

MINDSET #1: THE JOY OF THE JOURNEY

from *Joyful Intentionality* by Allison Bown

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If you've ever taken an extended road trip, you've probably heard the words, "Are we there yet?". Of the many, *many* times I've heard this phrase, my favorite remains "The Driveway Incident". My car full of kindergartners, I was setting out on a class field trip that required a two-hour drive to the city. We had barely exited the parking lot of the school (and had yet to actually get to the street itself) when the question rang out: "Are we there yet?"

Yes, it was a long day. It always is when the focus of the trip is only on the outcome.

In the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25) we read, "Well done, good and faithful servant." This phrase tells us that finishing isn't the only goal; instead, it is *how* we finish and who we've become along the way that is important. We call the time we spend on earth a "lifetime" for a reason: it takes time to live. If our only focus is getting to the end of a circumstance or season of our lives, then we can easily miss the treasure to be discovered along the way - one that we'll need in order to thrive and finish well—not just survive to the end. Joyfully Intentional people have embraced the joy of the journey, not just arriving at the destination, and that joy continually transforms how we think about life, about God and about the circumstances we encounter on the way.

RUN YOUR OWN RACE

Long distance runners race for a variety of reasons. Speed and time to the finish line are not their only measures. Many will never match a world-class pace, but all have their own uniquely wonderful course to complete. Dick Hoyt is just such a runner. When his teenage son, Rick, came to him and expressed his desire to participate in a 5k fund-raiser for a local boy who had been paralyzed, Dick said "Okay." They ran their first race together and Rick loved it. (Dick says he was just glad he survived it.) Then Rick asked if they could do another race, a marathon. The marathon took more training, but together, they did it. Eventually, they entered the Iron Man Triathlon, one of the most grueling swim/bike/run events on the planet. And together, Dick and Rick finished that one too. Their times were not record setting or even competitive, but everyone was amazed at this father and son running team. You see, Rick was born with cerebral palsy and is a spastic quadriplegic. Since 1977, when Rick was 15 years old, Dick has invented ways to swim, bike and run *with his son in tow* for over 37 years.

Everyone's race is different and has its own distinctive value. There is no standard in the Kingdom that measures our achievements in quantifiable statistics. The value of our lives will never be in how many books we've read (or written), the years we spent in school, the number of hours that we prayed or how fast we read our Bibles. The standards for "success" that tend to impress human beings are rarely ones that God shares.

**Comparison thinking is a thief, assigned to rob us of the joy of the journey.
Focus on God's delight in the exceptional champion He created you to be,
running the unique course He has crafted just for you.**

The joy of the journey explodes in us when we surrender the lies that are designed to steal it. Imagine getting rid of the weight of these ridiculous comparisons that God isn't making:

"Everyone else seems to be getting it faster than me."

"My friend just had a great breakthrough. Why hasn't mine come?"

"If I had the advantages in life that he's had, I would be able to do that too."

"How will I ever be able to catch to her? She has so much more experience than me."

These are "imagination" that Joyfully Intentional people learn to throw down, lock up, and walk over (2 Corinthians 10:5). They *think* about their thinking and ask: "Who wins with this mindset?"

Look again at the thoughts listed above. Would any of them bring you peace that passes understanding or joy unspeakable and full of glory? Do they sound gentle or kind? People often ask me, "How do I know if it's God or not?" God's voice and His thoughts are filled with the Fruit of the Spirit. They will be patient, kind, merciful, gracious, good, and loving—leaving you with peace and joy. But the fruit of comparison is shame, guilt and insignificance. Comparison doesn't encourage us. It disheartens us in order to keep us from continuing in our race. Satan's only real hope of defeating you is to find ways to get you to compare yourself to others and come up short.

**God is the author of "en-courage-ment" on your journey.
Satan is the author of "dis-courage-ment".**

**All of us will run our race with "courage",
but which type of "courage" will we choose?**

Remember the scenes from the movie “Chariots of Fire,” where Abrams loses several races at the finish line because he looks to see how his competitor is doing? The need to compare his progress to another runner costs him the victory. That knowledge didn’t help him win. In fact, it hindered him. Then consider Eric Liddell, who ran with abandon in a style that was completely unique, but was authentic to him. He ran his own race, his own way, including being true to the values that he believed in. And in the end, Liddell won—in more ways than just receiving an Olympic medal.

