

CHAPTER 1

Stretching to the Next Level

The famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed many beautiful buildings, homes, and other magnificent structures. Toward the end of his career, a reporter asked him, "Of your many beautiful designs, which one is your favorite?"

Without missing a beat, Frank Lloyd Wright answered, "My next one."

Frank Lloyd Wright understood the principle of stretching, constantly pressing forward, never being satisfied simply with past successes. The entire world is waiting for your next adventure.

Too many people are living far below their potential. They have many gifts and talents, and so much more going for them. But they've gotten comfortable, settled where they are, and lately become too easily satisfied.

I often hear people making excuses for stagnating in their personal growth:

"I've achieved as much as most."

"Compared to other people, I'm doing pretty well in my career."

"I've gone as far as my parents did."

That's great, but God wants you to go further. He's a progressive God, and He wants every generation to be increasing in happiness, success, and significance. No matter where we are in life, God has more in store. He never wants us to quit growing. We should always be reaching for new heights in our abilities, in our spiritual walk, in our finances, careers, and personal relationships. We all have areas where we can come up higher. We may have achieved a certain level of success, but there are always new challenges, other mountains to climb. There are new dreams and goals that we can pursue.

No doubt, God has already done a lot in your past. He's opened doors for you that nobody else could open. Maybe He's given you a wonderful family and home. Perhaps He's caused you to be promoted, given you favor with your employer or supervisors. That is marvelous, and you should thank God for all that He has done for you. But be careful: Sometimes when you are enjoying life, it is easy to become complacent, to get satisfied, and think, *Yes, God's been good to me. I can't complain. I've achieved my goals; I've reached my limits.* But God never performs His greatest feats in your yesterdays.

He may have done wonders in the past, but you haven't seen anything yet! The best is yet to come. Don't allow your life to become dull. Keep dreaming, hoping, and planning for new projects, experiences, and adventures with God.

God never performs His greatest feats in your yesterdays.

I've discovered that God likes to outdo Himself. He wants to show His favor in your life in greater ways today than He did yesterday. He wants you to be more blessed tomorrow than you are today. He intends for you to have a greater impact on the world than you have had. That means if you're a teacher, you haven't taught your best lesson yet. If you're a builder, you haven't built your best home yet. If you're a businessperson, you haven't negotiated your best deal yet. It's time to get your hopes up; enlarge your vision, and get ready for the new things that God has on the horizon. Your best days are not behind you. They're in front of you.

But if this is going to happen, we have to keep pressing forward, stretching ourselves. Get rid of low expectations. Don't make little plans for your life. Don't have little dreams. Don't go around thinking, *Everybody gets good breaks except me. I've reached my limits. I'll probably never get this promotion. I don't know why I'm not as talented as that other person.*

No, get rid of that defeated mind-set. You are a child of the Most High God. God has breathed His life into you. He planted seeds of greatness in you. You have everything you need to fulfill your Godgiven destiny. God has already put in the talent, the creativity, the discipline, the wisdom, and the determination. It's all in you. You are full of potential. But you have to do your part and start tapping into it. You have to make better use of the gifts and talents that God has given you.

The Scripture teaches that we have a valuable treasure on the inside. You have a gift. You have something to offer that nobody else has. You didn't just show up on planet Earth by accident. You were handpicked by Almighty God. He saw you before you were formed in your mother's womb and placed you here for a reason. You have an assignment. There's something that God wants you to accomplish. Somebody needs your touch. Somebody needs what you have.

Don't live with that treasure undiscovered, and don't die with the treasure still in you. Press forward. Give birth to the dreams and desires that God has placed in your heart.

Neurologists have discovered that the average person uses less than 10 percent of his or her mind. That means more than 90 percent of the mind's capability lies dormant. It never gets tapped into. But if we could just understand what we have: God has deposited a part of Himself in you. When it came time for you to be born, God said, "Let Me give you some of this gift; some of this talent; some of this creativity." You have the seed of Almighty God on the inside of you. You were never created to be average. You were never created to reach a certain level and then plateau. You were created to excel. There's no limit to how high you can go in life. There's no limit to what you can accomplish, if you will just learn to shake off complacency and keep stretching into the next level.

