Foreword by *New York Times* bestselling author Ann Voskamp

JODIE BERNDT

Praying the Scriptures for Your Life

31 Days *of* Abiding *in the* Presence, Provision, *and* Power *of* God

Praise for *Praying the Scriptures for Your Life*

Scripture is God's way of initiating a conversation; prayer is our response—and in *Praying the Scriptures for Your Life*, Jodie Berndt invites us into the dialogue on everything from strengthening our marriage and family relationships, to dealing with fear and anxiety, to discovering what to do in the face of unanswered prayer. This book is a powerful companion for our prayer life!

Mark Batterson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor of National Community Church

As a new mom, I so appreciated having one of Jodie Berndt's previous books to guide me in praying for my babies! Now I'm thankful for this book, as Jodie beautifully lays out the Scriptures to encourage my own prayer life and walk with the Lord.

Mary Kate Robertson, social media voice and blogger at *The Little DuckWife*

Jodie Berndt is the mentor and friend we all long to have. In this book, she ushers us into the presence of God and teaches us to stay there as she gives us deep theology in a practical, inspiring, and truly comforting way. Like a counselor, she touches on every part of our hearts as she leads us to God's truth and points us to the way to pray through our deepest needs and longings. This book is one you'll keep on your nightstand and pick up over and over.

Alyssa Joy Bethke, author of *Satisfied* and host of *The Real Life Podcast*

Prayer is such a powerful tool in our lives, but as Jodie Berndt reminds us, it is not a one-way conversation, with most of us doing the talking and asking. *Praying the Scriptures for Your Life* is a great tool to draw each of us closer to God, especially in these uncertain times. As you pause to pray over the next thirty-one days, you will see God's provision and power work miracles in your life. God's Word is alive and active and sharper than any double-edged sword and is meant to draw us closer to the One who desires an intimate relationship with us.

Anne Neilson, artist and author of *Angels: Devotions and Art to Encourage, Refresh, and Inspire*

I'm so grateful for the way that Jodie Berndt continues to teach us to pray the Scriptures, this time focusing deeply on the intimacy of our inner world in relationship with the Lord. I love the way she combines gentle inspiration with practical examples deeply rooted in biblical truth. This is a powerful and necessary book.

Pete Greig, founder of 24-7 Prayer International and author of *How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People*

For a decade, I have been using Jodie Berndt's books to guide me in praying for growth and direction for my kids. You can imagine how eager I was to dig into this resource for praying for myself! It did not disappoint.

Emily Thomas, founder of the *Mom Struggling Well* podcast

I've read a lot of books on prayer, but this is the one that unlocked a power I didn't even know I had. If you're looking to move your prayer life from dull and rote to alive and impactful, this is the transformative

book you need right now.

Jennifer Dukes Lee, author of *Growing Slow* and *It's All Under Control*

If you long for your prayer life to be more than just a shopping list of personal requests and a few quick "Bless them, Lord" sentiments for others, *Praying the Scriptures for Your Life* is just the resource you need. Packed with practical ways to deepen your walk with God, Jodie's book will guide you to an enriched prayer time as you not only become resolved to make connecting with God a priority but are shown just how to do so. Highly recommended!

Karen Ehman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Keep It Shut* and *Settle My Soul,*
Proverbs 31 Ministries speaker, wife, and mom of three

Saturate your soul with the Scriptures. This is the message of Jodie Berndt's newest book on prayer. Soaking our hearts and minds in God's living active words and then forming them into prayers is a profitable practice for abiding with the One who loves us more than we can imagine!

Barbara Rainey, author *of My Heart, Ever His: Prayers for Women*

Each one of Jodie Berndt's books have been profoundly impactful in my life and the lives of those around me. Her new book takes you deeper and allows you to linger longer in God's truths and in the power of prayer. As you abide in God, he will transform your life and through you bear much fruit for his kingdom. God will give you the ability to live out the fullness of all he has created you for. I pray that you'll read this book, reflect on its truths, and respond in such a way that you will live out the great destiny God planned you for. And be sure to share this book with others so they too will be blessed by God.

Sally Burke, president of Moms in Prayer International

Also by Jodie Berndt

Celebration of Miracles

Praying the Scriptures for Your Adult Children

Praying the Scriptures for Your Children

Praying the Scriptures for Your Teens

Praying the Scriptures for Your Adult Children Study Guide (available at jodieberndt.com)

Praying the Scriptures for Your Children Study Guide (available at jodieberndt.com)

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To Robbie—
forever and always.

For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
Psalm 84:11

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Foreword

“True, whole prayer is nothing but love,” wrote Saint Augustine.

It’s a tender question: is the only reason we don’t truly pray because we don’t truly love?

If we are not praying regularly, is it only because something else is regularly loved more than God?

I don’t know where I was when the conviction struck me so hard it stung for days. The only reason we fail to pray is because we’ve made an idol out of self. The only thing that prevents me from praying more—*is me.*

I look in the mirror, in my calendar, in my own heart and confess, I’ve had to painfully face it’s my own inflated sense of self-importance, the elevation of my plans, my work, my agenda, that keeps me from prayer-communion. That’s called idol worship. It’s a striking thing of deep conviction to realize: I don’t pray enough because I’m practicing idol worship.

But what else is it when I too often have something else that comes first, or one more thing to do, or anything else that’s more distracting, appealing, satisfying, instead of stopping my work to still my heart and speak words back to the very Word whence I came?

The truth I came to sit with is: my prayer life reflects my theology—or my idolatry.

Unless we make time to genuinely pray, our other priorities betray what we genuinely think of Jesus. The extent of prayer in one’s life is a direct function of whether something else has been set up as more important than God. I began to whisper it gently to my soul: Do not work so hard for Christ that you make no time to pray to Christ. He is the lifeblood of all work, all joy, all hope, all being, all communion.

I began to slowly turn and learn: when I choose to be still in prayer is when I know that He’s God . . . and I am not.

When I bow, idols topple.

Our life changed when we as a family began to embrace a daily rhythm of prayer, by gathering in a circle in our kitchen as the sun comes up, and bowing

our heads in prayer first thing, before any of us do anything else. The house of our Lord is a house of prayer—and we realize that prayer is the only way we can keep ours standing. Each morning, we pray honestly, vulnerably. We pray through tears, we pray His Word, we pray each one of us around the circle, we pray first thing, we pray our hearts to the One who gave us a new heart. This is what we began to do: we returned to our first love.

We discovered: prayer is not what we do before we begin our work. Prayer is our life's work.

Prayer becomes what we live when we want to get hold of God, not just get hold of what we want. And real prayer isn't about changing God's mind, but about finding God's heart, and letting His heart change our minds.

Is this why God urges us to pray without ceasing? We need to pray *without* ceasing—because it's the only way to live *in* communion. Without prayer, how can our life and His will have anything in common? Without prayer—we have no fellowship, no relationship, no worship.

But when we choose to enter a life of prayer, Christ enters into our thoughts, takes captive every thought because we are most captivated with Him, Him having first place in our hearts and hours and priorities—and the conversation never ends, and we have our heart's real desire—communion with Christ.

"I know of no better thermometer to your spiritual temperature than this, the measure of the intensity of your prayer," wrote Charles Spurgeon.

And the relief is? None of us pray alone.

Though you think no one is praying with you, the Ultimate One is praying for you.

The One who breathes stars breathes prayers for you, the One whose words spoke the world into being uses priceless words over your being, the One who made time lives beyond time, controls all of time, uses all of His time to pray for you, because you are priceless to Him.

Jesus is praying right now that the Spirit comforts you, strengthens you, anoints you with fresh oil of brave joy. Jesus is seeing us through, carrying us through, praying us through. And when we're struggling to pray, it's Jesus Himself who prays for all we're struggling with. There are arms that won't let you go, there are plans that won't abandon you, there are prayers that won't fail you.

Jesus won't get off His knees until you are in His arms.

Nothing makes you more fiercely brave than knowing Jesus is fiercely praying for you.

Hard times don't need to understand what God is doing—like they need to know that God's standing with us, that He's kneeling in prayer for us at all times.

The Word-formed, scriptural prayers of Jodie Berndt have led me into our Abba Father's heart on some of my very hardest days. When my spirit didn't know how to find words, the pages of Jodie's prayer books find the Word itself, giving His own words to us, that we may pray them back to the Word Himself. Jodie has become a prayer companion for me, the gripping, Word-saturated pages of her prayer books reaching over and grabbing hold of my hand and holding me like a lifeline, tied to the heart of God. Books from Jodie's *Praying the Scriptures* series have become the gifts I give for all occasions—because there is no greater gift than praying on all occasions, without ceasing. And there is nothing we need more than to learn how to become a prayer warrior—instead of a panicked worrier. Worry is just the facade of taking action—when prayer really is.

When I think of how prayer is always our most real work, our most meaningful act, I call to mind again the story of Abba Paul, that desert monk who wove baskets and prayers. And while other monks lived close enough to cities to sell their handiwork in the markets, Abba Paul lived such a distance that the cost of transportation would exceed any profits from selling the baskets. Nonetheless, each day he collected palm fronds and worked as faithfully as if basketmaking was his primary means of support. And come the end of the year, when his cave overflowed with long months of toil, he took a torch to the work of his hands and the flames devoured and rose higher and crackled long into the night. Then, come morning, the heat died away, satiated. And Abba Paul stood in the long quiet and the wind blew away the ashes of all his work.

It is not the products of our days that will matter in the end, but the prayers of our days. *Prayer is not what we do before we work, nor is prayer what we do instead of our work. Prayer is our life's work.*

Because by and large the work of our hands, the to-do lists, the plotting across planners—while all needful acts of service, these acts will become ash in wind. "On the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames" (1 Corinthians 3:13–15 NLT).

What survives fire? Our places of work won't. Neither will the actual work of our hands. Abba Paul's baskets didn't. But what was woven into the baskets did—the prayers. *Ora et labora*—pray and work—but what is everything? Weave prayers *through* all the work.

The prayers we weave into the matching of socks, the stirring of oatmeal, the washing of floors, the coming and going and all the moments of our work, these

survive fire.

Turn these pages, and return to your first love—for prayer is nothing but love for Love Himself.

We were loved to life by the Word, by Him kneeling close and kissing us to life with His warm breath, and when our words return to Him in prayer, we are returning home. Prayer is our coming home.

We become whole—when our breath becomes prayer.

Ann Voskamp, from the farm, early 2021, author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

Part 1

An Invitation to Abide

Chapter 1

What Is Abiding?

"Remain in me, as I also remain in you."
John 15:4

I remember, back when I was a young girl, coming into the kitchen and seeing my mom's spiral notebook—the one in which she made a fresh to-do list each morning. "Make List" was always the first thing she wrote, followed by "Read Bible," and then on the third line, "Pray."

"Why do you do that?" I asked one day. "I mean, you do these things every day. Do you really need to jot yourself a reminder? And can't you combine reading your Bible and praying into one 'Time with God' or whatever?"

"It's not that I need a reminder," Mom said with a laugh. "It's just that I want to feel like I've accomplished something—and if I get my list made, then I have. And when I spend time with the Lord, if I count that as two things instead of just one, I get to check more stuff off!"

Today, as a grown woman who makes her own lists (and who is not above noting something she has already done, just for the pleasure of checking it off), I appreciate my mother's perspective. And I bet you do too. Because we can't help ourselves: We *want* to be people of impact. We *like* being productive. We are created, God says, to do good works—works he prepared in advance.[1] We want to get to it!

Which is partly why, when I read John's gospel and got to chapter 15, I didn't really think it was intended for me.

I mean, I know that *all* of God's Word was written for *all* of his people, but this particular passage—one where Jesus tells us to "remain" in him eleven times in only ten verses—just seemed so *passive.* Like it had been written for people who had time to be still—people with fewer children and less laundry than me. People who were content to sit and wait for their name to be called, like you do at the DMV.

DMV people, I thought, *would appreciate John 15.*

The fact that I had memorized huge chunks of this chapter (well, a few verses anyway) in the King James Version for my grandmother, who wanted Bible verse recitals as her Christmas gift every year, didn't help. King James did not say *remain.* He said *abide.* And even *abideth.*

I didn't even know what that meant.

Nor did my much younger brother. We'd grown up going to a Christian family camp every summer, one where we learned to sing a song called "Abiding in the Vine." Having no idea what that was, four-year-old David sang what he thought were the lyrics: *Fighting in the barn! We're fighting in the barn!*

And honestly? To me, David's version made much more sense. I mean, anybody could picture what a barn fight looked like, but *abiding*? In a *vine*? Not so much.

Still though. Eleven mentions. In just ten verses. Clearly Jesus thought that abiding—or remaining or whatever it was—was something important.

What It Means to Abide

I needed help. I needed wisdom from a varsity Christian. I turned to Warren Wiersbe, a Bible brainiac with a knack for putting the grass where the sheep can reach it. I opened his *Be Transformed* and read this: "To 'abide' . . . means to keep in fellowship with Christ so that His life can work in us and through us to produce fruit."[2]

I liked that. The idea that God can work *in* us and *through* us to do stuff excites me. It makes John 15 sound dynamic. Active. Productive—in the best kind of way.

I wanted more.

I picked up Andrew Murray's *Abide in Christ*, a book that was originally published in the late 1800s. The language has supposedly been updated for the "modern reader," but buckle up, because it's no *People* magazine:

> If, in our orthodox Churches, the abiding in Christ, the living union with Him, the experience of His daily and hourly presence and keeping, were preached with the same distinctness and urgency as His atonement and pardon through His blood, I am confident that many would be found to accept with gladness the invitation to such a life, and that its influence would be manifest in their experience of the purity and the power, the love and the joy, the fruit-bearing, and all the blessedness which the Saviour connected with the abiding in Him.[3]

I read that—that one single sentence—and I felt like Murray was getting at something really profound. But I wasn't exactly sure what. So I read it again.

And again.

And then, the third time through, it hit me. Murray's point, in a nutshell, was this: If Christians got as excited about staying *connected* to Christ as we did about *coming* to him in the first place, we'd experience more power. We'd feel more joy. We'd become people of impact. The deepest cry of our souls—for an encounter with Jesus that will sustain us even when our hearts fail and our prayers feel empty and flat—would be satisfied.

I could feel my toes starting to tingle. John 15—and the whole idea of abiding—was not as dull as I had thought. I went back to my bookshelf and dug out R. A. Torrey. He wrote *How to Pray* in 1900.

(And if you think you are sensing a theme—as in, a lot of input from dead authors—you are right. My library is full of old stuff. I figure that if somebody's work has lasted for fifty, a hundred, or even more years, it must be good. Not a passing fad. Not like platform sneakers, for instance. Or kale.)

And sure enough, Torrey delivered:

> To abide in Christ . . . is to renounce all life independent of Christ, and constantly to look to Him for the inflow of His life into us, and the outworking of His life through us. When we do this, and in so far as we do this, our prayers will obtain that which we seek from God.[4]

Our prayers will obtain that which we seek from God. Oh my goodness. Could there be a more captivating invitation than that which leads to tangible answers to prayer? Taken together with Wiersbe's promise of a fruit-bearing life and Murray's assurance that abiding opens the door to things like power and joy, Torrey's idea—that connection to Christ is what facilitates a powerful prayer life—was enough to push me over the edge. I was ready to abide.

It's Not Up to Us

But . . . how? I knew what it looked like to *come* to Christ in the first place—to acknowledge my sin, to receive mercy and grace, to enter into a love relationship with the Lord—but what did it look like to *stay*? What if I got distracted? What if I wound up like my dog Minnie?

Minnie is a white Labrador puppy. She comes when she's called, and she will gladly sit still for a treat. But then, once she's inhaled whatever bone-shaped snack you give her, her attention is prone to wander. She loves us, to be sure, but throw a squirrel or a ball in the mix and she's gone.

Could that happen to me? When I come to God—when I taste and see that he is good—how can I be sure I won't go running after some squirrel? How can I

know I will stay? Is abiding a willpower thing?

I went back and reread all the biblical scholars and—to a person—here's what they said:

It's not up to us.

Sure, we can choose whether or not we want to lean into God, and whether or not we'll surrender to him. But when daily life presses in—when we have to stop being "holy" and attend to the toddler who's sick, the coworker who misunderstood our email, the spouse who can't find the butter—that doesn't sever our connection to Christ. God's grace does not stop working once we get saved.

Paul talks about this very thing in his letter to the Philippians: "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion," he writes.

"God is working in you," he continues, "giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him."

And then, lest there be any doubt that God is the one who always makes the first move, Paul adds this: "I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me."[5]

When we reach out for Christ, we discover that he has already reached out to us. The love that saves us is the same love that keeps us attached. We don't have to struggle or strive for connection; rest is a gift, and abiding is what equips our soul to receive it, even when our minds or our bodies are occupied elsewhere. "Come to me," Jesus says to the weary and burdened, "and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."[6]

The Productivity and the Peace

I can hear what you're thinking. You're asking yourself the question that every parent has heard hundreds (thousands?) of times: *Wait, what?*

I know. I thought the same thing. How can Christ's invitation to abide—to make us people of impact, to give us power and joy, to transform how we pray—*simultaneously* be an invitation to rest? Wait! What?

All I can say is, look at Moses.

When God told Moses to leave the wilderness and take the Israelites to the Promised Land—a job that would undoubtedly involve a lot of herding and hauling and walking and work—he gave him a twofold promise: "My Presence will go with you," God said, "and I will give you rest."[7]

Moses could work hard—*really* hard—but it wouldn't be a frenzied or driven-to-succeed sort of work. Instead, moving all of those people and animals and possessions could be done while his soul stayed at rest. Why? Because God was with him.

And it's the same thing for us.

When we choose to surrender to Jesus—putting down roots and living not so much in a *place* as in a *person*, making "the Most High your dwelling," as the psalmist says[8]—the Holy Spirit moves into our lives. His presence goes with us. He turns our deepest thoughts toward God so that, whether we're sitting in church, crafting a sales presentation, or loading groceries into the back of the car, our hearts and minds can enjoy perfect peace. The two things—the productivity and the peace—can happen at once.

My mother—the to-do list lady—understands this dynamic. When I told her I was trying to understand what abiding looks like in everyday life, she told me this story:

> One Thanksgiving Day, before all the family arrived, I was stirring the gravy, mashing the potatoes, and cooking all the vegetables. I was whirling around between all the pots, trying not to let anything burn.
>
> I looked out the door, and I saw my husband just sitting in a chair, reading his Bible. "Lord!" I said. "Look at me. I used to be a Mary. Now look at me. I've turned into a Martha! All I really want to do is to be with *you*, Lord!"

Then, she says, she heard the Lord speak in his gentle whisper: "Where do you think you are right now?"

