting out with good intentions is not enough. Being the smartest guy in the room is not enough. Winning is not enough. I pray for my sisters and brothers here that in some small way, Your Word

will speak to their hearts. Your Word will say, "Trust Me." That in retirement, in singleness, in work, or at home, or in school, or wherever we are, the God who searches all the earth might find our hearts and strengthen us. We pray, knowing that grass withers and the flowers fade but the Word of the Lord remains fresh forever. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.