But it all starts in our hearts and minds. We have to believe that we have what it takes. We have to believe that we have a gift, a treasure on the inside. People may have tried to push you down. Circumstances may have soured your outlook on life.

Maybe you've tried to succeed in life but have hit a brick wall again and again. Try again. Somebody may have told you "no" a thousand times; ask again. Keep asking until you get the "yes" that you've been waiting to hear. You've got to keep pressing. Too many people grow satisfied with far less than God's best for their lives. Sometimes they get discouraged, but all too often, they simply get comfortable. They stop stretching anymore; they are not exercising their faith, and like a once muscular, toned body that no longer exercises, they grow flabby. One of the main reasons for this sort of complacency is that people don't really understand what they have on the inside. They don't understand their God-given potential.

Years ago, a friend of mine and a passenger were in Europe driving on the Autobahn, the superhighway across Germany. Unlike American freeways, the Autobahn has no speed limits. You can travel as fast as you want to drive.

My friend was so excited as he pressed down on the accelerator and took the car up to 80 miles an hour, then 90, 100, 110. He felt like the king of the road, zooming past people left and right.

A few minutes later, another car streaked down the freeway. This car was the exact same model as my friend's car, but it blew by him like he was standing still. That second automobile must have been going 170 per hour.

The passenger traveling with my friend laughed and said, "See; you're not going as fast as you can. You're just going as fast as you will."

Think about that: My friend's car possessed tremendous potential. It too was capable of going 180 miles per hour. The manufacturer put in the potential. How fast my friend drove didn't have anything to do with the car's capability. In other words, the potential was not lessened just because he chose not to use it. And simply having the potential on board did not affect his future.

It's the same way with us. Our potential has been put in us by our Manufacturer, our Creator, Almighty God. Whether we use it or not does not diminish it, but it does impact our future. The events of your past do not reduce your potential. How somebody has treated you or what he or she said about you doesn't change your potential. Maybe you've been through some disappointments, or have had some unfair things happen in life. None of that affects your potential. It has been put in you permanently by the Creator of the Universe. When we believe, we take a step of faith and stretch ourselves; that's when we start to tap into it. That's when we'll rise higher.

The capability is in you. The real question is: Are you willing to break free from your self-imposed limitations and start stretching to the next level?

Too often, we allow experiences from the past to keep us from pressing forward. Perhaps a business partner, a coach, a relative, or a friend said, "Hey, do you really think you can do that? Maybe that opportunity is not right for you. What if you try and fail? What if it doesn't work out?"

These negative words may haunt you and stymie your progress in pressing forward. Understand that none of those statements can change your potential on the inside. It's still in you. Don't allow other people to talk you out of using what God has given you and doing what you know God wants you to do.

Many people have had negative comments spoken over them, such as "You don't have what it takes. You're not very talented. I don't think you'll ever be successful."

If we're not careful, we'll allow those negative words to play over and over in our minds. They can create a stronghold.

A young woman named Sherry came to me for advice. She had tolerated an abusive relationship for years in which she was repeatedly told, "You can't do anything right. You're so slow. You're not attractive." After hearing that for so long, it had totally beaten her down physically, emotionally, and spiritually. She had no joy, little confidence, and extremely low self-esteem.

I told her what I'm telling you: "Your value, your gifts, and talents have been put in you by Almighty God. And it doesn't matter what anyone else has spoken over you. The good news is God has the final authority. He says you have a treasure on the inside. He says you have a gift. He says you are valuable. You've got to quit playing that old tune and put on a new one. You need to be dwelling on thoughts like: I am creative. I am talented. I am valuable. I have a bright future. My best days are still out in front of me. You have to get your mind going in this new direction. Because dwelling on negative thoughts about yourself will keep you from becoming all God has created you to be."

Regardless of who has spoken negative words into your life -- a parent, a spouse, a coach, or a teacher -- you must cast those words down. Words are powerful. They can create barriers in your heart and mind. Sometimes one little phrase can hold us back for years. A friend of mine used to travel as an assistant with a well-known minister. One day, a man came to the hotel and wanted the minister to pray for him. The associate told the man, "I'm sorry, but the minister can't be disturbed. He's resting and getting prepared for the meeting tonight."