Right there by the stove, potato masher in hand, Mom had her answer: God knew her desire was to abide in him—and there he was, in her kitchen, abiding in her.

Abiding Transforms Our Prayer Life

Abiding, then, boils down to a willingness to surrender. It's taking our everyday, ordinary, potato-mashing lives and placing them before God as an offering—not trying to live up to any sort of impossible standard, but simply trusting the Holy Spirit to change us, renew us, and keep us connected. "Embracing what God does for you," Paul writes, "is the best thing you can do for him."[9]

All of which has a transformational effect on the way we pray.

At its most basic level, prayer signals relationship; it's the vehicle God invented to allow us to communicate with him. And when we take God up on his

invitation—when we say yes to dwelling in Christ and to letting him dwell in us—our prayer life changes. No longer do we cultivate our own feelings and desires; rather, it is Christ who forms his thoughts, emotions, and purposes in us—and the more we allow this life-giving flow of his life into ours, the more powerful and effective our prayers become.

Scripture reinforces God's desire for connection. God could, of course, do stuff on his own (heal this person here, make it rain there), and sometimes it seems like he does. Far more often, though, we see him *waiting* on people, *engaging* with people, getting to *know* people—and then meeting their needs—through their prayers.[10]

(And if you only look up one endnote in this chapter, make it that one. Connecting with people—letting us know he sees us and knows us—is so important to God.)

In John 15:7, tucked into the very center of the call to abide, Jesus gives us one of the most jaw-dropping promises in all of Scripture. "If you remain in me," he says, "and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." We'll dig into this if-then dynamic in the next chapter; for now, though, consider the fact that, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to experience a deeper level of desire, one where our raw and unformed thoughts begin to reflect purposes that God wants to accomplish—*even if we're not consciously aware that we are praying!*

Abiding in Christ sharpens our spiritual senses, equipping us to pray "without ceasing."[11] In her book *Live a Praying Life*, Jennifer Kennedy Dean maintains that prayer is not something we start and then stop. It is a continual flow:

> Your mind is an amazing creation. It functions efficiently on many levels at once . . . At one time you may be driving a car, remembering directions, carrying on a conversation, retaining a grocery list in your memory, observing the time, and on and on and on. And there are mental processes going on that you are not even aware of. Consider this: At one of those levels, prayer is always going on. This is true because the Spirit of Christ lives in you and He is always praying.
>
> Sometimes, prayer is at the most conscious and aware level of thought. Other times it is down a level or two . . . The sweet aroma of prayer is always rising from my innermost being (and yours) before the throne.[12]

Jennifer became a dear friend of mine before her death in 2019. Ever ready to apply her science-oriented brain to biblical concepts, she considered prayer to be "proof" of how much God loves us. Why else, she wondered, would he choose to work *with* us and *through* us instead of *around* us?

I remember Jennifer telling me that in Psalm 37:4 ("Take delight in the

LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart"), the word *delight* comes from the Hebrew word *anog*, which means "soft" and "moldable." When God has your heart, she said, he molds it and shapes it, giving us desires that we may not even be fully aware of.

"And then," she said with a smile, "God says, 'Yes.'"

Chapter 2

Why Pray the Scriptures?

"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."
John 15:7

If you've been around the Bible for any length of time, you've probably noticed that you can read a passage and learn something one day, and then—a day, a week, or a year or more later—you can read it again and discover something entirely different.

That may have been what Jesus was talking about when he said, "Every student well-trained in God's kingdom is like the owner of a general store who can put his hands on anything you need, old or new, exactly when you need it." Put another way, the Bible is like a storeroom in which we find treasure that is both new and fresh and old and familiar.[1]

All of which to say that, no matter whether this is your first attempt to dig into John 15 or you've read it a dozen times, there is gold in these hills. And I want you to picture the scene.

Jesus is with his disciples, his closest companions on earth. He has washed their feet, celebrated the Passover meal, and told them about the Holy Spirit and what he would do. He has much more to say—more than his friends can bear to hear at that point—and he knows his time is growing short.[2] He will, in fact, be arrested later that night.

Jesus chooses his words carefully. "If you remain in me," he says, "and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

To me, that's remarkable. Not just because he says we can ask for whatever we want (we'll get to that in a minute), but because, out of all the topics in the universe that Jesus could have covered, he chose to drill down on prayer.

Think about it. He's with his inner circle—the guys he has chosen to follow him, to learn from him, and ultimately to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Jesus could have taught them how to preach a really good three-point sermon.

He could have doubled down on what it took to heal people. He could have talked about turning water to wine or (in a nod to what was undoubtedly one of his most popular miracles) circled back to what it looked like to feed five thousand people from a single lunch box.

But no. Jesus doesn't cover any of these "how-to" topics. Instead, he focuses on how abiding—how dwelling in him and letting his words dwell in us—can, and should, impact how we pray.

Jesus' Model for Prayer

I don't know about you, but I spent a lot of years thinking that prayer was basically a one-way conversation in which I'd ask God for what I thought would be good and then see what happened. If my relationships or my circumstances lined up with my requests, I would know that God said yes. And if not, he said no. I didn't begrudge God when he turned me down (I knew verses like Isaiah 55:9, which explains that God's ways and his thoughts are higher than ours), but I much preferred it when I'd put in a prayer and get the answer I wanted.

I liked it when prayer worked like a vending machine.

But that's not how Jesus sees prayer. As we see in the Lord's Prayer, he puts *relationship* ahead of *results.* When Jesus tells us to call God "our Father," he invites us to experience a whole new level of access and intimacy. Now, in John 15, he calls us to come even closer. To *connect.*

Jesus' model for prayer is based on attachment. On abiding. On the idea that if we remain in him and allow his words to soak into our souls, we can pray with the full and wholehearted expectation that God will answer.

That's an incredible promise—but it's conditional.

I'm no math-brain, but I remember enough from my ninth-grade geometry class to know that in a conditional statement, the *if* clause causes the *then* clause to happen. We've already considered the first part of the promise and how abiding—remaining—in Christ allows the Holy Spirit to influence our desires. Our prayers are no longer just "our" prayers; rather, they are petitions that draw their inspiration from the heart of God.

The second condition—the part of John 15:7 where Jesus says "if my words remain in you"—works much like the first. In this case, though, the Bible—God's Word—actually *creates* our desires. The more we dig into Scripture, letting the words we read penetrate our thoughts and shape our perspective, the more our longings will start to reflect what God already wants to do.

The more our prayers will line up with his plans.

And the more we will position ourselves to be people of impact.

We see this dynamic played out over and over again in the pages of Scripture, in places like Psalm 1:1–3. “Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the LORD [that is, in God’s Word], and who meditates on his law day and night. That person,” the psalmist writes, “is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.” Soaking up God’s Word equips us to be fruit-bearing people.

Fruit, when it’s talked about in the Bible, is often an outward expression of an inward power. In Galatians 5:22, for example, Paul writes about the fruit of the Spirit—things like love, joy, peace, and gentleness—which are visible manifestations of an unseen inner power at work in our lives. In the John 15 passage, when Jesus invites us to ask for whatever we wish, he tells us why: “This,” he says, “is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”[3]

God wants us to bear fruit. *Much* fruit. And delighting in his Word—letting it dwell in us and give shape to our desires and requests—can open the door to a harvest of answered prayer that extends beyond anything we could have imagined.

Lay the Track Down

So what does it look like, in practical terms, to let the Bible shape our desires and requests? Here’s a simple example of how this can work.

As I write this, I’m working my way through the Gospels, using a Bible reading plan that lets me check off sections I’ve read every day. A few days ago, I came upon the story in Luke 5:1–11 where Jesus asks Simon to put his boat out from the shore so he could use it as a pulpit of sorts, since the crowd was pressing in on him. Simon was cleaning his nets at the time, but he complied.

But then after Jesus had finished teaching, he made a second request: “Push out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.”

Simon was an experienced fisherman who had been up all night long. He had to have been tired. Discouraged, even. Had I been in Simon’s sandals, I might have balked.

But he doesn’t. Instead, Simon says this: “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.”

Because you say so.

Right there was the prayer prompt I needed. “Lord,” I prayed, “help me obey

you, even when what you're asking me to do doesn't make sense. May I always be willing to let down my nets—to do what you want—simply because you say so."

Had I been thinking about obedience when I opened my Bible that day? No. But just reading a handful of verses reminded me of how important it is to be ready and willing to do what God says. In Simon's case, obedience led to an "above and beyond" blessing; he and his partners hauled in so many fish that both of their boats started to sink! Who knows what God might do in my life—and in your life—when we ask him to make us quick to obey?

We don't know—we can't know—the good thing God might have in store as we ground our prayers in his Word.

One year, for example, I decided to pray 2 Peter 1:2 on behalf of one of my dearest prayer partners. She is a woman whose zeal for life is almost unmatched—she lives big, you might say—and the word *abundance* in that verse caught my eye. "May grace and peace be hers in abundance," I prayed over this friend, again and again. What I didn't know—what I couldn't have known—was that she would come up against some incredible challenges in her workplace that year, including rumors and lies that eventually led to her leaving her job. Had my friend not been thoroughly covered in God's grace and peace, the fear and anxiety that tried to capture her heart during that difficult season might have succeeded. As it was, she weathered a six-month-long storm and, when she came out of the darkness, she found herself in a new job, one far more fulfilling (and financially rewarding) than anything she could have imagined.

I was asking God for abundance. He was willing to provide that—and he did—but he knew my friend would need his grace and peace even more.

And here's the thing about praying the Scriptures. We don't do the blessing, the healing, the providing, the protecting. That's God's job. Our job is simply to be the conduit for his power. The *branch*, to use John 15 terminology, through which the sap can flow.

Watchman Nee, a Chinese Christian writer, put it like this: "Our prayers thus lay the track down which God's power can come. Like some mighty locomotive, his power is irresistible, but it cannot reach us without rails."[4]

Let's lay the track down.

God's Word Has Us Covered

Stories like the one about God providing grace and peace for my friend—long before she knew she'd be out of work for a while—should not come as a

surprise. Ephesians 3:20 tells us that God is able to do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” And when we pray prayers birthed out of time spent in Scripture—when Christ’s words remain in us and animate our desires—we tap into a power that goes beyond what our minds can conceive.

“My word,” God says in Isaiah 55:11, “will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Likewise, in Jeremiah 1:12, God declares, “I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.”

And his word comes with clout. It’s like fire, God says, or like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces.[5] It’s what he used to create the whole world, for goodness’ sake! How much more can he use it to shape our lives?

Author Mark Batterson agrees that Scripture opens us up to an ongoing conversation with God. “The Bible,” he writes, “wasn’t meant to be *read through*; the Bible was meant to be *prayed through.* And if you pray through it, you’ll never run out of things to talk about.”[6]

He’s right. When we use Scripture as a launching pad for our prayers, we never run out of material. Our health, our friendships, our jobs, our families, our finances—all of these things (and so many more) are covered in the pages of the Bible. They matter to God! There is not a need we will face, a concern we will have, a relationship we’ll want to navigate, that God has not already thought of—and provided for—in his Word.

Effective time management? “Teach us to number our days, so we may gain a heart of wisdom.” (based on Psalm 90:12)

Dealing with things like worry and fear? “Don’t let us be anxious or afraid, but instead move us to cast all our anxiety on you, knowing that you care for us.” (based on 1 Peter 5:7)

Being kinder, or more bighearted, toward others? “Prompt us to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and willing to share.” (based on 1 Timothy 6:18)

Those are just a few of the prayer prompts we find in the Bible; there are countless more to discover—prayer-shaping verses we’ll unearth during our thirty-one days of abiding in the presence, provision, and power of God. And the best part?

The best part of the John 15:7 promise isn’t just the fact that we can ask for whatever we want. The best part is that when we respond to Jesus’ invitation—remaining in him, and letting his words remain in us—we get to live out John 15:8.

We bring glory to God.

We become productive, fruit-bearing people.

And we discover the security of knowing that we are Christ's disciples. That we are part of God's family. That we belong.

Chapter 3

How to Use This Book

The word of God is living and active and full of power.
Hebrews 4:12 AMP

What do you want me to do for you?

Jesus posed the question twice in back-to-back conversations.[1] The first time, he was talking to James and John, two disciples (who were also brothers) who wanted to know if they could sit with Jesus—one on his right and one on his left—in his "glory."

And then, just a few verses later, Jesus stopped when he heard the cries of a blind man. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asked. "Rabbi," the man answered, "I want to see."[2]

Today, when we open our Bibles, we marvel at the chutzpah (and I'm pretty sure this word fits) the brothers displayed. To sit on each side of Jesus? Seriously? Who did these guys think they were?

The other disciples expressed their own indignation (maybe, I've wondered, because they didn't think to ask first?), but Warren Wiersbe has a slightly different spin on their request. Given that Jesus had just been talking about his impending death, Wiersbe says it "took a great deal of faith" to ask what they did.[3] James and John actually *believed* Jesus would rule a kingdom one day, and that they would (as he had promised) sit on one of twelve thrones.[4] Still though. The brothers' request was not about bringing God glory; it was a self-centered desire. Plus, Jesus said, they didn't know what they were asking. (Tuck that one away for a sec—we'll come back to it later.) He said no.

The blind guy though? He got what he wanted. He received his physical sight. Spiritually, he already had it; when he called Jesus "Rabbi," what he was really saying was *Rabboni*—which literally means "my Master."[5] It was an expression of personal faith and connection. The blind beggar knew exactly who Jesus was—and upon receiving his healing, he followed him.

Let Scripture "Read" You

Looking at these back-to-back encounters with Jesus, I think both the brothers and the blind man met the "conditions" for prayer outlined in John 15:7. Clearly, each request sprung from a connection to Jesus (they each knew him as "Lord"), as well as a firm belief in his words (the brothers had internalized Jesus' kingdom promise; the blind man had heard enough of his teaching to know that Jesus had the power to heal). Where they diverged, perhaps, was in their motives. The brothers were after an important position; the blind man wanted to position himself to physically follow the man his spirit called Master.

I say "perhaps" because motives can be tricky. For instance, I may think I'm being selfless when I fix Robbie his favorite dinner, but because I know he'll appreciate it—he'll appreciate *me*—it's a win for me too. Only God knows what *really* drives us to do what we do. "All a person's ways seem pure to them," reads Proverbs 16:2, "but motives are weighed by the LORD."

Motives *are* tricky, and yet they play a key role in answered prayer. "When you ask, you do not receive," cautions James 4:3, "because you ask with wrong motives." Is there a way we can be sure that when we pray, our motives are pleasing to God?

One litmus test is, of course, John 15:8—the follow-up to Jesus' "ask me anything" offer. *Will our request bring God glory? Will it equip us to be fruitful? Is it the kind of thing that, when God answers, will show that we're Christ's disciples, that our lives are devoted to learning from him?*

A more broad-based test is the totality of the Bible. "All Scripture," Paul writes, "is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right."[6] When we read God's Word—and allow it to "read" us—we can discover what pleases God and what doesn't.

And Scripture, as we give it room to "abide" in our hearts and our minds, *does* inspect us. Hebrews 4:12 says God's word is "active and alive," and that it "judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." That's the way the New International Version puts it; the New Living Translation is a bit more explicit. It says that the Bible "exposes our innermost thoughts and desires." And the Amplified Bible puts it even more clearly:

> For the word of God is living and active *and* full of power [making it operative, energizing, and effective]. It is sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as the division of the soul and spirit [the completeness of a person], and of both joints and marrow [the deepest parts of our nature], exposing *and* judging the very thoughts and intentions of the heart.

"No other habit," writes pastor Rick Warren, "can do more to transform your life and make you more like Jesus than daily reflection on Scripture."[7] It's true:

the more we reflect on the Bible—the more we allow it to shape our thoughts, our actions, our conversations, our prayers—the more the crooked or winding pathways of our motives will straighten themselves and begin to line up with what's pure and right. The more our prayers will line up with God's purposes.

Read, Reflect, and Respond

I've structured this book a little differently from previous titles in the *Praying the Scriptures* series. At the end of each chapter, instead of finding a collection of verses to pray, you'll have an opportunity to *read* a few verses, *reflect* on how they intersect with your life, and then *respond* by praying the Scriptures.

For instance, in the chapter about dealing with worry, you're invited to consider Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

We know this verse is not the only place in the Bible where God tells us to exchange worry for trust, to experience the comforting steadiness of his presence, and to enter into his peace. God does not want his children to be anxious, afraid, or stressed-out. But *reading* a verse like Psalm 46:10 and *reflecting* on it (and then praying it) are very different exercises.

Let's give this a try so you can see how it works. Go ahead and read Psalm 46:10. Do it out loud if you can:

> Be still, and know that I am God.

Now here's how we might reflect on these words, praying them back to God:

Heavenly Father,

Help me be still. Let me get off the treadmill of worry, busyness, confusion, and fear.

Quiet my heart. Help me be still.

I want to know you are God.

I don't want to just hope this; I want to be certain of it.

Show me, Lord. Let me know you are God . . .

And then, as we continue to reflect on this little phrase, we may find ourselves saying:

You are God. You are in control. You are the Lord of lords. King of kings.

The Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

You are GOD.

See how that works? With just a few breaths born from a sentence that's a mere eight words long, we can move from striving to stillness, from panic to peace, from fearful to free as we pray!

You can take hold of a verse and do this at any moment—driving to work, standing in the grocery store checkout line, folding the umpteenth load of laundry that week. But I want to encourage you, if you don't do this already, to carve out a specific time and place to meet with God.

Weather permitting, I love to grab a mug of coffee, my Bible, and a journal and meet God in the early morning on my screened porch. Perhaps you've heard people talk about "thin places"—places where, almost from the moment you get there, you sense the line between heaven and earth start to dissolve. That's the screened porch for me. I get out there sometimes and God's presence seems almost tangible. (I'd be lying if I didn't admit I felt the air more than once, just to see.)

It's not like this happens all the time. There are days when I'm out there with my Bible and the words feel more like ink on a page than they do like anything that might—to borrow John's term—become "flesh."[8] Not only that, but we live in a Navy town, and there are plenty of mornings when the jet noise—the "sound of freedom" we've learned to live with and love—shatters the calm. Or when the dog's tail connects with my coffee. Or when someone—my husband, a child, the pest control guy—pokes their head through the door and I find myself thinking about Susanna Wesley, a woman who birthed nineteen children (including Charles and John) and was known to pull her kitchen apron over her head as a signal to the kids that she was spending time with the Lord and should not be disturbed.

Maybe, I think on those days, what I really need isn't so much a prayer journal but a nice full-body bib.

