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LIFE IN HD
2 Corinthians 11:23-29

Raymond Feist, author of the science fiction fantasy Riftwar novels, said, “Life is problems. Living is solving problems.” There is truth to that statement. We keep thinking that we’re going to finally reach that moment when the problems are solved and this bumpy, potholed, twisting road we’ve been traveling finally straightens out and becomes smooth. There will be some smooth stretches, but for the most part we need to understand that life is the process of solving problems.

But is that all it is? Imagine you are taking a math class and the instructor just gives you a seemingly unending series of problems to solve. After a while you ask, “What is the point of these problems?” The instructor answers, “There is no point. Just solve the problems.” How well is that going to work?

The late atheist Christopher Hitchens said in his book *Hitch 22: A Memoir*, “It could be that all of life is a pointless joke, but it is not in fact possible to live one’s everyday life as if this were so.” He maintained that we must somehow create a meaning for our lives or find some meaning in them. But who of us is not wise enough to know that if life is a pointless joke, as he claims, then any meaning I try to create is nothing more than an illusion. It is also a pointless joke and somewhere inside me I’m going to know it. Hitchens himself insists that to live everyday life without that real purpose is intolerable. This sets up an unbearable tension in the human soul, desperately needing a purpose, requiring it for our souls as much as our bodies need air, yet only able to come up with a pretend purpose. Is it not obvious that a pretend purpose will sustain our souls as well as pretend air will sustain our bodies, which is to say not at all?

This idea of purpose most certainly has direct bearing on our idea of being antifragile. We will see that in the life of Paul, the author of 2 Corinthians, as we study 2 Corinthians 11:23-29.

PAUL RELENTLESSLY PURSUED A GOAL

I suspect that Paul, the great church planting apostle, would be dismayed by the way we sometimes speak about him and think of him. He clearly is a great hero of the Christian faith, rightfully so. But at times we may depict him as though he is almost divine, something more than human. He was unique in history, for as far as I know he is the only one to whom the risen Lord Jesus Christ made a special

return appearance. He was hand picked by Christ to be his first representative to the Gentile world.

Nevertheless, he was quite human. He had his fears. He got rattled while in Corinth after he had been through a series of riots in Macedonia where he planted a group of churches. We have seen in this study how he actually missed a ministry opportunity in Troas because he was so stressed out. We know that he and Barnabus had a falling out. You've got to be pretty hard headed to be unable to get along with Barnabus. He was known as the "Son of Encouragement" because he was such an uplifting and positive guy. This is affirmed by the fact that near the end of his life Paul would essentially admit that he was wrong in their conflict.

Yes, Paul was very human, but he was nevertheless an impressive character. Perhaps it is his very humanness that makes him a good role model for us. What Paul wrote in Romans 5:3-4 is remarkable. After saying we rejoice in hope he wrote, "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope."

We rejoice in our sufferings? Bill Cosby used to do a comic bit about the Lone Ranger and Tonto. He imagined a scene in which the Lone Ranger would say, "We're surrounded. There are Indians closing in from every side of us. What are we going to do, Tonto?" And Tonto replies, "What do you mean 'we' white man?" When I read Paul's statement that we rejoice in our sufferings I feel like saying, "what do you mean 'we' white man?" I don't rejoice in my sufferings. I just want them to stop. I want them over yesterday, if not sooner. If I'm rejoicing in something I'm not saying "Please make this stop now!" When I rejoice in something I want it to keep going. That's not true of suffering for me.

Actually what Paul said in those verses is a good description of what it means to be antifragile. When suffering occurred Paul didn't have a pity party. He didn't suck his thumb or curl up in a fetal position. He didn't start wailing that prayer does no good and doubting that God can be trusted. He rejoiced. He did so because in his suffering he was getting better, stronger. He was learning perseverance and his character was growing. Even hope was growing. That is what it means to be an antifragile person.

So the question is, how was Paul able to be like that? Much of what we have said over the past couple of months he knew and applied and that is how he was antifragile. But in this passage Paul describes his suffering. As we look at it we will see some more elements of his antifragile character, elements we can have too.

