

## **THERE'S A ROCK IN THERE**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Several weeks ago some members of the board of elders suggested that I take some time in the next several weeks and re-preach some of the sermons that I have enjoyed most preaching over the last 17 years. I don't know if I'm going to do that all through this month but I thought I would today.

God put this message on my heart when we first came here 17 years ago. It has had special meaning to me. It's really my favorite. It's not the most important truth there is in the Bible but given from where I came from in life it was one of the most important truths that I ever got a hold of.

John 1:42. The message is called "There's a Rock in There." And the text simply says "Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephus,' which when translated is Peter."

I don't suppose there's really anything wrong with repeating a message. In fact, I used to be so embarrassed about doing this until I read closely in the gospels and began to understand this was a frequent pattern of Jesus' preaching ministry – repetition.

In Mark 1:15 it notes for example that he went through all the synagogues of Galilee preaching the gospel of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent and believe the good news." Four points to his message and he said it often enough in all those different synagogues that the disciples never forgot the message. Still giving the four points as Mark writes the gospel.

Then the Sermon on the Mount, from reading the sermon on the plain that there were elements in both of those sermons that were very repetitious. In fact, when Jesus is dealing with an audience which is not taking notes while he talks in order to have what he says burned into their life and memory he's going to need to engage in repetition. Obviously the disciples hear him a number of times preach the same message.

So I don't really apologize for this message if you heard it once before. It's sort of like a hymn. There are times when you sing it again it has special meaning and certain phrases fall on your heart that didn't come in the first time.

Jesus looked at Simon and said, You're a rock. The Christian author Bruce Larson in one of his books tells us about this incident with his young sons, I think around 5 or 6 years of age at the time. He was the pride and joy of Bruce Larson's life. This boy began to develop a habit that was very bothersome to Larson. The boy would walk around with his thumb in his mouth. His daddy tried to break him of this habit in a number of different directions. No way that he tried succeeded. Finally he began calling his son by an epithet – "thumb sucker" thinking that by calling him this derogatory title he would shame him out of the behavior. However the more he called his little boy thumb-sucker the more compulsive the behavior became. In fact Larson noticed that not only did the boy's behavior become more obsessive but his own attitude toward

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his boy degenerated, changed. Instead of looking forward to times with his boy his face would scowl as he saw his boy characteristically sucking his thumb.

Of course a parent looks at a child about that age doing that and if you're in public you're concerned about what other people are thinking, about what insecurities you're fostering in the home that a boy would have this kind of behavior. So a little bit of our own ego gets involved at times with our children. Larson was no exception.

One day while he was praying he felt the Lord speaking to him and asking him some questions. Like, "Is this little boy that you and your wife prayed to have?" *Yes*. "Is this the little boy you wanted?" *Yes, Lord*. "Are you happy with this little boy?" *Yes Lord*. "Is this the wonderful little boy that I gave you?" *Yes Lord*. "Then why are you calling him thumb sucker?"

Larson got up from that place of prayer determined that he would no longer call his son by that name. The next time he saw his boy which was within a few moments there he was sucking his thumb as normal. Larson looked at him and said, "Hi, Mr. Wonderful! How you doing?" The boy looked at him like what's gone wrong with dad? He showed no response. But over a period of weeks as Larson continued to call him, Mr. Wonderful, the thumb sucking dropped away until it was no more.

The boy had not been free to break himself of the habit. It took one greater than he to give him a new self identity that became for him the freeing identity.

That's exactly what's happening here in the exchange between Jesus and this man called Simon. I sometimes alliteratively refer to him as Sifting Sands Simon. I don't know how you picture Peter but I picture him as about 6' 4" and 230 pounds. I think he was one great big wet block of putty. Or sifting sands. Or a bowl of Jello in a human frame. He does not appear at times to have the strongest of backbones. But Jesus looks at him and with one word wraps up a whole new identity for him. "Everybody else has always called you Simon. I'm going to call you Rock." I imagine Peter was in his late 20s or early 30s at the time.

It would be quite a surprise if someone meeting you for the first time said, "Your name is no longer *blank* but *blank*." If someone came up to me and said, Your name is no longer George. Your name is Ralph. I'd think twice before I answered to Ralph. But if they kept calling me Ralph over a period of years especially if it were associated with chocolate doughnuts I probably would learn to respond to Ralph.