You get the idea. Whether it's a screened porch, a park bench, or a special chair tucked in the corner of your bedroom, it can help to find a place that feels, for lack of any other word, a little bit *holy.* A place where the distractions of daily life don't seem to press in quite so easily as they do elsewhere. A place where the muscle memory in your spirit can speak to your brain and say, "Shh . . . God is near."

I envision the "Read, Reflect, Respond" section at the end of each chapter as a tool to enhance your own prayer time—your own conversations with God—but if you want to share your journey through these pages with a trusted prayer partner, or even a small group, be my guest. I recommend keeping a journal

handy to record your insights and prayers, as well as God's answers, but I realize that not everyone is a "prayer journal person." (My husband, for instance, is not; I'm always amazed by his ability to recall thoughts, prayers, and entire conversations without taking a single note, while I struggle to remember what I had for breakfast, let alone what I was talking to God about last Tuesday.)

If that's how you're wired—if you're not a big writer—consider making notes in this book. If you pray a particular verse for yourself or a loved one, write the date in the margin, along with a word or two to help you remember what was going on when you prayed. That way, you can remember to thank God when he answers—and you'll have a record of his faithfulness. There's nothing like seeing God spur you to press in for an even deeper encounter with his power and his love.

One more to-do. If you find a verse that speaks with particular power to you, try to memorize it. Write it on an index card and take it with you, reviewing it again and again until it's as familiar as your home address. You won't always have this book or a Bible handy when a prayer need arises; the more biblical "capital" you stash in your memory bank, the easier it will be to make a withdrawal and the more strategic, and satisfying, your prayer life will become.

What Do You Want God to Do?

True confession: When my editor broached the idea of writing a book that would equip readers to pray God's Word over their lives, I balked. Like many Christians, I tend to feel selfish when I pray about personal needs; prayer feels better—holier, somehow—when it's done on behalf of other people. Praying the Scriptures for my life felt like navel-gazing. I don't want to look down; I want my gaze to be up.

But then God derailed that train of thought. He reminded me of how much I love it when my kids share their lives with me. When they ask my advice. When they seek comfort for some sadness or have some joy to share. My children are young adults now, and they tease me for saving the texts and photos they send. I can't help it though; I love conversations with them!

I think it's the same way with God. No detail of our lives is too large—or too small—to share with him. He loves when we seek his perspective. He longs to comfort us in our pain. He's plotted our victories since before time began; his heart sings when the ordained day arrives and they become real. Why wouldn't he want us to talk to him about all of this stuff?

Not only that, but after camping out in John 15 for the better part of two

years—reading it again and again and again—I've come to realize that the whole reason God wants us to remain in him and let his words remain in us is to shape how we live. How we love. How we pray.

And speaking of how we pray . . .

Let me ask you a version of the same question Jesus asked James and John and then repeated when he heard the blind man shouting his name: *What do you want God to do in your life?*

Some of us may be navigating rocky places in marriage or needing God's provision in our job. Others may find themselves grappling with fear, worry, or grief—or having to wait on an answer to prayer that feels too long in coming. Maybe we're dealing with a relationship wound, a betrayal where extending forgiveness or being willing to love is something we just don't think we can do.

Maybe we just need to know that we're loved and that who we are matters to God.

In the pages ahead, you'll find thirty-one different prayer concerns. Pray through them over thirty-one days or thirty-one weeks—or at whatever pace works for you. Approach them in order or poke around randomly, choosing the topics that color your life. And feel free—*please* feel free—to adapt any and all of these prayers so they become petitions not just for yourself but for the people you love.

And if you don't see a particular concern covered here, remember that there is not a single need you will face that God has not already thought of, and provided for, in his Word. Open your Bible—use a concordance if you need help finding particular words—and ask God to show you how to pray.

Because here's the thing. We are not praying alone. When we abide in Christ, we abide with his Spirit—and the Holy Spirit's job is to help us. We may not know what to pray for, but he does (even if it's something, Scripture says, that is too deep for words). And because of how well God knows our hearts and how well the Spirit knows God's heart, we can be certain that whatever the Holy Spirit prays for us will be good—and that it will line up perfectly with God's will.[9]

So don't worry about praying for the "wrong" thing. Trust the Spirit to lead you—and know that God won't turn you away, any more than he turned away James and John. He may just say no.

Which is okay.

I like how Tim Keller put it when he wrote about prayers that don't get answered the way we want them to. "We have the assurance that God, our heavenly Father, always wants the best for his children," he writes. "God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew

everything he knew."[10]

In the brothers' case, Jesus declined their request for two reasons. One was that the celestial seating chart was not his to arrange; "These places," he said, "belong to those for whom they have been prepared."[11]

As a mother who's planned three big weddings, I find that Jesus' explanation makes sense. The places of honor at these things are always reserved in advance; I can let that one slide off my back without thinking twice. It's the other reason Jesus offers that tends to undo me.

"You don't know what you are asking," he says.[12]

James and John didn't know it, but their desire to see Jesus come into his kingdom meant that he'd have to suffer and die. And when they told him, yes, they certainly could drink from the very cup he drank from, they could not have imagined what their own future held. James was the first of the disciples to be martyred, and John went through great persecution of his own.

How often have I been just like those young men, begging God to give me something he knew would lead me through pain? How often have I asked for something without seeing the bigger picture? How often have I been disappointed in God, hugging my trust tightly to my chest, the way I do with a coat when I feel the bite of the wind?

God has met me in those places more times than I care to remember. He sees my arms folding in—*I trusted you, God!*—and he opens his wide. "Jodie," he whispers gently, "you didn't trust me. You trusted in an outcome, in a gift. I don't want you to want the gift. I want you to want me."

I want you to want me.

I want you to be with me.

I want to be with you.

That's God's desire, spelled out over and over again in John 15 in his call to abide. And as we do—as we remain in him and open ourselves up to him through our prayers—he satisfies our hearts' deepest cry. We may start the prayer process desiring a gift or an outcome, but somewhere along the way, our hunger will grow. Our desire will shift. We'll move from seeking the gift to the place where we long for the Giver.

> Whom have I in heaven but you?
> And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
> My flesh and my heart may fail,
> but God is the strength of my heart
> and my portion forever.
>
> Psalm 73:25–26

Part 2

31 Days of Prayer

Day 1

The Power of Connection

“I am the vine; you are the branches.”
John 15:5

People used to say my father and I favored each other.

They said I had my dad’s smile (which made me happy), as well as his nose (which made me less happy). We shared many of the same interests and skill sets, including the ability to play only mediocre tennis but get a varsity-level suntan if we parked ourselves in a beach chair for an hour. Dad loved comparing forearms at the end of the day to see who was darker—a contest that he always won.

For better or for worse, children are image bearers, a connection that reflects our relationship with our heavenly Father. Remember what God said when he was creating the world? “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.” And then, having created Adam and Eve, God gave them a job: “Be fruitful,” he said, “and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.”[1]

I can’t help but think that Jesus had the creation story in mind as he issued a similar charge to his disciples. “I am the vine; you are the branches,” he said. “I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.”[2]

Just as we bear the image of the Creator, so a branch bears the image of the vine. And just as God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful, so Jesus says we’ve been chosen—appointed—to bear fruit.

I don’t know about you, but I find these twin fruit-bearing assignments, one from Genesis and the other from John, as intimidating as they are inspiring. I love the grand vision—the idea that we are in a living relationship with the Creator who intends for us to impact the earth—but I wonder how we are supposed to go about doing the job. What role can I play? What role can you? Can we really be difference makers in the world?

Thank goodness for Andrew Murray, who explains how the vine-branch

union works in the fruit-bearing process.

"Without the vine," Murray writes, "the branch can do nothing."

As branches, we get that. We know we need the vine to nourish us and equip us to produce fruit. We know we need God.

But there's a flip side, Murray says, to the fruit-bearing process: "Without the branch the vine can also do nothing." He goes on:

> A vine without branches can bear no fruit. No less indispensable than the vine to the branch, is the branch to the vine. Such is the wonderful condescension of the grace of Jesus, that just as His people are dependent on Him, He has made Himself dependent on them. Without His disciples He cannot dispense His blessing to the world.[3]

It's okay. I'll wait while you read that one again. (I had to.)

What Murray is saying, in a nutshell, is this: Without the disciples—without us—God cannot provide good things for people.

That's . . . astounding.

God could have chosen to work around us (or even in spite of us), but he didn't. He chose to work in us and through us to bless other people. God chose us—his image bearers—to reflect his love and be the channel through which his power is unleashed in our world. And the way this works—the way we open the chute for God's power and provision—is through our prayers.

We see the link between prayer and provision played out over and over again in the Bible. God gave the barren Hannah a son, provided rain for Elijah, opened Peter's prison doors, and added fifteen years to King Hezekiah's life.[4] God moves when his people pray. And when Jesus tells us to "ask," it's not just an invitation. It's a command: "Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit."[5]

When we pray, we bring glory to God. He wants us to plow the field with our prayers so that he can provide an incredible harvest.

And all I can think, as I consider how a mighty God could entrust us with such a high calling, is that it is because of how much he loves us. Not because we are clever or well-behaved or (thank goodness!) athletic, but simply because he is our *Father*—the Father who loves us and longs, as Jesus reminds us, to "give good gifts to those who ask him."[6]

My earthly father died, way too young, from brain cancer. As I look back on his legacy—on all the ways his life left an imprint on mine—the gift I cherish the most is the introduction he gave me to Jesus. Dad came home one day when I was just eight years old and confessed that he'd had it all wrong. He had spent his life trying to earn God's approval (teaching Sunday school, working hard at

his job, playing second-rate tennis with a big grin on his face) until someone told him it wasn't about being a "good guy." Being a Christian was about realizing you were *not* good, after all, and that you needed a Savior.

All of which made complete sense to me. Even as a child, I knew I was a sinner. The idea that God's grace could cover my failings came then, as it does now, as a major relief—and I was only too glad to (as John 1:12 puts it) receive Jesus, believe in his name, and receive the right to become a child of God.

And today, as I slip my hand into my heavenly Father's and consider the fruit he has already produced and the harvest yet to come, I am reminded of the blessing, and the privilege, that comes with being an image bearer.

I am reminded of the blessing, and the privilege, of prayer.

Read

- See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)
- "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples . . . You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." (John 15:8, 16)
- We are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (Ephesians 2:10 NLT)

Reflect

- God created you with a longing to live a life of purpose and impact. He has put desires in your heart that he wants to satisfy in above-and-beyond ways. And as you receive him and believe in him, he calls you his child. You are his masterpiece.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to the work God wants you to do, the prayers he wants you to pray. Where do you long to see fruit in your life? How might your prayers in this area bring glory to God? What, if anything, is holding you back from asking "big"?
- Allow yourself to envision your life as a vine-branch union with Christ, one that brings glory to God, produces much fruit, and marks you as one of his own. Surrender any thoughts or fears (*I'm not good enough . . . I don't pray very well . . . I already have too much on my plate*) that may keep you from flourishing in your role as a fruit bearer. Rest secure in God's presence today, knowing you are extravagantly, lavishly loved.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Thank you for creating me in your image. I receive you and believe in you; thank you for welcoming me as your child. (John 1:12)*
- *Give me the power to understand how wide and long and high and deep your love is, and fill me to the measure of all your fullness. (Ephesians 3:18–19)*
- *May I gradually become brighter and more beautiful as you enter my life and make me more like Jesus. (2 Corinthians 3:18 MSG)*
- *Teach me to pray. (Luke 11:1)*
- *May my prayers bring you glory, bear lasting fruit, and mark me as one of your disciples. (John 15:7–8)*
- *You created me in Christ Jesus to do good works. Show me how to pray about _____ so the good things you have planned will come to fruition. (Ephesians 2:10)*
- *When I feel weak or ill-equipped, remind me that your grace is sufficient and your power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)*
- *Thank you for choosing me and appointing me to bear fruit. Teach me to focus my efforts, and my prayers, on fruit that will last. (John 15:16)*
- *No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Keep me attached to you. (John 15:5)*
- *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made . . . All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:14–16)*
- *When I am anxious or uncertain, remind me that nothing can separate me from your love. (Romans 8:39)*
- *You live among us, Lord. Take delight in me; calm all my fears; rejoice over me with joyful songs. (Zephaniah 3:17 NLT)*

Day 2

The True Purpose of Prayer

"This is to my Father's glory . . ."
John 15:8

When I was growing up, my family spent two weeks every summer at a Christian camp that catered to families and singles of all ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. It didn't matter what denomination you came from, or whether you liked traditional or contemporary worship; we were united by a love of Scripture, a belief in the power of the Holy Spirit, and a desire to draw closer to Jesus.

I remember the older woman who came every year from someplace in New Jersey. If you asked her what time it was, she never looked at her watch. Instead, her face would light up and she'd say, "It's time to praise the Lord!"

At the time, I thought she was a little bit crazy. I mean, I usually *did* want to know what time it was so I wouldn't be late for lunch, arts and crafts, or the goofy worship-slash-exercise class held outside on the lawn, called *Devotion in Motion*. Sometimes, though, I didn't really care what time it was. Sometimes I just wanted to hear her say it:

> It's time to praise the Lord!

The phrase seemed funny then, coming at random intervals and when there didn't seem to be any *reason* for praise. As I've gotten older, though, I've begun to realize that old gal was onto something. It's *always* a good time to praise God—particularly when you may otherwise feel discouraged, anxious, or weak.

Which happens, right? There are plenty of times when we may not *feel* like giving God praise, times when grief, disappointment, worry, or even just plain old fatigue fills the radar screen of our emotions. But as my friend Sara Hagerty says, that's actually the *best* time to adore. "Adoration," she writes, "never requires us to shut down our emotions. On the contrary, it invites us to bring them—*all* of them—to God. God does not want our polished pretenses . . . He

wants us to come honestly. So He invites us to wrestle."[1]

And as we wrestle—as we show up and (as Sara puts it) "sing your way into the truth"—something happens. The very act of praising (even when we don't feel like it in the midst of our pain) releases the power of God into our lives.

Fern Nichols, founder of Moms in Prayer International, understands this transformation. Praise, she writes, "changes our attitude; brings an awareness of God's presence; defeats Satan; releases God's power; brings a victorious perspective; provides peace; wards off the spirits of self-pity, depression, and discouragement; and produces strength in an anxious heart."[2]

In short, praise opens the door to hope.

When we look at our lives through the lens of God's character, everything shifts. Problems that once loomed impossibly large start to shrink. Everything finds its place in light of God's attributes: his perfect *holiness* reveals our flaws; his *mercy* allows us to confess them; his *faithfulness* emboldens us to come before him with our every need . . . which sets the stage for his glory.

When we call on God, releasing his power through our prayers and our praise, our lives become places where he can perform. Our careers, our marriages, our finances, our friendships, our health—all of these venues, and more—are opportunities for God to showcase his splendor. That's what Jesus is talking about in John 15:7–8 when he tells us to "ask." "This is to my Father's glory," he says, "that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

"The true purpose of prayer," writes R. A. Torrey, "is that God may be glorified in the answer."[3]

How fitting it is, then, for us to *begin* our petitions with that *end* in mind. How natural it is for us to come before God—to enter his courts—with praise.[4] And how comforting it is to know that there is not a single need we will face that God is not able, through his very nature, to address. When we are weak, he is strong. When we are uncertain, he is omniscient. When we need guidance, he is wise. When we know we've blown it, he is redemption and grace.

In the prayer prompts to follow, you'll find a collection of concerns—places where we need God to show up in the face of things like anxiety, loneliness, and grief—and Scriptures that reveal his presence there. If you don't see your particular need in the mix, try working your way through the psalms. You'll discover a God who is sovereign, powerful, omnipresent, faithful, full of wisdom, and more. Or use the alphabet as a praise prompt, thinking of words —*Awesome*, *Beautiful*, *Counselor*—that describe who God is. (I like to do this when worry and fear try to keep me awake during the night. I start naming God's

names—and I'm usually asleep again before I get beyond G or H!)

God longs to reveal himself—his character, his attributes, his nature—to us. Our struggles are his entry points, places where we can witness his goodness, his comfort, his power. "Call on me when you are in trouble," he says, "and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory."[5]

And you will give me glory. In other words, it doesn't matter where we are or what sort of trouble we face. My little old camp friend was right: it's always time to praise the Lord.

Read

- Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. (Psalm 100:4–5)
- Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. (Habakkuk 3:17–18)
- Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. (Psalm 8:2)

Reflect

- God wants to satisfy us with his presence. He longs to show us his goodness and let us know how much we are loved. As C. S. Lewis put it, "It is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates His presence to men . . . In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him."[6]
- What has been your experience with praise? Do you hold back, wondering, as Lewis once did, why an Almighty God would need, or crave, our worship "like a vain woman wanting compliments"?[7] Do you wait to praise until you have a reason to rejoice? Or are you comfortable with the idea of "wrestling" in praise, worshiping God even in the midst of doubt, worry, or pain?
- Ask the Holy Spirit to lead you into praise. Read the psalms; sing an old hymn or a new chorus; let your adoration spill onto the pages of a prayer journal, along with your questions or pain. God welcomes it all. "Come near to me," he says, "and I will come near to you."[8] Open your heart and enjoy God today.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *You are my PROTECTOR. You are a SHIELD to those who put their trust in you. (Proverbs 30:5)*
- *You are WISE. Your UNDERSTANDING has no limit. (Psalm 147:5)*
- *You are ALL-POWERFUL. You have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. (Jeremiah 32:17)*
- *You are a FAITHFUL FRIEND. You will never leave me or forsake me. (Hebrews 13:5)*
- *You are my COMFORT. You bind up the brokenhearted and comfort all who mourn, giving us the oil of joy and a garment of praise in place of the spirit of despair. (Isaiah 61:1–3)*
- *You are my GUIDE. You will guide me along the best pathway for my life. You will advise me and watch over me. (Psalm 32:8 NLT)*
- *You KNOW me. You know everything about me. You know my thoughts; you know everything I do; you know what I'm going to say even before I say it. You place your hand of blessing on my head. (Psalm 139:1–5 NLT)*
- *You are the God of HOPE. When I am weary or discouraged, you fill me with all joy and peace as I trust in you so that I will overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)*
- *You are my HEALER, physically and emotionally. You forgive all my sins and heal all my diseases. You heal my broken heart and bind up my wounds. (Psalm 103:2–3; 147:3)*
- *Whatever I need, you are ABLE to bless me abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that I need, I will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)*
- *You are MERCIFUL. Because of your great love I am not consumed, for your compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22–23)*
- *You are my STRENGTH. I do not need to be fearful or dismayed because you have promised to strengthen me and help me; you will uphold me with your righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*
- *You are TRUSTWORTHY. You are my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in you, and you help me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise you. (Psalm 28:7)*
- *You are my HELPER in my weakness. Even when I do not know how to pray, your Holy Spirit intercedes for me. (Romans 8:26)*

Day 3

Doing What (Doesn't) Come Naturally

"If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love."
John 15:10

Maybe you've heard about the woman who looked at God and said, "So far today, I'm doing all right. I have not gossiped, lost my temper, or told any white lies. I haven't been greedy, nasty, or selfish. I have not whined or complained or cursed—not even once! And I haven't charged anything on my credit card or eaten any gluten.

