

Surprisingly Simple
20¹ RULES
and TOOLS
for a GREAT
DAY

DR. STEVE STEPHENS

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are a registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

20 (*Surprisingly Simple*) Rules and Tools for a Great Day

Copyright © 2006 by Steve Stephens. All rights reserved.

Cover photo copyright © by Veer. All rights reserved.

Author photo copyright © 2004 by Yuen Lui Studio. All rights reserved.

Designed by Jessie McGrath

Some material for 20 (*Surprisingly Simple*) Rules and Tools for a Great Day taken from 21 (*Surprisingly Simple*) Steps to a Great Life

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the Holy Bible, King James Version.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV™ taken from the New King James Version.® Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked “Phillips” are taken from *The New Testament in Modern English*. Copyright © by J. B. Phillips 1958, 1959, 1960, 1972. Used by permission of Macmillan Publishing Company.

Scripture quotations marked TLB are taken from *The Living Bible* copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stephens, Steve.

20 (surprisingly simple) rules and tools for a great day / Steve Stephens.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4143-0584-4 (sc)

ISBN-10: 1-4143-0584-2 (sc)

1. Happiness—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Success—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Christian life. I. Title. II. Twenty (surprisingly simple) rules and tools for a great day.

BV4647.J68S74 2006

248.4—dc22

2006028667

Printed in United States of America

12 11 10 09 08 07 06

7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Getting Started 1

RULE ❶	Pay Attention 5
RULE ❷	Live Intentionally 15
RULE ❸	Know Yourself 23
RULE ❹	Keep Balanced 31
RULE ❺	Let Go 43
RULE ❻	Reach Out 51
RULE ❼	Celebrate 61
RULE ❽	Dig Deep 69
RULE ❾	Work Hard 79
RULE ❿	Rest 87
RULE ⓫	Cling to the Positives 97
RULE ⓬	Draw Close to God 107
RULE ⓭	Cultivate Community 117
RULE ⓮	Be Committed 127
RULE ⓯	Look for Lessons 137
RULE ⓰	Accept Mystery 147
RULE ⓱	Shine Brightly 155
RULE ⓲	Nurture Peace 165
RULE ⓳	Watch Your Words 175
RULE ⓴	Leave a Great Legacy 183

GETTING STARTED

TODAY IS A GREAT DAY.

In fact, lately, every day is a great day.

A great life is built one day at a time; some days are smooth and some days are rough, but each day is significant. You never know what your day might hold:

- sickness or health
- tragedy or victory
- attacks or appreciation
- confusion or clarity
- catastrophe or predictability
- exhaustion or energy

It doesn't matter what your day holds, but it does matter how you approach each day. Included in this small book are twenty surprisingly simple ways to approach every day of the rest of your life.

Each day is a gift, an amazing gift. You can make it great—or you can

passively let it go by. This book is about embracing the magic of each day, welcoming it as it fills you and empowers you and transforms you into something greater than you ever thought possible. To make your day great, you have to learn a few basic rules.

Life is full of rules. Some may be silly or insignificant or random, but others are important:

Stop!

One Way!

Do Not Enter!

Beware of Dog!

Poison: Do Not Drink!

You would be wise to follow these rules. Break them, and you risk a negative consequence. Good rules aren't meant to frustrate or control you; they are there to help you be more successful.

If you follow them, you'll be amazed at how the twenty surprisingly simple rules presented in this book can make an ordinary day extraordinary and save a difficult day from complete disaster. I have discovered these practical, thought-provoking rules in my work as a psychologist over the past twenty-five years. In this role, I have often made it my goal to help people improve their lives one day at a time by changing their attitudes, stretching their perspectives, and focusing their energy.

This personal and professional experience is important, but it is not the most crucial thing. Everything I learn through experience, observation, and research I run through the grid of the Holy Bible. God's Word is my

foundation; with it as my frame of reference, I know I will not stray far from the truth. And the truth is what ultimately matters!

Each chapter in this book explains one of the rules and shows why it's important. After each rule, you'll find three tools. I've included these tools because while information might make interesting reading, it's the application of that information that lifts your days above the typical levels of monotony and mediocrity. These three tools will help you to apply the rules:

Prayer: a way to seek God's help in getting you on track and keeping you there

Passage: a quotation from the Holy Bible to give God's perspective

Practice: a few assignments to help you insert the rules into the ups and downs of everyday life

With the help of these tools, the twenty rules can change your day. Each rule is surprisingly simple, yet profound. Former president Ronald Reagan once said, "For many years now, you and I have been shushed like children and told there are no simple answers to complex problems which are beyond our comprehension. Well, the truth is, there are simple answers. There just are not easy ones." These twenty rules are not easy, but they are well worth our effort. Even though I have written this book, it doesn't mean I have conquered all the rules. In fact, I have broken every one of them many times. Yet I have found that as I learn to understand them, apply them, and build them into lifelong habits, I have grown.