The enemy has to convince you to give up because he knows that God has a brilliant race strategy that will not fail. “... let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the *author* and *finisher* of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1b-2a). We find encouragement to finish our journey well by remaining mindful that Jesus ran this course first, and by focusing our vision only on Him. He pioneered this path and promises that Christ in us will gloriously complete it. Our job is to run in stride only with Him and “press towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14).

Psalm 139:16 says that all your days were written in God’s book of your life before you were ever born. That’s YOUR book, not someone else’s. God has already authored your story from beginning to end and knows the good outcome He intends. Your role is to partner with the Holy Spirit as He reveals your story and leave everyone else to do the same with theirs.

Comparisons that make us feel inferior, or give us a false sense of superiority at someone else's expense, are never from God. Let Him set your pace and course; then run your own race in a state of encouragement knowing that as you follow Him, you'll be right on time for everything He has prepared for you. Dick Hoyt never once acquired a record-setting time in any race he ever ran, and his son, Rick, technically never ran at all! But what they achieved together is inspiring, lasting and powerful. Find the joy in the unique nature of the journey God has created for you.

EFFORT DOESN'T EQUAL DISTANCE COVERED

During my days as an elementary school teacher, I had an unexpected revelation while cleaning the cage of our classroom pet. He was a cute, chubby little hamster and was full of passion, totally committed to running with all his might for hours upon hours—except that his race wasn't on a course that covered distance. His was on a wheel...

A wheel that took him nowhere.

Our hamster never actually went anywhere, but I'm fairly certain that he ran thousands of miles. And that day as I cleaned his cage, it hit me: just the action of running—even with great effort— isn't synonymous with making progress. We can expend huge amounts of energy worrying, replaying old mistakes, figuring out what we need to say or do if this or that happens, or creating ten contingency plans for numerous disasters, but it won't take us anywhere; and it certainly doesn't create joy. It is, however, guaranteed to be totally exhausting.

Just as I had learned that the volume of resources consumed didn't equal maturity, my little hamster exemplified the truth that "energy expended does not equal distance-in-the-Spirit covered".

That day in the classroom, the concept of joy from rest began to open up to me. Rest and peace in Christ is not about how much you are or are not doing. Nor is it about how much sleep you get or how busy your schedule is. Those things can cause your body to be tired, which is a legitimate part of life at times—but true rest is an internal state; it's the consistent inner calm that a world-class runner experiences whether he is battling an uphill climb on the course or sprinting on a downhill section, because he knows that every step is taking him closer to his finish line.

Rest comes from knowing that you're covering ground on the race course that God has uniquely designed for you. No matter what is occurring, you are partnering with Him to use it to grow stronger, rest deeper and rise higher, taking both internal and external territory as you go. It may not always be easy, but you experience a sense of ease as He sets the pace.

People who try to find rest by getting to the end of all their checklists or by totaling up their tasks that have been accomplished will never find it. Their wheel of endless jobs to be done will just circle around again and again. Their never ending sense of "If only I can just...." repeats over and over and over. Exhausted from believing that peace is achieved by getting everything finished, they pause momentarily on their wheel of performance. But soon, like the hamster, they're running again, with their heads tucked down and little legs churning faster—hoping that *this* time, with a little more effort, they will make some progress towards the joy of the journey that seems so elusive.

That day in my classroom, as I watched the hopeful little hamster racing in circles on his wheel towards a nonexistent finish line, I realized that I had a lot in common with him. I'd been racing on my own wheel for years, not understanding that a "checklist life" with God was not the life that He wanted for me. He had prepared an adventure—a life to be explored without limits in a

wide-open territory. But the enemy had substituted adventure and exploration with a performance wheel to nowhere, in hopes that I would never learn the difference.

However, when I began to see God as He really is (kind, good, gentle, faithful, loving and full of joy and delight in who He made me to be), we began to run and explore together. I traded the frustration of an endless, predictable wheel to nowhere for the joy of an often unpredictable but encouraging journey that's always going somewhere.

