

IF I COULD LIVE MY LIFE OVER

Robert Boardman

During the early years of the Second World War, a young American Marine named Robert Boardman was beaten up in a drunken brawl in Australia, and wound up spending several weeks in a hospital. In remorse he turned to prayer and to the pages of the Bible, and soon committed his life to Christ.

Later in the war, in the battle for Okinawa, an enemy bullet pierced his throat, and still today he can speak no louder than a husky whisper. Yet he prayed then that he would be able to return to Okinawa and serve the Lord there.

By 1953 he was back, ministering both to American servicemen and to the people of Okinawa. A few years later he moved to Japan, where he has been the Lord's servant in leading the nation's Navigator ministry for more than a quarter-century—years of lessons learned about the truly important things in life.

Is it right to dwell on past weaknesses, failures, and needs? It could lead unnecessarily to resurrecting what would best be left alone—letting sleeping dogs lie is often the better part of wisdom. The apostle Paul spoke of “forgetting what lies behind me, and straining every nerve towards that which lies in front” (Philippians 3:13).

But the Bible is history, and it tells not only of successes but also of failures by individuals and by nations—failures that teach us lessons. We are to learn from the past.

So if I can tell you in a positive, constructive way about my own mistakes and failures, and thereby warn and challenge you not to repeat them, this article will be a valid venture. If I can help just one other person avoid one of my pitfalls, then I rejoice.

It is important to remember, however that God in his sovereignty has made each of us different in temperament, personality, emotional makeup, spiritual gifts, capacities, callings, and experiences. My areas of need and failure may be your areas of success. Nevertheless, I believe that many of my listed weak points are those we may have in common, at least to some degree.

If I could live my life again, I would seek to make these changes:

1. I would stand more boldly upon my God-given calling, and not be so fearful.

In September 1943 as a young Marine in the South Pacific, I became a Christian through reading a small Gideons' New Testament. Six months later, after serving in the battle of Cape Gloucester on the island of New Britain near New Guinea, the God of all grace called me to serve him with my whole life. In subsequent years, he faithfully continued to reveal details of that call step by step, including sending me to Japan as a missionary.

I was not a heroic missionary volunteer to the land of my former wartime enemy, but rather a reluctant' fearful candidate whom God had to “draft” into his service. I was much like Jonah, who resisted the Lord's plans to send him to Nineveh, the great city of his enemy. My temptation is to be fearful—of the unknown future, of men's reactions to certain ventures of faith I want to take, of real adversaries. Nevertheless, the gracious call of God to me in early 1944 has been the anchor

of my soul when the storms of circumstances and my own limitations would resurrect the specter of fear.

I know that if my heart were more fully set on this calling from God I would be more Kingdom-minded, and therefore bold as a lion, remembering the admonitions and promise in Isaiah 54:17—
“No weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and this is their vindication from me,” declares the Lord.

2. While they were young, I would spend more time with my children in worship, in spiritual disciplines, and in just enjoying life.

I have read that by the time a child enters the first grade, the basic direction of his life has already been determined. What you and I have done or not done before our children enter school has made them what they will be.

My temptation as a young, full-time Christian worker some years ago was to think that what I did with my little children was not so important. I thought when they grew older and could understand better than I would give them fuller attention. So I became busy in a ministry with young adults, waiting for my own children to grow up.

But such thinking is a fallacy. I foolishly took too much for granted, and gave my excellent wife Jean more than her share of the load in the children’s upbringing.

There is some consolation for me in seeing that the twelve disciples had the same limited outlook on the importance of little children. But to this Jesus responded, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (Mark 10:14).

3. I would ask God for greater blessings and victories, claiming his mighty promises.

Salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ is a matter of believing and claiming his word in order to be saved from our sins. The subsequent, progressive steps of life are also a matter of continuing to believe God’s word—a belief that will determine our spiritual growth. Common people become uncommon as they stand on the promises of God.

Today I have mixed feelings as I think of portions of Scripture I claimed in the past that are now being fulfilled. On the one hand, I rejoice and am overwhelmed at how God works and blesses. On the other hand, I ask myself why I didn’t claim more of God’s amazing promises so that he could do more through this unworthy servant.

I came to the Land of the Rising Sun as a result of praying over God’s precious promises. One of these verses I continually claimed was Psalm 2:8—“Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.” As an heir of God and joint heir with Christ I believed I could legitimately claim that portion of Scripture.

With that verse in mind, I learned from Dawson Trotman how to pray for the nations using a world atlas. He and I would kneel in his study and put our fingers on country after country, key city after key city throughout the world, praying, pleading, and interceding.

As time passes, our temptation is to rely on our past experiences, on the knowledge we’ve gained, on new methods and ideas—on everything except God’s exceedingly great and precious promises.

Yet these promises are as sure as if they were already fulfilled, if we will but claim and believe them.

4. By God's grace, I would be quicker to turn from temptation and sin.

Our tendency is to play with fire as long as possible without getting burned, even though it puts us in constant danger of destroying all that is beautiful to us, including our own life and family.

We have an extremely clever enemy—much more clever than we are. He knows our weakest point, studies it, and works on it continually in his desire to ruin us. He is a master strategist at knowing where, when, and how to attack.

Each of us has a point of vulnerability, something referred to in Hebrews 12:1 as the weight and sin “that so easily besets us” or “which clings so closely.” It could be the love of money, the lust for power, an uncontrolled tongue, pride, lust for the opposite sex, sowing discord among brothers, procrastination, or just plain disobedience—refusing to do the clearly known will of God. Often, victory is ours only if we resist Satan and flee from our strong temptation, by God's grace.

