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1 Timothy 4:6-16

Tenth Message

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THE LOST SECRET OF SPIRITUAL VITALITY

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

On February 11, 1986 the nation of Israel waited in breathless anticipation for the arrival of a hero from the Soviet Union. Natan Sharansky was a dissident who worked for the *Aliyah*, the movement that was pressuring the Soviet government to allow Russian Jews to emigrate to Israel. Sharansky had openly denounced the KGB's persecution of Soviet Jews in the foreign press, and in 1973 he had applied for an exit visa. He had renounced his Soviet citizenship and expressed his desire to leave Israel. Two years later, he married Avital. The day after their wedding, he was abducted by the KGB in Moscow and taken to Lefortovo Prison. He was tried for espionage and treason and sentenced to thirteen years in the Gulag. While he was in prison, his wife Avital emigrated to Israel. There she worked desperately for his release. Even President Reagan became involved. Now, after eleven agonizing years, he was finally free. His people were waiting breathlessly for his arrival in Tel Aviv. His release was kept secret even to Sharansky himself, as four KGB men whisked him away to the airport and they took off in an airplane. He describes the historic moment in his book *Fear No Evil*:

More than two hours had passed and we were still flying west. We must be abroad, I decided.

"What's going on?" I demanded again.

The boss appeared from behind a curtain. In a solemn voice he announced, "Sharansky, Anatoly Borisovich. I am authorized to declare to you that by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, for conduct unworthy of a Soviet citizen, you have been stripped of Soviet citizenship and as an American spy you are being expelled from the Soviet Union."

It was over.

I had waited years from this moment, and now there was no longer any need to deceive myself. I stood and announced, in an equally solemn voice, "I want to make a written statement. Give me a piece of paper."

"You are not permitted to make written statements," he said in a typical guard's tone. I broke into a nervous laughter. In that case I shall say it orally. First, I am pleased that thirteen years after I asked to be deprived of Soviet citizenship, my wish has finally been granted.¹

Sharansky had not only survived imprisonment, he had emerged victorious over the KGB. With no political clout, having been subjected to endless days of brutal interrogation, solitary confinement, sickness, and starvation, he emerged vigorous and free. During his imprisonment—in fact, on the forty-fifth day of a hunger strike he had embarked upon—the Soviet leader Brezhnev died. It was his heart, not Sharansky's, that had failed to hold up. Shortly afterwards, Brezhnev's successor, Andropov, died. Four years after Sharansky's release, the whole Soviet state and the dreaded KGB collapsed. Meanwhile, this Jewish dissident and prisoner of conscience was enjoying his new-found freedom with his wife in Jerusalem.

How did this man survive years of brutality and deprivation in prison? The day before he his arrest, his wife gave him a copy of the Hebrew Book of Psalms. Though Sharansky "grew up completely unaware of the religion, language, culture, and history of my people,"² being isolated

in prison, with just the Psalms to feed upon, he discovered a spiritual strength to survive the dark days of confinement. Reflecting on the spiritual strength he received from David's Psalms, in Jerusalem he would later write:

In a totalitarian regime, it is essential for an individual to understand his own history and to be connected with his own values. That is why the turning toward history and toward our national roots among my own people became such a liberating process for me and many of my friends. A spiritually liberated person, standing on the firm ground of moral principle, and understanding what he is fighting for, has an inexhaustible reserve of strength to resist totalitarianism. And therein lies the essence of the struggle.³

This is our theme today as we resume our studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy. Paul, you remember, was writing to his young son in the faith in Ephesus, instructing him on how to restore a church when all the forces around, like a looming KGB, were bent on destroying his work. Timothy, as leader of this small band of Christians, was about as much in the minority in Ephesus as Natan Sharansky was in the Soviet Union. The economy of Ephesus was based on the licentious cult of Artemis. The temple that dominated the skyline of the city had become the seventh wonder of the ancient world. Tourists from all over the known world poured into Ephesus, making it the leading banking center in Asia Minor. Thus the temple brought together the destructive and intimidating forces of idolatry, sexual licentiousness, and materialism – and now these forces were undermining the church in Ephesus.

