

SEVEN WAYS TO MOVE FORWARD IN STRENGTH

Anyone who has spent time in the turmoil of life, whether spinning around or being stuck in the bottom of a pit, can attest that at some point you get to a place where you're tired of enduring. You just want to start moving forward again. It makes me think of the classic country song by Willie Nelson that goes: "On the road again, I just can't wait to get on the road again." We can try to be patient. We can tell ourselves that this too shall pass. But sometimes my inner self retorts back, "Yea, this too shall pass—like a kidney stone!" Incidentally, I've never had a kidney stone, but I've heard the pain rivals giving birth (although some mothers may disagree).

Trials in life are hard, and painful, and they usually go on way too long for our liking. It can be difficult to see progress or believe that the end is ever in sight. Especially for those of us who aren't innately patient.

So what happens when we realize it's finally time to move forward? The whole time we've been in the pit, we've been trying to get out. We've been praying and wishing for things to change for months, or even years. But now that we can leave, we're afraid. Are we really ready? Did we learn the lessons we need for the next season? Are we prepared to go into a new land? Who has the map?

The life we've been in, with its turmoil and stress, is now the life we know. It's hard to take that first step forward. Sure we'd love to make a grand entrance to a new beginning if we could start soaring above the mountains. We'd even like to be running the race of life feeling like we're still a contender to win. But initially, as we emerge from turmoil or trials or crisis, our walk will be a daily trek. What are some ways we can move forward in strength? Here are seven suggestions.

1. Let Go. As we begin to move forward, we have to let go of our circumstances, and we have to let go of the past. Our perspective has to change. What are we focusing on? Are we stuck looking in the rear view mirror at ourselves or at what lies behind us? Or are we intently looking ahead in anticipation? Are we going to make a U-turn and drive our lives back to what we know? Moving forward will require resolve, and it will require forgiveness. We're not called to forgive and forget. But we are called to forgive and let go. We have to let go of the hurt and bitterness that are binding our hearts and minds so that we can be free to move forward in strength. Free to hope for new beginnings. If we don't fully let go, we'll always be tethered to the past and we won't be able to move forward. Put the person or circumstance squarely in the hands of Almighty God. And let go. You may have to do this daily, or weekly, or even hourly at first if you continue to see the person. But over time, you'll get to the point where you know you've finally let go for good.

2. Go Day By Day. I'm a planner. I make plans for the future, but I really don't know with accuracy where I'm going to be in "X" number of years. Nor can I fully prepare for unknown challenges ahead. None of us knows what will happen in the future. Or when. And for all of us, the plans of others may differ from our own. The "other" may leave, betray, lie, cheat, abuse, or even decide they just don't love us anymore. We can't control the decisions or actions of others. We can't always control our circumstances. Thus life can become very stressful. Very overwhelming. Very disappointing. What can we do? Live day by day. Move forward one step at a time. Even if we're a planner with no plan. Even if we want someone to walk with us but we don't have anyone. The truth is that we're never alone. We have a God who is waiting patiently for us to come to Him each and every day. Take it one day at a time and make the most of each day. Do little things that are special to you. Call a friend. Eat lunch outside. Splurge on a dessert.

Consider finding one thing every day that you're thankful for and writing it in a "Thank You" journal. Time will pass and the past will be left behind. But don't waste the present. Don't be so focused on an unknown future that you're discouraged by a slow pace. True progress in going day by day is getting to the point where every day is savored, if for no other reason than because it is one more step toward a new tomorrow.

3. Don't Look Down. I look down a lot. I want to see where I'm walking or running so I don't turn an ankle. Or step in something gross. When I started realizing how much I look down, I started seeing how much I'm missing. I also began to see how indicative this is of my life. I'm looking down at the path on which I'm walking (self-focused) instead of looking around at those with me (others-focused), or ahead at where I'm going (heaven-focused), or best yet looking up to see the glory of God (Savior-focused)! It takes a conscious effort to stop looking at ourselves or where our circumstances are taking us. This is where JOY comes in. What should we focus on? JOY: Jesus—Others—Yourself. In that order. The premise of JOY is to refine our perspective as we look with new eyes on Jesus, others, and ourselves. So, how do we stop looking down and start looking around? First, we need to stop obsessing and worrying. We have little control over our circumstances and other people, but we can control our response. And our response should be to stop obsessing over what we think should be done in our lives, and when. Take a step back and see the big picture. Second, we need to learn to trust God and pray for His help in our circumstances. If we don't know that we can trust God, we need to get to know Him—who He really is. If you're going to obsess, obsess on God and His goodness, His character, His love, His faithfulness and His provision. Not on your circumstances or someone else. Third, we should foster opportunities where we can care for, love and serve others. We shouldn't be

