

Focus on Jesus and Keep Moving

Dr. John Tolson on God's Seasons, Desert University, Discipleship, Perseverance, and Finishing Faithfully

Program Summary

In this Wednesday edition of Mark & Friends, Dr. John Tolson concludes his Pinnacle Forum message by encouraging believers to remain committed, obedient, and focused on Jesus through every season of life. John traces how godly relationships and unexpected assignments led him from business leadership into seminary, discipleship ministry, a jazz organization, and nonprofit development. He reminds listeners that neither age nor a quiet season disqualifies anyone from God's purposes: Moses, Caleb, younger missionaries, and John's own years in what he calls 'Desert University' illustrate how God prepares people when outward results may be difficult to see. The message challenges Christians to seek the good of their communities without surrendering biblical convictions, to invest in disciple-making, and to recognize that fatigue is real when doing good. Hebrews 12:3 provides John's answer to weariness: consider Jesus. When tired, discouraged, uncertain, or tempted to quit, keep Jesus at the center. The message closes with a memorable charge: no reserves, no retreat, no regrets - focus on Jesus and keep moving.

Key Takeaways

God looks for committed and obedient people, not merely impressive people.
God can redirect skills and experiences from earlier seasons into assignments I never expected.
Neither age nor youth automatically disqualifies me from meaningful kingdom work.
Ephesians 2:10 reminds believers that they are God's workmanship and that He is still shaping their story.
Quiet or apparently unproductive seasons may be God's 'Desert University,' preparing me for work I cannot yet see.
God's timing can be trusted even when I cannot see His hand; I can trust His heart.
Everything God has used to shape me - success, failure, heat, waiting, relationships, and hard seasons - can become useful for future service.
Christians can seek the peace and good of their communities while remaining faithful to biblical convictions.
Disciple-making is central to lasting Christian influence; Jesus began by pouring Himself into a small group who would invest in others.
Doing good can become tiring, and faithfulness includes acknowledging fatigue rather than pretending it does not exist.
Hebrews 12:3 gives a clear response to weariness and discouragement: consider Jesus and keep the focus on Him.
The Bible's central story is Jesus; Christian service, cultural influence, endurance, and discipleship lose their center when He becomes secondary.
As long as God gives me breath, there are people to love, encourage, disciple, and help follow Jesus.

Scripture References

Hebrews 12:3, Ephesians 2:10, Jeremiah 29:7, Galatians 6:9, Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 12:2, John 15:4-5, Hebrews 12:1-3, John 14:6, Matthew 16:18

Quote of the Day

"No reserves, no retreat, no regrets. Focus on Jesus and keep moving."

Broadcast Notes

Mark introduces Part Two with Hebrews 12:3 and reminds listeners that the message was recorded at the Pinnacle Forum National Conference in Arizona in April. John begins by saying God is looking for committed and obedient people and then traces the unexpected path that led him into his current work. A Forum conversation challenged him to become more intentional about discipling young men, which contributed to his decision to attend seminary at age fifty-eight. Relationships formed there eventually connected him with Music Serving the Word, where he became involved in a major jazz facility and began learning an entirely new field. John describes launching a faith-based nonprofit incubator and emphasizes serious evaluation before investing resources. He then asks listeners to consider their own season. Moses and Caleb illustrate usefulness in later years, while younger Christian figures illustrate that

youth is no barrier to significant service. Ephesians 2:10 becomes a picture of God continually writing the 'poem' of a person's life. John calls his own less visibly productive years from roughly fifty to fifty-eight 'Desert University,' a season in which church involvement, prayer, forums, mentoring, and quiet preparation mattered even without headline accomplishments. He encourages Christians to serve the good of their communities while maintaining convictions, giving examples from nonprofit work with people whose worldview differed from his. The speaker's political and cultural characterizations in these examples are his own conference commentary; the Ministry Package preserves them in the transcript without adopting them as independent conclusions. John returns to disciple-making as the lasting work of Christian influence and then addresses fatigue. Hebrews 12:3 becomes the answer: focus on Jesus. He traces Jesus through Scripture and repeatedly returns to the conviction that there is nobody like Him. Mark closes the two-day presentation by applying John's message to listeners who are tired, discouraged, or wondering whether their useful years are behind them: God is not finished yet, and as long as He gives breath, there are people to love, encourage, and help follow Jesus.

