**Nine Lessons from A Positive Life**

**By Shane Stanford**

**Published by Zondervan (February 2010)**

**Lesson 1: Become satisfied with never being satisfied**.

Overview: Life is about moving forward. We either follow or lead. Deciding which makes all the difference. But so many of us, especially when confronted with difficult life issues, end up living somewhere in the middle of life's best qualities and opportunities. God wants more from and for us. He wants us to be at peace with life but not be stagnant in the opportunities for sharing and living out his grace.

Questions: In what ways have you grown stagnant in your spiritual walk? Have the troubles of life defined your view of the possibilities of life or vice versa? How does learning to make the best of our circumstances re-frame our potential for making a difference in our world?

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:58

Consider: Three principles for defining life before it has a chance to define you:

1. Develop a strong connection to your devotional life through a consistent study of God's word.
2. Make a "joy journal" where you name your joys. I have kept one for years and it is helpful, especially when life is difficult, to look back on the joys you name. As the old hymn says, "Count your blessings, name them one by one."
3. Continue to work and serve. Everything you do for God has a purpose and is useful for his work in the world.

**Lesson 2: Crave awe and wonder**.

Overview: Have you ever watched a child on Christmas morning? God shapes life to experience the wonder of his creation. Every day is a gift and should be opened as such. The first century Christians, even with all of their struggles and obstacles, experienced awe and wonder because they saw the working of God in the midst of their daily routines. Finding God in the small, simple things is the most profound opportunity for seeing God in our daily routines. Remember, God is in the whispers.

Questions: Describe the areas of "awe and wonder" for your life? What brings you joy? What keeps you from celebrating what God is doing in your life? How do the simple "wonders" of God's day impact our journey? What keeps us from seeing how God is working around us?

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:12

Consider: Four ways to not miss the awe and wonder of God around and in your life.

1. Make a "little things" list of small kindnesses that folks do for you.
2. Reciprocate by paying it forward. Share a small kindness with someone else but dedicate it to a friend.
3. A letter a day … recover the art of writing a letter or, if you must, an email to encourage a friend.
4. Instead of just a prayer list, also establish a blessings list at your church or through a small group or by yourself. Find a way to share it with others.

**Lesson 3: Simplify**.

Overview: We complicate life, not the other way around. As life grows more complicated, our two basic reactions is to recoil from it or to jump into the storm. Neither is healthy. We must learn to meet life as we find it and then prioritize according to what God would have us do in our lives. Most of our priorities are driven by our ambitions, not God's plan for our lives.

Questions: Write down the ten most important things you wanted to accomplish. Then, tear the list in half. What keeps your life so complicated and charged? Is it relationships? Priorities? Duties? Expectations? Some of it all? How can you enrich life by simplifying your priorities and redefining your goals and values. What do the Beatitudes, long seen as simply a sermon of Jesus, teach us about ordering our lives into manageable frames for living?

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-12

Consider: Three principles Christ teaches at the Sermon on the Mount about the ordering of life.

1. "He sat down…" Jesus focused on the important concepts first.
2. "He opened his mouth…" Jesus made transparency a way of life. To live openly and honestly is a first step to living simply.
3. "He taught them saying…" Jesus did the important things over and over again. He repeated the critical steps and added value to them instead of trying to do too many things at one time.

**Lesson 4: Celebrate boldly and laugh loudly**.

Overview: In Luke 15, God seeks after lost things and then throws a party when they are found. Put simply, Christians don't throw parties and laugh enough. There is much to be down about in our world, but nothing recharges our instincts, intentions and desires for living like Christ than joy and sharing that joy with others.

Questions: After reading Luke 15, which character are you most like? Are you the younger brother, breaking the rules and stealing your joy? Are you the older brother, making the rules your religion and stealing your joy? Or are you the Father, with reckless love and grace and seeing the joy of life even with its struggles. Deciding which character we are decides how we experience consistent, bold joy in this world.

Scripture: Read Luke 15 and the stories of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son.

Consider: Three principles about God, joy, and lost things

1. God loves lost things—I mean he has extravagant, ridiculous love for the most broken parts of our lives.
2. God is always watching for the horizon to see if we will return to him. Nothing, by far, brings him more joy than this.
3. God celebrates when a lost or broken life is brought home or back together. Why don't we?

**Lesson 5: Do life with others**.

Overview: The most important things we do in this world can't be done alone. The Bible is full of one story after another of God building together community. Whether it is the Garden of Eden, Jacob's children, David's broken family, the Disciples or the Early

Church, God loves for humanity to experience life in the same fullness and interdependence that God experiences the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Of course, it doesn't always happen and the results are more than obvious. What about your journey? Do you live life as the Lone Ranger or are you involved with folks in life. There is a huge difference.

Questions: Make a list of the most important relationships in your life. Do they offer a positive source of encouragement, or do they drain life? Why? Why is "doing life" with others so difficult? What are the benefits of sharing the journey with others? How can being in community, being vulnerable in your faith journey provide a sense of depth, stability and safety for you? What is required of *you* in doing life together with others?

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

Consider: Four devotions of the first Christians in their life together

1. Teaching and Learning: One of the best and most beneficial ways to do life together is by learning the Word of God together.
2. Fellowship: Sharing a meal, seeing a movie, laughing, crying together are all part of God's greater plan that we might experience life with others.
3. Sacrament: Not just sharing in the Holy Sacraments, but allowing the Holy Sacraments to share in us together. Experiencing the sacred places of God together through service and "real moments" changes the dynamics of relationships and makes them significant.
4. Prayer and Devotion: Investing oneself with others in a devotional life and regimen of prayer focuses the group on the greater good and shifts the group's dynamics from being a support/grip/gossip/whine group to a group committed

to making a difference in each others' lives.