starving ourselves by pouring out to others. But giving our time and attention to others can help us to stop being consumed by ourselves and our circumstances.

4. Feed On God's Word Daily. Some people are looking for something they can cling to, something that will stay with them as they move forward. Others are looking for spiritual growth or spiritual enlightenment as they move into a new season of life. No matter where we are in life, we all need to nourish our hearts and minds daily with God's Word, the Bible. God's Word is living and active. It brings sustenance. It brings renewal. It brings direction to our lives. Just like the pillar of cloud that went before the Israelites by day and the pillar of fire that led them at night, so God's Word guides us on our daily journey. Every day and every night God is in our midst. And God gives us His Word. No other words have the power of God's words to revive and sustain our souls. If you haven't read the Bible in a long time, or maybe you never have, it's never too late to start. Pick a book of the Bible like John or Luke or James, and just start reading. Commit to reading for 15 minutes a day for the next two weeks, and see how God's Word can apply to your life. If you don't have a Bible, you can go online to read the passages (try a site like www.BibleGateway.com, and pick a translation like New International Version also known as NIV). Consider doing a Bible study on a specific book of the Bible (you can select from many studies at www.Christianbook.com). Try short studies by Carol Kent or Women of Faith. For more in-depth studies consider one by Beth Moore, Max Lucado or Kay Arthur. Make God's Word a part of your daily routine, and begin to find new strength as you bring nourishment to your heart, mind and soul.

5. Have Something To Look Forward To. It sounds so simple saying, "I need to have something to look forward to." And truthfully it is. If there is something on the calendar that we can get excited about, we start looking ahead instead of getting consumed by looking down at

our circumstances. “Something to look forward to” can be very basic. Lunch or dinner with a friend. A night out at the movies. A weekend away. A few hours walking through the mall. A new class at the gym or community center. Whether elaborate or basic, whether with a group or by ourselves, having something to plan and look forward to can help us keep a more positive perspective of where we are today and where we’re headed. Even adopting a pet at the local animal shelter can give us something to look forward to each day as we’re coming home to our new friend. We don’t have to stay isolated. Even in the most difficult times, it’s okay, and even healthy, to get out of the house and smile and laugh. Fresh air and a change of scenery can do wonders. Try planning something to look forward to, and get excited!

6. Share Life With Other People. A big part of moving forward is sharing life with other people. We need friendship, prayer support, encouragement, accountability, sisterhood/brotherhood, loyalty, love and hope. Sharing life together is essential for healthy living. We have an inherent need to love and be loved. We have an inherent need to know and be known. We are not meant to be alone. As friends, we pour out to others when we’re able, and they pour into us when we’re not. Friends can help build us up when we’re down. They mentor us as we mature in our faith. They rejoice when we rejoice. They mourn when we mourn. They extend hope when we have none. They can be an important part of our healing. Don’t get me wrong, living in community with others is not always easy. But we need to make the effort to find a solid group of people, “a sisterhood” so to speak, where we can be ourselves and continue to grow in love and friendship as we move forward. Come be a part of our community, our sisterhood, at Rising Above Real Life! You can find us at www.RisingAboveRealLife.com and on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/RisingAboveRealLife.