How then do we exert influence for God's rule on earth when we live in such an intimidating and evil environment? Paul's answer is simple, yet profound. The key is staying focused on right priorities. He first instructs Timothy in the priorities for his personal life (vss. 6-12), and follows with the priorities for his ministry (vss. 13-16).

I. Training for Personal Life (1 Tim 4:6-12)

A. A healthy diet (4:6-7)

If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather train yourself to be godly. (1 Tim 4:6-7 TNIV)

Many mistakenly think that if they could only be set aside for ministry on a full time basis, they would automatically live in God's presence and become godly and influential. But it doesn't work that way. Becoming a spiritual leader who commands the influence and respect of others demands rigorous effort and years of faithful discipline similar to that of an Olympic athlete. It comes as a shock for many people that the spiritual work of prayer, preaching, evangelism, and counseling isn't something that just flows through them as they "let go" and trust God. Paul says that it takes the strenuous effort and dogged determination of a farmer to turn a field of rubble into a lush vineyard.

Of first importance is one's diet. Paul tells Timothy to cut out the fat and avoid heretical junk food that has been so processed that most

of the natural and vital nutrients have been leeched away. Though it is artificially sweet to the taste, it has no lasting benefit. Over time it clogs our arteries and dulls our spiritual vitality. For Timothy, this meant having nothing to do with controversial fables (this is probably referring to Jewish apocalyptic literature written during the intertestamental period), which did not elicit faith or spiritual health. Instead, he is to be “constantly nourished” with a steady diet of the Scriptures until they are inbred.

Natan Sharansky survived prison by drawing his daily water supply from the deep wells of David’s musings in the Book of Psalms. His constant source of nourishment, it became the tool by which he broke out of prison to his real life, and one that prevented the KGB from imposing their world on him. Sensing its divine power, they confiscated the book. In response, Sharansky went on a hunger strike to get it back. During this intense struggle that lasted for a year, he spent 186 days in a punishment cell. He emerged a mere skeleton of a man, weighing only 35 kg (77 lbs). But in the end, Sharansky won and the KGB returned the book. After receiving it back, he wrote, “I took my Psalm book and for days on end, with photographs of my dear ones in front of me, I recited all one hundred and fifty of King David’s Psalms, syllable by syllable.”⁴

Just as the dry, blinding heat of the desert intensifies our thirst, so times of suffering or persecution intensify our thirst for God’s word for daily survival. As David wrote in Psalm 63 when he was in the Desert of Judah:

**You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.” (Psa 63:1)**

In times of ease, however, it is easy for our longings to wane and our resolve to weaken. Sustaining a life of reading and reflection in God’s word, and solid books that enrich the soul, is a most difficult priority to maintain, especially when there are dozens of other tasks clamoring for our attention. As Tom Wright observes, most people view reading as relaxation, not work:

Yet reading is a form of renunciation, almost a living embodiment of the call to **faith** over against works; you must renounce your strenuous effort to justify your existence by the busy-busy lifestyle that pastors regularly fall into...A pastor with a ready, receptive mind, open to lifelong learning, will be a gift that keeps on giving to those in her or his care.⁵

To maintain a steady diet of reading, I have found it an absolute necessity to place myself under a yoke of daily Bible reading and a weekly study group. For daily readings, I have found that I must establish a set time when I am at my level best (which is first thing in the morning, with some strong coffee). There are also many lectionaries to help us with daily Bible readings throughout the year (you will even find two on our web site). Recently, I have discovered that the “St. James Daily Devotional Guide for the Christian Year” serves me well. It has a good cross-section of readings from both the Old and New Testaments, a special focus on the Book of Psalms for prayer, and a sensitivity to the various seasons of the liturgical year.

The first priority then is to watch your diet. That means cutting out all the junk food your soul craves, and “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Pet 2:2). The next requirement for a healthy soul is exercise.