"But . . . I am going to be getting out of bed in a minute, and I think I will need your help."

Can you relate? I know I can. When it comes to right living, we all need God's help. Particularly since abiding—staying connected to Christ and remaining in his love—is linked to obedience.

"If you keep my commands," Jesus says in John 15:10, "you will remain in my love."

At first blush, a conditional promise like that might be welcome. It takes the mystery out of abiding. If we do what God says to do, we stay connected to Christ. But then the truth hits. We can't do it. None of us, in our own strength, can be command keepers. We all fall short. We are like sheep, the Bible says; we've all gone astray, leaving God's paths to follow our own.[1]

And honestly? The whole concept of "obedience" can leave a sour taste in our mouths. When we think about obedience, we often associate it with something we'd rather not do. Tidy our rooms. Be home before dark. Follow an order we may or may not agree with. In today's me-first world, obedience translates into limited freedoms and a lack of control. Obedience can feel . . . stifling.

But that's not how God sees it.

"I run," the psalmist says, "in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding."[2] God doesn't want to restrict us or make us

unhappy; his commands are designed to release us to run, to increase our understanding, to free us to enjoy the rich and satisfying life he has planned. When we delight in God's laws, "chewing on" Scripture day and night, we become fruit-bearing people. Whatever we do prospers![3]

Again, though, obedience does not come naturally. *Dis*obedience comes naturally. "I have the desire to do what is good," Paul writes, "but I cannot carry it out."[4] We'd all be doomed . . . except for the fact that God knew we'd need help. And he gives it to us. He gives us the Holy Spirit.

It's the Holy Spirit's job, the Bible says, to remind us of what Jesus said and to convict us of sin. But that isn't all. The Holy Spirit also guides us into truth, and—get this—he takes what God gave to Jesus and gives it to us.[5] What that means (among other things) is that *the Holy Spirit can actually give us God's desires*.

Philippians 2:13 reinforces this promise. "It is God," Paul writes, "who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." That's the way the New International Version reads; the New Living Translation says God gives us the "desire and the power" to do what pleases him. I love that. Because how very sad it would be if God gave us an overwhelming *desire* to obey him but not the power. Or if he gave us the *power* but not the desire. God is so gracious to give us both!

But just as with our salvation, God does not force the desire or the power on us. He stands ready to transform us—to make us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image[6]—but it is on us to surrender. To put ourselves in God's hands. To trust him enough to work in us and through us to make our hearts reflect his.

In her 1978 book about the Holy Spirit aptly titled *The Helper*, Catherine Marshall tells the story of her friend, Janet, who arrived in Washington, D.C. "deficient in taste and know-how." Knowing that her friend needed help if she hoped to fit into the city's sophisticated climate, Catherine connected Janet with a style maven who took her on, sans the customary fee for her service, and ordered up a beautiful three-piece British tweed suit—something the newcomer could feel confident wearing in almost any setting.

(Okay, stick with me here. I know that a three-piece suit—British or otherwise—might not be a "must-have" today, but as a high-schooler in the 1970s who owned one made of royal-blue polyester, I would have given anything to have some tweeds of my own. And I love this story.)

When the suit arrived, Janet burst into tears. It was ridiculously expensive—and she wasn't even sure she liked it! But then, as she wore it, a strange thing

happened. She began to love the outfit, and her own taste started to change. “The purchase turned out to be one of the mainstays of Janet’s wardrobe for eight years,” Marshall writes. “The tweeds were not worn out even then.”[7]

Here’s the takeaway: When we submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit (just as Janet submitted her will to that of the big-city stylist), we allow him to go to work in our lives. He transforms us, as Romans 12:2 puts it, renewing our minds —changing the way we think—so we can know God’s will, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

And then, somewhere along the way, it hits us. Like a professional stylist, God knows what looks good on us. His commands are designed for our benefit. And when the Holy Spirit tells us what to wear—to “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”[8]—we can trust that he has impeccable taste.

Read

- I run in the path of your commands, for you have broadened my understanding. Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. (Psalm 119:32–35)

- For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him. (Philippians 2:13 NLT)

- “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” (John 15:9–10 ESV)

Reflect

- God’s commands are *always* designed for our benefit. They are motivated by love. Likewise, our obedience is born out of relationship, not obligation. Our connection to Christ creates our desire to obey—and it is through obedience that we abide in Christ’s love.

- Still, though, obedience can be hard. Don’t be afraid to ask the Holy Spirit for help, knowing that your humility acts as a magnet for God’s grace.[9] And remember that God will never give you a command that he doesn’t also give you the power to fulfill. The same power that raised Christ from the dead is at work in your life today.[10]

- Take a few moments to reflect on what this resurrection power can accomplish in your life. Dry, dead places can become fertile ground; sin’s chains can be broken; radiance can replace shame. Ask God to open your eyes to the beauty of his commands as you surrender yourself to his care, trusting the Holy Spirit to give you both the desire and the power to do what pleases God.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Open my eyes so that I can see the wonderful things in your law. (Psalm 119:18)*
- *Work in me to will and to act to fulfill your good purpose. (Philippians 2:13)*
- *Put your law in my mind; write it on my heart. Be my God, and count me as one of your people. (Jeremiah 31:33)*
- *Where your Spirit is, there is freedom. As I see and reflect your glory, make me more and more like you. Change me into your glorious image. (2 Corinthians 3:17–18 NLT)*
- *You began a good work in me. Carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)*
- *Create in me a clean heart. Restore the joy of my salvation and make me willing to obey you. (Psalm 51:10–12 NLT)*
- *May I wholeheartedly follow your decrees, that I will not be put to shame. Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me. (Psalm 119:80, 133)*
- *Don't let me be arrogant and stiff-necked, refusing to obey your commands. May I listen to you, knowing that you are gracious and compassionate toward me, slow to anger and abounding in love. (Nehemiah 9:16–17)*
- *Strengthen me with power through your Spirit in my inner being so that Christ will dwell in my heart by faith. May my obedience to your commands be rooted and established in love. (Ephesians 3:16–17)*
- *Help me put on the new self, created to be like you, Lord. May I put off falsehood and speak truthfully. When I am angry, keep me from sinning. Equip me to work instead of stealing, that I may have something to share with people in need. (Ephesians 4:22–28)*
- *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of my mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up. Do not let me grieve your Holy Spirit. Rid me of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Make me kind, compassionate, and quick to forgive. (Ephesians 4:29–32)*
- *As I submit my will to yours, may I grow as Jesus did—in wisdom and stature and in favor with you and with man. (Luke 2:52)*

Day 4

Loving People (Even When It's Hard)

"This is my command: Love each other."
John 15:17

"Which command is the most important?"

That's what one of the Pharisees—a legal expert—wanted to know. And when Jesus answered the question, he boiled the commandments (all 613 of them!) down to just two: love God, and love others.[1] And lest there be any confusion about point number two, Jesus underscored the importance of loving one another in some of his very last words: "This is my command: Love each other."[2]

"Love one another" is one of those Bible verses that pretty much everyone can quote, even if we don't know the exact reference. It's a theme we can all get behind. Love doesn't cause divisions in churches or heated discussions at dinner. And if you see a "Love One Another" sign posted on Pinterest or Instagram, you hit the "Like" button.

We all *like* it.

And we *understand* it, from God's perspective. We're his children, after all, and if we have kids of our own, we feel the same way. We want them to love one another. To be patient. To be willing to forgive. To put each other's interests and needs ahead of their own (even if it's something as simple as not interrupting when someone is speaking, or giving a sibling the last piece of cake). We want our family relationships to be colored by love.

The "love one another" command is repeated in one way or another throughout the Bible—by some counts, nearly a hundred times—and at first blush, it doesn't seem all that hard to obey. Love your neighbor? Easy! We live on a great street, and we're surrounded by wonderful people.

But when your "neighbor" is the fellow who cuts down all the trees between your house and theirs, or the relative who shows up at Thanksgiving and keeps wondering if you've gained weight, or the coworker who seems to go out of her

way to make your life hard (or, even worse, the kid at school who makes your child miserable), love can be harder to generate. And when you turn the page in your Bible and come to Luke 6:27—"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you"—some of us may be tempted to balk.

I have.

And as I thought about Jesus' words in John 15—and in particular his choice of the phrase "my command" instead of something softer, like "my strongest advice"—I couldn't help but wonder: *Can* love *be commanded? And if so, can we really be expected to obey, particularly in light of how Jesus defined love in terms of laying down one's life for one's friends?*[3] Do we need to be willing to go *there* for people? Maybe not literally giving up our lives, but being willing to risk our privileged position, our reputation, or our right to be "right" in order to demonstrate love? Can *that* kind of love be commanded?

I say yes.

I say yes—with confidence—for two primary reasons. First, Jesus *did* command it; clearly, love can be commanded. And second, as we saw in day three, God never gives us a command he doesn't also give us the power to fulfill.

So the question isn't so much *whether* we can love each other as it is *how*.

I'm sure there are countless ways we can put Christ's words into action—countless strategies we can tap into to equip us to love others well—but for now, I'll give you just three.

1. Love out of God's riches, not your poverty. You may have a zero balance—or even a negative balance—in your love bank. But consider where love comes from. "We love," the Bible says, "because he first loved us."[4] When we allow an awareness of God's love for us to flood our souls, we can grasp (as Paul prayed) how "wide and long and high and deep" Christ's love is—with the result that we are "filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."[5] Our love banks get full. We don't have to manufacture feelings of love for other people; we can let God's love fill us up and flow out from us.

2. Pray for the person you are trying to love. When I say pray, I'm not talking about praying the way the country song does that talks about praying for somebody's brakes to go out when they're going down a hill or for a pot to fall off a windowsill (and conk them on the head).[6] I'm talking about praying the way Jesus tells us to when he says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."[7]

When you pray for someone who hurts or offends you, it gets harder and harder to hate them. We can't help it; when we commit to bringing someone before the Lord—asking God to bless them, protect them, and pour good things

into their lives—we begin to have a vested interest in their well-being. A warmth starts to soften our hearts. It may not be full-on love, at least not at first, but it will grow.

3. Finally, remember the why. In the months and years of Jesus' public ministry, people could tell who his disciples were because they followed him from place to place. As the day of the crucifixion drew near, Jesus changed that, telling them his *new* command was that they love one another. "By this," he said, "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."[8]

That's the why. Jesus wants us to love one another so people will know that our trust is in God—and that our faith is legit. People aren't going to look at how many Bible verses we can quote, how much money we give, or even how often we show up in church. People are going to evaluate us—and potentially decide whether or not they also want to follow Jesus—based on the way we treat one another.

Let's ask God to help us obey his command. Let's ask him to equip us to love one another.

Read

- God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)
- "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:44–45)
- We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing. (2 Thessalonians 1:3)

Reflect

- Is there someone who is particularly hard for you to love? Maybe you wouldn't classify them as an "enemy," but the idea of loving them feels difficult, if not impossible. If so, ask God to help. Start by meditating on God's extravagant love for you, knowing the reason we can give love is that God loved us first.
- Next, ask the Holy Spirit to show you different ways you can love and pray for this particular person, as well as for others—your spouse, your child, your coworker, your best friend, your neighbor who cut down all the trees. Consider asking someone else—a trusted friend or prayer partner—to hold you accountable.
- Finally, allow God to love others through you, as you remain in his love. Abiding is what makes obedience possible; it's what equips us to do what we cannot do on our own. The more we stay

connected to Christ, the stronger our faith will grow and the more our love for one another will continue to increase.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Equip me to obey your new command to love one another. Show me how to love others, especially _____, the way you have loved me. (John 13:34)*
- *May my love be more than just words and speech; let me demonstrate true love by my actions. (1 John 3:18)*
- *I want to do everything in love. (1 Corinthians 16:14)*
- *Give me the desire and the ability to love my enemies, do good to those who hate me, bless those who curse me, and pray for those who mistreat me. (Luke 6:27–28)*
- *Make me completely humble and gentle. Help me be patient, bearing with others, including _____, in love. (Ephesians 4:2)*
- *Remind me to love deeply, knowing that love covers over a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8)*
- *Make my love increase and overflow for others. Strengthen my heart so I will be blameless and holy in your presence. (1 Thessalonians 3:12–13)*
- *As I love others, especially _____, may I do so out of the lavishness of your love for me. (1 John 3:1)*
- *Equip me to love in such a way that others will know I am your disciple, and that they will want to follow you too. (John 13:35)*
- *Grow my faith and increase my love for others, including _____. (2 Thessalonians 1:3)*
- *Thank you that I can love because you loved me first. (1 John 4:19)*

Day 5

Extending Forgiveness

Forgive as the Lord forgave you.
Colossians 3:13

Unlike some of her siblings, our daughter Annesley was born with a deep reservoir of self-control. She's more analytical than emotional, and I'm not sure I've ever seen her really "lose it." She does, however, have a strong sense of justice, and when she sees something that's unfair or unkind, she'll occasionally intervene. Like the time she hit a neighbor's son with a toy. It wasn't his, and she knew it—so she took it, clocked him on the head with it, and returned it to its rightful owner.

Later, once Annesley had apologized and I had dried the boy's tears (and called his mother to explain why he might come home with a bump on his head), I asked whether he thought he could forgive Annesley for what she had done. "Y-y-yes," the child whimpered, "but it still hurts!"

It still hurts.

Right there, I think, is the trick with forgiveness. Sometimes, long after the offense is over, the pain lingers. And that can make it hard to extend grace, even when we know we should.

When someone wrongs us, we may think we have the right to be angry. To set the record straight. To want revenge even. To lash out in protest—or to close up our heart to protect it.

But I love the perspective shared by University of Virginia basketball player Jay Huff and his dad, Mike, when they spoke at our church after U.Va. won the national championship.

Jay, like our Annesley, has a super high radar for what's right and what's wrong, and when he sees an offense, he feels compelled to speak up. That sounds great in theory, but it doesn't work so well when you're a basketball player and the "wrong" is a bad call from the ref. As a high school player, Jay often protested those calls—and wound up setting a school record for technical fouls.

His dad helped put things in perspective.

"Nobody," Mike told his son, "got a worse set of calls than Jesus did. He got as bad a call as you can get. He had a perfect life—and yet he was crucified for my mistakes.

"And he didn't say a word. He just stood there and took it. And he forgave."

The apostle Paul would have appreciated Mike Huff's point of view. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul told the new believers to "put off" things like sexual immorality, rage, and filthy language and "put on" new clothes—things like kindness, humility, and patience. But that wasn't all. Paul also called them to forgive. "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone," he wrote. "Forgive as the Lord forgave you."[1]

If you're like me, you may hear a story like Jay's or read that excerpt from Paul's letter and think to yourself, *Forgive as the Lord forgave me? Right. Jesus could do it because he is God. But I'm not. I'm just a regular person, with regular person limitations and warts. And one of my warts—one of my biggest problems—is so-and-so. I can't forgive them. That's just too hard.*

I hear you. I *am* you sometimes. Forgiveness is hard, especially when it's not a single offense but (as C. S. Lewis notes) the "incessant provocations of daily life."[2] Forgiving ongoing injuries from the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying classmate, or the deceitful son is not easy.

But neither is it optional.

Warren Wiersbe puts it like this: "It is not enough that the Christian must endure grief and provocation, and refuse to retaliate; he must also forgive the troublemaker. If he does not, then feelings of malice will develop in the heart; and these can lead to greater sins."[3]

Ahh. So true. And as countless people have observed in some quotable way or another over the years, holding on to a grudge allows bitterness to put down roots. It's like drinking poison—and then waiting for the other person to die.

I realize that stolen toys and bad calls in basketball are not, actually, the sort of offenses or betrayals we struggle to forgive. Many of us deal with wounds—deep wounds—that have left ugly scars, and we may worry that extending grace in those situations will somehow discount our suffering or excuse the evil. But forgiving evil is not the same thing as tolerating it. Instead, as Lewis Smedes wrote, forgiveness is a way of taking power away from a monster so that we don't have to keep relieving our pain. "When you release the wrongdoer from the wrong," he said, "you cut a malignant tumor out of your inner life. You set a prisoner free, but you discover that the real prisoner was yourself."[4]

Perhaps you acknowledge this truth intellectually—you know that harboring

unforgiveness is like nursing a tumor—but you still struggle emotionally and spiritually with extending grace. Again, I get that. I know how it feels. And one of my favorite prayers when it comes to being open to forgiving someone who has hurt me (or who has hurt someone I love) isn't just, "Lord, make me willing"; it's "Lord, make me willing to be willing."

Make me willing to be willing to forgive.

That's a prayer God delights to answer. As the gardener in John 15, he knows the heartache and trouble a bitter root can eventually cause, but he doesn't make us dig it out on our own. Instead, the One who made us from dirt gets down in the dirt, changes our heart, and washes us clean.

Read

- The LORD . . . does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:8–14)

- See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (Hebrews 12:15)

- Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you. (Psalm 51:12 NLT)

Reflect

- God is compassionate and full of grace. He forgives us not because we deserve it but because he loves us. Reflect on God's mercy toward you. Open your heart to receive his gift of grace so you can extend it to others and prevent bitterness from putting down roots in your life.

- Is there someone you struggle to forgive because of the hurt they've caused or because they've never said they were sorry? Do you find yourself reliving painful memories again and again, like tearing at a scab so that the wound cannot heal? Are you willing to be made willing to forgive?

