



# LIFELINE

## Breakthrough

The idea of a “spiritual breakthrough” is subjective, and the term itself is not found in the Bible. Generally speaking, a spiritual breakthrough is an experience of having reached a new level of spirituality, whatever that means to the person who is “breaking through.” The experience will be different depending on the person (and the religion) in question.

In Christian circles, a spiritual breakthrough can be defined as a time when a person is saved, gains a deeper understanding of biblical truth, receives an answer to prayer, or wins the victory over a besetting sin. Paul’s experience on the Damascus Road could be considered a spiritual breakthrough, as he saw for the first time who Jesus really is (Acts 9). Peter’s experience on the rooftop in Joppa could be considered a spiritual breakthrough, as he learned that the gospel was for all people, Gentiles included (Acts 10). The conversion of Lydia on the outskirts of Philippi could be seen as a spiritual breakthrough, as she was the first person saved on European soil (Acts 16). The idea of a “breakthrough” suggests a preceding struggle that finally peaks and finds resolution.

Believers might seek a spiritual breakthrough when they are feeling far away from God. Many believers feel that they need a regular emotional experience during worship or prayer and that, if they don’t feel that emotion, there is something wrong with them or God has walked away for some reason. However, this is wrong thinking. The Bible says that God is always with those who trust in Him, guiding them (Proverbs

3:5–6), that we are never separated from His love (Romans 8:37–39), and that we can rest contentedly in His promise, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

Should we seek a spiritual breakthrough? We can and should pray for wisdom (James 1:5), victory over sin (Ephesians 6:18), and the filling of the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). But intimacy with God does not require a series of “spiritual breakthroughs.” Working under the assumption that a connection with God already exists (that is, a person has faith in Jesus Christ for salvation), spiritual growth occurs in that person as naturally as a tree growing in the soil and sun. The tree grows because of its placement—its nearness to God (Psalm 1). How do we achieve nearness to God? It happens exactly as it would in a human-to-human relationship: spending time together, knowing one another’s thoughts, making choices that please the other person. We read the Bible (which is the sum of His revealed thoughts to man); pray to Him, trusting that He is faithful to do what He promises (2 Corinthians 1:19–20; Deuteronomy 7:9; Hebrews 11:6); and choose to think and act according to what is good (Philippians 4:8; Galatians 5:16–24).

The healthiest human relationships are not based on breakthroughs or emotional highs but on steady, patient growth through faithfulness and love. It is no different in our relationship with God. Emotional and spiritual highs do occur—we sometimes receive amazing answers to prayer or

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# Are You God?

Shortly after World War II came to a close, Europe began picking up the pieces. Much

of the Old Country had been ravaged by war and was in ruins. Perhaps the saddest sight of all was that of little orphaned children starving in the streets of those war-torn cities.

Early one chilly morning an American soldier was making his way back to the barracks in London. As he turned the corner in his jeep, he spotted a little boy with his nose pressed to the window of a pastry shop. Inside, the cook was kneading dough for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The hungry boy stared in silence, with his nose pressed against the window, drooling and watching the cook's every move. The soldier pulled his jeep to the curb, stopped, and got out.

“Son, would you like some of those?”

The boy was startled. “Oh yes...I would.”

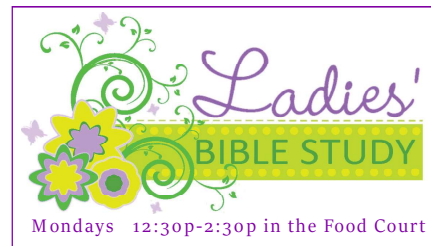
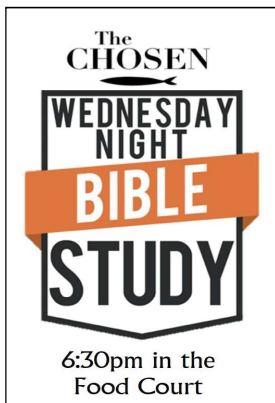
The American stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag and walked back to where the lad was standing in the foggy cold of the London morning. He smiled, held out the bag and said simply, “Here you are.”

As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his coat. He looked back and heard the child ask quietly, “Mister...are you God?”

When we love people with no strings attached, we are doing something quite godly. We are demonstrating in a very real way what God is like. God loves us with an unconditional, agape, love which is gracious and kind and rare.

Many people find it hard to believe in a God they can't see. They want a God “with skin on.” That's why God sent his Son, Jesus—and that's also why he established his church. We are God's agents in the world—and when we are serving others, and loving them with a godly love, we are showing people what God is like. We are helping them to understand that God loves them like we do—only even more so. Someone once said, “You may be the only Jesus a person ever sees.” That's true. As Christians, it is an honor to be able to represent Christ to the world. Let's make sure we represent him accurately. It could be the “Breakthrough” someone else needs.

*Pastor Greg*



times of extraordinary insight or periods of intense joy. But these are frosting—delicious, but not to be sought as the substance of our relationship. If we focus only on the highs, we might miss the beautiful,

# HOW GOD TURNS SMALL STEPS INTO BIG BREAKTHROUGHS

“GRADUALLY THEN SUDDENLY”, the unusual title of Mark Batterson’s book is actually a quote from the 1926 novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, by Ernest Hemingway. A character is asked, “How did you go bankrupt?” to which he cleverly replies, “Two ways. Gradually then suddenly.” Mark took that concept and developed an entire book on how small, faithful actions grow into profound results and leave a lasting legacy.