Jesus does this stunning thing. He says I rename you.

The fact is all of us like Simon are made up of positives and negatives. If we want to change, if we need to change, we need to catch Christ's method for change. I fact, had Simon's fate been left up to me he would have disappeared back into obscurity.

I could have told Jesus a thing or two about Simon. I could have pointed out to Jesus that evidently he didn't know the real Simon. That Simon had some weak aspects to his life and character that did not deserve his being given a title called Rock. These weak aspects of Peter become obvious as you read his story in the New Testament. They were not character flaws that he developed since the time that he started to follow Jesus. The instances we see of him simply manifest the character flaws that had been in his life the whole period of time.

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Here are some of them. I could have told Jesus for example that Peter was impulsive. How dare you call this person a rock. A rock suggests a person who has solidity to their life. A rock suggests someone who has substance, who is strong enough to bear weight as a foundation stone. Yet you're looking for a solid kind of person. This guy Simon is impulsive. Rock-like leaders are the opposite. They need to be reflective, to listen to all sides of the question, to make considered decisions. But impulsive Peter will deny that he will ever betray the Lord, then fall asleep, then cut off a soldier's ear, then flee into the night. Then deny Jesus. Then break down hysterically weeping. Sort of a spiritual yo-yo. A roller coaster. But we've all done that.

I'll point to another impulsive moment in his life. After the resurrection he and the guys are out fishing and Jesus comes to the shore, John's gospel tells us about it. He says put the net on the other side and they do and after they had fished all night and had caught nothing, they drag up a net full of 153 fish. John, always the perceptive one in the crowd, says "It's the Lord." He's 100 yds away so they can't see him clearly. Peter upon hearing that word from John does an impulsive act. It says he had been stripped for work, but he put on his clothes and jumped into the sea and swam to shore. Impulsive on two counts. One, he didn't wait for the boat to get to shore. And two, any person in their right mind knows if you're going to go swimming you take off your clothes not put them on. But that is characteristically Peter, the man who follows his impulses.

I could have also told the Lord that he lacked control over this tongue. And a rock like leader needs to hold his counsel, to think first, to do more listening than speaking, to not open mouth and insert foot. But Peter was the kind of person who did that. He simply blurted things out. Whether it was cursing or whether it was in a grand moment like the Transfiguration where Moses and Elijah come from the presence of God and Jesus' himself, his countenance is changed into radiant glory. His divine nature shows through. His garments, Luke says, are like no fuller can bleach them they were so white and radiant. I would have liked to have been there. What an incredible occasion.

But Peter was awestruck by what was going on. The text of Mark to paraphrase it slightly says something like this, "And Peter not knowing what to say, said..." That's my boy Peter. He does it again at the footwashing. "Lord, you're never going to wash my feet." Jesus said "If I don't wash you, you have no part of me." Then Peter says, "Then give my whole body a bath."

I could have also told the Lord that he cracks under pressure. This Simon cracks under pressure. A rock like leader has to take the heat. Has to stay in control when everybody else is deserting the ship they need to stand and be the captain on guard. But this man Simon cracks under pressure. We all know what he did when the little mad servant accused him of being one of them. And again, maybe we'd have all done that. But that's not the only time in Simon's life that he cracks under pressure. Long after he was an apostle, long after the day of Pentecost, long after he was a leader of the church, Paul tells us in the Galatian letter that Peter had gone down from Jerusalem to Antioch. Three hundred miles. For the first time in his life Simon Peter is eating non kosher food. He's having table fellowship with the Gentile believers. And some of the legalists, the Jewish believers who were kosher and thought that eating kosher was part of being a Christian came up to Antioch and they said to Peter, "You're going to destroy everybody's faith in Christ by eating ham and eggs!" Peter felt the pressure of these legalists. So he withdrew from eating with the Gentiles. Of course leaving them feeling bad and embarrassed like, "What's wrong with us?"

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Here he is. Cracking under pressure and he's a mature leader in the church. I could have told the Lord that, that day when he first met Simon. That's the kind of guy, you're calling Rock.