EMBRACE ADVERSITY

Often, the very elements that can accelerate our process the most are the very situations that we try our hardest to avoid. When obstacles appear on our horizon, we are prone to view them as negatives. Whether the obstacle is an authentic attack of the enemy that is meant to delay or deter us, or it's an opportunity for transformation that God has wisely allowed, we must look at it through the lens of grace. Otherwise, we may miss seeing Holy Spirit as our Comforter (or the faithful Father, or Jesus as our Friend) who is holding out His hand to us in an invitation to get to know a new aspect of His true nature that we've never seen before.

Adversity and acceleration are partners on this journey; they work as a team. In the Bible, Joshua's leadership was established in Israel with what seemed to be an insane battle plan to take a massive, fortified city by silently marching around its walls until it was time to shout. David accelerated from being a shepherd boy to a national hero after defeating a very large giant who had paralyzed an entire army. An outbreak of persecution forced the early Church out of the comfort zone of Jerusalem, allowing them new opportunities to share the Gospel throughout a much greater territory. Daniel gained favor and influence with kings while petting hungry lions on the head.

Tough times, challenges and obstacles that the enemy has designed to take us out of the race can be the very occasions that God smiles at, knowing who He plans to be for us as we encounter Him in a new way. Nothing infuriates our adversary more than having the very thing that was meant to discourage us become an opportunity for acceleration, advancement and upgrade. He continually seems to forget that we don't need to know God as the Faithful One when we're surrounded by loyal friends. Encountering the Holy Spirit as Teacher isn't so necessary when we've got life all figured out. A happy heart doesn't need a Comforter, but a broken one does. When we can exchange "Why do these things always happen to me?" choosing instead to focus on Who God will be for us now in this unique place—we deal the devil a staggering blow and

commit a fabulous act of war. We've turned the obstacle meant to destroy us into an opportunity to become stronger in Christ.

During my years in education, I had a colleague who was a long-distance runner. His dream was to run the Boston Marathon; but in order to do that, he needed a certain qualifying time in another race. As his preliminary race, he chose the Big Sur Marathon, a course that runners consider to be one of the hardest in the country because of its countless steep hills and tough terrain. Big Sur had to be one of the most absurd choices my friend could have made to obtain the race time that he needed to qualify for Boston.

When I asked him why he chose Big Sur as his qualifier, his answer was quite direct. "Because Boston is famous for 'Heartbreak Hill'. I want to have run a race with 10 hills tougher than 'Heartbreak' so that when I get to that point in Boston, I'll *know* that I can do it...and more". Smart man. He wasn't just trying to survive a race. He was choosing to transform his identity as a runner to being a "runner of impossible hills."

**He had decided to use the obstacles of today
to fuel the opportunities of tomorrow.**

Joyfully Intentional people know the value of adversity on their journey, and they train for it. For them, it is not something to be avoided, but to be expected. One of the Bible promises that no one ever puts on a pretty refrigerator magnet is: "In this world, you *will* have tribulation". No "maybe" or "you might encounter." Nope. It's going to be there, so prepare yourself. Jesus told His disciples just how to prepare (and it wasn't with cynicism that expects the worst). "Cheer up!" was the key He gave them (and us). "I've overcome the world (John 16:33)."

That wisdom increases in its impact when we consider that He shared it as He was preparing to face the cross just a few hours later—the greatest adversity of all. It was such a statement of confidence in His Father, since Jesus hadn't actually walked out all the steps of overcoming the world yet. He faced a pretty rough night ahead: betrayal, isolation, beatings, the crushing weight of sin, separation from His Father, and a tortuous death. Yet, Jesus already saw Himself as an overcomer. The shame of the world's iniquity was awful for Him. He despised it, but He endured it by purposely connecting with the joy ahead (Hebrews 12:2).

Now *that's* Joyful Intentionality.

In essence, Jesus had trained all of His earthly life for that moment in time—by growing in grace with God, through developing a deep relationship with His Father, and by gaining experience in

overcoming temptation and tribulation many different ways. When that night of His greatest adversity began, John 13 says that Jesus *knew* that the Father had now given all things into His hands and that He *knew* that He had come from God and was going to God. Everything He had gone through before that night (both the triumphs and the challenges) had created in Him a deep, unshakeable knowledge of who His Father was to Him and all that He had been born to be. He *knew* the eternal outcome that was possible, and that outcome was the joy that He focused on. It would literally carry Him to hell and back.