B. Regular and rigorous exercise (4:7b-10)

Rather train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for

both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe. (4:7b-10)

Godliness requires more than reading and reflection; it demands regular and rigorous exercise. But, as Tom Wright suggests, this is not something most of us expect or want to hear:

We expect and want to be told that spirituality is simply the sense I have of being in God’s presence, being surrounded with his love, sensing a transcendent dimension in the affairs of everyday life. It comes as a shock to be told that it’s something you have to work at – and something, moreover, which will take the same kind of hard work as going into training for athletics.⁶

The verb *gumnazo*, “train,” is where we get our word “gymnasium.” Few things thrill us like watching the sheer physical beauty of Olympic athletes in action. When I was a gymnast, I placed my life in the hands of my coaches and submitted to their grueling workout schedules. It wasn’t particularly fun, but without the painful discipline of training there would have been no beauty to behold when the time came to compete. Yet, Paul describes this as a fading glory; it doesn’t hold any promise for the age to come. What does it matter if your skin is without blemish or your muscles still have visible tone when they lay you in your coffin? Godliness, on the other hand, transcends bodily exercise. It not only ushers in life and opens doors of opportunity in the present age, it also anticipates and yields future blessings in the age to come.

Paul places his full, apostolic authority behind this statement, calling it a “trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance.” Therefore, because of its eternal promise, we should apply all the more effort to it. This is something for which we “labor and strive,” something for which we concentrate all our energies (Col 1:29), and intensify our struggles (1 Thess 2:2). “Striving also calls for denial (1 Cor 9:25), the setting aside of provisional ends (1 Cor 9:27)...This is not asceticism but athletic discipline (2 Tim 4:5). It is not contempt for the world but a right ordering of priorities.”⁷

When Sharansky was a student at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, he wrote a thesis entitled “Simulating the Decision-Making Process in Conflict Situations Based on the Chess End-game.” Ethical decisions in life should be made with the “end-game” in view. When Sharansky’s convictions landed him in a Soviet prison, he determined to employ the same strategy in facing the KGB as he had applied in chess. First, he wrote out his goals; then he would study the enemy, expose his tactics, and by all means, never compromise. This meant fortifying his resolve to refuse any creature comforts, such as tea, or more frequent family visits, which the KGB would offer in hopes of compromising his resolve. In this manner he predetermined his every move and the countermoves by the KGB right to very end of the “game,” which was death. One year before his captivity ended, Sharansky refused a medical release from prison. Instead, he demanded that they release him because his imprisonment was unjust. They refused, so he went back to his cell for one more year.

After I read this, I had to ask myself, do I give this kind of effort to loving my family, forgiving my enemies, and serving my co-workers? Do I predetermine my choices and suffer this way in order to be godly? Natan Shanarsky did. And what is even more amazing is that his silent, secret resolve to not compromise was heard around the world. While Sharansky was writing his book, the American writer, Cynthia Ozick, captured the necessity of “focus” in order to have a “voice” in the image of the *shofar*. Her insight ignited Sharansky’s imagination: “The *shofar*, the ram’s horn that is sounded in the synagogue on the High Holidays, is narrow at one end and wide a the other. Nothing happens if you blow

into the wide end. But if you blow into the narrow end, the call of the *shofar* rings loud and true.”⁸

Such is the impact we can have when we focus all our energies on godliness. Our striving is not in vain, “because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.”

C. Silence your foes by example (4:11-12)

Command and teach these things. Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. (4:11-12)

Paul now turns his attention to a troubling issue that Timothy faced as a leader. Timothy, likely in his early thirties, had been a cast in a role well beyond his years, which probably made him the object of ridicule from those who felt they had been passed over, or resentment from older people in the congregation. As John Stott remarks, this is a perennial conflict: “Older people have always found it difficult to accept young people as responsible adults in their own right, let alone as leaders. And young people are understandably irritated when their elders keep reminding them of their immaturity and inexperience, and treat them with contempt.”⁹

When faced with rejection, it is tempting for leaders to feel threatened and react by becoming overbearing or tyrannical in their control. But Paul insists that leaders should never lead by force or coercion, but by example. Everything in Timothy's life, from his speech to his behavior, from his trust in Christ to his purity in relationships, should be a model for all to see. It is pre-eminently the love we extend to others, not our age or ability to control, that lends authority to our lives.