The three main ideas are: LONG VISION, LONG OBEDIENCE, and LONG LEGACY. The first of those, LONG VISION, takes time and eternity into account. “It’s doing what you do with the third and fourth generation in mind.” Long obedience, he says, is living for the applause of nail-scarred hands. “It’s the key that unlocks our potential and God’s promises.” Lastly, Mark explains long legacy as not what we accomplish, but what others accomplish because of us. “It’s growing fruit in someone else’s garden. Just as we drink from wells we did not dig, we dig wells for the third and fourth generation.” Mark says his writing career is a prime example of “gradually, then suddenly” in his own life.

Though he felt called to write by age 22, his GRE scores indicated that writing wasn’t his strong suit. Mark decided to start reading voraciously (200-plus books a year) to learn how to write from others, and glean from their life experiences. He later made his 35th birthday the deadline for his first book. “I love pastoring,” he says, “though 99% of my influence is through writing,” which is why he chooses to write a new book every year.

## LONG VISION

To illustrate the concept of LONG VISION, Mark introduces a principle he calls, everything is created

quiet moments in the valley when God works unseen and we experience no thrilling epiphany. Rather than focus on our own experience, we should pray in patience and perseverance that God will complete the good work He began in us, however He sees fit (Philippians 1:6).

twice. “The first creation always happens in the imagination, which is an expression of the image of God. The second creation involves blood, sweat, and years,” he explains. Think of great architecture, artwork, and the world-famous Disney parks, he suggests. “The first creation is spiritual while the second creation is physical. The first creation happens in the imagination, while the second creation involves time, talent, and treasure.” The key to imagination, Mark believes, is talking with the great Creator. “Prayer is how we get God ideas. Prayer is how we write history before it happens. Praying is a form of dreaming, and dreaming is a form of praying. It’s a virtuous cycle—the more you pray, the bigger you dream. And the bigger you dream, the more you have to pray! Of course, you can’t just pray like it depends on God. You have to work like it depends on you—that’s the second creation.”

Another dimension of long vision, Mark says, is “opportunity cost.” “Most of us are pretty good at calculating actual costs. All it takes is addition and subtraction. Opportunity cost, on the other hand, is a hidden cost,” he explains. “It’s the loss of potential gain because of indecision or inaction. Calculating opportunity cost is much more complicated because it involves compound interest. That’s where long vision enters the equation. It’s recognizing that every decision we make, every action we take, is subject to inflation and deflation. Good decisions appreciate while bad decisions depreciate. How? Gradually then suddenly! Long vision is an eye for opportunity. And despite what the old aphorism says, opportunity does not knock. You have to knock on it.”

## LONG OBEDIENCE

The word obedience often makes people

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uncomfortable. When it refers to obeying God and growing spiritually, Mark says obedience over time can turn those negative connotations into joy. He calls it “the power of same.” “The only ceiling on your intimacy with God and impact on the world is daily spiritual disciplines,” he says. “What disciplines? Journaling, meditating, praying, and studying Scripture to name a few. How do you put them into practice? One day at a time! ‘Anyone who has mastered a golf swing or a Bach fugue,’ said professor and author James K. A. Smith, ‘is a ritual animal.’ That not only includes gym rats; it also includes Bible geeks.” Mark again quotes Smith: “One simply doesn’t achieve such excellence otherwise. Ritual is marked by embodied repetition. Ritual recruits our will through our body: the cellist’s fingers become habituated by moving through scale after scale; the golfer’s whole body is trained by a million practice swings. Because we are embodied creatures of habit—God created us that way—we are profoundly shaped by ritual.”

Mark offers another example of long obedience in a principle called “the butterfly effect.” Named for a 1960 weather pattern discovery by an MIT meteorologist, “the butterfly effect is the idea that small changes to a complex system can have big consequences. Simply put, little things make a big difference over time. And time is the key exponent in that equation,” Mark explains. “Most of us get paralyzed by outcomes when all we can control are inputs. Reading the Bible cover to cover is impossible if you try to do it in one sitting. Break it into 365 days, and it’s very doable. Want to increase flexibility? Stretch every day! Want to control blood sugar? Try intermittent fasting. Want to regain work-life balance? Turn your phone off on your day off. The butterfly effect is more than a meteorological phenomenon. It holds true physically, financially, relationally, and spiritually. Small changes in input make a big difference in outcome. If you do little things like they’re big things, God has a way of doing big things like they’re little things.”

## LONG LEGACY

Giving careful thought to the legacies we will leave is the first step to being “good ancestors,” Mark says. “Legacy is the gift that keeps on giving after we are long gone. It’s compound interest on generosity. It’s deeds done that have a domino effect. It’s words that echo into eternity. The seeds we plant never stop multiplying. In the counterintuitive kingdom of God, the way we reap a harvest in our garden is by planting seeds in someone else’s. ‘Let us not become weary in doing good,’ said the apostle Paul, ‘for at the proper time we will reap a harvest.’”

In addition to writing and preaching, Mark has found great joy in leading chapels for a variety of professional and collegiate sports teams. He considers Chicago Bears President and CEO, Kevin Warren, a good ancestor, who is building a long legacy. “Kevin is the kind of person, when you’re with him, who is fully present. He makes people feel seen, heard, and loved. He makes each person feel like they are the only one in the room.” While Kevin has held many impressive positions in sports, and helped lead the building of the U.S Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, Mark focuses on caring for people as his true legacy. As an example, Mark tells of a time years ago, when Kevin was the COO for the Minnesota Vikings and the two of them took a picture at a game with a ninety-nine-year-old woman named Millie. A decade later, Mark asked Kevin if he remembered her. “Yes, I do,” he said. “Millie passed a few years ago and I stay in touch with the family. I check in every now and then to see how they’re doing.” “Are you kidding me?” Mark asked. “You’re the president of the Chicago Bears now. Why would you do that?” Because Kevin knows that his legacy isn’t U.S. Bank Stadium. His legacy is people, and so is yours!”



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