Practical Applications

Ask God what assignment may be emerging from skills and experiences I already possess.
Refuse to assume that age makes me either too old or too young for meaningful service.
If I am in a quiet or confusing season, treat it as preparation rather than automatically labeling it wasted time.
Write down one lesson God may be teaching me in my current 'Desert University.'
Stay connected to godly people during seasons when direction or visible progress is unclear.
Look for a community need where I can seek the good of others without compromising biblical convictions.
Identify one person I can intentionally disciple, encourage, or help take a next step toward Jesus.
When fatigue comes, acknowledge it honestly and return attention to Jesus rather than relying only on willpower.
Use Hebrews 12:3 as a prayer prompt when I feel weary or faint-hearted.
Review one responsibility that has become centered on achievement, influence, or results and deliberately put Jesus back at the center.
Encourage someone who believes their most useful years are behind them.
Finish one difficult but worthwhile task this week with the prayer: 'No reserves, no retreat, no regrets. Jesus, keep me faithful.'

Today's Challenge

For seven days, begin with Hebrews 12:3. Name the place where you feel most tired, discouraged, overlooked, or uncertain, and then deliberately 'consider Him.' Write one sentence each day about what focusing on Jesus changes in that situation. Before the week ends, take one concrete step of obedience in your present season - encourage someone, disciple someone, serve a community need, resume a neglected calling, or simply keep faithfully doing the next right thing.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank You that You are not finished with me. Help me trust Your timing in every season, including the quiet places where I cannot yet see what You are doing. Use every experience You have allowed - success, failure, waiting, hardship, relationships, work, and disappointment - to shape me for faithful service. Keep me from believing I am too old, too young, too ordinary, or too late to be useful in Your kingdom. Give me courage to seek the good of the people around me without surrendering the truth You have entrusted to me. Show me whom I can encourage, disciple, mentor, or help follow Jesus. When doing good becomes tiring, keep me from losing heart. Fix my attention on Jesus. When I am discouraged, help me consider Him. When I am uncertain, help me trust His heart. When I am tempted to quit, remind me that there is nobody like Him. Keep Jesus at the center of my work, relationships, service, influence, and hope. Give me grace to live with no reserves, no retreat, and no regrets - focused on Jesus and faithfully moving forward. In His name, Amen.

About Today's Speaker

Dr. John Tolson is the founder of The Gathering Dallas and has spent more than four decades as a disciple-maker, speaker, author, and mentor. His ministry emphasizes helping men follow Jesus intentionally and then invest what they have learned into others. In this concluding Pinnacle Forum message, John draws from business leadership, mentoring, seminary, nonprofit development, community service, and seasons of personal transition to encourage believers that God continues shaping and using them throughout life. His closing emphasis is simple and

Christ-centered: when weariness comes, focus on Jesus and keep moving.

About Today's Host

Mark Burns is General Manager of the WLUJ Family of Stations and Great News Radio Network and host of Mark & Friends. For decades, Mark has been involved in Christian radio and ministry, with a heart for helping listeners know Jesus and grow deeper in God's Word. Through Mark & Friends, he brings pastors, ministry leaders, teachers, missionaries, authors, and everyday believers around the microphone for biblical teaching, testimony, conversation, and encouragement. His desire is that each program help listeners learn, grow, and faithfully live out their relationship with Jesus.

Proofread Broadcast Transcript

Reading from Hebrews chapter 12, verse 3, Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. That was Hebrews chapter 12, verse 3. O magnify the Lord with me, let us exalt His name together. It's Wednesday, September 23, 2026.