But this man refused to take no for an answer. He was extremely aggressive and determined. My friend remained kind and courteous, trying to placate the unexpected visitor. But the caller continued to press.

Finally, my friend said, "How about this? I will pray for you. I work with the minister every day. I'll be glad to pray for you." At that, the obnoxious man turned his nose up. He said, "I don't hink so. You won't do."

The words stung: "You won't do." The implicit message was "You are not good enough. Your prayers can't get the job done."

My friend later told how those words seared through his heart and mind day after day. "You won't do." Lying in bed at night, he'd think, *You don't have what it takes. You're not anointed like the famous preacher. You can't help a soul.*

The young man already struggled with his confidence, but now he was allowing these negative words to play repeatedly in his subconscious mind. He couldn't shake them off, and instead allowed those negative words to hold him down for years.

Too many people don't have the confidence and the self-esteem they should because they're constantly dwelling on negative thoughts about themselves. I don't say this arrogantly, but in my mind, all day long I try to remind myself: *I am anointed. I am creative. I am talented. I am successful. I have the favor of God. People like me. I'm a victor and not a victim.*

Try it! If you go around thinking those kinds of thoughts, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, or inferiority won't have a chance with you. Throw your shoulders back, put a smile on your face, and be looking for opportunities to stretch into the next level.

Back in the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they hid. In the cool of the day, God came to them and said, "Adam, Eve, where are you?"

They said, "God, we're hiding because we are naked."

I love the way God answered them. He said, "Adam, who told you that you were naked?" In other words, "Who told you that something was wrong with you?" God immediately knew the enemy had been talking to them.

God is saying to you today, "Who told you that you don't have what it takes to succeed? Who told you that the best grades you could make in school would be C's rather than A's? Who told you that you are not attractive enough to succeed in your personal relationships or talented enough to flourish in your career? Who told you that your marriage is never going to last?"

Who told you that something was wrong with you?

Those are lies from the enemy. You need to reject those ideas and discover what God says about you.

"Well, I don't think I could ever get this promotion, Joel."

Who told you that? God said, "No good thing will He withhold when you walk uprightly."

"Well, I don't think I'll ever get married, Joel. I haven't had a date in so long I don't think I'll ever find someone who would love me for who I am, and with whom I would be compatible."

Who told you that? God said, "When you delight yourself in Him, He will give you the desires of your heart."

"Well, I don't think I could ever be in management. I don't think I could be a leader."

Who told you that? God says, "You can do all things through Christ." The potential is inside you. It doesn't change just because you don't believe it or just because you've been through some negative experiences in the past. It has been deposited in you permanently by the Creator of the Universe. The Scripture says, "God's gifts and His callings are irrevocable."¹ That means God is never going to take back the potential He has poured into you. He's never going to say, "I'm tired of dealing with you. You've tried and failed too many times. You've made so many mistakes. Let me just have the gifts back."

No, those gifts, and the calling on your life, will be with you till the day you leave this earth. But it is up to you to decide whether you tap into them and use them or not.

If You Only Knew

In John 4, Jesus met a woman at a well in Samaria, and He asked her for a drink of water. She was surprised, because back then, the Jews didn't have anything to do with the Samaritans. She said, "How can you ask me for a drink?"

Jesus said, "If you knew who I was, you would ask me for a drink, and I would give you living water."

The woman thought that Jesus was talking about literal water. She said, "Sir, you don't even have anything with which to draw water. You don't have a bucket, and the well is deep. How can you possibly give me water?"

I wonder how many times God tells us that He wants to do something great in our lives, that we are going to be healthy and well; we are going to get out of debt. We feel it strongly, but like the woman at the well, we start thinking about what we don't have, and all the obstacles in our path, and before long, we've talked ourselves out of God's best.

"That could never happen for me. I don't have the education; I don't have the talent; I don't have the discipline. I'll never break this addiction; I'll never accomplish my dreams." No, you must quit looking at what you don't have, and start believing that all things are possible.