The couple who live across the street from us are acupuncturists and shiatsu specialists. Mr. Suzuki is gone in the daytime. One day during a period of extreme pain in my neck, Jean urged me to go see Mrs. Suzuki for treatment. My conscience clearly revealed that I would have risked too much by visiting alone such an attractive woman. It is far better to have a bad neck than a ruined moral life.

I want Jabez's prayer to be mine: “that you would keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me!” (1 Chronicles 4:10).

5. I would be more systematic and single-minded in following a lifetime personal Bible study and Scripture memory program.

God has been gracious in helping me discover in the Scriptures some things about himself, about my own life, and about the needs of the ministry. Yet I feel I'm operating only on the fringes of his word, which is more powerful than any nuclear weapon.

The supernatural word of the living God melts and breaks our hard hearts! “‘Is not my word like as a fire,’ saith the Lord, ‘and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?’” (Jeremiah 23:29).

There are gaps in my life regarding the rich books of the Bible that I ought to have studied and mastered by now. But the temptation is to procrastinate and not redeem the time—to live and act as if I have all the time in the world.

Yet I am now fifty-nine years old. If the seventy years of a normal lifespan were squeezed into a single 24-hour day, it would now be 8:30 in the evening in my life. It is late; time is slipping by so rapidly.

If I were young, I would work out a tentative lifetime Bible study plan that I would review and revise as necessary each year. If you develop such a plan, make it flexible, so that it fits your lifestyle and ministry calling. Memorizing Scripture and reading through the Bible once a year ought to be a part of the plan. You must take the initiative in it, but get someone to help you. I will delight myself in thy statutes; I will not forget thy word. (*Psalms 119:16*)

6. I would be more determined in my one-to-one discipling ministry.

I would expect and demand more of people under my leadership, those whom I had responsibility for training. The temptation in this ministry is to underestimate men's and women's capacities and their desire to grow, to serve, and to accept challenge. Sometimes I have been fearful of offending them by asking too much, yet seldom have I met this kind of reaction.

The Master Challenger of all times, Jesus Christ, never hesitated to stretch men beyond their abilities, and over a period of time to bring them up to their true potential. His dealings with the unpredictable fisherman Peter are an example. It is a work that takes time, tears, failure, faith, prayer, trust, humility, love, responsiveness, perseverance, intercession—and clear objectives.

Waiting for the right time is important. There are various growth stages in a disciple's life, and what can be taught to him tomorrow cannot be taught today. Jesus knew this: "I have yet many things to say unto you," he told his disciples, "but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). God can reveal the right timing to the disciplemaker in answer to prayer.

So timing is important; yet in my life I may have been too cautious. We have wonderful promises for the men and women God has given us, and by active faith in these promises we can see God work, bless, and multiply beyond our expectations.

7. I would welcome trials and even failures as mends and as builders of my poor character. This is in response to the command in James 1:2—

When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance.

God always has his own special training programs for our lives: a physical injury or disease, a broken heart over a love affair, a potential disciple who becomes an adversary, relatives who harass us, fruit in evangelism that turns out to be false after testings, disunity on our ministry team, our own lack of personal consistency and discipline, financial struggles, career conflicts, and so on. These can bring us a sense of failure and low self-esteem, and a loss of confidence.

In such trials and testings I am tempted to complain, and to not trust in God's sovereignty. I may want to give up, or to fight against God's special purposes. I may murmur against my spiritual leader or against others who I feel are conspiring against me. Or I am tempted to think God has forgotten and forsaken me.

But with the reflection that comes from a faith rooted in God's word, I know he has my best interests at heart. He is a loving Father who chastens me because I am his son. He is purging out the dross, and only the heat of the fire of trials can bring the impurities to the top. So to these trials I must say with fear and trembling, "Welcome, friends!"

8. I would be more considerate, kind, tender, and communicative toward my wife, my children, and my fellow workers.

God has given me an unusual and wonderful wife. Jean and I have been married thirty years. Yet it took me the first ten of those years to learn to praise her. In Proverbs 31 we read that the woman of virtue is praised by her husband and her children. If I, as her husband, praise Jean, my children will also. If I don't, they won't. They learn from my example.

In the early years of pioneering the Navigator ministry in Japan, there were times when I made major decisions affecting staff members and their families. Sometimes I made these decisions with little consideration for their feelings, and with little discussion. They were not always bad decisions, but the manner in which they were made was not always thoughtful. Looking back, in certain cases I would certainly have done things differently. Scripture admonishes me to walk in my calling “with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2–3).

Over the years the Japanese have taught me much about this kind of thoughtfulness, contributing more to me than I have ever contributed to them in the area of decision-making.

9. I would seek to develop a hobby earlier in my life.

Christian workers are often hard-driving, hard-working people with little recognition of their need to slow down—for a diversionary hobby, for example. I’m not sure anyone could have convinced me in my early adulthood that I needed a hobby, and not until I was 46 did I begin to discover some hidden talent in woodcarving.

Since then I’ve learned that a hobby can relieve tension and pressure by diverting my thinking and attention from the ministry. It also brings out the creativity that is within me waiting to be released, and gives me opportunities to use my mind and hands in a new sphere. It leads to a new circle of friends, and involves the whole family in wider horizons of experience. And it also teaches me much about the wonders of creation and about the Creator—the One who made us, and who is still at work within us; “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

Scripture quotations are from the Twentieth Century New Testament, the New International Version, the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, and J. B. Phillips’s *The New Testament in Modern English*.