Welcome to Mark & Friends. Today we continue Dr. John Tolson's message, Making Disciples Who Make Disciples, recorded at the Pinnacle Forum National Conference in Arizona this past April. Yesterday we considered the importance of having godly people around us, iron sharpening iron, and then intentionally pouring what God has taught us into somebody else.

Today John challenges us to recognize that whatever season we're in, God isn't finished with us, and when we become tired, discouraged, or wonder whether we're making a difference, John points us back to the one who must remain at the center of everything, Jesus. Learn more at PinnacleForum.com. Now let's continue with Dr. John Tolson. God is looking for committed and obedient people.

He's not looking for big people. Gideon was a little on the shy side. David was a teenager.

Moses had a murder rap sheet. Paul was a terrorist. One of Jesus' disciples was Simon the Zealot, which was a precursor to the hell's angels.

Peter was a liar and a braggart. God's looking for the committed, and he's looking for the obedient. Frankly, I have not always been obedient or fully committed, but at 63, I have burned the boats.

There is no possible retreat. I am all in for King Jesus. My dad and my grandfather were Baptist pastors in Appalachia, never pastored in a city larger than 2,000 people.

We had more cows than people. I went into teaching history. I served in Desert Storm with the Marines.

Then I launched Odysseyware from a napkin idea, and God grew that thing to 500 employees. And now I find myself running a non-profit in a jazz venue in my 60s. And you're like, how does that happen? And I'm going to tell you, Pinnacle Forum is how it happens.

It all began with a forum conversation challenging me to be more intentional in my discipling of young men. And I decided to go to seminary at 58 to study the Word at a deeper level so I could ground my discipling in truth. It was there that I met a professor who was putting together a Journey the Apostle Paul tour, which took me on a clipper ship cruise where I met the chairman of the board for music serving the Word on that cruise.

And one year later, he calls me looking for a CEO. None of that happens without being in a forum and godly leaders speaking into my life. The organization I inherited had some unique challenges.

I tried my best to find them someone, but none of the puzzle pieces fit. And finally, my wife, who I've been married to for 41 years, Margie, raise your hand, please. Thank you.

She said, you ought to go help those people. And I was like, you're just trying to kick me out of the house. And she was like, no.

She said, if somebody doesn't go help them, in 20 years, they'll have jazz events there, but nobody will ever know that the founder was a follower of Christ. You cannot let that happen. And then she started dropping some Harvard and Yale on me about organizations that start off right and go off the rails.

I knew nothing about jazz. I grew up in Appalachia, where gospel and country music reigned. You know the difference between a fiddle and a violin, right? The difference in a fiddle and a violin is the number of teeth in the person playing the instrument.

I decided I needed to learn a lot about jazz. So I read five books, and I came across a book called Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel. I listened to podcasts.

I watched documentaries. And today, in our \$30 million facility, we have world-class musicians writing and arranging songs, performing and recording some of the best music in the United States right here in our backyard. Phoenix will be known for jazz music that honors God.

Our goal on a Friday night is in a jazz venue in Paris, where they, at the end of the song, they tell the audience that that song was written and arranged by music serving the word Scottsdale, Arizona. We're going to launch a record label. And you're like, what do you know about record labels? About as much as I knew about software when I started Odysseyware.

But we need a record label right here in our backyard that will develop, produce, and honor God with great music such that on a Sunday morning in your church, it will have meaty biblical truths in the songs that are being sung, and the postscript will say music serving the word instead of Hillsong or Bethel. We were all taught that Martin Luther nailing the 95 thesis to the wall was the thing that started the Reformation. I would make the case that it was when he wrote A Mighty Fortress is Our God, so that a housewife could sing her liturgy on a Monday morning, or a farmer could sing deep biblical truths in a wheat field of Eastern Europe on a Thursday afternoon.

