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Ultimate Survival: Be on the Alert Luke 12:32-40

A sermon for the glory of God for the people of God at First Christian Church, Ames, Iowa, by David Digby

³²My little flock, don't be afraid. *God is your Father, and your Father's great joy is to give you his kingdom.*

³³That means you can sell your possessions and give generously to the poor. You can have a different kind of savings plan: one that never depreciates, one that never defaults, one that can't be plundered by crooks or destroyed by natural calamities. ³⁴*Your treasure will be stored in the heavens, and since your treasure is there, your heart will be lodged there as well.*

³⁵⁻³⁶*I'm not just talking theory. There is urgency in all this.* If you're apathetic and complacent, then you'll miss the moment of opportunity. You should be wide awake and on your toes like servants who are waiting for their master to return from a big wedding reception. They'll have their shoes on and their lamps lit so they can open the door for him as soon as he arrives home. ³⁷How fortunate those servants will be when the master knocks and they open the door immediately! You know what the master will do? He'll put on an apron, sit them down at the kitchen table, and he'll serve them a midnight snack. ³⁸The later he comes home – whether it's at midnight or even later, just before dawn – the more fortunate the alert servants will be.

³⁹*In contrast, imagine a complacent, apathetic household manager who has no sense of urgency. He wanders out one night and leaves the door unlocked, and some thieves sneak in and empty the place.* If he had been aware that thieves were waiting in the bushes and what hour they were coming, [he would have watched and] he never would have left the house! ⁴⁰I'm trying to tell you that these are times for alertness, times requiring a sense of urgency and intensity, because *like the master in the first story or the thief in the second*, the Son of Man shows up by surprise.ⁱ¹



Do you **want** to stay alive? It is a **choice** we make, you know, to stay alive or to give up and die. Sometimes we choose to let it all go and die, when the time is right. Until then, let us resolve to live fully until the moment of death.

Last month my mother turned 86. When she was 24 she contracted a severe case of rheumatoid arthritis which changed every aspect of her life. She's had knees and fingers and toes replaced. She lives with intense pain. Now her hands are useless. She cannot walk unassisted. She **had** come to the point of giving up, wanting to die, feeling miserable. Then she fell and had to leave the apartment she

ⁱ¹ *The Voice of Luke: Not Even Sandals.* Translated by Brian McLaren.

and Dad shared to move into an assisted living environment where other people make the decisions for her. Somewhere from deep inside she found the will to survive again and began challenging herself to meet her therapy goals, indeed, to surpass them. She threw herself into the regimen so intently that, in her ambition and will to succeed; she caused herself some setbacks because of overdoing. She will never return to the life she knew. But she is surviving and taking a measure of pride in her stubborn unwillingness to let the disease rule her heart.

She made the choice to do whatever it took to survive, not because she is afraid to die, but because she *wants* to live.

Laurence Gonzales, author of *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, says, “A survival situation brings out the true, underlying personality. Our survival kit is inside us. But unless it’s there before the accident, it is not going to appear magically at the moment it’s needed. When you consolidate your personality as a survivor, what you *get* is the essence of what you always had. A survival situation simply *concentrates* who you are. It drives the natural system you’ve developed over a lifetime, and it drives it harder. Whether or not it becomes chaotic at the boundaries depends on what you’ve put into it over a lifetime. Your experiences, education, family, and way of viewing the world all shape what you would be as a survivor.”²

Jesus is the ultimate survival guide. He’s the only one to survive even death. He knows about living. Jesus says, “Little flock, don’t be afraid. Develop your own survival savings plan. Give generously to those in need and thus make deposits in heaven where your life is safe from destruction. There is no better way.

Sure, *anyone* can live anxiously, worrying over this and worrying over that. But where’s the joy in that? Who wants such a life?

Here’s a secret. Survivors always do it for others. Survivors are always connected to loved ones, friends, society, and causes bigger than themselves. That’s how they serve God first by knowing that they are not God. At the heart of this magnificent survival is an attitude of humble awe in the face of creation.

² Gonzales, Laurence, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*. W.W. Norton. New York. 2003. P. 223.

