

SIX KEYS FOR 2023*by Steve Brown***1 CORINTHIANS 16:13 – 14**

As you look at this new year, how are you feeling about it? Maybe you're optimistic. Sometimes, when the calendar turns over, I look ahead and see a blank canvas. It's like a re-set, and I'm excited about the opportunities and possibilities and want to pursue them with vigour. Maybe you're optimistic. Maybe, though, you're cautious right now because you see chaos – you see change and challenge and complexity, not only in our world, but also maybe in your own life, and you're starting this year with some caution inside. Optimistic... Cautious... Maybe you're approaching this year feeling like it's daunting – there are difficulties in your own life and difficulties in people's lives around you. Maybe you're feeling deflated or discouraged and the year hasn't even gotten going. Whether you're feeling optimistic, or cautious, or whether the prospect of a new year feels daunting to you, I want to point you to six keys for your 2023.

Five of the six keys are based in two simple verses of scripture. They're found in 1 Corinthians 16:13 – 14. I believe these keys are going to help you, whether you're trying to survive 2023 or you want to thrive in 2023.

1 Corinthians is a letter in the New Testament, written by Paul to a church that he helped start. Chapter 16 is the very last chapter in this long letter. The letter has a number of different components to it: it starts out with concern about division because, within the church, there's division and Paul is speaking to that; there's sin within this church and Paul is speaking to that; there are issues and questions around sexual morality and Paul is speaking to that; and there are questions around how a church should function in a healthy way, and Paul speaks to that.

Paul lays down the cornerstone of the faith in 1 Corinthians 15, which is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And then, in this final chapter, Paul is giving his last summary words. These words are incredibly important for us because that church was navigating how to be a healthy church in the midst of a very diverse culture that's chasing after idols, and within which they were a minority. That's the foundation for these two verses that have five keys to your 2023. Let's read them.

Be on your guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. Do everything in love.

We're going to unpack these five keys to 2023 one at a time.

The first sentence in 1 Corinthians 16:13 is, *Be on your guard*. Some other versions translate this as, *Be watchful* or *Keep your eyes open*. When I read this verse, I think back to my minor hockey days, and I remember learning early on how to skate and how to stick handle the puck up the ice. Skating and stick handling at the same time are two actions at once. It's complicated, and most young people, when they're starting out, keep focused on the stick and puck in front of them; they're looking down all the time. Once they master that, the ideal is that they begin to look up and look around to see what's going on around them. It's important to do that because in those early years of learning how to play ice hockey, there's no body contact. That's introduced around 13 or 14 years old in most leagues, and if the player is still looking down all the time – looking at their skates and looking at the stick in front of them, they miss what's going on around them on

the ice; they miss the opportunities and the possibilities of who they can pass the puck to. They also miss the potential of running into a big defenseman who's maybe spurred faster in puberty than they have, and that big defenseman is looking at this player who's maybe smaller and looking at their feet – not looking at what's coming at them – and then with that body contact rule, there's a body check that the player didn't even see coming, and they can be flat on their back and the puck goes off to the sides.

In Bible times, cities were protected, usually, by a wall. That wall was guarded with guards on top who would be watchmen. The job of a watchman was to be looking around outside the city to see what's going on – to see when there might be good news that's approaching the city, and to also see when there might be bad news approaching the city (maybe there's another army or some raiders that are approaching the city – some danger that's approaching the city). The job of the watchmen is to alert the city so they can be prepared for what's coming at them, whether it's good or bad. The watchman is to be vigilant in looking – to stay awake and to be alert.