Of course, it was obvious to anybody who knew Simon that he was a man of extremes. A leader should be centered. A rock should be immovable. But one moment Simon is saying, you're the Christ, the Son of the living God. And the next moment he's saying, You can't do that, Jesus!

One moment he's saying, You're Lord. And the next moment after the Lord has said, I'm going to Jerusalem to die, Simon is saying, You don't know what you're talking about!

I think personally that there was many a laugh in Peter's home town of Capernaum when the word got back that the carpenter from Nazareth had named him. "He's a poor judge of human personality! First impressions are false impressions. He doesn't really know what's up."

I like what Criswell did when he quoted a great black preacher's sermon on Peter. It went something like this, "The Lord sees his disciples and he sat down and thinks, 'Here's the man I done called to the word. Matthew and Bathlomew, James and John and every last one of them heard. There's Andrew and Phillip and Thomas and Jude. And each is a dependable man. But Peter is the one I called out first. And Peter is like the shifting sand. Peter blows this way and Peter blows that way. What I do with Peter? Matthew is my staff which I cut from the oak. I lean on him. Phillip is my arrow. Shooting straight from the bow. James is the candle on a hill. John is my lamp that they can't blow out, shining just as steady as can be. But Peter is the one I count on most. And Peter is like the changing sea. Peter moves this way. Peter moves that way! What I gonna do with Peter? What I gonna do with sand and water? Both of them slipping away. When the sand and the water is mixed like in Peter you can mold and shape but how can you make it stay? It needs cement. That's the Spirit of the Lord and nothing else can hold him fast. If it's poured in the sand and the water, maybe Peter's going to last. The sand and the water done made the rock. That's what I done with Peter!"

The Lord's doing that in every life that we yield to him.

I can see a lot that was wrong in Simon. You can too. The Lord saw some things that were right in him. The Lord saw some things he could build upon. In fact, we know based upon Peter's personality that here were three things especially the Lord could have seen as strengths in him.

On the ledger sheet there are not only our debits but there are our assets. He has some assets.

One of them is he's willing to learn. We know he's willing to learn because of two things. First, if you go through the gospels and write down all the questions that were ever asked of Jesus and then ask who asked these questions, you will discover that Peter asked Jesus more questions than any other human being. That's a mark of a person who wants to learn.

We know he's a good learner also because on the day of Pentecost he gets up and preaches without any advance preparation. A fantastic message – 3000 people get converted and in that message he quotes line after line of the Old Testament relating passages in the Old Testament in the psalms to the resurrection of Christ. Where did he get such ability? Doing his memory work with Jesus on the roads of Galilee. He was learning. When the time came when he needed to

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make an *ad hoc* presentation there it was right there. Great quality. The Lord knew that was in him.

The Lord also knew that he was a person who not only was willing to learn but he was typically one step out in front. That's a quality that he wanted in a rock-like leader. The second story at sea it's Peter who takes the step out of the boat. When Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?" It's Peter who leads the way: "Thou art the Christ." When Jesus says, "Everybody's leaving me. Are you also going to go away?" It's Peter who takes the lead: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." When Jesus curses the fig tree it's Peter who notices that it is withered and asks about it. When Jesus stops making his appearances after the resurrection in Jerusalem, it's Peter who says, "I go fishing." And people follow after him to go back up into Galilee. He is typically a step out in front.

The third quality the Lord knew in him as a positive attribute was a willingness to obey. Sometimes I think there are only two qualifications for being a good disciple of Jesus. That's the first and the third in Peter – a willingness to learn and a willingness to obey. Right off the bat you see it in Peter. Luke 5:5, the first miraculous catch of fish. Peter the fishermen confronts the carpenter and the carpenter's telling him, Cast the net on the other side. Peter's protesting. He says "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything." In other words, this doesn't make sense. "But because you say so, I'll let down the nets."

Here he is willing to obey the Lord even if it doesn't add up. Even if it doesn't make good sense.