From Timothy's personal life, Paul now turns to the priorities in his ministry.

II. Training for Ministry (1 Tim 4:13-15)

A. Dispense a healthy diet (4:13)

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. (4:13)

If the secret to Timothy's spiritual vitality is being constantly nourished on God's word, it is the same for his ministry. Timothy's primary task is to lead people to Life's source—the Word of God. Like the good shepherd, “who leads me beside quiet waters and restores my soul,” so Timothy is to ensure that whenever God's people gather, God's word is read so that all may hear, explained so that all will understand, and applied so that God may be glorified in all things. These readings included not just the Old Testament Scriptures, which were normally read in synagogue worship, but also the letters of the apostles, which they directed the churches to read (1 Thess 5:27; Col 4:16; Rev 1:3). “Already by about the middle of the second century these readings were part of the accepted liturgy. Justin Martyr in his First Apology wrote: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has finished, the president speaks, instructing and exhorting the people to imitate these good things.”¹⁰

This, says Paul, is the main thing. By staying fixed on the Scriptures, Timothy, though young, would also silence any resistance to his leadership by demonstrating that he was not imposing his authority on others, but was allowing Christ to exercise his Lordship through the authority of his word.

The ancients valued the Scriptures so highly that in the fourth century, every monk was expected to memorize all 150 Psalms. I often wonder what has happened to our thinking in this highly technical modern age. Beginning in preschool, we yoke our children to the most rigorous

academic training in the hope they might get into college. But when it comes to the Scriptures, we demand little of them. Since when did we think these texts were beyond their reach? A greater tragedy is that this trend continues through adulthood. What makes us think that we have to extract sacred texts from their historical and canonical contexts and process them with psychological additives until all mystery is removed? And why must we package them for mass marketing in banal “how-to” principles, to be consumed in bite-size pieces, like Chicken McNuggets? Do we think this will sustain God's people when they are diagnosed with cancer, when a spouse walks out, when they are unemployed, or when a son or daughter suffers from depression? What are we thinking? The sad result of all this is that most Christians in the Western world are Biblically illiterate, their lives anemic.

So Paul tells Timothy to focus on the word of God. And second, he is to be diligent to exercise his spiritual gift.

B. Focused exercise of your gift (4:14)

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. (4:14-15)

Paul is hearkening back to Timothy's ordination, when there were “prophecies” made about him, through which he received his spiritual gift and call to ministry. At that time the elders laid hands on him to give public confirmation of God's call and gifting. It is very important that both the inward call and public recognition of the call go together. This protects the body from deluded individuals who seek to serve not the flock but themselves. It also serves as an anchor of stability for authentic leaders in treacherous times who might doubt their call. This was true for Timothy, as Paul reminds him to “fan the flame” of his gift. Once you discover your spiritual gift you should never need permission to use it, nor should you ever neglect it. Consider what would happen to your physical health if your heart suddenly decided that the pressure was too great and it wanted to quit. You wouldn't last very long. In like manner, the souls of God's people will not be able to thrive very long without a steady supply of God's word.

Paul goes on to speak of the need for whole-hearted diligence in these matters so that Timothy's progress, both in his personal character and his teaching ministry, are clearly evident to all.

C. Lead by example (4:15)

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. (4:15)

Leaders need not present perfection, for that would lead to hypocrisy, but their lives should not be stagnant. Rather, they should demonstrate dynamic growth in all aspects of the Christian life, always learning new things, exploring new vistas, probing their sin more deeply, and discovering new ways to love.

In conclusion, Paul reminds Timothy that if he is faithful to persevere, his life will be rewarding beyond measure.