When you apply, whether it's ice hockey or this idea of the watchmen on the city wall, to you and me in 2023... we need to stay on our guard, we need to be spiritually awake, we need to be watching what's going on around us. With a positive lens on things, we need to be watching for what God might be doing, and asking ourselves the question: What is God doing right now? Where is he at work? How should I be joining him in his work? We need to be attentive to ask that question – to look around to see what's around us. We also need to be on our guard and to be watching for the negative side – the dangerous side – and that can actually start happening inside of us. We can have, perhaps, thoughts in our head that are negative – even toxic. If we let those stay in our heads, those negative thoughts – those toxic thoughts – take root and then take ownership. What goes on in our heads impacts the rest of who we are and how we act. We need to be attentive to what's going on inside of us and what's going on inside of our heads. Our thoughts impact how we live and how we function every day, and if we let things that are negative – things that aren't good, aren't right, aren't truthful – reside in our head and grow in our head, that will take us to a bad place. If that's the case, we need to, as 2 Corinthians 10:5 says, *take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.*

We're not only watching what God might be doing around us, so we join him, we're paying attention to what's going on inside us. We also need to be on our guard to what the evil one might be doing. We're not to be paranoid of the evil one, but we are to be alert and to be aware, because the evil one is looking for places to divide, to destroy, to get a foothold, to start a lie or a mistruth, or to be a prowling lion looking for someone to devour (that's from 1 Peter 5:8).

So, the evil one is also at work, and we're to resist the evil one, but we can't resist until we're aware of what the evil one might be doing. So we're being vigilant. We're being watchful – spiritually awake. We're putting on the armour of God. Ephesians 6 talks about putting on the armour of God, recognizing there's a spiritual battle and that God's given us armour to put on. One of the ways I start my day every day is by praying on the armour of God. I pray on the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness; I buckle on the belt of truth, take up the shield of faith to guard me from the fiery darts of the evil one; and take up the sword of the spirit, which is God's word; and I ask God to help me to share the gospel of peace as I come and go with my feet.

This first key to 2023 is to *be on your guard* – to be awake, to be alert, to be vigilant – to what God might be doing, to what’s going on inside us, and to the evil one working around us. The second key to 2023 is to *stand firm in the faith*.

Whatever is going on for you, stand firm in the faith. If you are on your own, stand firm in the faith. If you are in the midst of disappointment, stand firm in the faith. If you’re in disillusionment, stand firm in the faith. If you’re in prosperity or abundance, stand firm in the faith. If you’re the only Jesus follower at home or at school or at work, stand firm in the faith.

In 2 Samuel there’s a description of David’s mighty warriors – David’s 30 mighty men. One of those mighty men is named Shammah, and it says in 2 Samuel 23:11, talking about Shammah, *When the Philistines banded together at a place where there was a field of lentils, Israel’s troops fled from them. [Everyone took off.] But Shammah took his stand in the middle of the field. He defended it and struck the Philistines down, and the Lord brought about a great victory. Even on his own, when everyone else had left, Shammah was standing firm.*

As you think about standing firm in the faith, remember it’s not just about you standing firm, it’s you standing firm in the faith – in your faith of who God is. A.W. Tozer says that the most important thing about us is what comes into our minds when we think about God. We need to have a bigger, fuller, clearer vision of who God is so that we can have faith in who he is.

One of the things that I’ve been doing over the last year, is seeking to remind myself of a characteristic or attribute of God for each letter in the alphabet, and to learn those attributes and keep repeating them – in a sense, praying them – that I would be standing firm in the faith of who God is. I’m remembering that God is my advocate, that he’s Abba Father, that he’s Almighty, that he’s the Bread of Life where my sustenance comes from, that he’s my counselor, that he’s compassionate, that he’s my comforter, that he’s my defender, that he’s from everlasting to everlasting, that he’s my fortress, that he’s good, that he’s my guide, that he’s my helper... And the list can go on through the alphabet. I’m trying to train myself, and remember and pray with my faith in who God is.

The second part of standing firm in the faith is standing firm in the faith of what God has done. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul argues strongly and unreservedly of what God has done by overcoming and paying the debt for sin and overcoming the grave. Paul writes in verse 57 of chapter 15 that *God gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*.

We have faith in what God has done and we also have faith in what God promises for the future. 1 Peter 1 says that we have *a living hope..., an inheritance that will not perish, spoil, or fade... kept in heaven for us*. Those are promises about the future. Jesus is coming back. All the things that are messed up and mixed up are going to be transformed and changed into God’s ways.

So as you stand firm in the faith, may your faith in God and who he is, grow; may your faith in what God has done, grow; and may your faith in God’s promises grow.