In the context Paul was answering both the boasts and the criticisms of some opponents. They claimed that they were servants of Christ because they talked about Jesus. So Paul answered in verse 23, “Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this). I am more.” In other words, those guys are no more servants of Christ than I’m a quarterback in the NFL. In fact, I’m closer to being an NFL quarterback than they are to being servants of Christ. Paul asserted that he was the one who actually was a servant of Christ.

That little statement is easy to overlook. But Paul is about to list all the suffering that happened to him, and it is an impressive list. It all happened to him specifically because he was a servant of Christ. In fact, if you zoom out and get the bigger picture on Google Maps, you will learn that this was Paul’s main goal in life. The thing he wanted to accomplish was to be a servant of Christ. That was his identity, the way he defined himself. What he aimed at doing in his life was whatever Christ called him to do. Anything else was a rabbit trail that was of no interest to him.

At the beginning of Romans, Philippians and Titus Paul introduced himself as a “servant of Christ Jesus.” In 1 Corinthians 4:1 he wrote, “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ.” He refers to himself as a servant of Christ or of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 3:5, Galatians 1:10, Ephesians 3:7 and Colossians 1:23 and 25.

We are familiar with the idea of a servant, but usually have little or no personal experience with it, for we generally are not servants nor do we have them. But there are people in our lives who operate sort of like servants to some extent. What pops into my mind is servers at restaurants. They used to be called waiters or waitresses but our politically correct culture has determined those to be sexist terms. So the powers that be decided they needed to come up with some gender neutral title for that job. So they are now known as servers.

What is the job of a server? I actually like the older term “waiter.” Their job is to wait. To stand by and wait for you to have some need then to serve you by meeting that need. Laurie and I had some encounters with “waiters” on our honeymoon. Our first fight as a married couple started because we were the waiters. We waited forever for a waiter to actually serve us. The long delay waiting for service led to a disagreement between us because one of us didn’t want to wait any longer. The other extreme was on the last night of our honeymoon. We went to a nice restaurant for dinner. It was a very large restaurant with lots of staff, but we were

there a little early so there were only 5 guests in the place, counting us. I have this memory of all these people on their wait staff standing near our table, all poised to meet any need we might have. That's what waiters, servers do, right?

Imagine what it would be like if you went to a restaurant and you ordered a filet mignon and the server said, "You need to lose some weight so I'm not going to give you the filet. Instead I'll bring you some chicken." How would you feel about that? Would you consider that good service? Obviously you would not. A server, a servant is to do whatever the master says to do. If he is to be a good servant he is to do it with enthusiasm to the best of his ability. One time our family was at a restaurant that had really good burgers and a reputation for terrific milkshakes. We ordered our food and Toby ordered a shake. The waiter later brought the food and said he would come back with the shake. Then he disappeared. He was gone for a long time. We decided he had just forgotten about the shake and determined to make sure he didn't put it on our bill since we never got it. But when we were just finishing our food he finally showed up again, holding the shake. He said, "I'm sorry for the delay. We were out of milk so I went to the store to buy milk so we could make the shake. Do you still want it?" Now that's serving.

Paul's view of himself was that his whole existence was about serving Christ, about waiting on him, receiving his instruction and doing it, no matter what it was. He was given a direct command by Jesus Christ to carry the news of the gospel of grace to Gentiles. He made it the goal of his life to do that. He literally gave everything that he had to accomplish that. All he wanted to do in life was to serve Christ, to do as he had commanded him with enthusiasm, diligence and faithfulness. That became the all-consuming passion and goal of his life.

In Philippians 1:20 while in prison waiting to find out whether he would be freed or executed Paul wrote, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." He didn't really care whether he lived or died, all he cared about was that Christ would be exalted.