We see also in Matthew 17 where Peter is out with some enemies of Jesus who say to Peter, Does your rabbi pay the temple tax? And Peter says, Of course he does. Then Peter comes back to Jesus and says, by the way, do you pay the temple tax? The Lord says, "I really don't have to but I will. Peter, you go out and catch a fish and in it you'll find a coin and it will pay your tax and mine." That's the only time in the New Testament where there is not net fishing involved. All the times Jesus says I'll make you fishers of men. He's talking about catching fish in schools and families. Only one time a hook, line and sinker are involved. That's this occasion. Some people regard it as a fish story. But it's a real lesson on discipleship because the Lord had elucidated a principle to him who has will more be given. That's sound educational methodology. Learn today's lessons and you can get ready for tomorrow's lessons. If you do it today, to him who has more will be given to you.

Peter had been progressing in the school of obedience. Now he's ready for the graduate course in obedience – go catch a fish and you'll find a coin in it.

I can't imagine Thomas carrying out that assignment. He'd had said, You've got to be kidding! Peter went ahead and did it.

I suggest that in Peter's life there is so much like our own. There are the minuses and the pluses. The outcome is very uncertain. But the chances are that the minuses will dominate.

Jesus however calls out the rock in him. From the first day he gives him a new identification. Peter begins to grow into what the Lord called him.

I want to make some applications out of this message to our lives.

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The first application is do with the people that are around us. Perhaps you are close to someone and you really love them but you say, I really wish they'd make some changes. Anyone know anyone you'd like to see make some changes.

We probably all can identify changes we'd like to see somebody else make. How are we going to bring those changes about? I'll guarantee you one thing. You will not bring changes about by continuing to focus on the other person's weak points, their negatives and their liabilities. You will only confirm that behavior and drive it deeper.

If a parent for example is all the time saying to a child, You are so careless! You never pick up your things! That is exactly what that child is going to be like.

If a husband says to his wife, you always run late. Then that is what she's going to do. I know that from personal experience!

If the wife says to the husband, you're not caring. You're not sensitive. You're not loving. Guess what? He's not going to be caring, sensitive or loving. Because the language we create is a harbinger of reality. It forecasts the reality developed.

So how do we bring about change in another person? We do it by following Christ's method. Finding the strengths in another and continuing to emphasize those strengths. By emphasizing them and complimenting them we bring them into being.

Someone may not be all that loving but if they just have a flicker of love we might be able to say to them, you are a loving person. And like thumb-sucker, first they may not believe it. But if we believe it and if we keep at it along enough we can see God works changes in that life.

Years ago when I was a youth pastor there was a couple in the church with a 2 or three year old. She was terror on wheels. I can recall watching her in a home we were both guests at. She tore up everything in sight. The hostess couldn't move fast enough to get stuff put up from this little kid's reaching hands. Totally uncontrollable. I noticed the parents called her "Tiger." And she acted like it. Some months went by and I hadn't been close to the family socially so I sort of lost track of what was going on. A few months later we showed up at another social function. Same girl, but a marked change in behavior. She was calm, kind, obedient. What has happened here? Is she on medication? I tried to discreetly raise the question with the parents. They said, "We discovered what we were doing wrong. We were calling her Tiger and we were reinforcing that behavior. So we decided to give her a new name. We decided to call her 'Lamb. Or Lamie.'"

They got it! That's what Jesus did to Simon. He called him Rock. A few more years – a lot of years – went by. Several years ago now, I was teaching the introductory lesson to the semester at southern California college, the Introduction to the New Testament class. About a hundred students in the class. Most of them freshmen. I was going through the roster. As I was calling the names, all of a sudden there jumped out a name I knew. That was the name of this family. I said her first and last name. Then I said, Would you please stay after class? I'm sure as a freshman she wondered why I was picking on her the first day. But she came up after the class. I said, are your parents, so and so by any chance? And you had a sister? Do you remember your parents used to call you Tiger? She said, "No, I don't remember that." I said, it must have been your sister. She turned to go and then looked back kind of like an afterthought. "But I do remember my parents used to call me Lambie!" *You're the one!* I said "You've given me a great

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P.S. to the story because not only did your parents rename you but they so effectively renamed you that you even forgot your old name.”

By the time Jesus got done with Peter, he forgot that here ever was a time he was a Simon.

