

Little things count

By David F. Maas

HAWKINS, Texas—Several years ago I received two memos from a student stating that it was “urgent” that he see me in order to arrange for an “extension.”

He had not turned in one assignment for the entire semester. The final test was now over and the grades were due in one week. This student proposed to me that he would stay up for several nights writing six essays and one research paper.

I personally have always found it hard to be tough on students, even when it would be for their own good. After praying at length about this situation, I invited him to my office to explain to him my decision. The first thing I told him was that I liked him as a person. I found this student a very personable young man with the potential of going far.

But I informed the young man that I was going to fail him and that, under the circumstances, it was the most loving thing I could do.

“Failing freshman composition,” I told him, would not keep him out of God’s Kingdom, but the *behavior pattern* that led to the failing could keep him (and could keep all of us) out of the Kingdom of God.

Several key scriptures indicate that small undramatic steps ensure lasting success:

“Wealth [not earned] but won in haste, or unjustly, or from the production of things for vain or detrimental use [such riches], will dwindle away; but he who gathers *little by little* will increase them” (Proverbs 13:11).

We’re certainly not talking about a crash program here.

“The thoughts of the [steadily] diligent tend only to plenteousness, but every one who is impatient and hasty hastens only to want” (Proverbs 21:5).

Power of time

Both growth and decay do not occur overnight but over a long period. Little by little, piece by piece, the Grand Canyon took thousands of years to erode, with wind and water chipping away the canyon walls. The giant redwoods in Kings Canyon and Sequoia started out as seeds no larger than a fingernail. The entire configuration of this mighty tree is contained in a microscopic code within this tiny seed.

God Almighty doesn't seem to work in the frenetic crash programs that we humans seem to burden ourselves with. Truly God's thoughts are on a different plane from ours (Isaiah 55:8-9), and God's timetable is on a different plane from ours.

Years ago my family moved out of an apartment in the city into a house in a small town in East Texas. I have had the pleasure of taking lengthy hikes with my son Aaron and his cat Matt through the East Texas woods following the Exxon petroleum pipelines.

When I consider the pace of life in the forest, I marvel at how much more deliberate and relaxed raw unspoiled nature is compared to the sporadic bursts of activity in urban settings. When we consider the unhurried pace in the natural environment, we must ask ourselves if God intended human beings to hold themselves to such a frenetic pace.

Jesus' brother James referred to the farmer patiently waiting for the precious fruit through the early and latter rains (James 5:7). We have no inkling of genetically altered hybrids to make them grow faster or yield more. Those strategies in the long run prove highly counterproductive.

We, of course, are well acquainted with the principle in Isaiah:

"For it is [His prophets repeating the concept over and over] precept upon precept, precept upon precept; rule upon rule; here a little, there a little" (Isaiah 28:10, 13).

In Proverbs 25:2 we learn that God chooses not to make everything instantaneously clear. He makes us work to find what we are looking for, trying to develop patience and *sitzfleisch* (the padding on our backsides helping us endure the waiting) in the process. Waiting is good for us.

Home brew

I used to make home brew. After boiling the water, adding malt syrup, hops, yeast and sugar, the 10-gallon vat is set to cool and begin the process of fermentation. What do you suppose would happen if I dipped my glass into the mixture the next day? Probably I would come down with a bad case of the skitters.

One of the explanations for the admonition in Proverbs 23:31 to "not look on the wine when it is red, and still sparkles in the cup," is that the wine is still in the fermenting stage. The intent of this caution focuses on the impatience of the alcoholic to have his next fix, not waiting for the proper aging process. Good cheese takes time to ferment. One old Yiddish Proverb suggests:

"Four things get better with time: wine, cheese, violins, and some women."

Consistent practice

Music takes time to compose and learn. Concert pianists spend hours every day practicing and refining their craft. Vladimir Horowitz claimed that if he missed practice one day he would know it. If he missed practice two days his critics would know it. If he missed three days his public would know it.

Books take up to a year or, in some cases, several years to write. Some works take up to decades to complete. I tell my composition class: "You can write a research paper in 20 hours, but you can't write a research paper in 20 hours."

The key to this conundrum is the explanation of *which* 20 hours: those spread incrementally over several months or those massed together right before the due date. The research papers that get whipped out in one evening are no better than green beer or curdled milk at the beginning of the cheese-making process. They metaphorically make the reader want to regurgitate.

Maturity of character cannot be accomplished without patience and the passage of time:

"Moreover, let us also be full of joy now! Let us exult and triumph in our troubles and rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that pressure and affliction and hardship produce patient and unswerving endurance. And endurance (fortitude) develops maturity of character" (Romans 5:3-4, Amplified Bible).

Patience (that character trait of taking things little by little, piece by piece) is also encouraged by Jesus' brother James:

"But let endurance and steadfastness and patience have full play and do a thorough work, so that you may be [people] perfectly developed (with no defects), lacking in nothing" (James 1:4, Amplified Bible).

So many of us have developed what sociologists have termed "symptoms of hurry":

- We want to hurry to graduate. Over the years I've had dozens of students tell me they are determined to graduate in three years instead of the recommended four. By taken fast-track minicourses and accelerated summer classes, they make sure they beat their classmates to the pass.
- Young people want to get married now without the proper getting-acquainted time.
- People on the freeway want to hurry to get around the car in front of them.

Spiritual maturity

In God's church we have been given the most awesome responsibility this creation has ever known: that of becoming transformed into the God family.

"For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19).

This process of spiritual maturity demands that we absorb God's Word a little at a time, perhaps page by page by page. Crash programs toward spirituality don't work any more than a crash diet builds the kind of habits that keep the excess weight off.

What if our lifetime accomplishments had to be completed in the next month? What if you were led to a Bekins or Allied warehouse in a major city where all of the food you were going to eat for the rest of your life were presented to you—but you were instructed to eat it in the next 20 weeks?

It has been recommended that for minimum spiritual growth we pray an hour a day. What if we decided to wait until Nov. 15 and pray eight hours a day until the end of the year?

Little neglects

Some of us (I daresay most of us) from time to time put off irksome chores until what we think will be a more favorable time. But the problem is that our Monday mañanas turn rapidly into freaky Fridays and consequently the “I should have done that earlier” hits us at 3 o’clock Friday morning.

Consider: “The hand of the diligent will rule, but the slothful will be put to forced labor” (Proverbs 12:24).

There have been times when some of us have become virtual bondslaves to our neglect. Big calamities come from little neglects:

- “The beginning of strife is as when water first trickles” (Proverbs 17:14).
- “A little leaven will ferment the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6).
- “Sin begins with an evil desire” (James 1:14).

The cumulative effects of a little neglect becomes clear in the following narrative:

“I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; and there it was all overgrown with thorns; its surface was covered with nettles; its stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: *a little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest;* so your poverty will come like a prowler, and your want like an armed man” (Proverbs 24:30-34).

Daily decision

We have been counseled to be diligent to know the state of our flocks (Proverbs 27:23). The implication is that this task should be done on a daily basis rather than a part of a sporadic crash program. Virtually most of our activities, from balancing our checkbook to prevailing in prayer, need to be a day-by-day practice.

I related to my student who wanted to do a semester’s work in an evening a metaphor from Horace Mann, quoted by J. Millard Bennett in his *The Power of Inspired Salesmanship*:

“Character (or a good set of habits) is like a steel cable (or perhaps a gigantic rope). You weave a *strand a day* until it is virtually impossible to break.”