- Believe that God can and will equip you to forgive. Ask the Holy Spirit to transform your heart and make you an ambassador of his grace. Trust God to work in you, giving you the desire and the power to extend love and forgiveness, even to those who neither ask for nor deserve it.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Help me be kind and compassionate, forgiving others just as in Christ you forgave me. (Ephesians 4:32)*

- *When I feel unable or ill-equipped to forgive, remind me that I don't have to do it on my own because your grace is sufficient for me, and your power is made perfect in weakness. (2 Corinthians 12:9)*

- *Help me live at peace with everyone, looking out for other people so that all of us will receive your grace. Let me keep watch so that no poisonous root of bitterness can grow up to trouble me and corrupt others. (Hebrews 12:14–15 NLT)*

- *Clothe me with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Equip me to bear with others and forgive people instead of holding a grievance against them. May I forgive as you forgave me. (Colossians 3:12–13)*

- *When people offend or wrong me, don't let me repay evil with evil or insult with insult. Instead, show me how to repay evil with blessing, since that's what you have called me to do, and so that I will be blessed. (1 Peter 3:8–9)*

- *Expand my capacity for forgiveness so that I can forgive someone not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. Unlimited forgiveness, just as you give us! (Matthew 18:21–22)*

- *When I am tempted to withhold love and grace because someone has hurt me, give me a new heart and a new spirit. Remove my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26)*

- *Work in my heart so that instead of wanting to take revenge on others or continue to hate them, I can love my neighbors as myself. (Leviticus 19:18)*

- *May I neither judge nor condemn others. Rather, let me trust you when you say you are the avenger of wrongs, the One who will set the record straight. (Luke 6:37; Romans 12:19)*

- *Work in me so I will have the desire and the power to forgive people, because this pleases you. Restore my joy and make me willing to obey you. (Philippians 2:13; Psalm 51:12)*

Day 6

Living without Shame

"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."
John 15:3

I'm not an athlete. But I have four children who all played sports, and over the years I got really good at laundry. Grass stains. Bloodstains. It didn't matter; the more stubborn the stain, the more I wanted to beat it. When word of my competitive obsession got out, the kids' friends started bringing their nasty stuff to our house. I even got some dirty clothes from their *parents*. ("I really like this shirt, but I spilled some wine on it. My son says you can help . . .")

One Christmas, I found myself facing a worthy opponent. We had a houseguest who brought me a pair of new pants—they'd been a Christmas gift from his mom—but he was resigned to having to throw them away because he'd gotten grease and gravy down the front of one leg, and it hadn't come out in the wash. And he had made the rookie mistake of putting the pants in the dryer, thereby setting the stain.

Game Day.

If you know anything about stain removal, you know that waiting it out is not a good plan. Whether you're dealing with a physical spot, like what you get from red wine or gravy, or a spiritual blot, like what happens with lying, some variety of sexual sin, or the sort of anger that simmers until it explodes, it's best to address the stain right away.

"If we confess our sins," Scripture says, "God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."[1]

God is faithful. He is eager to wash away the stains of our sins. And the sooner we confess, the sooner he can make us clean—no matter how dirty or shame-filled we may feel.

All too often, though, we sideline ourselves. We know our flaws better than anyone, and we move quickly from the Holy Spirit's conviction (a good thing) to self-condemnation ("What kind of a person would *do* that?"), concluding—

wrongly—that God could not possibly want to be with us or use us the way he abides with and uses the "good" Christians, the people whose lives look so much cleaner than ours. But the John 15 call to connection is not just for spick-and-span people; it's for everyone.

God wants all of us to be clean. He wants all of us to know the joy of abiding. He wants all of us to flourish—which is why he prunes us, cutting away the diseased and sin-damaged parts of our lives so we can be "even more fruitful."[2] And coming to God in confession—bringing him our stains in the same way my son brought me his filthy lacrosse stuff—is what opens the door to being made fresh and clean.

I love how Acts 3:19 describes the redemption process: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord."

Repentance leads to refreshment, no matter how foul the stain or how long we've been crippled by shame.

One other thing I have learned about stain removal (apart from the value of addressing the problem right away) is that soaking can help. It may take two or three different ingredients (a pretreatment spray perhaps, along with a color-safe bleach mixed with your favorite detergent) to get the job done. (That's what happened with our guest's pants, by the way. Game Day went into double overtime before we finally won.)

Likewise, the more we employ different parts of God's Word, letting them "soak" into our hearts and our minds, the more they can work together to refresh and renew us. To teach us right from wrong. To give us things like endurance, encouragement, and hope.[3]

And here's the really remarkable thing about the cleansing power of Scripture. When we open our Bibles, we are not the only ones doing the reading. God's Word is actually looking at—examining—*us*. Powerful, penetrating, and sharper than any double-edged sword, the Bible exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.[4] And when God uses a particular passage to alert us to something that needs to be pruned, either because it could lead to trouble or because it already has, we need to pay attention. God won't *force* us to come clean. He doesn't *make* us confess. In fact, if we repeatedly resist the convicting nudge of his Word, we run the risk that God will eventually let us have what we want.[5]

Which never ends well. "The greatest judgment God could bring to a believer," writes Warren Wiersbe, "would be to let him alone, let him have his own way."[6]

When we feel the tug of old sin patterns or notice new habits trying to gain a

foothold in our lives, let's give ourselves over to God's tender care. Yes, repentance can be hard, and pruning can hurt. But remember that the only reason a gardener cuts something out is that he knows there is life in the plant. He knows the branch can be fruitful. He knows how to make it healthy and clean.

> Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean, scrub me and I'll have a snow-white life.
>
> Psalm 51:7 MSG

Read

- All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17 NLT)
- "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." (Acts 3:19)
- Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. (Psalm 34:5)

Reflect

- We can make two mistakes when it comes to forgiveness. We may think our sin is not all *that* bad (and that a loving God can overlook or excuse it). Or we may think our sin is *really* bad (and that a holy God could never look at it, in all of its horror, and still want reconciliation with us).
- Are you willing to ask God to show you your sin as he sees it? Open your heart to the Holy Spirit's conviction, and trust God to use his Word to examine you, correct you, and (as Jesus promises in John 15:3) cleanse you. Confess any specific sins that come to mind—the seemingly small, as well as those that feel too heavy to lift—bringing them before God's throne of grace.
- But don't stop there. Ask God to show you yourself as he sees you: *redeemed*, *renewed*, and *restored*. Picture yourself covered in his love. Receive the refreshment he offers. Believe that God's grace has removed every last shadow of shame and know that you are radiant—beautiful—with his joy.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Thank you for your promise that if I confess my sins, you are faithful and just and will forgive me my sins and purify me from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)*
- *Help me believe that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, and that nothing can separate me from your love. (Romans 8:1, 38–39)*
- *When past sin threatens to steal my joy, remind me that you do not treat us as our sins deserve, but*

that out of your great love you have removed my transgressions as far from me as the east is from the west. (Psalm 103:10–12)

- *Open my eyes to the power of your Word to teach, rebuke, correct, and train me so I will be thoroughly equipped to do every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17)*
- *Scrub away my guilt; soak out my sins in your laundry. (Psalm 51:2 MSG)*
- *Keep my gaze fixed on you, since those who look to you are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. (Psalm 34:5)*
- *Thank you that in Christ I am a new creation. The old has gone; the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17)*
- *Help me not to be afraid, but to remember your promise that I will not be put to shame or humiliated, because you are my Redeemer. (Isaiah 54:4–5)*
- *When I am tempted to hide my wrongdoing, remind me that whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but that the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)*
- *Do not let me show contempt for your kindness and patience. Your kindness is intended to lead me to repentance. (Romans 2:4)*
- *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:10–12)*
- *Turn my heart toward you. Wipe away my sin. Refresh my soul. (Acts 3:19)*

Day 7

Your Friendships, Part One (Make Me a Good Friend)

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."
John 15:13

News flash: *Friendship is good for you.*

That's according to researchers at the University of Virginia, who—not making this up—did experiments in which they had people lie down in a brain scanner and then repeatedly shocked them. (The shock was described as "minor." But still.) Sometimes the subjects got to hold the hand of a friend, sometimes they held the hand of a stranger, and sometimes they held no hand at all. I won't go into all the details (the scientists used words like *hypothalamus* and *epinephrine*), but the gist of their report is that when you are under the threat of electrical shock, your brain will be a whole lot happier if "a trusted loved one is near."

And if you are holding that person's hand, all the better.

"Having that hand to hold," noted the lead scientist, "signals that you have resources—you have safety—so any particular stressor is just not as stressful as it might have been."[1]

I love it when science catches up with what Christians have known all along. We are created for connection—to God and to one another. We find security in knowing God as "a trusted loved one." We feel safe when he says, no matter where we go, his right hand will "hold us fast."[2] And, as we seek to obey Jesus' command to "love one another," it really helps to know that we have "resources"—God's resources—at our disposal.

Because Jesus didn't just tell us to love one another. He told us—and then *showed* us—what love in friendship looks like. "There is no greater love," he said, "than to lay down one's life for one's friends."[3]

Much has been written about the value of "life-giving friendships"; type this phrase into your search bar, and you get nearly 400 million results. We all want friends who encourage us, sharpen us, and give us life—friends who will, as the old proverb says, "Double our joy and divide our grief." But before we can *have*

that sort of friend, we need to *be* that sort of friend. We need to learn to love others the way Jesus did, giving life by laying down our lives for our friends.

So what does "giving life by laying down life" look like in everyday life?

Paul's letter to the Philippians offers some clues. "In humility," he writes, "value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others." And in our relationships, he says, we need to be like Jesus, who "did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, but made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant."[4]

Loving people the way Jesus did—laying down our lives, valuing others above ourselves, and making ourselves nothing so as to serve—can take any number of shapes.

It may be as simple as resisting the temptation to gossip about someone, or choosing to celebrate their victory (instead of feeling jealous that it isn't ours). It may mean setting aside our plans or our to-do lists to come alongside someone in need, whether it's picking up the phone to listen to their story or booking a cross-country plane ticket to be physically present in their pain. It may even mean relinquishing something we value, risking something we may never get back. Giving up our right to be "right" in a friendship. Extending love without waiting for it to be earned. Being vulnerable, knowing that our feelings may be trampled or our heart may get wrung—and then being quick to extend grace and forgiveness if that were to happen, even though the sting is still there.

Scripture is brimming with stories about life-giving friendships, true-life examples of what it looks like to lay down your life—your dreams, your privileged position, your reputation—on behalf of someone else. Jonathan could have spent his days trying on crowns; instead, he gave David his royal robe and protected his life. Aaron offered his speaking talent to Moses, becoming not just his brother's mouthpiece but also his physical support. Ruth could have gone safely home to her people in her widow's grief, but she stayed with her mother-in-law, venturing toward a land and a future she did not know. Elizabeth humbly welcomed her relative Mary, celebrating the child others gossiped about and fueling Mary's tender faith with affirmation and blessing.[5]

All of us want friends like that, and in day eight, we'll ask God to provide them for us. For now, though, let's take an honest look at our own willingness to "lay down our lives" for our friends. Let's ask God to hold our hand—and to help us love like he does.

Read

- Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. (Romans 12:15)
- As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17)
- Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:3–7)

Reflect

- Jesus Christ shows us what it looks like to be a life-giving friend. He was willing to make himself nothing, setting aside his status in order to love and serve others. He chose to extend grace and forgiveness, even to those who reviled him. He came alongside people in their joy, and he wept with them in their sorrow.
- Think about your friendships. When something good happens to someone, are you quick to celebrate? Or do you struggle with jealousy? Do you approach relationships with an eye toward how you can serve and love deeply, or do you look for a way to even the score? Do your words build up or tear down? Do you pray for your friends?
- Consider Jesus' friendship model and ask the Holy Spirit to help you lay down your life—to be quick to listen and slow to speak, to extend grace and forgiveness, to be willing to die to your need to be "right" so you can put others' needs ahead of your own. Take some time to pray for your close friends by name, and ask God to show you how to love them well.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Keep me alert to my friends' needs. Prompt me to pray in the Spirit for them on all occasions and with all kinds of prayers and requests. (Ephesians 6:18)*
- *Make me the kind of friend who is not selfish or vain but who, in humility, values other people and their interests above my own. (Philippians 2:3–4)*
- *When my friends experience a win or a blessing, equip me to genuinely rejoice with them [without feeling jealous]. When they mourn, show me how to come alongside them in their sorrow [without a hint of judgment or condemnation]. (Romans 12:15)*
- *May I be a person who spurs others on to love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10:24)*
- *In my friendships, help me be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. (James 1:19)*
- *Make me a kind and compassionate friend, someone who is quick to forgive. (Ephesians 4:32)*
- *Let me encourage my friends daily so that none of us will be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. (Hebrews 3:13)*

- *May I be the sort of friend who sharpens others and makes them better. (Proverbs 27:17)*
- *Equip me to love others the way you love me, being willing to lay down my life—my position, my agenda, my reputation—for my friends. (John 15:13)*
- *Shape me into the sort of friend who loves at all times. (Proverbs 17:17)*
- *When others look at the way my friends and I treat one another, may they know we are your disciples. (John 13:35)*

Day 8

Your Friendships, Part Two (Give Me Good Friends)

Be good friends who love deeply.
Romans 12:10 MSG

Robbie and I will be driving home at night, and we'll pass a house that's all lit up, with cars spilling down the driveway and out into the street.

"Look," I will say. "Go slow. They're having a party."

"Looks that way," Robbie will say.

"But . . . they didn't invite us," I will say.

"Jodie," Robbie will say, looking sideways at me, "we don't *know* the people who live in that house."

"I know," I will sigh. "But we *could* know them. And I bet they would like us."

I may be an extreme (and slightly pathetic) example, but I know I'm not alone in my desire to be included, to have friends. This longing to belong—this desire for connection—goes back to the beginning of time. Remember what God said when he created Adam?

"*It is not good for the man to be alone*."[1]

Roger that. The woman either.

It's not just the creation story that says we need one another; science maintains that we're actually *wired* that way. Matthew Lieberman, a Harvard-trained authority on social neuroscience, writes, "Love and belonging might seem like a convenience we can do without, but our biology is built to thirst for connection because it is linked to our most basic survival needs."[2] *Translation: We need friends every bit as much as we need water, shelter, and air. And chocolate.*

So powerful is our built-in drive for acceptance—to have friends, to be part of a network, to know that who we are matters—that there is even a name for it now: *Belongingness.* With a sense of belonging come health, happiness, and a sense of purpose; without it, everything from our intellectual achievements to our immune system can be compromised.[3]

So how do we get that?

For starters, we can ask God, our Father in heaven, who promises to graciously give us all things.[4] He loves it when his children connect. “Two are better than one,” he says.[5]

But we can also ask people. As in, ask people to be our friends. I realize this sounds a bit awkward (as my children would say, “Mom, it must be so embarrassing being you”), but I have years of empirical data to back up this method:

Our family moved when I was a junior in high school. I knew literally no one in our new town, but when my mom spied a group of teens at Pizza Hut, she made me go over to their table and introduce myself. (I’m pretty sure she stood behind me and said something like, “Will you be Jodie’s friends?”) It worked.

Years later, as a young wife, I moved again, this time with Robbie’s job. His thirtieth birthday was approaching. I had met a few moms in the preschool car pool line, and not knowing how else to honor my man, I invited them to come with their husbands to a surprise party. More than twenty people—all strangers to Robbie—showed up and hid on our back deck so they could jump out when Robbie got home from work. To say he was surprised would be putting it mildly. But now, nearly thirty years later, these folks remain some of our dearest friends.

When Robbie and I hit the empty-nest years, the friendship landscape shifted again. With the kids gone and no organic connections happening with other parents at school events or on the sidelines of our kids’ teams, we realized we’d need to be more intentional about investing in relationships. Our church and our neighborhood proved fertile ground. As did a phone call from another empty nester who was feeling some loneliness pangs of her own.

This gal wanted to cultivate some meaningful “second half of life” friendships. She put out a few feelers—“Who wants to connect?”—and five couples from different parts of the country said yes.

When this group gets together, we goof off like friends do, but we also make space for hard questions: *What are you doing to invest in your marriage? Where have you struggled at work? How might God want to use you and your gifts in the next season of life? What are you doing to grow closer to him?*

And we pray.

We pray for our jobs, our kids, our marriages, and our own stubborn hearts, asking the Holy Spirit to work in the places where we’ve strayed or grown hard. We give thanks for the Romans 8:39 promise that nothing can separate us from God’s love. And we rejoice in the sense of belonging that is rooted not just in our human connections but in our friendship with Jesus.

Read

- “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:14–15)
- Encourage one another and build each other up. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 NLT)

Reflect

- We are created for connection—to God and to one another. Our friendships matter to God.
- Think about your friendships. Do you encourage and sharpen one another? Push one another closer to Jesus? Do you have fun together? If so, thank God for the gift of these life-giving connections. If you find yourself longing for deeper relationships, bring that need before God. Be alert to the names he puts on your heart, and consider reaching out with a phone call, a text message, an invitation to coffee. Everyone wants to be wanted—and who knows what blessings God might have in store?
- Finally, take some time to reflect on your friendship with Jesus. Jesus longs to be your advocate, your counselor, your source of joy. His greatest desire is to confide in you. He wants to show you God’s heart and satisfy you with his love. How can you draw closer to Jesus today?

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *May I enjoy friends who are kind and compassionate, who are quick to forgive, and who carry each other’s burdens. (Ephesians 4:32; Galatians 6:2)*
- *Surround me with friends who spur one another on toward love and good deeds and who get together so we can encourage one another. (Hebrews 10:24–25)*
- *Don’t let my companions sow trouble or gossip, since a perverse person stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends. (Proverbs 16:28)*
- *May my friends and I be devoted to one another, honoring each other above ourselves. (Romans 12:10)*
- *Thank you that Jesus is my advocate, my intercessor, and my friend. (Job 16:19–20)*
- *Teach my friends and me to speak the truth to one another in love, knowing that wounds from a friend can be trusted. (Ephesians 4:15; Proverbs 27:6)*

- *Show me how to choose my friends carefully, since the one who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. (Proverbs 13:20)*
- *May my friends and I love not just with words and speech but with actions and truth. (1 John 3:18)*
- *Surround me with friends who will sharpen me the way iron sharpens iron. (Proverbs 27:17)*
- *When I feel the ache of loneliness, may I turn to you, remembering that Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Luke 5:16)*
- *Give me the desire and the strength to run away from anything that stimulates youthful lusts. Help me pursue righteous living, faithfulness, love, and peace, enjoying the companionship of those who call on you with pure hearts. (2 Timothy 2:22 NLT)*
- *May my friends and I not envy each other's talents or abilities but use our different gifts to serve one another, stewarding your grace in all its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)*
- *Help me, Jesus, to love others as you do. Equip me to obey you. Thank you for calling me your friend; let me be alert to all the Father is doing and attentive to all he says. (John 15:12–15)*

Day 9

Praying for Your Marriage

. . . and the two will become one flesh.
Ephesians 5:31

The Bible says that when two people get married, they become "one flesh." You may think, therefore, that it's super important to marry the "right" person, a soul mate with whom you are perfectly compatible. You may think that—but you'd be wrong. That person, writes Tim Keller, doesn't exist.

"The moment you marry someone," Keller contends, "you and your spouse begin to change in profound ways, and you can't know ahead of time what those changes will be. So you don't know, you can't know, who your spouse will actually be in the future until you get there."[1]

My husband can vouch for the truth of Keller's claim. "College Jodie" (the woman Robbie fell in love with) was very different from "Career Jodie" (the woman he married three months after graduation). And when "Wife Jodie" became "Wife and Mother Jodie," she morphed yet again. I won't go into the details of each transformation, other than to say that College Jodie was more fun than any of the subsequent models.