The third key for 2023 follows after *be on your guard* and *stand firm in the faith*. It's to *be courageous*. We're going to start this key with a video clip from Charlotte's Web.

The clip is a conversation of two crows perched above a town dump, looking out at a scarecrow in cornfield.

Crow 1: *How can he be in every corn field?*

Crow 2: *It can't be the same guy. It can't be.*

Crow 1: *He's wearing the same hat. I'm telling you: He is following us.*

Crow 2: *I hate that guy.*

Crow 1: *Oh, I have got to get some corn now!*

Crow 2: *Alright, alright, alright! This is crazy! There's two of us, right? Trust me; there's two of us and there's only one of him.*

Crow 1: *I don't know, man, he scares me! He really does.*

Crow 2: *Just think about that corn.*

Both Crows: *Yeah. Alright. Let's do it!*

The crows fly off their pole toward the corn field, diving at the scarecrow, who, at the moment they get close, is blown by the wind so he spins around toward them.

Both Crows: *Abort! Abort! Abort!*

The crows return to their perch.

Crow 1: *Man, he is good. I bet he's laughing at us.*

Crow 2: *Don't look at him. Don't even give him the satisfaction. Just think about something else.*

The scarecrow that scared off the crows, are not just real for those crows, but they're real for us as well. All of us can be overwhelmed by giants or scarecrows that we face – maybe it's a person that stirs fear in us, maybe it's a situation, maybe it's something we know we should do, whether it's to take a risk, or to speak up, or stand up, or to listen and ask for help. All of us can have scarecrows that, in a sense, undermine – deflate – our courage.

Courage isn't the absence of fear. Courage is pressing on in the midst of fear. My definition of spiritual courage is choosing to follow Jesus even when your knees are knocking.

As you choose to follow Jesus, I want to give you some tools that might help you with courage in the year ahead. The first one is a prayer from my friend Mark Buchanan. The prayer is this: *Fear of _____, leave me. Peace of God fill me.* That prayer can help you get rid of the fear and focus on God and his peace with you.

The second tool would be to remember. Remember God's faithfulness in scripture and in your own life. Can you think back, even this last year, to how God was faithful in his provision or in his promises or in his protection or in his presence? It's not that God's going to act the same way in different circumstances all the time, but God is always the same. And if we can remember his faithfulness from the past, it can fuel us with courage for the future.

The third tool is community, and having community – people around us – where we break the power of our fears, and we bring other people into our fears. Leaning into a brother or sister or a friend in Christ to share and to give us courage.

The fourth tool is choosing to trust – choosing to trust God, even though your knees are knocking. King David, in Psalm 56:3, says this: *When I am afraid, I choose to put my trust in you.* Notice that David didn't say *if*, but he said *when I am afraid*. And there's this act of God.

I choose to trust you with _____ (and then fill in the blank). Maybe it's a person, maybe it's a situation, maybe it's a relationship, maybe it's your health. God, I choose to trust you with _____, giving God – the One who's able – your burden.

Courage is incredibly important – not only having courage for ourselves, but being a courage-giver to others. Everyone I talk to needs courage in some area of their life. Maybe your 2023 focus needs to be being a courage-giver to the people around you.

The fourth key from this passage for your 2023 is to *be strong*. To be strong sounds like you should be able to pull up your socks, dig deep, find your reserve to overcome, to press on, to press through. After all, you can hear it from a lot of different places that you've got it in you – you're enough. I want to pause there because I've recognized that on my own, I'm not enough. On my own, I'm not enough to stand before a holy God. On my own I'm not enough to stand against the evil one. On my own I'm not enough to press through some of the gigantic challenges that have been and might be before me. The good news about walking with Jesus and following Jesus, is that the *be strong* isn't something you do on your own. The *be strong* is God with you and God in you.