Laurie and I had an interesting conversation with our wonderful son-in-law Michael recently. As you all know he has been in Afghanistan most of this year. It has been an exceedingly frustrating experience. It could have been much worse since initially he was slated to have a really risky mission. That mission was abandoned and as a result he has been in a relatively safe situation there. Unfortunately because the mission for which he was trained was scrubbed he was sent over there with no real mission. They have basically made up a task for him

and assigned him to a team that was doing a job no one wanted or needed done. It was a totally pointless exercise. The result is he has had to live apart from his new bride in a miserable, desolate place where temperatures this summer reached 127 degrees for no discernible purpose at all. So there he is, going through the motions but for no purpose whatsoever. How enthusiastic do you think he has been about his life? He and his whole team have been struggling to do their best but this has been a soul-deadening. It has been a maddening experience in which each day is an ordeal as he waits for it to be over. What has made it so? There is no real meaningful mission, no purpose.

That's a good analogy for life. If it has no real purpose, no meaning, we will end up going through the motions, but the whole thing will be a soul deadening, pointless exercise. One of the things that made Paul an antifragile Christian hero who literally changed the world was that he had a laser like focus on the purpose of his life. He had a mission. He was a servant of Jesus Christ. That defined him. He didn't care about making money, about winning applause, about whether someone liked him or not, about being comfortable, about getting some real power in this world, or even about changing his culture. Those were dead end rabbit trails. He cared about one thing. Jesus told him to tell people about the gospel of grace through Jesus Christ, specifically Gentile people, and that was what he did with everything that was within him. That enflamed his heart, ruled his thoughts, and determined the choices he made every day.

PAUL MADE THE SACRIFICE

In Colossians 1:28-29 Paul wrote of Christ, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me." The Greek word that is translated "struggling" here was *agonizomai*. He agonized to tell people about Jesus and help them grow up in him. If you don't believe that just look at what he went through.

Five times he was beaten by his countrymen, given 39 lashes. This was a flogging so horrific and brutal that there were provisions in Jewish law for what should happen if the victim died from it. He went through that five times. Sheesh, I get nervous and a little squeamish having my teeth cleaned at the dentist. Paul was beaten 5 separate times by the time he wrote this letter. Unfortunately that wasn't at the end of his life so we can surmise there were more incidents of that kind.

Before Laurie and I got married she had to have surgery to remove bunions from her feet. I thought it curious that they did both feet at the same time, which made

her recovery more difficult. Why not do one at a time so that she could get around a little better? There was a reason. It was because the surgery was so painful after they had done one they knew she would refuse to do the other. Can't you imagine Paul undergoing that horrific beating and saying, "Note to self: whatever you do, make sure you never have to experience that again." It was that bad, yet Paul refused to be deterred from serving Christ, even if it meant he had to undergo those beatings over and over. Added to that were 3 more episodes of beatings at the hands of Roman authorities. Do you know of anyone other than a really bad boxer who has been beaten up 8 times? And the beatings Paul received were worse than losing a boxing match.

A mob in the town of Lystra in what is now Turkey stoned him and left him for dead. He was unconscious at the end of that encounter and barely breathing. He had among many other injuries at the very least a severe concussion, if not a fractured skull. Three times he was shipwrecked and on one of those occasions he was in the water for nearly 24 hours.

We had a neighbor named Steve who loved to buy toys. He had to have a fast car (which, of course, he totaled in an accident). He had many other toys, but among them was a wave runner. He had to get the most powerful one he could. So one day he took it up to the harbor in Oceanside, put it in the water and went for a spin. He took it out into the ocean and went several miles off shore away from other boats where he could really open it up. He gave it the gas and went flying along the swells at full speed. He was having a blast as he sped across the water slamming into the swells. It was great fun right up to the time he hit one swell so hard it dislodged a plug and allowed water into the machine. The craft was swamped and the engine died. It didn't sink completely. It settled down in the water until it was nearly submerged. It just hung there with just the top barely above the surface, totally dead.