I never dreamed that I'd be doing what I am doing today, encouraging people around the world. For seventeen years, my father tried to get me to speak at our home church, but I

had no desire. I'm naturally quiet and reserved and would much prefer working behind the scenes.

But when my father went to be with the Lord, I knew that I was supposed to step up. Although I had never preached before, never had been to seminary, and had no formal training, I said, "God, I'm not going to look at what I don't have. I'm looking unto you. I know in my weakness, you show up the strongest." I took that step of faith, and God has taken me places I never dreamed.

He can do the same for you. Don't get stuck in a rut in your attitude, your career, or your marriage. You have incredible potential within you -- much more than you may realize! God is not limited to the laws of nature. He can do what human beings cannot. The key is to get your eyes off your problems and onto your God.

When God puts a dream in your heart, it may look impossible in the natural. Every voice may tell you it will never happen. "You'll never break that addiction. You'll never accomplish your dreams. You'll never be happy." But if you will believe and stay in faith, and expect good things, you too can defy the odds.

I talked to a famous tightrope walker, who comes from a family of seven generations of circus entertainers. I asked him, "What is the key to walking on the tightrope? You make it look so easy."

He said, "Joel, the secret is to keep your eyes fixed on where you are going. You never look down. Where your head goes, that's where your body is going, too. If you look down, there's a good chance you will fall. So you always have to look to where you want to be."

It's the same principle in life. Some people are always looking back, focused on their hurts and pains. Other people are looking down, living in self-pity, and complaining that life is not fair. The key to rising higher is to keep looking to where you want to go. Dream big dreams! Don't focus on where you are today; keep a positive vision and see yourself accomplishing your goals and fulfilling your destiny.

As a young man, growing up, Pete loved playing baseball. That was his passion. But when he tried out for the team, the coach didn't even give him a chance. He said, "I'm sorry, son; you're just too small. You will never be able to play on this team."

Pete was devastated. His heart was set on playing baseball. His mom picked him up from school, and he and his best friend climbed into the backseat of the car. Poor Pete was doing all he could to keep his composure, trying not cry, and then his friend -- who was much bigger than Pete -- said, "Hey, did you tell your mom you didn't make the team because you're too little?"

The friend's words pierced Pete's heart. He hated being small. He went home feeling low and dejected. Later that week, though, the school made a special announcement: "Since

so many boys tried out for the team, we are going to create a second team; a B team." Pete tried out and made the B team.

That season, those two teams ended up in a play-off for the championship, and the second team, the B team, beat the A team. Guess who the winning pitcher was. That's right; the B team won the championship thanks to Pete's great pitching ability.

Now, consider this question: How much potential did Pete have when he was rejected for the A team? Was his potential any different when he began pitching for the B team?

Other people do not determine your potential.

The point is: Other people's opinions do not determine your potential. What they said or what they think about you does not change what God has placed on the inside. Don't allow negative words or attitudes to take root and keep you from pressing forward. God may be asking you today, "Who told you that you were too small? Who told you that you aren't intelligent? Who told you that you don't have the necessary talent?"

God would not have put the dream in your heart if He had not already given you everything you need to fulfill it. That means if I have a dream or a desire, and I know it's from God, I don't have to worry whether I have what it takes to see that dream fulfilled. I know God doesn't make mistakes. He doesn't call us to do something without giving us the ability or the wherewithal to do it.

You have to realize that God has matched you with your world. In other words, even though at times you may not feel that you are able to accomplish your dreams, you have to get beyond those feelings and know deep inside, *I have the seed of Almighty God in me*. Understand, God will never put a dream in your heart without first equipping you with everything you need to accomplish it. If you feel that you don't have the necessary wisdom, talent, ability, or resources, simply remind yourself, *God has matched me with my world. He has already put in me what I need*.

A minister once handed a man a twenty-dollar bill and asked him to hide it secretly in his wife's Bible. "Be sure she doesn't see you do it," he emphasized.

Later, during the sermon, the minister asked the woman to stand up. "Do you trust me, ma'am?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," she replied.

"Will you do what I ask you to do?"

"Yes, I will," she answered.

"Good, then please open your Bible, and give me the twenty-dollar bill inside."

The woman cringed, as she said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't have a twenty-dollar bill."