7. Put In What You Want To Get Out. We need to remember that we can't get out what we don't put in. If you're baking leavened bread, you have to add yeast. You can have every other ingredient in the recipe, but if yeast isn't there, the bread won't rise. The same is true with us—if we want “Good” to come out in our life, we have to include “Good” in our recipe. What goes into our minds and hearts through what we read, watch, hear and share in conversation will be an integral part of what comes out through our thoughts, our words, our attitudes and our actions. What goes in includes books, magazines, newspapers, the internet, music, and TV. Are we using “Good” ingredients or are we binging on tempting fuel? The old adage “What would Jesus do?” has a lot of truth to it. Would we include Jesus in what we're doing, just like we would a friend? Would we watch that show with Jesus, or read that page aloud to Him? If we're trying to feed our hearts and minds with solid, nutritious “inputs” so that our “outputs” are “Good”, how do our current “inputs” measure up? Do we have a diet that includes God's Word, praise music, and devotionals? The more solid (or healthy) the ingredients we're putting in, the more solid (or healthy) the result we'll see coming out through our thoughts, words, attitudes and actions.

Be encouraged. You can move forward in strength from any life trial or circumstances. It may take time. It may not be easy. But you can do it. We all can do it. How? Let go of your circumstances and the past. Go day by day. Look around, not down. Feed on God's Word daily. Plan something to look forward to. Get in community and find your tribe. Start filling your life with “Good” ingredients. And do all of these in the power of prayer and praise.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11

For further study. Let's go a little deeper into each of the seven ways to move forward in strength. Read and answer the following questions. And be honest. Only you and God will know your answers, so it's important to be open and honest about what you think and how you feel.

#1. Let Go.

1. In Psalm 46:10 God says "*Be still, and know that I am God.*" The Hebrew word used for "be still" means "let go". So God is telling us to "Let go" and allow Him to be God. Is there something that comes to mind, from your present or past relationships or circumstances, that you think you may need to let go? What would it take to put that person or that circumstance in the hands of Almighty God and let go? What would it take to then back away, and not take hold of that person or circumstance again? Are you willing to pray to God for the strength to let go? Consider praying right now.
2. Letting go of something, putting it in the hands of God and believing that He will take care of it, requires trust. What things do you trust God with? What things do you not trust God with? Do you believe that the wrath of God on the person or circumstance that you're holding onto would be better than anything you could come up with? To some degree, this is a silly question because we can't control God or know how or when He will pour out wrath. It may not happen in this lifetime, but sometimes it still makes us feel better to consider it. In Romans 12:19, God says, "*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge: I will repay,' says the Lord.*" God is clear in the Bible that He is just, and we are not to take revenge. By not letting go, the bitterness, anger and hurt will grow in us like a cancer and eat away at our hearts and minds. If we let go, we are released from the emotions and worry, and we can

move forward in strength. Let go with confidence, knowing that you have placed the person or circumstances in the hands of God. He will take care of it in His way, in His time. You can now be freed of the burden that has been weighing you down.

#2. Go Day By Day.

3. What is the hardest thing for you in living day by day? What do you think about or worry about that prevents you from truly savoring and making the most of each day? Jesus said in Matthew 6:25-27, *“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”* What in Jesus’ words brings encouragement that God loves you and He is in control? What does this say about worrying?
4. Are there times that you feel alone, or lonely? God says, *“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you,”* (Hebrews 13:5) and He says, *“Come near to God and He will come near to you.”* (James 4:8) God wants to be a part of your daily life. He wants to comfort you in your times of need, and rejoice with you in your times of joy. Through praying with God and reading His Word, we can come near to God so that He will come near to us. Take some time now to pray to God. Your prayers can be simple and honest—that’s what God wants. You don’t have to have any special words. Praise Him for being God, and for promising to always be with you. Tell Him how you feel, even if that includes having doubts about Him. Give Him the opportunity to speak to you by reading His Word, the Bible.

#3. Don't Look Down.

5. Review the paragraph on page 3 that describes the four areas of focus and the three parts of JOY. What are some ways that we can be self-focused, others-focused, heaven-focused or Savior-focused? What type of focus do you think is most indicative of your life? In Nehemiah 8:10 God says, *“The joy of the LORD is your strength.”* What are some ways that the joy of the Lord can be a strength to you? Think for a minute on this one and try to be specific.