We want to take over the music. After taking over the reins, I soon discovered that the organization was investing a lot of dollars into local nonprofit communities without a real plan for whether that investment was wise or effective. And so we launched a faith-based nonprofit incubator.

It's a rigorous process. You apply, we train you hard. One of the worst things that can happen to a startup or to a nonprofit sometimes is if you actually give them resources, because it'll take six years to kill what should have died in six weeks.

We're going to put them through a rigorous process. We just finished our first cohort, and when they graduated, we gave each of them \$50,000 to launch their ministry in this city to make a difference. We asked three core questions.

What's the nature of the problem you're trying to solve? Number two, what makes you think you can solve it? And then number three, how are you going to scale this venture? It all started with joining a forum where leaders could engage at serious and committed levels of iron sharpening iron. The ideas and friendships made during this season prepared me for God's next assignment. So what is your season? Moses was 80 when God called him out of the desert to go back to Egypt and lead a group of slaves out and form them into a nation.

Caleb was 80 when he went into the promised land and he took the mountain God had promised. Some of us in this room have more time behind us than ahead of us, and yet God wants to use us. As Caleb said, may our strength be as our days.

We believe Ephesians 2.10, God goes to work every day and his project of the day is you. We are his workmanship. We are his poem.

God is writing the poem of you and he's writing the poem of me and he's doing it every day. And God has us in our season designed for us. There's no one on the planet that can do what the king has assigned for us to do.

Regardless of our age, we are never too old. At the same time, maybe you think you're too young. David Brainerd was married to the daughter of Jonathan Edwards.

He did incredible missionary work and was dead at 28. Spurgeon was gone at 58. Moody gone at 62.

William Borden was a wealthy Yale graduate who gave up a family fortune to become a missionary in China. He contracted spinal meningitis and died at 26 years. Oh, and yet in his Bible, these words were written in bold.

No reserves, no retreat, no regrets. Don't let your youth stop you from attempting big things for a great God. One of the movies that shaped my life story was the story of Eric Little in the classic Chariots of Fire.

In the movie and in real life, he is struggling whether to run in the 1924 Olympics. Or to go and serve in lifelong ministry. His sister's trying to convince him in the dialogue to go do the thing of eternal significance, to go into ministry.

The reality is he winds up doing both. He winds up running in a race for which he had never prepared and won the gold medal in the 1924 Olympics. And then he winds up practicing as a missionary and living and dying in China.

Today, today in communist China, there is a monument to a Scottish evangelical missionary because of the work he did during World War II. In the movie, his sister is trying to persuade him to do the greater work of missions. And his response still resonates with me 40 years later.

He said, when I run, I feel God's pleasure. God made us with purpose. And so what is that purpose? As long as we breathe, we have a purpose.

Some of us may wonder where we fit in God's purposes. Maybe we're unsure what God is doing. We can't see his hand, but we can trust his heart.

What did Moses do for 40 years while enrolled in desert university? Kind of quiet out there. Nobody's noticing. There's no social media.

There's no likes. Very little meaningful work happening in the desert. No headlines.

And yet God's season for Moses was the most impacting of his life. Whatever the courses of the curriculum at desert university, God was preparing him to lead a nation of slaves out from under the largest and wealthiest nation on the planet at that time. Saul spent much time in secret away from the spotlight before being launched in the ministry.

But Paul's greatest work was in Acts 29. How many of us know there's only 28 chapters to Acts? But in Acts 29, the apostle Paul turns the Mamertine prison in Rome into a publishing house, and he conquers the Roman empire by writing letters. Sometimes the greatest work that God does is in the quiet, when no one notices you.

If you're in a gap or inner desert season, the one thing that is indispensable is a forum of other leaders who can go through that with you. In my personal resume, I have a gap between the ages of 50 to 58. I can't put down that I started another \$100 million company.

There are no other organizations that I started, and some people might look at it as a lost season of life. Here I was in a place financially that most people would envy, and yet I felt lost. And unbeknownst to me, I was being matriculated in God's famous and fully accredited desert university.