"I thought you said that you trusted me?" the minister asked with feigned incredulity.

"Yes, I do," the woman replied.

"Then please open your Bible and give me the twenty-dollar bill." The woman opened her Bible with no small measure of reticence, and to her complete surprise, she discovered a twenty-dollar bill within the pages. Her eyes brightened as she looked at the minister and asked, "But how did it get there?"

"I gave it to you," the minister said with a smile, "and now I'm simply asking you to draw out the gift I have already given, and use that twenty dollars for something good."

In a similar way, God will never ask you for something without first depositing it within you. If you will dare to take a step of faith, you will discover gifts inside that you never before realized were there.

Some people almost miss the great things God wants to do in and through them because they talk themselves out of believing for better things. In the Old Testament, when God told Moses to confront Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, and command him to free God's people who had been living in slavery, Moses balked. "God, I can't do such a thing," Moses said. "I stutter and stammer. I'm not a good speaker."

I love how God answered Moses' protests and excuses. God asked, "Moses, who made your tongue? Who made your voice?"

With these poignant questions, God was reminding His man, "Moses, I have already put in you exactly what you need. Now draw out what I've given you, and use it for my honor, for the good of your family and friends, and your own good."

God said something similar to Gideon, another Old Testament hero. God told Gideon that he would deliver the Hebrew people from oppression. God even called Gideon a mighty man of valor.

Nevertheless, Gideon cowered in fear and insecurity. "No, not me, God," he fretted. "I'm the least in my family. Everybody around me is more talented than I am."

Yet God gave Gideon exactly what he needed to do what God had asked him to do.

Don't let the size of your dreams or the vastness of God's calling on your life intimidate you. Moreover, don't allow naysayers in your path to keep you from pressing forward. When people attempted to discourage the Apostle Paul, trying to talk him out of his dreams, telling him what he couldn't do, Paul responded, "What if they don't believe? Will their unbelief make the promise of God of no effect in my life?"

Paul was saying, "If other people don't want to believe God for better things in their lives, fine; but that won't keep me from believing. I know the promises of God are in me."

That's the attitude we need to have as well. So what if other people say I can't succeed? So what if someone tries to pull me down; so what if a person doesn't believe? I am not going to allow their actions, attitudes, or comments to cause me to give up on my Godgiven dreams. I'll not allow their unbelief to influence my faith.

Don't Let Rejection Keep You Down

Too often, when we suffer some kind of rejection or disappointment, we get so discouraged that we settle right where we are. "I guess it wasn't meant to be," we rationalize. Or "I thought I could go out with that attractive person, but maybe I am not good-looking enough." Or "I thought I could get the promotion, but I tried and failed. Maybe I don't have the talent. It didn't work out."

When disappointment or rejection knocks you down, get back up and go again. We give up too easily on our dreams. We need to understand that just as God supernaturally opens doors, sometimes God supernaturally closes doors. And when God closes a door, it's always because He has something better in store. So just because you've come to a dead end, that's not the time to give up. Find a different route and keep pressing forward.

Often, out of our greatest rejection comes our greatest direction. When you come to a closed door, or something doesn't work out in your life, instead of seeing that as the end, regard that as God nudging you into a better direction. Yes, sometimes it's uncomfortable; sometimes we may not like it. But we cannot make the mistake of just sitting back and settling where we are.

Out of our greatest rejection comes our greatest direction.

Back in 1959, my father was the pastor of a successful church with a thriving congregation. They had just built a beautiful new sanctuary and my father had a bright future. About that time, my sister Lisa was born with something like cerebral palsy. Hungry for a fresh touch from God, my dad went away for a while and got alone with God. He searched the Scriptures in a new way, and he began to see how God was a good God, a healing God, and that God could still perform miracles today. My dad went back to his church and he preached with a new fire, a new enthusiasm. He thought everybody would be thrilled, but the congregation's reaction was just the opposite. They didn't like his new message. It didn't fit in with their tradition. After suffering much persecution, heartache, and pain, my father knew the best thing for him to do was to leave that church.

Naturally, my dad was disappointed. He didn't understand why such a thing should happen. But remember, out of rejection comes direction. When one door closes, God is about to open up a bigger and a better door.