There is a Navy Seal motto that says: “In the heat of battle, you will not rise to the occasion, but will revert to the level of your training.” To finish our race well with joy, we will need to embrace our challenges as opportunities that will strengthen us to make it to the end—no matter how many “Heartbreak Hills” we encounter. We purposely practice by rejoicing always and giving thanks in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18), knowing that the obstacles of today are our practice grounds for finishing well tomorrow.

THE RELATIONSHIP *IS* THE JOURNEY

Our “journey” is not what we achieve in ministry or a long list of our accomplishments. It isn’t based on the people we’ve met or where we’ve traveled. Discovering God Himself is the journey, and our relationship with Him is the course we run. When Jesus spoke about the eternal finish line at the end of the age in Luke 16, it isn’t the miracles or deliverances that will matter in the end, but it will be whether or not we are intimately known by Him. As He closes the doors of Heaven, He won’t say “You didn’t work hard enough” or “You should have done something more spectacular”. Instead, He will say, “You need to leave now. I don’t know who you are. We never had a deeply personal relationship” (my version of Luke 16:36-38).

Each of us wants to impact our world, our communities, our families and those we love. But all we can ever give away in ministry is our own relationship with God. “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note: *These men had been with Jesus.*” (Acts 4:13 italics mine)

**Joyfully Intentional people know that relationship with God IS the journey,
and knowing Him in it is the greatest joy of all.**

Paul described it in one of my most beloved scriptures in all of the Bible. If there is one ambition in my life, these words capture it completely,

“For my *determined* purpose is that I may know Him; that I may become more progressively and deeply acquainted with Him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding the wonders of His person...” (Philippians 3:10, Amplified Bible).

This verse is the very essence of a passion driven life that’s lived with determined purpose. It’s the progressive path of knowing God in all His manifestations. It’s knowing Him as Father and everything that comes with His Fatherhood. It’s knowing Jesus as Savior, as Lord, as the Friend who sticks closer than a brother, as Wonderful Counselor and as King of Kings. It’s our intimate friendship with the Holy Spirit as Comforter, genius Teacher and steadfast Helper... just to name a few of the ‘wonders of His person’. It’s perceiving who He wants to be for us in any circumstance, recognizing Him and knowing how He thinks and loves. It is living in the understanding and wisdom of His grace, mercy, love, kindness.... and it goes on and on. One life is really far too short a time to truly explore His wonders. Thank God for eternity.

The guys at the end of the age that Jesus talked about in Luke 16 had confused “knowing about” Him with “knowing and being known.” Their idea of relationship is like someone who mistakes their supermarket tabloid knowledge of a celebrity for an actual friendship. You might buy and read every magazine that’s ever printed a story about your favorite movie star, but it doesn’t mean that you are their friend. If you met them on the street, you might be able to tell them all about their lives: the names of their children, their favorite food and where they like to vacation. *But they wouldn’t know you.* They’ve never met you. You are a stranger to them.

I had a supermarket tabloid relationship with God for years, reducing Him to human proportions that I could quantify and understand. There were bread crumbs of authenticity in our relationship, but they were eclipsed by my insecure need for achievement as proof of my value. I was proud of how much I knew about Jesus; I even had a degree in Bible to prove it. Yet I was clueless. I didn’t really know who He was.

But my tabloid relationship with Him changed one night in 1995. I had received prayer in a ministry line and was sitting on the ground as the rest of the people around me were being prayed for. Suddenly, there was Jesus, standing right in front of me. His presence was so overwhelming that I couldn’t look up. Everything seemed impossibly bright, and the love I felt radiating from Him invaded every cell in my body until it hummed with joy, delight, and peace.

Such tangible love provoked an immediate, passionate response within me. All I wanted was to do was give Him something. So I reached inside my chest (which I could apparently do since we were no longer dealing in a earthbound realm) because I wanted to give Him my heart. I guess I

thought that I would pull out this lovely, Valentine's Day looking object - but instead, my hand was filled with filth. Not just dirt... *filth*, so vile that it was actually moving.

There are no words for the embarrassment I felt; I can only describe it as absolute horror. I panicked. I desperately reached back inside my chest, attempting to find the *real* heart that obviously I had missed. Yet when I pulled my hand out again, the same putrid rot was there. And instead of stopping, I just kept repeating this action over and over - until there was a mound of squirming filth about 2 feet high all over the feet of Jesus.