People do become what we call them. I'm not saying that there's some magical formula here. And I'm not into positive confession either. But there is such a thing as positive language and positive faith. This does not mean that we always avoid the negative. Jesus on occasion would rebuke Peter. But his fundamental orientation to Simon was one of positiveness. You're a rock.

If you notice every time we get ready for our annual church counsel – we deliberately do not call it a Business Meeting. A business meeting sometimes is not too exciting. But church counsels are when the saints get together to do God's work. On the Sunday's before annual church counsel comes up I throw out something like this: “There may be those of you in this church that are not members. Perhaps you've been members of another church and the last business meeting you attended you vowed you'd never go back to another one. Maybe you've been hurt. Maybe there was a church that split and you were in that kind of a session. I'd like you to come to this church counsel to see how maturing Christians can conduct the work of the Lord together in a spirit of love and forthrightness.” Words to that effect.

First, I really believe that this church does that. But I'm also kind of setting you up too. I'm saying no other kind of behavior is really acceptable here. This is the kind of behavior that we're looking forward to as Christians and we're always going to model.

Over the years on occasions we've had tough issues. All of them have been handled in a beautiful kind of a way. Because that's just the way this church handles those kind of things. I think things do become what we call them just as people become what we call them. I think of the people I've visited in the hospital over the years who have faced open heart surgery, and I've visited a number of them. Every single one that has faced that operation and said “God's with me. God's going to bring me through. I'm confident.” Their basic attitude is one of peace, and they're going to come through, has had a marvelous recovery. Part of it is because they faced that crisis in their life and they said, there are two ways looking at this. With God's help I can be a winner.

If we're going to see changes in people around us, we're going to have to do what Jesus did and draw out the strengths in the other person. Draw out the strengths in a particular time in our life. Or a particular phase we're going through.

Then another thing. If we're going to see strength develop in our own life we're going to have to have the attitude toward ourselves that Jesus has toward us. He has not come to condemn us. but to commend us, to build us. Sure we're all sinners. We're all sinners saved by grace. But the enemy, the devil, is the slanderer. He is the accuser. He is the condemner. It is not Christ who condemns us.

Once we've taken care of the sin problem and laid it onto the Lord's shoulders... he then called the twelve to *be* with him. To be changed and shaped by him. It's a high calling. The Lord comes along and wants to help us create faith in our lives not only toward the people about us. But faith in regard to his mission and will for us as well.

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Some years ago a sermon was preached about how all of us are shaped by the people in our cellar or the people in our balcony. He said we learn about those cellar influences primarily from Freud who said that we replay all the negative injunctions from early childhood and these erode our self confidence by reminding us of our weaknesses and failures. His solution was to make peace with these negative forces through lengthy psychoanalysis. But not only do we have things in our basement to pull us down but we also have people in our balcony. People that are special, living and dead, who are shouting down encouragement to us and attempting to pull us up.

Jesus had those people in the basement and people in the balcony. His own family one time came to take him away because they said he's crazy. They were pulling him down. But the heavenly voice was saying "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased."

Take the limits off of what God wants you to do in your life. Remember that justification by faith is really fiction. What do I mean by that? Simply that when we come to believe in Jesus Christ we're sinners. In one moment of time the Lord reverses the edict and is no longer calling us a sinner but is calling us a saint. Is no longer calling us unrighteous but righteous. I'm saying from an effectual point of view that's fiction. How could I in one moment of time go from being unrighteous to righteous. Yet by the Lord's decree, by his word, he says, *you're righteous!* He gives me that whole new term – justified, righteous – as a gift. He says "I see you as complete. I know you've got some growing to do and you've got some sanctification to walk through. You're going to ultimately get there. But before you ultimately get there I already see it as happened and I declare it as already done. You're righteous here and now! "

That's exactly what he did with Simon. You're a rock. You may not be there yet, but I already see it. So as far as I'm concerned it's already done. The Lord sees that for our lives.

I close with this personal illustration. I'm the first member of my family, direct generational linkage, to ever go to college, graduate from college, hold an earned degree. I had members of my family go to Bible school but not to college. No one ever graduated however.