Good old Steve had a problem. He was far from other boats. He was several miles off shore, far enough that he couldn't swim all the way. Plus even if he did it would mean abandoning his \$15,000 watercraft and losing it for good. Fortunately he had his life vest on so he wasn't going to drown, but what would he do? He stayed with the machine, hoping someone would come by. He had no way of signaling or radioing the coast guard, so he just waited. He just floated there in the water for hour after hour hoping that no sharks would show up. But then the sun began heading for the horizon, meaning he had a new problem. He was getting seriously cold. As you know, the water here is never really warm. That day it was near 70 degrees, but that's still 30 degrees below body temperature, which means

the heat was slowly dissipating from his body and his core temperature was dropping. If it got dark and grew colder he stood an excellent chance of dying of hypothermia. Poor Steve told me those were some of the most frightening hours of his life. In the end he was fortunate. Just before the sun went down a fishing boat happened on him and rescued him.

Paul survived a night and a day in the water. The temperature in the Mediterranean can be near 80, but if you're in that long enough hypothermia is going to be a big issue. And that was only one of the shipwrecks he suffered. Some friends of ours were telling us not long ago of a flight they were on that was to land in Hong Kong, but they had to fly through a typhoon. They said the turbulence was awesome and terrifying, but it hit its peak when the plane pitched over and headed straight down. It seemed like the pilots had lost control and they were going to crash. Obviously, since they were telling the story they survived. My friends said it was very difficult to get on a plane again after that flight. After a couple of shipwrecks how could Paul have had the nerve to get back on a ship?

He was able to keep doing it because nothing could deter him from spreading the good news of Jesus. He experienced danger from his countrymen and from Gentiles, meaning he knew people in both groups plotted to kill him. He labored, toiled, suffered hunger, cold, bandits on the roads, wild animals, you name it. On top of all that he dealt continually with the emotional stress of relational problems and doctrinal problems in the churches.

Paul's suffering actually did not come as a surprise to him. There is a little verse in Acts 9 that is easy to miss but has an important message. Paul, then mostly called Saul, had been the chief inquisitor of Christians. He led the terror campaign aimed at stomping out all Christians. On his way to the Syrian town of Damascus where the reports said this pernicious superstition had spread, Saul had the shock of his life. The Jesus he believed to be a dead heretic, confronted him, risen from the dead. He was struck blind. God tapped a Christian named Ananias and gave him the unenviable task of sharing the gospel with Saul, the Christian hater. Ananias didn't think that was a very good idea. But in verses 13-14 God said to him, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Did you catch what God said? God would show him what he would suffer. In other words, Paul went into his ministry with his eyes open. He knew what was coming. Did he know how many beatings and shipwrecks he was going to experience? I

don't know. We are not told how much detail God revealed to Paul. But my guess, and it is only that, is that Paul knew that if he took on this ministry some of his fellow Jews would hate him and try to stop him. He knew he would face violence and abuse, he would spend time in jail, he would face riots, opposition, maybe even shipwreck and other serious hardships in his travels.

At some point after his conversion Paul faced a choice. It was the choice between obedience to God that came with some serious and frightening consequences, and disobedience that seemed to offer safety. It doesn't appear that he deliberated very long over that choice. Almost immediately he plunged into the task God had given him, and in short order was faced with a conspiracy to kill him in Damascus.

In Luke 14:27 Jesus issued a stark challenge when he said, "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Then he gave an illustration in verses 28-30. "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'" He gave another illustration of the same idea then concluded in verse 33, "In the same way any of you who does not give up everything cannot be my disciple."

We bought our house back in 1990. I have a memory that sticks out from not long after that. I would drive home on La Costa Avenue next to the Batiquitos Lagoon. I would look across and on the hill on the north side of the lagoon I could see a concrete structure. It was one wing of what was going to be a hotel. It was just a shell of bare concrete. That wing of that place sat there unfinished for years. Someone had bought that land, made plans for a hotel, obtained the permits, graded the land, and started construction. Then the economy went bad and they ran out of money. There it sat. Someone didn't accurately count the cost. Of course someone else eventually took over that property and it is now the Park Hyatt Aviara.

God gave Paul the opportunity to count the cost of following Jesus. He did it and said, "I'm all in." He not only knew what his mission in life was, he knew what it would cost him and he decided that he was not just willing but eager to pay the price. So when the time came he was ready for what happened and he didn't blink.