6. Many of us worry. God says, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:6-7) “Do not be anxious” means “do not worry.” How do we stop worrying? God says first to pray and present our requests, our petitions, to Him. Note that He says we need to do this “with thanksgiving”. We need to have praise in our hearts (we’re seeing a theme here about praising God, even in the midst of worry and trials). God then says that if we do this—if we pray with thanksgiving and present our requests to Him—He will give us peace that is beyond our understanding. Think about something that is worrying you, or that is weighing heavy on your heart. Present it to God right now. If you aren’t sure of the words to pray, try praying something like this:

“Heavenly Father, I come before You in prayer and ask for Your help. I don’t always feel like I have the right words to pray, but I know that You hear every prayer of mine, and I thank You that You promise to be with me. Lord, I present to You my worry about _____ . I don’t know what to do about it, but You already know the situation. I want to leave it in Your hands. You have promised that if I come before You

in prayer and thanksgiving and leave this worry with You, You will bring peace to my heart and mind through the truth of Jesus Christ. I ask You to do this for me now. I praise You, Father, that You are Almighty God. I believe who You say You are, and I know that You have all power in Your hands. Help any unbelief that I may have. Work in me to help me trust You. I commit my ways to You, and release this worry to You now. In Your holy and precious name I pray. Amen.”

7. Many of us obsess about our circumstances or other people. God says, “*Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things... And the God of peace will be with you.*” (Philippians 4:8-9) What are some things that are true? Noble? Right? Pure? Lovely? Admirable? Excellent? Praiseworthy? Notice that all of these adjectives also describe Jesus. If we were to think about Jesus, who fills all of these attributes, what do you think would be the result? According to God, His peace would be with us. How could this help you when you begin to worry?

#4. Feed On God’s Word Daily.

8. God’s Word can bring guidance and protection to our lives. Exodus 13:21-22 says, “*By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*” Psalm 119:105 says, “*Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*” How can God’s Word be a pillar to guide you, and a light to your path?
9. God tells us about His Word in Hebrews. He says, “*The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful*

Word,” (Hebrews 1:3) and “*The Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*” (Hebrews 4:12) What do these verses say about God’s Word?

10. Jesus said, “*It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’*” (Matthew 4:4) What do you think this means about God’s Word?

11. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, “*Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*” (Isaiah 46:4) What does this verse promise? How can this comfort you in your life today?

#5. Have Something To Look Forward To.

12. The proverbs of Solomon include, “*A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones,*” (Proverbs 15:30) and “*A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*” (Proverbs 17:22) How do these proverbs pertain to having something to look forward to? What are some things that you could plan in the next week and month so that you would have something to look forward to?

13. Psalm 118:24 says, “*This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*” How might having something to look forward to help us to rejoice and be glad?

#6. Share Life With Other People.

14. It can be hard to think about sharing life with other people if we feel alone or if we’ve been betrayed by someone we loved or trusted. Proverbs 19:22 says, “*What a man*

desires is unfailing love,” and Proverbs 17:17 says, *“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”* The words man and brother in these passages mean humankind and pertain to both men and women. Why is it important to find a group (or a tribe) where we can be ourselves, and where we can be supported and encouraged?

15. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, *“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!”* If we think about “work” as “efforts” not just as a vocation, what does this passage convey about the importance of having a close friend?

#7. Put In What You Want To Get Out.

16. If you think about your life as a recipe that requires “Good” ingredients to produce a “Good” result, what are some “Good” ingredients that you think should be included? What are some “Bad” ingredients that should be avoided? What are the ingredients you are currently putting in your life recipe? Are there ingredients you’d like to change? If so, what are some things you could do starting today to change those ingredients?
17. Psalm 119:11 says, *“I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You.”* How does memorizing Scripture and adding it as a “Good” ingredient by hiding it in our heart help us to get “Good” out?

Let’s pray. Father God, thank you for Your Word and the way You use it to speak into our lives. We praise You for being the one and only Almighty God who holds all things in Your hands. Help us as we take new steps to move forward in strength. Fill us with Your peace that transcends all understanding. Grant us Your strength to let go and move on. Help us to find our tribe. Please, Lord, go before us like the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night and

light our path with Your Word. Thank you for never leaving us. Thank you for never giving up on us, even when we turn away from You. We praise You, that You alone are God. We praise You knowing that You always listen to our prayers. In Jesus' Name. Amen.