Steve Callahan's sailboat was demasted in a storm and sank out in the middle of nowhere as he was sailing alone around the world. He escaped into a small rubber life raft and got to work on the business of survival. He set small tasks for himself. He kept his sense of humor. He kept a diary. He practiced discipline in the stewardship of his supplies. He did things right. In that diary he wrote, "I believe in the miraculous and spiritual way of things. I do not know the true workings of that way. I can only guess and hope that it includes me."³ He went on to say, "In these moments of peace, deprivation seems a strange sort of gift... My plight has given me a strange kind of wealth, the most important kind. I value each moment that is not spent in pain, desperation, hunger, thirst, or loneliness. Even here, there is richness all around me. As I look out of the raft, I see God's face in the smooth waves, God's grace in the dorado's swim, feel God's breath against my cheek as it sweeps down from the sky."⁴

He saw a rainbow and wrote, "I feel as if I am passing down the corridor of a heavenly vault of irreproducible grandeur and color." To lose everything at the edge of such a glorious eternity is far sweeter than to win by plodding through a cautious, painless, and featureless life. Survivors always have something to lose, something precious. It makes life all the sweeter. In 1982, after 75 days on the water, Steve Callahan sailed into the Caribbean Islands drinking lavishly from the stores of water he had hoarded, celebrating the joy of living.

Fear not, little flock. It is God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. You can give away your possessions and become rich. You will have a new spirit and a bold heart and a fearless soul.

You make deposits in the heavenly bank and become rich in kingdom living. You who have been faithful in worship week after week, year after year, decade after decade have made deposits. Over time Christ shapes our character and molds our personality. You are rich in grace and on the pathway to holiness.

My grandfather was a kingdom person. I remember, as a little boy, riding with him as we drove through a dark night rainstorm. An oncoming car kept its high beams on, and the light glaring through our rain-streaked windshield blinded us. I asked my grandfather why he didn't signal the other driver to dim his lights. He thought about it and said, "I always try to give the other fellow the benefit of the doubt. Maybe he couldn't see very well and needed the light. It makes my heart light to believe that." Deposits in heaven. Stored up for eternity.

³ Ibid. p. 220.

⁴ Ibid p. 225.

Albert Schweitzer gave up a lucrative career as a concert organist to go off to west central Africa where he built a hospital and grew to love the people he served. His life of poverty and privation was much more difficult than it would have been on the stages of the world, earning the applause of the world. But he was so very rich. Treasures stored up. Fear not, little flock. It is God's great joy to give you the kingdom.

My friend, Monty, marched into the president's office at Kerr McGee Oil Company where he held a position of importance and power and announced, "I'm resigning. I have to do something meaningful with my life. I have enrolled in seminary." After years of study he received a call to pastor a congregation. He told me, "I've never worked harder for less money. And, I've never been happier."

It's like those servants waiting and waiting and waiting through the long night as the master was off at a wedding reception for hours of feasting and singing and dancing and drinking. Most servants would take the opportunity to get drunk themselves, or run off for a night out, or steal away for some sleep. But these servants kept on the alert: shoes tied, lamps lit, and when they first heard their master's footstep, like a loyal dog, they rushed to the door, flung it open, and welcomed him home.

And the *master*, a kingdom of God type of person, went into the kitchen, put on a waiter's apron, and cooked up a meal. He sat the servants down at the table and served them. That act of graciousness changed everything. He added something eternal into their relationship. Neither he nor they would ever forget that evening. The old arrangement of boss and slave was gone forever. They'd serve him with their whole hearts because he was alert enough to recognize their humanity and their sacrifice for him.

Here's the heart of everything I'm trying to say, here are the survival tips to the life abundant that Jesus offers. Here are the deposit slips for the heavenly bank into which survivors make a lifetime of deposits:

Trust God in all things, no matter what.

Develop a **compassionate, forgiving spirit** in every relationship you have.

Be **generous** with every resource God has given you, give much away.

Recognize **all** God's creatures as worthy, wonderful, and valuable. Do not treat any of them with hypocrisy, snobbery, or prideful arrogance.

Cultivate a **life of prayer** so that God's joy becomes your joy and you are rich in soul no matter what.

Those who are not on the alert are like the apathetic homeowner who didn't even pay enough attention to lock the door. Robbers waited in the bushes and when he left they entered and cleaned out the place. Jesus said this being on the alert is serious business, urgent business. Survivors care too much for the joys of this life to be apathetic about it, bored with it, or tired of it. In all things they find cause for gratitude, see the bright possibilities, laugh at the silliness, and trust God to get them through. So says Jesus. So say we all.