Let's take a look at Peter for a moment. Remember when Peter denied and disowned Jesus right before Jesus' crucifixion? Peter did that without people of power around him. It was just people standing around and they asked him, *Don't you belong with this Jesus guy?* And Peter three times denied even knowing him. But you see a little bit later, in Acts 4, you see a very different Peter – you see a strong Peter. What's happened is that Peter has healed a lame man, and everyone's seen it, and the religious powers are wanting to shut down Peter from talking about this, because they don't want more people to follow after Jesus. So they put Peter in jail and they bring him before the powers-that-be because, of course, Peter's going to buckle, right? He's going to say he'll be quiet – he won't talk anymore. He's going to do what he did before... But he doesn't. It says,

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: 'Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: it is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.'

A very different response. Peter doubles down and he says, *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven [except for Jesus] given to mankind by which we must be saved.* This new Peter blew the minds of the religious leaders, here's what they said *when they*

saw the courage of Peter and John, and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men: they were astonished, and they took note. What did they take note of? They took note that these men had been with Jesus.

There are two things that transformed Peter from being somebody who buckled to being somebody who was strong. First, he was filled by the Holy Spirit – God’s life in him, working through him – an inexhaustible power of God inside Peter making him bold. One of the prayers I pray every morning is *God, I don’t have what it takes to navigate this day with strength. You are my strength. You are the source of strength in my life. Would you fill me by your Spirit, live your life in and through me, and produce fruit in me that would bring glory to you and that would bless others, and that it would bless me?*

The Holy Spirit in us gives us strength.

I want to share one more verse with you about being with Jesus. Psalm 16:8 is one of my favourites. Here’s what it says: *I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

Where are your eyes focused? Your eyes need to be focused on Jesus – on the Lord who is at your right hand. He is with you.

The fifth key for your 2023, the last sentence in this passage, is *do everything in love*. Stand on your guard in love. Stand firm in your faith in love. Be courageous in love. Be strong in love. Do everything in love.

Our example of love, of course, is Jesus, who demonstrated love in radical ways – through servanthood, through sacrifice, through suffering – and we’re to follow after Jesus’ example. We’re to love one another as he has loved us. Everything we do, we’re to do in love. It is the sentence that holds together these verses – that holds together, actually, the outflow of our faith. So as you look at your family, your workmates, your schoolmates, your neighbours, your community, the least, the last, the lost, the broken, people around you, do everything in love. May your words be in love. May your social posts be in love. May your actions be in love.

I had a mentor, Evan Headley, who lived to over a hundred years old, and I would often call him for advice. I remember calling him at one point and asking him what he would do different in his life. And at a hundred, still sharp as a tack, he said, *That’s easy. I’d love people more.*

We need to be known, Church – brothers and sisters – for our love – our love for God, our love for one another, and our love for the people around us. We need to do everything in love.

I started with the focus on six keys for your 2023 and in this passage of 1 Corinthians 16, we’ve identified five of them as *be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong, do everything in love*. Is there one of those that you need to hang on to – to hold on to – to focus in on as this year begins? I pray that there is. I pray that God would bring to mind at least one of these phrases in these two verse that you need to hold on to and focus on. But I want to leave you with the sixth key for your 2023.

I share this poem at this time of year regularly. It's a poem that's from Minnie Haskins . It's called *God Knows*. Minnie Haskins' poem, *God Knows*, was made famous, the story goes, by a young princess Elizabeth. Princess Elizabeth, who was a teenager, I believe, back in 1939, gave to her father, King George, this poem because she thought it was significant and would help him as he addressed, at Christmas, the commonwealth countries who, in 1939, were on the precipice of what would become World War II. He wanted to give hope and help to his people. This poem does that, not only back then, but for 2023.

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And the man at the gate replied:
"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."
So I went forth, and finding the hand of God, trod gladly into the night.

This poem is a reminder that the safest way to journey into the unknown is with your hand in God's hand. This sixth key of 2023 is really the foundational key: to put your hand into the hand of God. Because whether you're feeling optimistic, or cautious, or overwhelmed and daunted by the year ahead, walking with the hand of God in your hand is a game changer – is a difference maker. And you can do that today.

Isaiah 41:13 says the same words of the poem in a different way. The passage reads this way: *For I am the Lord your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, 'Do not fear. I will help you.'* Foundational to 2023 is to put your hand into the hand of God, the God who says, *Do not fear; I will help you*, the God who desires to walk with you every step of whatever unfolds in the year ahead.