And somewhere along the way—it was maybe a year into our postnuptial bliss—"Nag Jodie" presented herself. Robbie wasn't doing anything wrong per se. He just wasn't doing all the things my father had done (or he was doing them differently!), and the clash in our expectations about who did what in a marriage played itself out almost every night. Sometimes my preferred communication style was sarcasm ("humor," I told myself); sometimes I'd bang a few pots and pans to let Robbie know I needed help in the kitchen; sometimes I'd just clam up, thinking my beloved should instinctively know what was wrong. (Looking back, I'm thinking that last approach—the one where I didn't say anything—probably came as a balm to Robbie's newlywed soul.)

Not knowing what else to do, I turned to God.

"Can't you fix Robbie?" I prayed. "I'm just as tired as he is when I get home

from work every night, and I wish I didn't have to keep asking him to pitch in."

"Jodie," I sensed God say, "it will be okay. If you will stop nagging Robbie and start trusting me, I can make him into a better husband than anything you could have asked for or imagined."

I didn't know then that God was quoting himself (the "more than all we ask or imagine" thing comes from Ephesians 3:20), but I agreed to back off. And that very night, Robbie came into the kitchen and offered to help me cook dinner.

I burst into tears. (Of joy—but poor Robbie didn't know that. He probably wondered what *else* he had done wrong.)

I wish I could say I stopped nagging forever (I didn't), but I learned a lesson that day. I learned we can't change anyone. Yes, our spouses will change (and sometimes we'll go through seasons in marriage where we need to figure out how to love someone who's not at *all* like the person we married), but shaping another person is not our job.

It's God's. And God is always at work, Scripture says, taking our stony hearts and making them flesh, renewing our minds, and making us look more like him.[2]

We can't change (or "fix") anybody, but we can ask God to bless and protect our marriage partner—especially when we don't feel particularly inclined to extend love out of our own reservoir. And we can pray that our marriage will be one in which things like kindness can flourish, because that's what glues couples together. Kindness, experts say, is "the most important predictor of satisfaction and stability in a marriage."[3]

According to the folks at the National Marriage Project, even the simplest acts, like making your beloved a cup of coffee in the morning, make a difference. Giving good things to one's spouse—going above and beyond ordinary "fair share" expectations about who should do what—creates an upward spiral of generosity, one that leads to both spouses ultimately being kinder and happier in the marriage.[4]

The Bible supports this dynamic. Noting that we'll reap a "harvest of blessing if we do not give up," Paul gave the Galatians some sound advice: "Whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone."[5]

And here's the thing about kindness: It is not something we either have or don't have. The Bible says kindness comes with our salvation as the Holy Spirit transforms our hearts. "The fruit of the Spirit," Paul writes, "is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."[6] Kindness, like all of these other God-given attributes, is available to every

believer.

It works like a muscle, getting stronger with use.

And it also gets stronger with prayer.

Which brings up some other interesting marriage research. Prayer, experts say, makes a difference—even (according to a *Wall Street Journal* report on the topic) when one or both partners are being unkind: "When people pray for the well-being of their spouse when they feel a negative emotion in the marriage, both partners—the one doing the praying and the one being prayed for—report greater relationship satisfaction."[7]

"Greater relationship satisfaction." That sounds very important and official. But let's put it plainly, shall we?

If you're annoyed with your spouse—they left the toilet seat up, they were late again, they did whatever—don't get mad. Try praying for them instead.

It will make you both happier.

Read

- Serve one another humbly in love. (Galatians 5:13)
- Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7 NLT)
- Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another. Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing . . . Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. (Ephesians 5:21–27 MSG)

Reflect

- Things like kindness and generosity in marriage create an upward spiral; criticism and contempt make us feel invisible and unloved. Think about your own marriage. Are there practical things you could say or do to make your spouse feel cherished and loved? Do you think it matters who goes first when it comes to creating an upward spiral?
- Take another look at the fruit the Holy Spirit produces in our lives: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What might your marriage look like with these attributes on display? Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you afresh, and then be alert to the ways he showcases his presence in your life.

- Remember that you have access to a reservoir of strength and love far deeper than your own. God longs to equip you to be kind, compassionate, and quick to forgive. Trust him to complete you with all the fullness of his life and power and to accomplish immeasurably more in your marriage than anything you could ever ask for or imagine.[8]

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Show me how to be generous in marriage; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed. (Proverbs 11:25)*
- *Make my spouse and me kind and compassionate to one another and quick to forgive each other as you forgave us. (Ephesians 4:32)*
- *(For a husband) Let me be considerate and treat my wife with respect, so that nothing will hinder my prayers. (1 Peter 3:7)*
- *(For a wife) Let me be worthy of respect, not a malicious talker but temperate and trustworthy in everything. (1 Timothy 3:11)*
- *May we submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)*
- *Protect us from sexual sin. Let us honor marriage and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband. (Hebrews 13:4 MSG)*
- *Show us how to love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8)*
- *Let us agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other, using encouraging words instead of dragging each other down by finding fault. (Romans 14:19 MSG)*
- *Protect us from divorce or marital strife. Thank you for uniting us as one flesh; what you have joined together, let no one separate. (Mark 10:8–9)*
- *May our marriage be rooted and built up in Jesus. Strengthen us in the faith and make us overflow with thankfulness. (Colossians 2:6–7)*
- *Give us a love that is patient and kind; not envying, boastful, or rude. May we not insist on our own way or be irritable or resentful toward one another. Let us protect and trust one another. Fill our hearts with hope and equip us to endure. (1 Corinthians 13:4–7 ESV)*

Day 10

Praying for Your Children

May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children.
Psalm 115:14

"If you could ask God to do anything for your children, what would it be?"

That's the question that led, in a roundabout way, to my book *Praying the Scriptures for Your Children.* I surveyed more than a hundred parents to see what they wanted, and I used their answers—health and safety concerns, good character traits, strong relationships with siblings and peers—to shape the book's contents. And what I realized as I started poking around in the Bible to see what God had to say is that (to put a twist on what I wrote earlier) *there is not a single problem or need that our children will face that God has not already thought of and provided for in his Word.*

And honestly? Using Scripture to help shape my prayers for my children is how Jesus' John 15 promise first caught my attention: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."[1]

What other parenting book offers that?

And the Bible is indeed a parenting book. It's brimming with practical how-tos about everything from our family conversations ("These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road"), to the value of strategic discipline ("Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord"), to what love-based obedience looks like ("Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done").[2]

God cares how we parent. And because he is a parent, he understands both the highs and the lows that come with the job. He knows the joy of watching his children walk in the truth, and the heartache of longing to gather them under his wings—only to see them walk away.[3]

Perhaps nowhere is his invitation to partner with him—to bear fruit through

our prayers—more valuable (or more necessary) than when it comes to raising our children. It's an invitation to experience relief from the pressure to "get it all right." Instead of focusing all of our efforts (not to mention our time and our money) on things like math tutors, soccer coaches, and chore charts (and hoping that something good sticks), we can slip our hand into God's, trusting that he loves our children even more than we do, and that he has the power to accomplish his best plans in their lives.

"Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord," Scripture says. "Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children."[4]

God wants us—he commands us—to pray for our kids. But prayer is not always something that happens at home. Maybe we didn't grow up with parents who prayed for their kids, and it feels awkward or unfamiliar to us. Maybe we don't want to bug God with our relatively minor requests ("Protect Johnny on the field trip; help Sarah do well on her test") when he has issues like world peace on his plate. Or maybe—and this is something I've heard time and again—we're just too busy, too tired, or too discouraged to pray.

"The biggest obstacle I face when it comes to praying for my children," one young mother confided, "is my children."

I knew just what she meant. We had four kids in six years, and between all the ear infections, ballet car pools, and science projects that always seemed to be due the next day, I remember feeling like a complete failure on the "praying mom" front. I'd set my alarm extra early to carve out a few minutes with God, and then, sure enough, some child would throw up. I'd find a quiet corner with my prayer journal and a cup of tea in the afternoon, and another kid would take a tumble.

And it didn't get any easier once the children got older. I had more time to pray, sure, but then things like worry and fear began to wage war on my soul. Driving, drinking, dating—and a host of other teen what-ifs—left me emotionally exhausted. There were plenty of days when my prayer was simply, "Jesus, help."

And you know what? He did.

Our four children are grown now and beginning to form families of their own. As I turn the pages in my Bible, savoring some uninterrupted moments with God, I am struck by how many of their names, or initials, I find in the margins, along with dates signaling when I must have prayed. What was happening then? I don't always remember. But God does. And in more than a few cases, his answers are still unfolding in my kids' lives.

"Prayer," writes Andrew Murray, "is the highest part of the work entrusted to us, the root and strength of all other work." As we approach God on behalf of

our children, trusting him with the ones he has entrusted to us, let's keep that perspective in mind. And let's ask God, as Murray did, to "give us a large and strong heart to believe what mighty influence our prayers can exert."[5]

Read

- Pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children. (Lamentations 2:19)
- Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:2–3)
- He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. (Isaiah 40:11)

Reflect

- What role does prayer play in your parenting? Are there things that keep you from bringing your children's needs before God? Do you let your kids see you pray?
- God longs to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents.[6] When our kids see our prayerful dependence on God, they learn to look past our weaknesses and appreciate God's strength. Release yourself from the pressure to "get it right" as you parent. Ask God to open your eyes to what he wants to do in the lives of your children, and then commit to partnering with him through your prayers.
- Remember how much God loves your children. It doesn't matter how far away they may be, physically or emotionally; they are never out of his reach. Use the prayer verses below to bring their names before God. And then be alert to additional prayer prompts the Holy Spirit reveals, knowing that God's word does not return empty but always accomplishes what he desires.[7]

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Turn _____ from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among God's people who are set apart by faith. (Acts 26:18)*
- *Let _____ take refuge in you and sing for joy. Spread your protection over them and surround them with your favor as with a shield. (Psalm 5:11–12)*
- *Make _____ wise. Equip them to lead many to righteousness so that they shine like the stars, for ever and ever. (Daniel 12:3)*

- *Give _____ a sense of purpose and destiny, knowing that they are your handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which you planned in advance for them to do. (Ephesians 2:10)*

- *Teach _____ to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. (Romans 12:12)*

- *Let no unwholesome talk come out of _____'s mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it would benefit those who listen. Keep _____'s tongue from evil and their lips from speaking lies. (Ephesians 4:29; Psalm 34:13)*

- *Prompt _____ to honor and obey us so that it will go well with them and they may enjoy a long life. (Ephesians 6:1–3)*

- *May _____ show aptitude for every kind of learning, be well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve. (Daniel 1:4)*

- *Show _____ your ways; teach them your paths; guide them in your truth and teach them. (Psalm 25:4–5)*

- *Keep _____ from all harm; watch over their coming and going, now and forevermore. (Psalm 121:7–8)*

- *May _____ be kind and compassionate toward others, and quick to forgive people just like you forgave them. (Ephesians 4:32)*

- *Bless _____ and keep them. Make your face shine on them and be gracious to them. Give them peace. (Numbers 6:24–26)*

Day 11

Asking for Help

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.
Psalm 46:1

Our daughter Hillary was halfway through the first grade when we moved from one state to another. We didn't know a soul in our new town, but we had heard good things about the neighborhood elementary school. I was delighted when Hillary came home after her first week and told us that her new teacher was a Christian.

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"I know she's a Christian because she prays," Hillary said.

Now *that* was interesting. This was a public school; I wondered how a teacher could get away with praying in front of her students. I pressed for details. "She prays?"

"Yes, Mom. Almost every day she says, 'O God, help me get through this day.' But sometimes she just says, '*O God,*' and puts her head down on her desk."

I laugh every time I remember that story, and I shared it in *Praying the Scriptures for Your Children* in the chapter about praying for your kids' relationship with their teachers. Honestly though? The more I've thought about that teacher's petition—"God, help"—the more I realize what a great prayer it is. And it's one of the best examples I can think of when it comes to praying the Scriptures; Psalm 70, for example, is one long cry for help. Here's how David starts his prayer: "Hasten, O God, to save me; come quickly, LORD, to help me."

And here's how he wraps it up: "I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; LORD, do not delay."[1]

Earlier, I said there is not a single need we will face that God has not already thought of and provided for in his Word. As we look to him for things like help and deliverance, we can expand that thought to say that there is not a single need

we will face—in our relationships, our jobs, our physical bodies, or anything else—that God has not already thought of and provided for in his *character.* Consider just a few of his attributes and how they provide for our needs:

- He is our Healer: "LORD my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me." (Psalm 30:2)
- He is our Protector: "The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me." (Psalm 28:7)
- He is our Counselor: "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit . . . will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:26)
- He is our Helper in all situations, working (I like to imagine) like an earpiece that TV anchors wear so they can hear their producer from the control room: "I will help you speak and teach you what to say." (Exodus 4:12)

All of these attributes, and countless more, are facets of God's nature that he longs for us to discover—and to appeal to—as we pray. "On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us," Paul writes, "as you help us by your prayers."[2] Clearly, God intends for us to have a hand in the rescue operation, whether the need is for ourselves or for someone else. And even when we have no idea how to pray or are feeling too weary, frightened, or discouraged to put our thoughts into words, he helps us then too: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."[3]

I think my favorite "God, help" prayer in the Bible comes from one of the stories Mark tells in his gospel.

Jesus comes down from the mountain where he has been talking with Moses and Elijah and finds the disciples surrounded by a large crowd of noisy people. When Jesus asks about the commotion, he learns that a father has brought his son to the disciples for healing from being possessed by a spirit, but that nothing has happened.

"Bring the boy to me," Jesus says.

As soon as the spirit sees Jesus, it throws the boy into a convulsion. "He fell to the ground and rolled around," Mark recounts, "foaming at the mouth."

Jesus turns to the boy's father. "How long has he been like this?"

"From childhood," the dad answers. "It has often thrown him into the fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

Take pity on us and help us. How many of us have prayed a prayer just like that? And here's where I think the story gets particularly good. Because Jesus

acts almost surprised by the father's request.

"'If you can'?" Jesus repeats. (Like, does this man even know who he is talking to?) "Everything is possible for one who believes."

That's Mark 9:23, and it's a great memory verse: "Everything is possible for one who believes." But it's still not my favorite line in the story. My favorite line is what the father says next: "I do believe," he exclaims. "Help me overcome my unbelief!"

And at that, Jesus rebukes the impure spirit—who shrieks and comes out, leaving the boy looking so much like a corpse that folks assume he is dead. But Jesus takes him by the hand, lifts him up, and then heads indoors.[4]

Here's why I love this story. I love it because of how it showcases God's power. It doesn't matter how bad things appear (the spirit was intent on *killing* the boy) or how long the problem has been going on (since early *childhood* in this particular case), God is able to help. And if we're at the point where even hoping—believing—feels like too much, he makes up for that too. We ask, and he gives us belief.

Psalm 46:1 reads, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." Another word for *refuge* is *shelter.* Some Bible translations use the term *safe place*. As we consider God's attributes in light of his call to abide, let's remember that he is indeed our refuge. Let's find our help—our deliverance, our security, our provision—not in a place but in a Person.

Read

- "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)
- "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:15–16)
- Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." (1 Samuel 7:12)

Reflect

- When we call on God, we can do so knowing that he sees us. He knows our needs, and his heart is filled with compassion toward us. God will never ignore or forget us; his deepest desire is to show himself faithful. Our struggles are opportunities for him to reveal his character, his power, and his love.

- Where do you need God's help today? Are you struggling with a challenging relationship? A job that feels too big to accomplish? A particular temptation? A physical sickness or an emotional heartache? The burden of unconfessed sin?

- Spend some time meditating on God's attributes. Thank him for the ways he delivered you in the past, and reflect on how he has revealed himself to you. Come before him with confidence, trusting that it doesn't matter whether your plea is for wisdom, protection, forgiveness, or anything else; he is ready to give you mercy and grace and to help in your time of need.[5]

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *When I need help in any situation, may I turn my eyes toward you. Let me trust your promise to keep me from all harm and watch over my life, now and forevermore. (Psalm 121)*

- *When I am frightened, be my hiding place. Protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. (Psalm 32:7)*

- *When your answer seems slow in coming, equip me to wait in hope, knowing that you are my help and my shield. (Psalm 33:20)*

- *When I need to talk to _____, help me speak; teach me what to say. (Exodus 4:12)*

- *When I feel orphaned or abandoned, remind me that you see my affliction. Consider my grief and take it in hand. You are the helper of the fatherless. (Psalm 10:14)*

- *When I confront circumstances that feel overwhelming or a job that is too hard to do, fulfill your promise. Bless me abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that I need, I will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)*

- *When I face temptation, remind me that you were made fully human in every way, and that because you suffered when you were tempted, you are able to help me when I am tested. (Hebrews 2:17–18)*

- *When others mock or oppose me, do not let me be disgraced. Equip me to do your will, knowing that you are near and that I will not be put to shame. (Isaiah 50:7)*

- *When I need wisdom, guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. (Psalm 25:5)*

- *When I don't know what to pray for, help me in my weakness. Thank you that the Holy Spirit prays for me with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. (Romans 8:26 NLT)*

- *Let me take refuge in you and be glad, ever singing for joy. Spread your protection over me; surround me with your favor as with a shield. (Psalm 5:11–12)*

- *Thank you for your promise that I can approach your throne of grace with confidence, so that I may receive mercy and find grace to help me in my time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)*

Day 12

Praying through Suffering and Grief

"God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering."
Genesis 41:52

"Sometimes grief is a gentleman," writes Sara Hagerty, "waiting until we have time to think and feel before entering the rooms of our interior lives. Other times grief ignores all the cues, and you weep over your salad at dinner while celebrating a friend's birthday, or tuck away into a bathroom stall at a concert and cry."[1]

I know exactly what Sara means. And reading about how she mourned the loss of her father—a story that mirrored my own—rekindled my own twenty-year ache. Like Sara, I am all too familiar with grief's habit of lying in ambush, sometimes waiting months—years even—before attacking again.