I continued to be plugged into my church. I prayed. I started two forums.

I was busy, but the outward evidence was not there. And if you don't hear anything I say tonight, please listen to these next 60 seconds. The desert is lonely, and sometimes you may have to go into the cocoon before you can emerge as a butterfly.

God's timing is always perfect. You have influence. You have identity.

Shepherd it. Join someone whom God has called into a worthy work. And so what is the greatest thing you can do when in the desert? Start a forum.

Bring leaders together. Invest in their lives. Some of us need to launch a forum where we can shepherd someone whom God will guide to their next mission, or God will use them to help shape your next mission.

One of the classes God assigned to me in desert university was to serve as a mentor to inner city people who had developed hustles that they wanted to become businesses. That led to me serving on the board of that nonprofit. It was one of the most liberal organizations I'd ever encountered.

There were 13 members of the board and only one conservative Christian. And I served as the chairman. They kept deferring to my knowledge of people and systems and connections.

On another occasion, one of the most liberal professors at Arizona State University wanted to help launch a nonprofit for children graduating out of the foster care system. She wanted to create a permanent housing solution so that they could get a job and launch a career. And so I advised her, and I connected her with the most knowledgeable person in this city regarding housing, who also happens to be a Pinnacle Forum partner, and they're off and running.

She still relies on me to help her seek the peace of the city, even though we're at odds on things like sex and gender. I never compromised my Judeo-Christian values. The citizens of heaven and the citizens of this world want many of the same things.

They want the good and the peace of the city. And just like Jeremiah 29, we should seek it. When God enrolls us in Desert University, we need to take all the core classes.

But don't be surprised when God assigns you an elective class that doesn't seem to fit. Don't worry about it. Everything in your past is something God wants to use to make a difference.

Your time in the heat of trouble, your time on God's anvil, has shaped and sharpened you for this moment. No stroke of God's hand in shaping you was wasted. God is not done with you yet.

There are organizations in our city that need you to lead or support those who lead. Somebody ought to do something. Several years ago, right here in this city, a small filmmaker and fellow forum member named Michael Scott approached

a group of Pinnacle Forum partners with an idea to create a film to shine the light on a darkening world.

And because of the investment of that group of Pinnacle Forum partners, Pure Flix made the movie, God is Not Dead. Right here in this city, God's kingdom is looking for the obedient and the committed. The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever.

Jesus started with 12. He poured three years into them, and you and I sit here as a result. It starts with being a disciple maker.

The only thing we'll take to heaven are other people. Someone in a crowded room of 120 in an upper room, discipled someone who discipled someone who discipled someone who discipled us. As I start to wrap up, this work is going to get tiring.

I sleep less at 63 than at any other time in my life. If you're up at two or three o'clock in the morning, there's a good chance I'm up to. Text me, send me a message, amen.

I live in the fatigue. Maybe you're there as well. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to get up and I'm going to meet a group of young men I'm discipling at the gym at 5 a.m. That 220 pounds is not going to lift itself.

I have to watch everything I put in my mouth. I have to spend time in the word daily. I have to force myself to write notes of encouragement to others when I don't feel like it.

And sometimes we will get tired by doing good. Maybe you're sick. Maybe you're tired.

Maybe you're sick and tired. Maybe you're sick and tired of being sick and tired. God warns us not to become weary in well-doing, but the reality is we do get tired.

Do you ever get tired fighting the good fight? So how do we overcome tiredness and weariness? And I think Hebrews 12 verse 3 gives us the path. Consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, lest you grow weary or faint-hearted. So how do we deal with fatigue and weariness? Focus on Jesus.

How do we keep moving? Focus on Jesus. How do we deal with suffering? Focus on Jesus. How's the best way to help our children? Focus on Jesus.

How's the best way to change culture? Focus on Jesus. In this season of our lives and that of our country, you and I need to be centered on the purposes of God. If we're not careful, we can fall into bad theology thinking that the Bible is about us.