I remember how important education was to our family. It was especially important to my dad. I am so indebted to my dad for the impact that he had in my life in this particular area. Dad never finished the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. As a young boy his stepfather put him to work in a glass factory. He worked the night shift so he did not do his studies too well and never got past the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. It was as a missionary I can remember him out on the China-Tibetan border finishing up his high school work by correspondence. Then finishing his three year theological diploma also by correspondence. He pushed me and pushed me to get an education.

When I graduated from high school I told them I felt called to go into the ministry and I was going to Bible school. Dad absolutely put his foot down and told me I was not going to Bible school. That that would not qualify me to work in secular employment and that my degree would not be as strong as if I went to college. He said, if you ever fail in the ministry you're going to need something to fall back on. You're not going to go to Bible school; you're going to go to college. I won't help you if you go to Bible school. It's ok that you be a minister – just go to college.

So I went to college. I remember how proud mom and dad of me when I graduated from college. Ultimately when I finished my doctrinal work at Fuller Seminary. I finished that degree when I

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was 29 years of age. I went back to Evangel College thinking I was some hot shot. I was the new campus pastor at the college. It was such a pleasure to hear students no longer call me Mr. Wood but *Dr.* Wood. I know Jesus tells us not to wear titles but there are delicious. In those days it really went to my head! Now I don't care. Just call me George. Just call me for chocolate doughnuts.

The first week I'm back on campus and with me in the dining hall is a faculty college friend of mine. Across the dining hall is a person my age whom I knew in my teenage years as a high school student and fellow member of the Central Assembly youth group. I was very conscious of the social distinction between him and me as a kid. His father was rather prominent in the church, mine was not. His family was rather well fixed, mine was not. I was in a different socio-economic category. Yet we had been friends. Except that teenagers are enormously conscious of status, whether it's now or then. So I would be pumping my bike to my paper route three miles away from my home and be loaded with papers on the front basket my friend would come by riding in his car. To me that represented the two different worlds we lived in.

Now I had my doctorate. He hadn't even finished college. I'm a little bit proud of that. He comes up to me and my friend I was with did not know we knew one another from earlier years. So as my old friend comes near my new friend says, I would like for you to meet Dr. George Wood. My old friend said to me and I could see the slight sneer in his lips as he said it: You mean the old paper boy!

I could have killed him! As I reflected on that edict over time I realized two things. One, I had it coming. I needed that balloon of pride to be pricked. I also realized on a serious level that had the course of my life been left to this friend's determination, that's all he ever saw me as. Not that there's anything wrong with being a paper boy, especially if God has called you to do that. but he didn't see any prospect that perhaps I could write and speak and read and think and create and minister and lead. In fact when I see him periodically today I still feel very much locked within the box of his expectation. I realize that so many times we do that with people. We get a mental construct of what a person is and they remain there. We never see them in any other terms.

That's why Jesus Christ is so freeing. He throws aside those kinds of in-a-box mentalities that we get about ourselves and about other people. And under his guidance we're free to become whatever he says.

I have tried, I have not always succeeded and I apologize where I have not. I have tried in my time as pastor to not lock people in a box and to believe that God could use you in ways that may be different than I've seen or other people have seen. To not let first impressions be a final guide but to have faith.

I would encourage you as you look at the people that are near by you in life, maybe you've got them all pegged. You know exactly what they're like. May I say to you, maybe that's not what they're like. Maybe you're missing what God would see, so lift your vision in a little bit different direction. And while you're doing it for someone else, do it for yourself.

Our Lord, we thank you for this time we have around your word. What a wonder you are Lord. You're in the people construction business. Other people make buildings but you construct individuals. Just like any contractor you operate like a blueprint. You know

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where you're going before you turn the first spade of dirt. You know exactly where you want to go in our life. You see the end from the beginning. Therefore you call us saint, you call us righteous. So many days we don't feel that way. But nevertheless, our feelings don't alter the realities which you establish. Thank you for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Help us to do for one another what you do for us. Help us to give another person room to grow. Help us to have the faith that allows them to grow. Drop a seed word within our heart that gives us some expectation that will bring liberty to another person. Instead of reminding another individual in our life of what they cannot do, and the ways they continually fail, help us Lord to look on the things that are good and true and of worthy report. Lord, in our own lives, help us to accept every challenge that you bring our way knowing that in Christ we can do all things through you who strengthen us. In Jesus name. Amen.