If we're going to be antifragile we will not just need to have a clear picture of our mission but we will need to consider the cost. We have to ask what we're willing to pay to accomplish the mission.

IMPLICATIONS

As we consider the relevance of this passage for us I believe there are two questions we need to ask ourselves and one truth we absolutely must remember.

WHAT IS YOUR MISSION?

Paul said that he agonized over his mission. He gave everything he had to accomplish it. He knew what he was supposed to do on this planet. He had been given direct marching orders by Christ himself. So he never lost sight of what he was to do.

Even better than Paul, the Lord Jesus is our ultimate model. He had that same focus on what he was here to do. In John 6 Jesus fed a massive crowd with a tiny bit of food. They were thrilled. In verse 14 they were saying to each other, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” But what they wanted was a king who would give them food they wouldn’t have to work for. Verse 15 says, “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” He wasn’t going to be sidetracked from his mission. Being king was not it.

In Luke 19:10 Jesus said of himself, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” In Mark 10:45 he said, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus came here to die for the human race and he refused to be sidetracked. Satan tried in the wilderness, but Jesus was clear on his mission and never wavered for a minute.

What is your life about? In his book, *Spirit Warrior* (p. 63), Stuart Weber wrote, “Men fight hardest and longest for a cause that flows out of a just and righteous warrior soul... The heart of a warrior is a muscular soul, a center of conviction, that beats for a large and noble cause. A transcendent cause. We’re talking about the kind of guy who knows he’s one small part of something much bigger and is willing to invest himself in it, even to the point of death.”

In his book, *Season of Life*, Pulitzer Prize winner Jeffrey Marx wrote about his boyhood hero, Joe Ehrmann, former NFL player. Joe is now a pastor and a football coach. But he is an unusual coach, for he sees his job is not to win football games but to teach boys to be men. A key component of that, he says, is giving one’s life in the service of a cause that is bigger than self. He said he does a lot of funerals. He said, “There’s nothing sadder than doing a funeral when you have to manufacture something to say about the impact the person had... I’d like to be

thinking that I've accomplished something during my time here. You know, I didn't die with the most toys. I didn't die with the most money. But I left something behind me. I had a cause."

Paul had that. In Acts 20 he was on his way to Jerusalem where he had been warned that people were going to try to kill him. While addressing the leaders of the church at Ephesus for the last time he said in verse 24, "I consider my life worth nothing to me if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

Do you know what your task is? I had a sense in my teen years that I wanted a mission, I wanted my life to count for some grand thing. At first I thought it was to be involved in the exploration of space. But I found a bigger and more important cause. It was to serve Jesus and impact lives for him. It took a while before I found what form that would take. It is not about a job. It is about helping people be amazed at the majesty of God and helping them experience his grace brought to us through Jesus Christ. I want people to discover, know, and feel his grace because it transforms us from the inside out. That is a task I can pursue until the day I die no matter what my job. Do you know what your mission is?

WHAT PRICE WILL YOU PAY?

Jesus knew the price he would pay to fulfill his task of rescuing us was to live in this dark and broken world, to experience the brunt of its fallenness, to be opposed, rejected and killed. He was willing to pay that price. Paul was given a picture of what he would have to suffer to finish the task that God had given him. He was willing to pay that price.

In his book, *Authentic Faith*, Gary Thomas wrote, "Christianity was birthed in sacrifice—Jesus faced a torturous death, even crying out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' *And he is the model for how life is to be lived.* Thomas goes on to say, "What have you given to God in recent days that cost you something...If you are dissatisfied with your faith or disillusioned with your God, try this: Instead of accusing or blaming god, ask yourself what you've been holding back."