My father went down the street to an abandoned feed store. There, he and ninety other people formed Lakewood Church on Mother's Day, 1959. The critics said it would never last, but today, nearly fifty years later, Lakewood Church has grown to become one of the largest churches in America and is still going strong.

I don't believe that my father would have enjoyed the ministry he had, and I don't believe he would have become all God created him to be, if he would have stayed in that limited environment. Here's a key: The dream in your heart may be bigger than the environment in which you find yourself. Sometimes you have to get out of that environment in order to see that dream fulfilled.

The dream in your heart may be bigger than the environment in which you find yourself.

Consider an oak tree. If you plant it in a pot, its growth will be limited. Once its roots fill that pot, it can grow no further. The problem is not with the tree; it is with the environment. It is stifling growth. Perhaps you have bigger things in your heart than your present environment can facilitate. That's why, at times, God will stir you out of a comfortable situation. When you go through persecution and rejection, it's not always because somebody has it in for you. Sometimes, that's God's way of directing you into His perfect will. He's trying to get you to stretch to the next level. He knows you're not going to go without a push, so He'll make it uncomfortable for you to stay where you are currently. The mistake we make at times is getting negative and sour; we focus on what didn't work out. When we do that, we inhibit the opening of new doors.

A few years ago, Lakewood Church was trying to buy some property on which we could build a new sanctuary. We had looked for months, and finally had found a wonderful one-hundred-acre tract of land. We were so excited. However, the day we were to close the deal, the people sold the land right out from under us.

I was terribly disappointed, and I had to tell myself, "Joel, God has closed this door for a reason. He has something better in store." Sure, I was down, and I admit that I was discouraged, but I had to shake that off and say, "No, I'm not settling here. I'm going to keep pressing forward."

A few months later, we found another nice piece of property. It would have worked as well, but a similar series of events transpired and the owner refused to sell it to us. Another disappointment. I didn't understand it, but I said, "God, I'm trusting you. I know your ways are not my ways. This doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem fair. But I'm going to stay in an attitude of faith and keep expecting good things."

Not long after that, the door to the Compaq Center, a sixteenthousand-seat sports arena, opened up in downtown Houston, right in the middle of one of the busiest sections of the city. Then it became clear why God had closed the other doors. Had we purchased either of those properties, those choices might have kept us from God's best.

Throughout life, we're not always going to understand everything that happens along the way. But we've got to learn to trust God. We've got to believe that He has us in the palm of His hand, that He is leading and guiding us, that He always has our best interests at heart.

I know people who have experienced rejection in their personal relationships. Maybe their marriage didn't work out. They put all those years into it and now they're hurt, dejected, going around defeated and not expecting anything good.

I don't believe that divorce is God's best. Unfortunately, sometimes it is unavoidable. If you have been through a divorce, understand that God still has another plan for your life. Just because somebody rejected you or walked out of your life and left you hurt, that doesn't mean you should retreat and settle where you are. That rejection did not change what God put on the inside of you. It doesn't mean that you cannot yet be happy. When one door closes, if you will keep the right attitude, God will open another door. But you have to do your part and keep pressing forward. Too many people get bitter, they get angry, and they start to blame God. Instead, let that hurt go. You may not understand it, but trust God and move on with your life. Don't look at it as the end. Look at it as a new beginning. Somebody may have rejected you, but you can hold your head up high knowing this: God accepts you. God approves you. And He has something better in store.

Friend, don't die with the treasure still inside you. Keep pressing forward. Keep reaching for new heights. Give birth to what God has placed in your heart. Don't let other people talk you out of your dreams. Listen to what God says about you, not all the negative voices. When you face rejection and disappointment, don't stay there. Know that God has another plan. That closed door simply means God has something better in store. You may not have experienced God's favor in the past, but this is a new day. You have not seen, heard, or imagined the wonderful things God has in store for you. Don't be weighed down by the distractions and disappointments in life; instead, keep stretching to the next level, reaching for your highest potential. If you do that, I can tell you with confidence your best days are in front of you. God is going to show you more of His blessings and favor, and you will become a better you, better than you ever dreamed possible.

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