I was exhausted. I was empty. I wanted to die. Here was Jesus, whom I adored and this was the best I had to give Him. Why was I even alive?

And then He did something that changed everything.

In the kindest voice I've ever heard, He simply said, "I'll take it". And He did. He picked it all up, pressed it to His chest, and it disappeared. No shame. Without cringing or disgust, He took it all.

I've never recovered from that moment. Thankfully, I know now that I never will. I still don't understand the depths of all that happened that night, and for many years I didn't even try to understand. But I became a different person because of that encounter, though I didn't magically transform overnight in my thinking, language and behavior. That continues to be an on-going process. But I beheld the Philippians 3:10 "wonders of His person" in a way that imparted a glimpse of Who He really is that continues to captivate me.

In recent years, I've entered into a new conversation with God about what happened to me that night on the floor in front of Jesus. What was it that I pulled out of me?

After a great deal of pondering and listening, I've come to understand much more than I did before. I know now that the filth I pulled out of myself was my "Old Man", the one who is dead (Colossians 3:3). My life was now hidden with God, in Christ. I didn't have to be transporting my Old Man around anymore, but I was. And like any dead thing in the natural, it had rotted. My religious ideas about a legalistic God left me continually trying to dress up my old self to be acceptable to Him. It was a hopeless cause that had left me exhausted and ashamed. There's no makeover for a rotting corpse; yet that's just what I had tried to do with all my self-improvement efforts. On that evening in 1995, my moment had come to truly "reckon myself dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). I could keep trying-harder-to-do-better to fix up this

“old Allison,” but it wasn’t going to work. She was dead already... and God found a creative way of showing me just how dead she really was.

Instead, it was time to embark on a journey of discovery of Christ in me, my hope of glory; of who He really is and who I really am in Him.

I don’t consider that night to be a “supernatural” encounter as much as I see it as God naturally being Himself in my world. It certainly doesn’t make my journey more significant than anyone else’s, and I can’t say that it has made my process easier either (which I always imagined such an experience would)—just different. If anything, I think it occurred because I had been rather thick-headed and hard-hearted. God had been trying to have that conversation with me for years, but I didn’t have ears to hear. They were plugged-up with the checklists and self-improvement inventories that I adored. So He graciously invaded my warped world instead—knowing it would take years for me to unwrap what He imparted, and He was kindly hoping that we could get on with that.

Most people are much brighter and are more sensitive to the Spirit of God than I was. With them, He has been able to speak in whispers, nods, and nudges. If that’s your story, good for you. Thanks for extending grace to those of us who are more like Paul on the Damascus road; who have become so blind that we’ve needed some direct, Divine intervention to get us back on the relational journey that God treasures most.

That’s why there’s such joy in this great road trip of life, because God has so much delight in it! God initiated a relationship with people out of His passionate desire for friends. He saw no fun in creating a people who just passively ride through life on a “motorized airport walkway” to our final destination. He’s a good Father, whose greatest pleasure is feeling our trusting hand in His as we say, “Where to now, Papa?” It’s *being* with us that He adores.

In journeying with Him, life ceases to be only about getting to an outcome. We even find ourselves glad when our path ends up being a little longer than we anticipated or takes an unexpected curve. Rather than a disappointment or delay, it’s simply more time to travel with and be loved by Him. And we revel in the peace, renewal, and encouragement found in the joy of the journey.

Questions for Exploration
“Mindset #1: The Joy of the Journey”

What parts of your current journey are you really enjoying?

What is an area of adversity that you’re realizing is a great place to practice your learning?

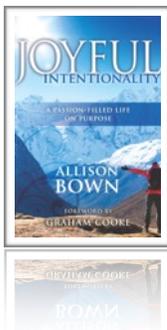
If you’ve envisioned this part of your journey as a finish line to cross, consider thinking of it as building a staircase instead. Rather than jumping from one level to the next (and feeling bad about not making it), maybe God is building your process bit by bit. (And it’s fine if it doesn’t look like a staircase. You might see it as stages in a race or base camps on a mountain. Whatever you and the Holy Spirit create is great!)

What are the steps that are being put into place?

Does one seem to need to come before another?

What is the outcome that you think the process is for?

What are the steps needed and are there ones to be added to the steps you already see?



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