An article February this year in *Esquire* magazine titled "Theater of Pain" discussed injuries in the NFL. In 2011 the roughly 2000 players in the league suffered 4,500 injuries, a rate of 225%. Torn ACL's, ruptured Achilles tendons, torn muscles, high ankle sprains, concussions, pulled hamstrings, various contusions and herniations made the list. One player who wants to remain

anonymous says, “My left knee has been aching this entire week. I don’t know why. I didn’t get hit directly on it... When I start moving around the muscles and tendons in my leg feel so stressed... I feel they might rupture. My lower back is so sore, painful and stiff; my right shoulder has lost some mobility for some reason. My right ankle is constantly being twisted; my left feels very weak... I don’t sleep much, I feel super stressed and on game day I take tons of drugs.” Green Bay center Jeff Saturday says of guys in the league, “They see guys writhing in pain. They see guys crying, they hear guys screaming. They see guys knocked out, guys go limp as a suit sliding from a hanger, guys stay horribly still, guys strapped to the board—and that’s what every player fears. The board. Getting strapped to the board.”

Those guys count the cost. They know what they’re in for. Yet not only do they do it, they have to turn people away! My own son would sign up in an instant if offered the chance to play. Thousands would do the same. All that to play a game. What price are you willing to pay to accomplish your mission, whatever it may be?

If it is to serve Christ and bring his grace to others, some of that price is going to happen at the interpersonal level. It will mean with your spouse, your children, with your neighbors and co-workers, with the difficult people that we all have in our lives you will have to say no to yourself. Instead of serving self you will have to ask how you can bring grace to them, how you can bless them.

SACRIFICING FOR THE MISSION IS THE HD LIFE

This all sounds rather grim and difficult, all this talk of mission, cost, sacrifice. But there is a seemingly paradoxical truth that Jesus told us that is hard to believe, hard to live by, but absolutely true. In Matthew 16:25-26 he said, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?” When Toby first was home from college he lived at home for a while. At the time he was doing IT work while pursuing football coaching and was living at home. So he had quite a bit of money. He insisted that we had to upgrade our television. He bought a flat panel HD television that we put in our living room. Our television watching was transformed. It was a whole new way of seeing things, a much better way. It is so much better than when I see something in non-HD I can barely watch it and I find it annoying. HD is so sharp, so vivid, so clear. Jesus said there’s an HD life available to us. We think if we can just order life so that it and all the people in it serve us, if we can just get what we want, then it will be HD. Jesus said the high definition life comes from giving up yourself to serve his mission.

His point is that when we pursue our selfish desires, when we live for self, try to find life by gaining the whole world, we forfeit our soul. We lose life. It is only when we give up life, when we focus on the mission and sacrifice totally for the mission that we find life. It is to the degree that we sacrifice for the mission that we will experience the peace, the joy, the fulfillment, the love and hope that God wants our lives to have.

I will quote Gary Thomas in *Authentic Faith* again. He wrote (p. 210), “We pay a price when we become leisure oriented, self serving, pleasure seeking people. **Something within us dies.**” Life turns into this soul deadening experience where no matter what we get it may be nice, feel good for a bit, but ends up futile, it’s not enough. This is the hardest thing for us to believe, but life is found in giving up self. Over decades of ministry I have seen time and time again people destroying their marriages, their families, their lives because they are desperately trying to get what they think they need. Sadly the one thing they resist most is the one thing that can save them. Stop serving self and live for Christ.

To the extent that we live out our purpose each day we will be more antifragile. We will experience the deep joy of life. Our problem is that get a grasp of that idea when we are sitting in a church service, but in the heat of battle in the daily grind of life it is easy to lose it. A few years ago Laurie and I were walking down a street in Hawaii in the middle of a weekday. It was normal business hours. I was surprised to see a shop that was closed. It was a shop that depended on foot traffic so it was odd to see it closed at that time, especially since its posted business hours indicated it should be open. But there was a sign on the closed door that read “open almost daily.” We tend to approach our “purpose” that way, pursuing it some of the time. We need to remember that when we only pursue our purpose “almost daily” we hurt ourselves. God is not damaged when we decide to live for other ends. His kingdom is not hampered by our selfish pursuits. The person who is hurt when I choose to sacrifice the real purpose of my life for some selfish goal is me. The measure of our commitment and willingness to sacrifice for God’s purpose will also be the measure of our joy and fulfillment. So let’s be clear on what our mission is and let’s pursue it relentlessly and passionately so we can experience life in high definition.