People will tell you (they told me) that God never gives anyone more than what they can bear. That isn't true. God *does* give his children more than we can bear—much more sometimes. But he never intends for us to carry the load on our own; he offers himself as our burden bearer.[2] He promises to be with us as we face fiery trials and turbulent waters so that we don't get burned or swept away.[3] And sometimes in his mercy he reveals the purpose in our pain. "This happened," Paul writes after things got so bad that he and his companions were sure they would die, "that we might not rely on ourselves but on God."[4]

I won't pretend to know all the reasons God allows his children to suffer. We want to point the finger at Satan (or at Adam and Eve for taking that bite), but that's not always the case. Sometimes, Jesus says, our pain is a result of God's pruning. "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."[5]

As a gardener (well, okay, as someone who has a few plants), I get that. If you want your branch to be really fruitful, you need to cut it back. I understand what Jesus is saying, but I can't say I like it. I don't like the idea that God might cut something out of my life—that he might cut *me*—in order to make me more

fruitful. I don't like the thought that a loss could be used in God's hands to bring about something good. I don't like pain. Period.

One of my first encounters with life-shaping pain (and one that shaped my own understanding of God's presence in our grief) was when I "met" Joni Eareckson Tada. I was a teen whose parents worked in the Christian book publishing world, and when they invited me to choose any book from their collection of new releases, I picked up *Joni's Story.* I didn't focus on the words *quadriplegia* or *depression* on the cover; all I saw was a very cute girl with a felt-tip marker in her mouth. She was smiling, and it looked like she knew something I didn't. I wanted to get to know her.

That was 1977. Today, untold millions of people know Joni's story: As a fun-loving, active teen, she went to the beach one day and dove into the surf. Misjudging the shallowness of the water, she broke her spine and became paralyzed from her shoulders down.

Joni prays to be healed (and knows she will be, even if it's in heaven), but thus far, God has kept her in her wheelchair. As an advocate for people affected by disability, she has impacted millions worldwide. Hers is an inspiring story, but I wondered, years after reading it, did she find herself wishing she had never gone to the beach? Would she just as soon *not* have a worldwide ministry? Was —is—her suffering worth it?

I was bedridden myself when God answered my questions. Knowing I was sick but having no idea of my one-sided friendship with Joni, the Zondervan publishing team sent me a copy of *A Spectacle of Glory*, a devotional book Joni wrote fifty years after her accident. I opened to a random page—October 4. Reflecting on the scene where Moses beholds the burning bush, the one that never burns up, Joni writes this:

> Christians who suffer greatly and yet also graciously often cause the same curious response. They are a spectacle of grace to the church, like flaming bushes unconsumed, causing onlookers to ask, as Moses did, "Why is the bush not burned up?"

If you read a sentence like that and think to yourself, *I'm not sure I want to be a burning bush,* you're not alone. Joni knows how you feel. And she admits as much in this devotion's closing prayer:

> *Father,* part of me resists being a spectacle or drawing the attention of others. But if my life somehow draws attention to You, if the way I process suffering draws people to Your grace and strength, then I can accept—even embrace—being on display. Thank You for sustaining me. Thank You that Your grace is enough for me.[6]

Having wrestled with my own suffering in everything from big sorrows like my father's too-early death to the pop-up losses that color our everyday lives (the best friend who moved, the child cut from a team, the sickness that stole a whole season), I will admit to having more questions than answers when it comes to the pain God permits.

I do know, however, that Joni is right. We can count on God's grace to sustain us.[7] And it's okay to let our wounds show.

It can be tempting to hide our grief or our scars (*I don't want to burden others*, we say to ourselves, or *I need to look happy if I want to make Jesus attractive*), but here's the truth: The people in our sphere of influence will go through their own seasons of pain. Our broken places are not the sidebars to our story; they *are* our story. They are the marks that authenticate God's redemptive power—his resurrection power—in our lives.

And as we trust the vinedresser with the tendrils of our hearts—knowing there is purpose in his pruning—we can anticipate a harvest. We can look forward to saying, as Joseph did, "God has made me fruitful in this land of my grief."[8]

Read

- "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." (John 15:2)
- "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." (John 16:33 NLT)
- In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6–7)

Reflect

- It can be easier (and more appealing) to believe a gospel that says God wants us to avoid hardships and be protected from pain. But Scripture tells us we will face trials and sorrow, and that our suffering can be used—redeemed—to produce fruit that will last.
- What has been your experience with suffering and grief? Do you know people whose lives are "a spectacle of grace"? Can you point to any places where God has used pain or loss to produce growth in your life or to draw others to his strength and grace?
- Wherever you are in your suffering, you are not alone. Jesus was "a man of suffering, and familiar

with pain."[9] Ask God to sustain you with his grace. Trust him to be your burden bearer. Meditate on his promise to make you even more fruitful, knowing that your faith—which is of greater worth than gold—is a display case for God's glory.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Be my merciful Father, the source of my comfort. Comfort me in all my troubles so that I can comfort others. Help me be alert to their needs and give them the same comfort you have given me. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4)*
- *Help me trust you as the one who daily bears my burdens. Prompt me to give them to you. (Psalm 68:19)*
- *Make me fruitful in the land of my suffering. (Genesis 41:52)*
- *When I feel the sting of pruning or loss, remind me of your promise—that when a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it produces many seeds. Produce fruit out of my suffering, Lord. (John 12:24)*
- *Answer me when I cry out. Make me bold with strength in my soul. (Psalm 138:3)*
- *I long to see your goodness in the land of the living. Equip me to wait on you. Help me be strong and take heart and wait for you, Lord. (Psalm 27:13–14)*
- *Be my God of hope. Fill me with all joy and peace as I trust in you, so that I may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)*
- *Take whatever is intended to harm me and use it for good, to accomplish the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20)*
- *Give me a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. Make me an oak of righteousness, a planting for the display of your splendor. (Isaiah 61:3)*
- *Help me consider it pure joy when I face trials of many kinds. Let the testing of my faith produce perseverance so that I will be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2–4)*
- *Heal my broken heart; bind up my wounds. (Psalm 147:3)*
- *When weeping lasts through the night, remind me of your promise that joy comes in the morning. Turn my wailing into dancing; remove my sackcloth and clothe me with joy. (Psalm 30:5–11)*
- *May my life be a fruit-bearing branch; help me trust your pruning to make me even more fruitful. (John 15:2)*

Day 13

Waiting on God

The LORD is good to those who wait for him.
Lamentations 3:25 ESV

In his classic devotional book *Waiting on God*, Andrew Murray says that waiting for God to answer our prayers "links us, in unalterable dependence, to God" and gives us the "unbroken enjoyment" of his goodness.[1] Given the John 15 call to connection, I love the idea that waiting can actually link us—attach us—to God. I'm less excited, though, about what Murray's theory looks like in real life. I don't think I would ever put "waiting" in the same sentence as "unbroken enjoyment."

Not even on the same page.

Waiting, to me, conjures images of unmet longings and disappointing circumstances. The dating relationship that was supposed to lead to marriage but hasn't. The job or promotion that never materialized. The "deferred" notice on the med school application. The gap between homesick and happy in a new place. The desire to have a baby (and the heartache that grows with each negative pregnancy test). The toddler who won't sleep through the night. The adult child who has walked away from his faith. The sickness—physical or emotional—that just won't go away.

Waiting is not for the wimpy. Even Murray concedes that. "The word *patience*," he writes, "is derived from the Latin word for suffering."[2] It comes as no surprise, then, that when Scripture exhorts us to "wait for the LORD," the very next words are, "Be strong, and let your heart take courage."[3]

You know? *Be strong* and *take courage* are words far more suited to an epic adventure than to a long holding pattern; it's like the psalmist knows that waiting on God will tap—maybe even exhaust—our deepest fuel reserves.

And it can be easy in the face of delayed provision or unanswered prayers to grow weary and want to give up. Particularly when we're asking God for something we *know* is good—the salvation of a loved one, reconciliation or

forgiveness among family members, freedom from a crippling addiction—and it doesn't look like the needle is moving. That can be confusing. Frustrating. Faith-shaking even.

Maybe God has some secret reason for withholding an answer, we think to ourselves, *and the most pious thing we could do would be to just quit. To stop praying. To pack up our hope and our trust and go home.*

But let's don't do that.

Instead, let's take the long view, believing Jesus when he says that his Father is always at work, even when we can't see what he's doing.[4] And let's consider what may be happening behind the scenes as we wait:

- God could be teaching us perseverance—the trait that marks us as mature and complete.[5]
- God could be testing and purifying our faith—not for his benefit, but to prove to us that it is strong and it is real.[6]
- God could be giving us an opportunity to hone our request so that our desire lines up with his (better) plan.[7]

God could be doing any number of things while we wait. Even the waiting itself can sweeten the deal. How much more grateful are we for the blessing that arrives after a long prayer battle than we are for the one that just shows up on our doorstep, as if delivered by Amazon Prime?

Again, though . . . waiting is hard. And the only way we can do it successfully—the only way we can turn our frustration and fear into trust and wait well—is through abiding in Christ.

Here's how this works. We start the prayer process desiring a particular outcome. But then as we abide—remaining in Christ and letting his words remain in our hearts—something shifts. God uses our need, our longing, to point us toward something better. Something higher. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways," he says, "higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."[8]

Murray puts the transformation like this: "We were seeking gifts," he writes. "He, the giver, longs to give Himself and to satisfy the soul with His goodness."[9]

God wants us to know he is good—all the time. He wants us to know he is good *when* the gift comes, *before* the gift comes, and even if the gift *never* comes. He wants us to experience the unbroken enjoyment of waiting.

Have I gotten there yet? No. I still struggle. But I'm convinced that the destination is real. And not just because Andrew Murray says so.

I'm convinced that we can find joy in the waiting because I know actual people who have. I know people who've experienced God's goodness—who *are* experiencing it—even though their prayers have not been answered. The Giver, for these dear ones, is more than enough.

And even more than their testimony (compelling as their radiance is), the thing that assures me that our perseverance and God's goodness walk hand in hand is that the Bible says they do. The book of Lamentations does not sugarcoat life; it's basically five straight chapters of bitterness, affliction, and other unhappy words. And yet tucked right in the middle of all the despair we find this gem: "The LORD is good to those who wait for him."[10]

Lord, make it so.

Read

- This I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. (Lamentations 3:21–25 ESV)
- The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)
- He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

Reflect

- How does waiting on God increase your dependence on him? Do you see that as a good thing? Or does the idea of not being able to control your own outcomes and timelines frustrate you? Do you trust God's timing?
- Consider the ways you have experienced God's faithfulness in the past. How can reflecting on that provision equip you to "be strong and take heart" for the future? What role do you think Scripture plays in preparing you to bear fruit "in season"?
- God longs to show us his goodness and to draw us into deeper intimacy with him. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you wait well. Ask him to open your eyes to the purposes that God may want to accomplish. And ask him to help you trust God's timing, knowing that his ways are always higher and better than ours.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *May I take delight in your law and meditate on it day and night so I will bear fruit in season, at just the right time, and prosper in whatever I do. (Psalm 1:2–3)*
- *Make me confident that I will see your goodness while I am here in the land of the living. Equip me to wait patiently for you, Lord. Help me be brave and courageous. Yes, help me wait patiently for you. (Psalm 27:13–14 NLT)*
- *You set eternity in our human hearts, but when I can't fathom what you are doing, help me trust your promise: You make everything beautiful in its time. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)*
- *Renew my strength as I wait on you. Equip me to run and not be weary, to walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31)*
- *Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life. Plant your longings in my heart, Lord, and delight to fulfill them. (Proverbs 13:12)*
- *Let me not get tired of doing what is good, since you've promised that at "just the right time" I will reap a harvest of blessing if I do not give up. (Galatians 6:9 NLT)*
- *When I find myself in a waiting season, equip me to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. (Romans 12:12)*
- *As I wait for you—as my whole being waits—may I put my hope in your word. Keep me vigilant and alert as I wait for you in the darkness, even more than watchmen wait for the morning. (Psalm 130:5–6)*
- *May I be patient like the farmer who eagerly awaits the valuable crop that comes after the fall and spring rains. Help me be patient and stand firm as I wait for your coming, Lord. (James 5:7–8)*
- *Open my eyes so I can see the big picture. You are not slow in keeping your promise, as some understand slowness. Rather, you are patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)*
- *May I be like King David, who waited patiently for you. Turn to me and hear my cry. Lift me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire. Set my feet on a rock; give me a firm place to stand. Put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to you, God. (Psalm 40:1–3)*
- *Anchor my hope in your steadfast love and in your mercies, which are new every morning. Show your goodness to me as I wait on you. (Lamentations 3:21–25 ESV)*

Day 14

Finding Freedom from Worry and Fear

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."
John 16:33

Robbie and I had gotten an early start on our hike. We had been climbing for more than an hour—without spotting even one other person—when we came upon a "Bear Alert" sign, one that offered several key bits of advice.

"Don't let it sense your fear," I read aloud. That sounded . . . iffy. I kept going. "Once the bear identifies you, it may leave the area or try to intimidate you by charging to within a few feet before it withdraws."

Alrighty then. We had options. The bear might walk away . . . or it could charge. Which sounds a lot, actually, like everyday life.

Because we face threats and what-ifs all the time. Sometimes, like a disinterested bear, our worries and fears just pack up and leave: *The test comes back negative. The money is there. That thing's not a spider; it's lint.*

Sometimes, though, we find ourselves taking a charge: *It turns out to be cancer. He wants a divorce. It's 2:00 a.m., and we know this call won't be good.*

Stuff like that scares us. Makes us anxious. Uncertain how to respond. The Old English word from which we get our word *worry* means "to strangle or choke," and if you've ever experienced a panic attack—or even just felt your chest tighten in the wake of bad news—you get it. "Don't let it sense your fear" sounds good in theory . . . but does that advice work in real life?

God evidently thinks so. He knew we'd face threats (both real and imagined), and "Don't be afraid" is one of the most oft-repeated commands in the Bible. But instead of just telling us not to be worried or scared—a charge we'd be hard-pressed to put into practice sometimes—God gave us a way to turn our panic into peace:

> Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can

understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.[1]

Prayer is the antidote to worry and fear. When we bring our cares before God—trusting in his wisdom, his love, and his ability to provide and protect—we enter into a transaction that, as Tim Keller puts it, "brings a comfort and rest that nothing else can bring."[2]

Is this exchange instantaneous? Rarely. Is it permanent? I wish. I've had to face my fears, gather my trust, and screw my courage to the sticking place more times than I can count. But you know what? That's okay. Because fear and worry are often the very things that drive us to God. They cause us to lean into him. They invite us (force us sometimes) to tether our prayers to his promises so that confidence has a chance to take root.

And then, as we meditate on these promises and remember who God is—and that he is for us—our default position can switch from one of panic to one of praise.

J. I. Packer, the influential theologian and author, was a firm believer in the inerrancy of the Bible and its power to impact our lives. He knew we'd come up against swirling torrents and trials and would need God to deliver us. And the Scriptures, he wrote, "are the lifeline God throws us in order to ensure he and we stay connected while the rescue is in process."[3]

So what Scriptures work best in the face of worry and fear? I'm partial to at least three:

> "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."[4]

> "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."[5]

> "Do not fear, for I am with you;
> do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
> I will strengthen you and help you;
> I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."[6]

I have overcome. I will be with you. I will strengthen you and help you. In each of these promises (and countless others), God offers his presence as a safeguard against every threat. "Where can I go from your Spirit?" the psalmist asks. "Where can I flee from your presence? . . . If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."[7]

Fear and worry are legitimate human emotions. But they are not places

where God wants us to pitch our tents and camp out. When God clues us in to a problem—the loved one who struggles with an addiction, the financial need our resources cannot meet, the bear that rises up out of nowhere and looks like it's getting ready to charge—it is never to prompt us to panic.

It is to prompt us to pray, knowing that as we dwell—as we *abide*—in the shelter of the Almighty, we will experience his rest.[8] His right hand will hold us fast.

Read

- He shall send from heaven and save me; He reproaches the one who would swallow me up. (Psalm 57:3 NKJV)
- Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6–7 NLT)
- "So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." (Matthew 6:31–33 NLT)

Reflect

- In this world we will have trouble. Relationships, circumstances, and the trials of life will conspire to steal our joy and fill us with worry and fear. But God does not intend for us to be anxious. He has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.[9]
- What is filling your heart with worry or fear? God knows our needs even before we ask him. Whatever this situation is, it has not taken him by surprise. Consider the fact that God may be cluing you in to a problem or need, not to prompt you to panic, but to invite you to pray.
- Meditate on God's attributes—things like his power, his wisdom, his limitless love. Tether your trust to his promises. Tell God what you need, thank him for what he has already done, and then allow his peace to guard your heart and your mind. Picture God's hand holding you fast. Rest in his presence. He's got you.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Thank you that you know my needs. When I'm tempted to worry about _____, help me replace fear with faith. Show me how to seek you above all else, trusting your promise to give me all that I need. (Matthew 6:32–33)*

- *Equip me to take hold of the peace you give so that I will not let my heart be troubled or give in to fear. (John 14:27)*
- *When I am anxious or afraid, help me take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ. (2 Corinthians 10:5)*
- *Cover me with your feathers so I can find refuge under your wings. May your faithfulness be my shield and rampart. (Psalm 91:4)*
- *When I face horses and chariots and armies that look bigger than the resources I have, help me remember your promise to be with me, to fight for me, and to give me the victory. (Deuteronomy 20:4)*
- *Send from heaven and save me; reproach the one who would swallow me up. (Psalm 57:3 NKJV)*
- *May I be strong and courageous. Help me not be afraid or discouraged about _____; send your presence with me wherever I go. (Joshua 1:9)*
- *Fill me with your perfect love, which drives out fear. (1 John 4:18)*
- *You are the God of peace. Give me your peace at all times and in every situation. Be with me, Lord. (2 Thessalonians 3:16)*
- *Fill me with all joy and peace as I trust in you, so that I overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)*
- *You are my refuge and my strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Help me be still and know that you are God, and let me exalt you above all the earth. (Psalm 46:1, 10)*
- *Guard my thoughts so that instead of focusing on worry or fear, I will think about whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—may I think about such things. (Philippians 4:8)*

Day 15

Avoiding the Comparison Trap

Don't compare yourself with others.
Galatians 6:4 MSG

Once upon a time, I got drafted to coach Little League. I had offered to be the Team Mom—I said I'd sew the team banner, distribute the rosters, lug the juice box coolers—but they didn't want that. "We need coaches," they said.

Never mind that I didn't (and don't) know a thing about baseball. That didn't seem to matter to my team, at least not at first. They christened themselves The Purple Wolves, and we spent our practice time perfecting our cartwheels, working on our team cheer (a growl paired with a threatening "wolf stance"), and honing our baseball-themed jokes ("Why did the sausage quit playing baseball? Because he was the wurst on his team").

Life was pretty good. But then Game Day arrived.

I had found a big old beach blanket so my team wouldn't have to sit on the grass and had packed what I thought was a strong lineup of snacks. My Wolves seemed happy and ready to play—until they looked across the field.

"Oh no," one kid said.