**Lesson 6: Embrace the Unfamiliar**.

Overview: The measure of a person is found not in what they know but in what they are willing to admit they don't know. This is also true for what we are unsure of and afraid of for the future. God's plan, as I have learned in my life, is not always clear on the frontend. It is amazingly clear as we look back and see his hand. But part of the process of living out God's work in our lives is the journey itself and learning to trust him along the way.

Questions: Reading Romans 8, we get a glimpse into Paul's own questions for God. This work is more treatise than letter. What are Paul's concerns about the journey? Can you sense his own uncertainties at points? But Paul makes a dramatic shift in the middle of the passage for the reader. What is it? How does Paul see the future for a believer, even in the midst of difficult times? What does it mean for Paul to say "nothing will separate us from Christ"?

Scripture: Romans 8

Consider: Three considerations about Paul's view of God's unfailing love and guidance.

1. Paul draws a distinct line between the difficulties of the world and the hope we find in Christ.
2. Paul's litany of 'troubles' includes spiritual, emotional and physical threats.
3. It is the Love of God that is the momentum of Christ's life, work and salvation in and for us.

**Lesson 7: Love unconditionally**.

Overview: This lesson should speak for itself. None of us are perfect. All of us have those broken places, when they are revealed to the light, look ugly and unlovable. On our own, we cannot experience the kind of acceptance and wholeness that God desires. However, agape changes the rules. It is unconditional love practiced by the Creator for a broken Creation. It runs counter intuitive to the consensus of how we often order the world. "I will love you based on how you love me." A nice human rule. But, it is not the way God has ordered the redemptive process in his economy. The sooner we come to grips with what this means for each of us, for both our lives but also for how we treat each other, the better we will see the Creator.

Questions: What does it mean to love unconditionally? What about those who continue to do things that are harmful or abusive? How does God make provisions for both loving the sinner, but hating the sin? In more common settings and situations, how does unconditional love enrich our relationships, change the way we communicate and redefine our priorities? How does the unconditional love of God through Christ model how we are to love one another?

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-8 and John 3:16

Consider: Five principles for understanding the unconditional love of God.

1. Parameters: God's love knows not parameters. As much as God hates the brokenness of our lives, he loves us even more.
2. Personal: God's love for us is personal and individual. He does sit back unconnected from our struggles and situations.
3. Provision: God's loves makes provision for our brokenness and for our own

inability to rectify the hurts and haunted corners of our soul.

4. Proximity: God's love draws us closer to him by him becoming like us in Christ.
5. Powerful: God's love is powerful and complete, and what he offers in Christ in eternal.

**Lesson 8: Get your hands and feet dirty**.

Overview: Holy is not about clean; it is about proximity. Jesus loved the least of these, so should we. This lesson means more to me that any of the others. I thought surviving my own struggle was enough. It wasn't. God meant for me to respond to the needs of my brothers and sisters as though my own body was perfect. There is always someone with a more complicated situation, sadder story or more broken path. The only way to move forward is to pry away the broken nature of our sin that separates us from God and to land in the middle of the world's problems with love, grace and solutions.

Questions: How does helping our brothers and sisters in need draw us closer to God? What is it about Matthew 25 that stunned those listening? How does helping others help us to see Jesus clearer? In Mark 1, the leper asks one real question? What is it? How does the "willingness" of Jesus trump the other attributes or points of the interaction? Why does that question redefine how faith and love intersect in our own lives?

Scripture: Matthew 25; Mark 1:40-45

Consider: Three points from the story of the Man with Leprosy

1. We have people in need all around us: The man had sat at the gate for a long time, begging from many people.

2. The real issue many times is not ability but willingness to make a difference: The man asked Jesus a different kind of question. The key is willingness.
3. Once you are touched by God, something happens and you can't hold it in: The man could not contain his joy and excitement.

**Lesson 9: Read more fairy tales and ride more roller coasters**.

Overview: Fairy tales and roller coasters are like life: between "Once Upon a Time" and "Happily Ever After" there are turns, twists, ups and downs, but in the end, it is worth the adventure. Life is an adventure, and we need learn to navigate the adventure, or it can overwhelm us. Most of what we miss in terms of really important moments of our lives has little to do with scheduled activities or marks on a to-do list. The critical elements of life's most personal and poignant places happen when we take down the shades and take a look at what's behind the curtains.

Questions: What keeps us from enjoying the "real moments" of life? Is your life more about control or about experiencing the joy of what God can do in and through you? Taking a breath and soaking up the experience of life is God's way of adding the color to our day and to our journey. We serve a God who is always doing something new, and it is wonderful and beautiful and exciting. We are the ones who suck the life from it and put into a "car pool" of carefully managed ideas and decisions.

Scripture: Psalm 149

Consider: Three requirements for the new song God sings in us.

1. Always sing. We are born to sing a song of hope and joy.
2. Always praise. The focus of our life is not our agendas, to-do lists or need to

make another buck. The focus is God.

3. Always rejoice. At the end of the day, the work of God is greater in us, than what the world measures against us. We are his, thus we are bound by his grace and potential in us. The length and width and depth of our lives is not measured by the standards of this world. The adventure belongs to God. And we belong to him.