This Bible is not about us. The Bible is about Jesus. It's all about him.

It's all about his story, which is why we call it history. In Genesis, he's the seed of the woman. In Exodus, he's the Passover lamb.

In Ruth, he's the kinsman redeemer. In Isaiah, the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. In Matthew, he's the son of God.

In Mark, he's the son of man. In John, he's the word who became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

In Revelation, he's the lion and the lamb, who is worthy to judge and to restore everything. Every chapter in the Bible is about him, and there is nobody like him. You're dealing with tiredness? Look to Jesus.

You're dealing with discouragement? Look to Jesus. If you're a carpenter, you'll find Jesus to be the door. If you're a doctor, you'll find him to be the great physician.

If you're a traveler, you'll find him to be the way. If you're a seeker, you'll find him to be the truth. And if you're dead or dying, you'll find Jesus to be the life.

There's simply nobody like him. If you're at the end of your rope, Jesus is the hope of the world. If you can't trust anybody, he's the author and the finisher of our faith.

If you feel lonely and abandoned, he is the essence of love and connection. If you're a builder, you'll find him to be the chief cornerstone. If you're a baker, he's the bread of life.

There's nobody like him. If you're in the valley, you'll find him to be the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley. Jesus is the light of the world.

There's nobody like him. You ask Bartimaeus of Mark 10, what's it like to be blind, but now you can see? Ask Mary Magdalene of Mark 15, what's it like to be marginalized by society? Ask the demon-filled man in Mark 5, what's he like?

And they would say there's nobody like him. Ask the woman at Jacob's well in John 4, and she would say, come see a man.

There's nobody like him. Jesus said he would build his church, and the gates of hell would not prevail against her. And for 2,000 years, the kingdom of Jesus has met in caves and cathedrals.

She's met in open fields and shopping malls. She's gathered during times of poverty, persecution, plagues, and politics. The church is met when the stock market is up.

She gathered when the bottom fell out in the best and the worst of times. God's truth keeps marching on. And lastly, in 2033, we will celebrate the 2,000th anniversary of the resurrection.

How has the church been led by strong and enduring saints through the centuries? And how will it make it into the future? By focusing on Jesus. You ask Augustine or Aquinas, Luther or Calvin, Edwards or Whitfield, Moody or Spurgeon, and they would all agree there's nobody like him. If we want to change culture, Jesus must change us.

And he can use a forum to do exactly that. The single greatest thing we can do in our culture, in our community, is investing in making disciples of the man from Galilee. You and I were tempered and chosen for this moment in history.

How will we make it through difficult days? By focusing on him. By keeping Jesus the focus. You making disciples? Keep him the focus.

You tired? Keep him the focus. You and I were chosen for this moment. We were forged for this moment.

God has a plan for your life, and it involves discipling others. No reserves, no retreat, no regrets. Focus on Jesus and keep moving.

Because only he could take an ordinary Friday and make it a good Friday. And that's because there's nobody, absolutely nobody, like him. Amen, there's nobody like him.

And him is Jesus, listening friend. Maybe you're tired. Maybe you're discouraged.

Maybe you wonder whether your most useful years are behind you. But as John reminded us today, God isn't finished with you yet. As long as he gives us breath, there are people to love, people to encourage, and people we can help follow Jesus.

So let's keep the focus where it belongs. No reserves, no retreat, no regrets. Focus on Jesus and keep moving.

You've been listening to Dr. John Tolson, founder of The Gathering Dallas, in a special two-day presentation from the Pinnacle Forum National Conference. Learn more at PinnacleForum.com. And continue growing under the Mark & Friends tab at GreatNewsRadio.org or WLUJ.org, where you'll find today's program, transcript, and additional ministry resources. Thanks for listening.

Thanks for being a part of our radio listening family. This is Mark Burns with the Ministry of Great News Media. God bless you and have a great day and night.