III. Summary Command and Rewards in Ministry (1 Tim 4:16)

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (4:16)

Paul leaves Timothy with a strong exhortation summarizing his need to diligently guard his life and doctrine. Over thirty years in ministry, I have learned that churches can do much to guard and protect their leaders from moral failure and doctrinal error. Insisting that leadership be shared, having regular evaluations, appointing an elder to walk alongside a pastor, and requiring unanimous agreement on major issues have

all proven to be excellent safeguards over the years. But, as Paul exhorts Timothy, each of us must take ultimate responsibility for our own life. Yes, safeguards are helpful, but if you won't take responsibility for your own soul and ministry, no safeguard will protect you.

On the other hand, if Timothy will take Paul's words to heart, the benefits will reach far beyond his sphere. Not only will Timothy serve with an authentic life, but through years of perseverance he will also find a fruitful and rewarding ministry. "Salvation involves perseverance; and Timothy's task in Ephesus is to model and teach the gospel in such a fashion that it will lead the church to perseverance in faith and love and hence to final, eschatological salvation. Thus both paragraphs in this section conclude with the great concern of the gospel—people's salvation."¹¹

During his eleven years in a prison cell, Natan Sharansky never sought to be influential. Even if he had been seeking influence (which he wasn't) his prison cell would be a strange and futile platform from which to mount his campaign. But upon his release, the world flocked to him because they recognized that he was a man of integrity, a hero who refused to compromise his ideals of liberty and justice. When his plane arrived at the airport in Jerusalem, he spoke by telephone to President Reagan. Then he was carried on the shoulders of an excited crowd milling in front of the Western Wall. "Holding our Psalm book in my hand, I kissed the wall and said, 'Baruch matir asirim.' Blessed is He who liberates the imprisoned."¹²

That was 1986. Now that he is in the free world, Sharansky finds it much more difficult to retain such a focus. He writes,

In freedom, I am lost in a myriad of choices...In the punishment cell, life was much simpler. Every day brought only one choice: good or evil, white or black, saying yes or no to the KGB. Moreover, I had all the time I needed to think about these choices, to concentrate on the most fundamental problems of existence, to test myself in fear, in hope, in belief, in love. And now, lost in thousands of mundane choices, I suddenly realize that there's no time to reflect on the bigger questions. How to enjoy the vivid colors of freedom without losing the existential depth I felt in prison? How to absorb the many sounds of freedom without allowing them to jam the stirring call of the shofar that I heard so clearly in the punishment cell? And, most important, how, in all these thousands of meetings, handshakes, interviews, and speeches, to retain that unique feeling of the interconnection of human souls which I discovered in the Gulag? These are the questions I must answer in my new life, which is only beginning.¹³

Can you answer these questions in your new life?

1. Which end of the *shofar* am I holding?
2. Do I *adequately feed* on God's word to nourish my soul?
3. What simple steps can I implement today to make *God's word a priority in my life*?
4. Do I *vigorously train* myself to pursue godliness?
5. What simple steps can I implement today to "get into training"?
6. Do I *focus* my ministry on my spiritual gift, or am I distracted by secondary concerns?
7. Am I continuing to find *new ways to excel* in my ministry to others?

1 Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (trans. Stefani Hoffman; New York: Random House, 1988), 408-409.

2 Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, xi.

3 Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (1989), xiii.

4 Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, 352.

5 Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Pastoral Letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 52.

6 Wright, *Paul for Everyone, The Pastoral Letters*, 46.

7 E. Stauffer, "agwn," TDNT I: 134-40.

8 Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, xxii. Cynthia Ozick's exact quote was, "If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wider part, we will not be heard at all; for us America will have been in vain." Jules Chametzky et al., eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 856.

9 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 119.

10 Justin Martyr, *First Apology, Cambridge Patristic Texts* (trans. A. W. F. Blunt; Cambridge University Press, 1911), I.67, quoted by Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, 121.

11 Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIBCNT; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2005), 109.

12 Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, 416.

13 Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*, 423.

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