By now you're probably ready to try a rule or two. As you apply each rule, you will be amazed to see your days

grow deeper;

grow better;

grow positive;

grow inspiring;

grow more and more meaningful.

RULE 1

PAY ATTENTION

IT HAD BEEN an overwhelming week.

I was going to school, doing two internships, working two jobs, volunteering at church, repairing a house built in 1902, and trying to finish a complicated doctoral dissertation. I was twenty-six years old and attempting to do much more than was realistic or even rational.

On my way home from church one beautiful spring afternoon, I looked up and noticed I was driving through a red light. Before I could even finish the thought, a car broadsided me. Glass shattered and metal crumpled. I shook my body to make sure everything was working properly. Then I went to the other car and was relieved to find out that no one was hurt.

When the police officer arrived and checked out the accident, he pulled me aside and gave me a piece of sage advice: “When you’re driving, you’ve got to *pay attention*.”

I can’t tell you how many times parents and teachers had told me that. I heard it in anger, frustration, impatience, and sometimes even in jest. I was surprised to find that Solomon, the wisest man in the world, also used these words. “Pay attention and learn good judgment. . . . My child, pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words” (Proverbs 4:1, 20).

In my role as a psychologist, it is my job to pay attention. As soon as someone walks into my office, I focus on his or her words, tone of voice, emotions, needs, concerns, beliefs, perspectives, history, relationships, openness, and body language. This requires focus, and it can be exhausting. Paying attention is not always easy; in fact, sometimes it is hard work. Yet the payoff is that we become aware of an amazing world of causes and consequences just below the surface. Life is incredible. It is rich and inspiring beyond our wildest imaginations, but we have to pay attention.

I am convinced that few of us have any idea what is really happening all around us. We don't look and listen with intentionality. We don't take time to slow down, and when we do, we still don't consider very carefully what is right in front of us. Maybe we are too distracted or lazy or worn out. Maybe we are looking at the wrong things or in the wrong direction. José Ortega y Gasset said, "Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are." Sometimes we just don't know how to pay attention. Yet whatever our reasons, this is something we can change with a bit of effort. Here are three big areas in which we all need to pay more attention each day.

OPPORTUNITIES

Each day is filled with incredible opportunities, but most people don't pay enough attention even to see them. Every day, many doors of opportunity stand before us—and sometimes they are frightening, inconvenient, or out of our comfort zones. Several years ago I was approached to do a daily call-in radio talk show. My schedule was full, and I had no experience with radio. I had been a successful psychologist for twenty years and had

spoken to hundreds of groups, but quite frankly, the idea of a talk show made me nervous. What if I was on the air and didn't know what to say? What if I made a mistake and a hundred thousand people heard it? What if I sounded foolish or uninformed? The what-ifs overwhelmed me until I asked myself, *What if God just opened a door of opportunity? Are you willing to trust him and walk through it, or are you going to slam it in his face?* I'm glad to say I walked through it and had an absolutely fantastic time for four and a half years, until God shut that door and opened another.

We are surrounded by opportunities beyond our greatest dreams. All we need to do is pay attention and seize the opportunities before us. Opportunities come in at least four varieties:

- ① **Easy opportunities:** things we feel competent at and capable of
- ② **Challenging opportunities:** things that stretch us and are out of our comfort zones
- ③ **Overwhelming opportunities:** things we can't do without the expertise or assistance of others
- ④ **Supernatural opportunities:** things that seem impossible (things we know we can't do without God)

We need to have all four of these types of opportunities in our lives. Unfortunately, many of us keep gravitating to the easy opportunities, rarely slipping into the challenging or overwhelming areas. Because of this, our days are ordinary and our lives are stunted. Grace Speare encourages us to “welcome every problem as an opportunity. Each moment is the great challenge, the best thing that ever happened to you. The more difficult the problem, the greater the challenge in working it out.”

Every moment is a great opportunity with the possibility of being the best thing that ever happened to you. If we are willing to look to God, we will find him waiting to take us to unforgettable places of excitement and fulfillment and opportunities. So, as the captain of the guard told the prophet Jeremiah when he released him from captivity, “The whole land is before you—go wherever you like” (Jeremiah 40:4).

BEAUTY AND WONDER

Yesterday I went on a hike with my two sons, Dylan and Dusty, up the small creek behind our house. It was a sunny February day with a frosty nip to the air, but we were determined to go exploring. We battled through brambles, climbed over mossy rocks, and waded across chilly waters. We laughed and joked and had a great time. About a mile upstream, all three of us suddenly grew silent. We had just entered a secluded place where the creek cascaded and the mist lingered in the air. A small grove of stately cedars guarded the multiple shades of green ferns and ivies. As the sunlight filtered through the trees at the perfect angle that illuminated the water, we knew this spot was sacred. It was beautiful, incredibly beautiful.

Nature is amazing. We are daily surrounded by its awe, wonder, majesty, splendor, power, and terror, but so often we fail to pay attention. Jesus tells us to “look at the lilies” (Luke 12:27). It’s like he’s telling us to stop and think about the simplest aspects of nature—the details, the fine points, the nonessentials.

