

# ***Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life***

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## **Bring It On**

In what ways is God's Word at work in you, developing you into His chosen person?

How are you resiliently pursuing your purpose despite opposition?

What does it mean to you that the world would rather die than permit you to save the godless?

**1 Thessalonians 2:13-16** – <sup>13</sup>We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers. <sup>14</sup>For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from our own compatriots as they did from the Jews, <sup>15</sup>who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone <sup>16</sup>by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

### **I) Do You Have the Right Stuff?**

Those of us convinced our lives are bound to a purpose confront two serious questions. The first is: are we fit for the purpose? Some of us have learned the painful lesson that we cannot do something just by wanting to. Talent, physical makeup, access to resources, these can all limit our fitness for a task. Contrary to popular cliches, we cannot be anything we set our minds to. Our Hope is not self-determination – it is divine-determination.

♦**Diamonds in the rough**: Great baseball scouts have a keen eye. They pick up nearly imperceptible details of players, their reactions, their mechanics, their instincts for the game. What separates the scouts from fans, though, is their ability to see past raw talent to the

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potential when that talent is honed by professional coaching. Rare is the player fit for the major leagues when they are found. Fitness requires development. As Jesus recruits followers for His team, He also seeks people who can be developed. When His apostles find such, they “give thanks” because of the openness to receive the message “not as a human word but what it really is, God’s word (1 Thes 2:13).” This open-hearted response gives way to development.

◆ **Coaching up:** Fans of some teams are driven mad by the inability to develop talented players. Promising players arrive, do not achieve their potential, and move on to thrive somewhere else. Evidence of an inadequate coaching staff. Our Hope is not found in a great pastor, Bible teacher, or any other human. It is assured because God’s Word is not passively received, it “is also at work in you believers (v13).” God designed His purpose, created us to fit it, and restores us to fitness for it. If we remain with the team, success is guaranteed.

## II) Talent Wars...

That’s an important *if*, the second serious question we face. Will we remain devoted to our purpose till the end? In a competitive environment, talent is fiercely fought over. Those being fought over have difficult decisions to make as they navigate their careers by weighing their values against the various offers. We, too, must daily make choices that ultimately reveal what we value most.

◆ **Moneyball:** Teams that find and develop talent are dangerous. They can upset the perennial favorites. The dominant teams oppress their rivals by offering whatever they can to lure away their good players. We face a similar situation. As Jesus develops those whose hearts are open to His Word, His church threatens to upturn the power structure of the world. Fulfilling our purpose requires resilience against being lured away by the world’s temptations. Success requires becoming “imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea,” because we will suffer “the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews (v14).” That resilience is based on what we value.

◆ **Honor the jersey:** Baseball players can pursue one of a few purposes. Team championships, personal greatness, wealth. Many an argument has been waged over the primacy and legitimacy of each. Christians have only one legitimate purpose: accepting God’s choice to be His adopted heir. Fulfilling that purpose results in “speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved (v16),” which is the “labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ

(1:3).” This seems like a harmless task. We might be tempted to think that means we are not going to face opposition. This would be a mistake leading to disaster. Unprepared, we are likely to abandon our values without thought when tempted by God’s enemies, who are crafty and want to deceive us. Our defense is the constant commitment to being His chosen one, knowing that means serving Him, and remembering He has enemies.

## III) Competitive Imbalance...

A team with the ability to find and develop the best players would never lose if other teams did not interfere. In baseball, fans want competitive balance and benefit from the movement of players. In life, we prefer stability and the assurance of Hope. Yet God has permitted His enemies to combat us. We are wise to take this seriously.

◆ **Better than them:** Many Yankee fans take satisfaction from being better than the Red Sox if they cannot be the world champs. They want to preserve the power structure in the American League. God’s enemies want to preserve the world’s power structures, so they “killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets (v15),” both of whom urged an upending of the social order. We see this motive expressed in their “hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles (v16).” They might not earn salvation, but they sure don’t want the godless saved. When we fulfill our purpose by securing our identity from God and God alone, we are felt to be attacking the very source of power to which humanity is addicted.

◆ **Overcoming betrayal:** The players who spite a team by joining its rival infuriate fans, who expect loyalty. It is one thing to leave for a neutral team. That is forgivable. Joining the rival is betrayal. The Jews, God’s original chosen people, “displease God and oppose everyone (v15),” because they have given into the God’s rival by denying and perverting their purpose. They pretend to be God’s people while instead attempting to make Him their god, one they control. While “they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins...God’s wrath has overtaken them at last (v16).” His wrath is the unleashing of His Spirit directly into the world, into us, His other chosen people, for the purpose of completing His plan. Our resilient resistance to the world’s power structures is His act of destroying evil, the true fulfillment of His purpose in our lives. When we live out our purpose as His chosen people, we are His agents of setting the world right. A tough, resilient people expecting fierce opposition from those not strong enough for the job.