A friend once asked me the purpose of all the unique, beautiful flowers that bloom in unknown meadows and are never seen by humans. My mind flashed to a hillside I stumbled upon off a narrow gravel road at the

Arctic Circle in northern Iceland. It was ablaze with thousands of brilliant yellow and blue wildflowers. I wonder whether God creates all this beauty for his own enjoyment as well as ours. Annie Dillard wrote, “Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will sense them. The least we can do is try to be there . . . so that creation need not play to an empty house.” I want to be there, and I want to pay attention.

We have lost our sense of beauty and wonder. We have grown callous and complacent. We have become so preoccupied with ourselves that we miss the glory of nature. Paul Simon said, “These are the days of miracle and wonder.” Yet we walk amid the beauty, unaware of its magnificence and message.

Henry Ward Beecher wrote that “beauty may be said to be God’s trademark in creation.” Yet we often pay no attention to his handiwork and then wonder why we can’t feel his presence. We need to pray with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: “Dear Lord, grant me the grace of wonder. Surprise me, amaze me, awe me in every crevice of your universe. Each day enrapture me with your marvelous things without number. I do not ask to see the reason for it all; I ask only to share the wonder of it all.”

GOD MOMENTS

The book of Genesis tells the story of Jacob’s dream, in which he saw a stairway that was filled with angels and reached from earth to heaven. When he awoke, he declared, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn’t even aware of it!” (Genesis 28:16). Jacob had a “God moment”—a point in time when he was keenly aware of God reaching out and touching his life. Most of us have had moments when we

sensed that God had just done something amazing in our lives or when we sensed that God was present with us. Unfortunately, we frequently don't pay attention to these moments, so they come and go and are often forgotten. They should be remembered, treasured, and shared with others. They are an important part of our story and a significant reminder of God's grace.

Jim Caviezel will likely never forget one of his God moments. Jim played Jesus in the 2004 Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. He dangled nearly naked on a cross in bone-chilling winds during the filming. He was struck by lightning during a re-creation of the Sermon on the Mount. A fourteen-inch gash was ripped into his back when the "soldiers" missed their mark during a scene of Jesus' scourging. He dislocated his shoulder while carrying the cross. Through all of this he became aware of God's presence and protection. Jim said that these experiences "forced me into the arms of God. That's the only place I could go."

In his book *The God Moment Principle*, Alan Wright discusses the following five kinds of God moments:

Amazing rescues: moments when God protected us, healed us, rescued us, or made a way out for us

Holy attractions: moments when God led us to a healthier path, enabled us to resist a temptation, or inspired us to take a higher road

Unearned blessings: moments when God gave us an unexpected blessing or an undeserved gift

Revealed truths: moments when God spoke to us through something we heard, saw, read, or felt and conveyed truth about himself or our lives

Valuable adversities: moments when God sustained us through difficult times or made us stronger through tests of adversity

If we pay attention to all the God moments in our lives, we will be lifted above everyday, ordinary existence to a level of greater meaning, purpose, and perspective. Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English writer, stated, “It is God’s will for us to pay attention to all his past acts. . . . Only then shall we rejoice in God.” God moments, whether big or small, give us a more accurate and meaningful perspective on life, while reminding us of his never-ending perspective.

Too often we miss the most important stuff of each day because we don’t pay attention. In the book *God Is in the Small Stuff*, Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz insist that “if you want to improve in any area of your life, you have to pay attention to the small stuff.” Sometimes the tiniest details and seemingly insignificant pieces of your day can have an extremely significant impact. So throughout your day, from when you wake up to when you go to sleep, please pay attention.

TODAY'S TOOLS

Prayer

Dear God,

Forgive me for all the times I was too distracted, lazy, or self-absorbed to truly pay attention to you or your hand in my life.

Help me to face reality honestly with my eyes and my heart and my mind fully opened. Thank you for walking alongside me when reality is tough and for holding me close when reality is frightening.

Teach me patience as I wait for you to open the right doors, and give me the courage to walk through those doors you open. Thank you for all the opportunities you have set before me.

Amaze me with your wonders. Stimulate each of my five senses to the intricacies of nature in such a way that I am drawn close to you. Thank you for being the creator of so much beauty and for allowing me to enjoy it.

Wake me up to the times you directly touch my life. Help me to treasure these God moments, meditating on them for my own growth and sharing them with others for their encouragement. Thank you for each of these miraculous interventions and how they have had an impact on my life.

I praise you for caring enough to pay attention to someone as broken and insignificant as I am. Nudge me often so that I may develop the habit of always paying attention.

Amen.

Passage

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

Hebrews 2:1 (NIV)

Practice

- ① What opportunities have you been faced with in the past month? Which did you pursue?
- ② Go to a place where you can enjoy nature. Relax and pay close attention to all the details and beauty of what surrounds you there.
- ③ Sit down with a friend and share three God moments you have experienced in your life.