I followed his gaze. The other team wasn't seated just yet, but you could tell where they'd be. Every single one of the fourteen spots in the opposing lineup was clearly marked on the ground by a carpet sample. A *carpet sample!* And on top of each tidy square sat a matching red water bottle, with a little baseball stopper on top.

"We're gonna get killed!" a wolf moaned. A few others agreed. And fear spread through my team like wildfire.

Can I just interrupt myself here and let you know that this was *T-ball*? If you know anything about T-ball (and if you don't, consider us friends), you know that nobody keeps score. You cannot lose. And you definitely cannot get killed. But try telling that to a bunch of kindergartners whose parents were stacked, three-deep, in lawn chairs on the sidelines. My Wolves had come ready to play . . . and yet they were already feeling defeated.

They had fallen prey to The Comparison Trap.

We do the very same thing. We can't help it. We look across the fields of our lives (or our social media feeds) and see neighbors whose grass is much greener than ours. Friends whose jobs look more fulfilling, whose vacations seem more relaxing, and whose kids appear infinitely smarter and more accomplished than ours. Even our faith can come under attack. *We don't know the Bible as well as she does. We have never been able to keep a prayer journal. And if people knew what we were really thinking about on Sunday morning, we'd probably get kicked out of church.*

We give insecurity a toehold in our lives, and then, like the Purple Wolves' fear, it starts to spread.

Here's the thing, though: Anybody can *look* like they have their stuff all together, like they are leading a carpet-square life. And if we spend our time scrolling through what other people look like instead of focusing on who we really are—beloved children of God, whose power is made perfect when we are weak and whose grace equips us for every good work—we'll be doomed.[1] The comparison trap, to paraphrase a quote attributed to Theodore Roosevelt, will steal every shred of our joy.

So let's not. Let's stop looking across the field at the kids with their matching water bottles. Instead, let's consider the unique gifts and talents that God has given us—gifts that find their meaning and function as part of the larger body of Christ. Let's "just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't."[2]

How that plays out in real life will look different for everyone.

One gal I know deleted her Instagram account when she realized that every time she logged on, she wound up being jealous, discouraged, or strangely forgetful of the good things in her own life. Either that, or she felt proud or judgmental when she saw people who didn't look as successful or as "virtuous" as she did—the ugly flip side of the comparison trap.

Another friend distanced herself from a peer group where the conversation pattern at every gathering seemed focused on building yourself up by tearing others down. "I just needed to change that channel in my life," was how she put it.

And a third woman told me she had decided to use feelings of envy as a prayer prompt when she saw someone else get a win. "It's not like God's blessings on someone else's life diminish his ability to provide for my needs," she said. "Instead of camping out in my own insecurity and feelings of lack, I

decided to get on board with what God was doing.

"Now," she concluded, "when I see God's favor on display in someone else's life, I ask him to bless that person even *more*."

I *love* that. Getting on board with what God is doing in someone else's life is a way of living out the Bible's command to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."[3] And asking God to pour out his blessing and favor on someone else—someone whose success we might otherwise be jealous of—goes hand in hand with Tim Keller's observation that prayer reorients our perspective and gives us relief from "the melancholy burden of self-absorption."[4]

Speaking of melancholy burdens . . .

My Little League coaching career was not long—just that one season, in fact. But there are images I still carry with me. The wolf stance for one. The carpet squares for another. And the way the parents all beamed with pride when their son or daughter stepped up to the plate.

Just like God beams over us, his treasured possession, knowing we are all fearfully and wonderfully made.[5]

Read

- Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don't be impressed with yourself. Don't compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life. (Galatians 6:4–5 MSG)
- Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)
- I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. (Philippians 4:11–12)

Reflect

- The Bible says we should rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. But the comparison trap—stacking our successes against someone else's—can make it hard to celebrate a friend's victory. "Comparison," as Teddy Roosevelt is reported to have said, "is the thief of joy."
- Where is comparison stealing your joy? Have you believed the lie that God's provision for someone else somehow diminishes his ability—or his desire—to bless you? Are you jealous of someone else's accomplishments? Wealth? Looks? Family?
- Ask God to reveal places of discontent in your life. Confess these things, and then consider the gifts

—the resources, the relationships, the talents—God has given you. Seeds of envy and insecurity cannot take root in a soil that has been cultivated with gratitude. Thank God for the blessings he has poured into your life, and ask him to help you do your creative best for his glory.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Show me how to go ahead and be what I was made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing myself to others or trying to be something I am not. (Romans 12:6 MSG)*
- *Don't let me judge by appearances or compare myself to others who commend themselves. Instead, let me focus only on your approval. (2 Corinthians 10:7–18)*
- *Help me use the gifts you have given me to serve others, faithfully stewarding your grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)*
- *Keep my life free from the love of money, and help me be content with what I have, for you have said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)*
- *Equip me to pay careful attention to my own work and get the satisfaction of a job well done so I won't need to compare myself to anyone else. (Galatians 6:4 NLT)*
- *Help me to see myself as your workmanship, fearfully and wonderfully made. (Psalm 139:14)*
- *Thank you for the gifts you have given me. When I feel like my contribution is weak or unnecessary, remind me that my gifts are indispensable in your eyes, and that you give special honor to things that seem less valuable so there won't be any division among your people. (1 Corinthians 12:22–25)*
- *Show me how to be content in every situation, whether well fed or hungry, living in plenty or in want. (Philippians 4:12)*
- *Don't let me harbor envy or selfish ambition in my heart, since that is not from you, and it leads to disorder and every evil practice. (James 3:14–16)*
- *Grant me godliness with contentment, since I brought nothing into this world and I will take nothing out of it. (1 Timothy 6:6–7)*
- *Give me the grace to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. Don't let me be proud, but make me willing to associate with those who are lower than I am. (Romans 12:15–16)*
- *Don't let me focus on trying to win the approval of people, but of you. If I were trying to please people, I would not be Christ's servant. (Galatians 1:10 NLT)*
- *Instead of looking around at what others are doing or what their lives look like, may I always stay focused on following you. (John 21:22)*
- *Don't let me be conformed to what the world thinks and does, but transform me by renewing my mind so I can discern what your will is, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)*

Day 16

Praying about the Words You Say

Words kill, words give life;
they're either poison or fruit—you choose.
Proverbs 18:21 MSG

"You'll never be any good. You're too old to start now."

The words were hard, but the tone was loving, and I knew my friend meant well when he tried to dissuade me from taking up golf.

I ignored him.

I mean, how did *he* know how good (or bad) I would be? Having fixed up enough old homes to merit an HGTV time slot, I can spot an off-center window or an out-of-plumb wall, even if it's just by half an inch; how hard could it be to line up a putt? (It's not like the hole *moves*, for crying out loud.)

Two lessons, one clinic, and twelve entire holes later, I had my answer. And a whole new respect for words like *mulligan.* Between trying to get my grip right, keep my head down, and remember the difference between a shank and a slice, I hardly had time to wonder if anyone had noticed my cute new golf skirt. Golf is trickier than it looks.

Especially when, every time you think about grabbing your clubs (I started with three; my goal was to learn one at a time and then add on), you hear a voice in your head saying, *You'll never be good. You're too old. Don't even try it.*

Words matter.

In fact, "Words satisfy the mind as much as fruit does the stomach; good talk is as gratifying as a good harvest. Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit"—and we get to choose.[1]

That's Proverbs 18:20–21 in *The Message* translation. The Bible is bursting with similar exhortations and warnings about the power of our words. We're told to return blessings for insults; avoid that which is crass; steer clear of things like gossip, slander, and boasting; and speak words that will benefit those who listen. But none of this comes easily. "No human being," Scripture says, "can tame the

tongue."[2]

Tell me about it.

We had four kids in six years, and I'll never forget my daily struggle to get them to be nice to each other—especially when we got in the car. They quarreled over who got to sit where, whose feet were in whose face; you name it. I wasn't much better ("Don't make me pull over!"), and finally, when one of the children wondered how I could be "so nice to the lady in the bank window and so mean to us," I realized we needed professional help. As in a word from the Lord that could transform our communication patterns.

I stumbled upon Ephesians 4:29—"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen"—and felt like God had been spying on my family. And that he had thrown me a lifeline.

The verse became my daily prayer prompt: *Don't let us say anything unkind or foul. Let us build each other up. May our words benefit and encourage people who hear them.*

As the children grew, I expanded my repertoire, using other verses to help shape my prayers. And I discovered that the Bible is right: A gentle answer does turn away wrath. Too much talk really can lead to sin. Covering over an offense fosters love, but repeating a matter—gossiping and adding fuel to the fire—separates close friends. And even fools are thought wise if they don't say anything![3]

So much good stuff!

One verse, though, was tougher to swallow. First Peter 3:9 reads, "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." I could imagine turning the other cheek—ignoring an offense (even a comment on social media) or choosing to just walk away. But . . . extending a blessing to someone who insulted you? To someone who was rude to your spouse? Or mean to your child? How did that work exactly?

I wasn't at all sure how blessing someone who had done you wrong would lead to getting a blessing. Wasn't it enough to just overlook an offense and move on? Why did God want us to bless the nasty people?

I've thought about this one for a while (decades, actually), and taken the "blessings for insults" command out for a test drive many times to see how it handles on life's bumpy roads. And you know what? It works.

Repaying evil with blessing takes the sting out of the offense. It removes the offender's power to wound. It softens hard soil—flinty hearts—so that love can

take root. And it allows us to experience God's pleasure. To see his smile. To realize we are being blessed.

If it seems awkward to bless someone who says or does something we don't like (or who has made a choice we believe runs counter to God's commands), consider this: *a blessing is not the same thing as an endorsement.* Rather, when we bless people—grumpy neighbors, ornery coworkers, wayward children—we do the same thing God does when he blesses us: he speaks favor over our lives and points us toward the abundant life he wants us to enjoy.

Words give life. And they really can, as Proverbs 18:21 says, produce fruit. Say, for instance, that you want your child to have wisdom. Envision it in his life, and speak words like this: "I can picture God shaping you into a wise and discerning young man. I have great confidence in your future."

This sort of affirmation represents a way to give others a sense of purpose, a vision for how God may want to shape or use their talents and abilities. We can do this for our children, our coworkers, our spouses—anyone. Maybe even someone we see struggling on the golf course.

Because who knows what could have happened had my friend spoken a blessing over my game instead of forecasting failure? We'll never know. But I can tell you this: that old Ephesians 4:29 prayer about unwholesome talk really worked.

I played twelve endless holes, lost at least seven balls, and never said a single bad word.

Read

- "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." (Luke 6:45 ESV)
- But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. (Colossians 3:8)
- Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. (1 Peter 3:9)

Reflect

- Think about the words you speak. Are you prone to gossip? To telling white lies? To coarse joking? Do your words build people up or tear them down? Ask God to show you any places where your speech patterns are not pleasing to him, and allow Scripture to shape your understanding of the "poison or fruit" nature of words.

- Reflect on your family members, coworkers, and friends. Is there someone who can use an encouraging word from you today, someone over whom you can speak God's favor (even if you don't think they deserve it, or you're afraid your blessing may fall on deaf ears)?

- Take God's promises out for a test drive. Be alert to how your words impact other people, and ask God to help you steer your conversations (in real life and online) in life-giving directions. As you meditate on God's Word, trust him to make the words of your mouth and the meditations of your heart pleasing to him.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Give me a well-taught tongue so I will know how to encourage tired people. (Isaiah 50:4 MSG)*

- *Let no unwholesome talk come out of my mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29)*

- *Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. Set a guard over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 139:4; 141:3)*

- *Help me make every effort to live in peace with everyone and be holy, extending your grace to others and not letting any bitter root grow up that would cause trouble in my relationships. (Hebrews 12:14–15)*

- *Let me speak gracious words that are like a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (Proverbs 16:24)*

- *Help me remember that without wood a fire goes out, and without gossip a quarrel dies down. (Proverbs 26:20)*

- *Equip me to bless those who persecute me; blessing them instead of cursing them. Give me the words to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. (Romans 12:14–15)*

- *May I always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks me to give the reason for the hope I have, doing so with gentleness and respect. (1 Peter 3:15)*

- *Guard my heart, since everything I do flows from it. Keep my mouth free from perversity and corrupt talk—including careless banter, white lies, and gossip. (Proverbs 4:23–24 NIV and MSG)*

- *Help me guard my lips and thereby preserve my life, since those who speak rashly come to ruin. (Proverbs 13:3)*

- *Keep my tongue from evil and my lips from telling lies. May I turn from evil and do good, seeking peace and pursuing it. May your ears be attentive to my prayers. (Psalm 34:13–15)*

- *Do not let me repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but give me the grace to repay insults with blessings so I will heed your call and inherit a blessing. (1 Peter 3:9)*

- *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)*

- *Grant me wisdom to make the most of every opportunity. May my conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that I will know how to answer everyone. (Colossians 4:5–6)*

Day 17

Praying to Love God's Word

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.
Romans 15:4

Two of our daughters got married within four months of each other. Throwing two weddings at once was glorious, exhilarating, and . . . more than a little intimidating.

On the plus side, we were in a good position to negotiate ("Can you cut me a deal if I take *two* wedding cakes?"). On the minus side, I was never so aware of how much I don't know about party planning. Like . . . tablecloths. Who knew that mixing three different patterns was key to achieving a "signature look"? Or wine. Some people can be kind of particular about what they are willing to quaff (even the guy at the wedding in Cana could tell the choice wine from the cheap), and I didn't want to serve the wrong stuff.

Thankfully, Robbie and I know several people who fit the "connoisseur" category, and mindful of Proverbs 15:22 ("Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed"), I started asking around.

And oh my.

People who know their wine *know* their wine. I quickly learned about the "lock" that some vineyard owners have on different price points, the impact that "cult" wines can have on a market, and the value of assessing the "drinkability" factor of any particular vintage (which—silly me—I had thought just came down to whether or not you had a corkscrew handy). I found my head spinning, and I hadn't even tasted the alcohol!

Honestly though? I was incredibly grateful for the expert feedback, both because it helped narrow my wedding day choices and because it proved the point that Jen Wilkin makes in her book *Women of the Word*: "The heart cannot love what the mind does not know."[1]

Wilkin taps into scientific studies done by Yale brainiac Paul Bloom, who specializes in (not making this up) "pleasure research." Bloom cites a clear link between *knowledge* and *enjoyment*, maintaining that our pleasure in something increases when we learn its "history, origin, and deeper nature." Put another way, pleasure doesn't simply occur; it *develops* as we study. And according to Bloom, a perfect example is wine: "The key to enjoying wine," he says, "isn't just to guzzle a lot of expensive wine, it's to learn about wine."[2]

Our grape-loving friends would add a hearty amen. The more they know, the more they appreciate. The more they enjoy. And (happily for people like Robbie and me) the more they are willing to share.

Which is also what happens with our relationship with the Lord.

Think about it.

The more we *know* God, the more we *love* him—and the more we want to *share* him with our friends. And one of the main ways we get to know God—his character, his promises, the things he loves—is through the study of Scripture. And the more we study the Bible, the more we enjoy it. And the more we want to remain in Christ and have his words remain in us, à la John 15:7, so that our prayers bear fruit—and so that we prove to be his disciples.[3]

So that we prove we *know* him.

All too often, we go about getting to know—and love—Jesus backward. We long to experience his presence, to feel his comfort and peace, to have some sort of heart change that will make us want to spend time with him. In reality, though, our mind is what needs to change first. We need to *know* before we can truly *love*.

The Bible puts it this way: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the *renewing of your mind.* Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."[4]

In other words, the renewal of our minds (which happens through the living, active, transformational work of Scripture) is what changes our hearts and transforms our desires, taking our focus off what the world values and making us yearn to know who God is and what he esteems. "We come to understand who God is," Wilkin says, "and we are changed—our affections detach from lesser things and attach to him."[5]

I may never be a sommelier (those people have to know a lot more than I do about things like the drinkability factor, for starters), but when it comes to knowing the true vine—the John 15 vine—I want to "detach from lesser things" and attach to Jesus. I want to let his words remain in me, renewing my thoughts and transforming my desires so that my prayers line up with God's plans—his

good, pleasing, and perfect plans. I want to bear fruit and live a life that brings glory to God.[6]

If that's what you want as well (and if you've gotten this far in this book, I have to assume you do), then let's do this. Let's open our Bibles, not with an eye toward discovering stuff for ourselves (seeking wisdom for *our* lives, direction for *our* relationships, comfort for *our* sorrows), but with an eye toward knowing —and loving—the Lord. *What does he think? What does he cherish? What does he want to do in our hearts?*

This sort of knowledge is what will kindle our love for the Bible. It will animate and energize our prayer life. And it will cause us to fall deeper, ever deeper, in love with God, the pioneer of our salvation and the perfecter of our faith.[7]

Read

- All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish . . . so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10–11)
- The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes . . . By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:7–8, 11)

Reflect

- God longs for us to know him intimately, and he reveals himself—who he is and what he values—through his Word. God's Word makes things happen. It teaches and trains us, gives us joy, equips us to do every good work, and achieves God's purposes. It also impacts how we pray. "If you remain in me," Jesus says, "and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."[8]
- How does this idea—that the Bible initiates our desires and shapes our requests—differ from your understanding of how prayer works? How might it change the way you pray? Can you think of a time when something you read in the Bible sparked a desire in your heart or led you to pray in a particular way?
- Ask God to help you see Scripture as a conversation—one he starts. Commit to reading your Bible not so much as a way to discover God's will for your life but as a way to discover God. Take delight in the Lord, trusting that as you do, he will give you the desires of your heart, both initiating and

satisfying your affections with his presence.[9]

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *May I remain in you, and your words remain in me, so that I can ask whatever I wish and it will be done. Let me bring you glory and bear much fruit through my prayers, proving that I am your disciple. (John 15:7–8)*
- *Keep your commandments on my heart. Help me impress them on my children, talking about them when I am at home and when I go out, when I lie down and when I get up. May your words be ever before me—on my hands, my doorframes, everywhere. (Deuteronomy 6:6–9)*
- *When I am confused or uncertain, may your word be a lamp for my feet and a light on my path, showing me what is right in front of me, as well as what lies ahead. (Psalm 119:105)*
- *Do not let me merely listen to the word, and so deceive myself. Let me do what it says. (James 1:22)*
- *You know the way I take. May I closely follow your steps and treasure your words more than my daily bread. (Job 23:10–12)*
- *Equip me to fight life's battles armed with the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:17)*
- *Open my heart and mind to your word, which is alive and powerful, so that the innermost thoughts and desires of my heart will be exposed. (Hebrews 4:12 NLT)*
- *When I need strength or courage, let me look to the Bible, since everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we may have hope. (Romans 15:4)*
- *Help me handle your Word wisely, not adding to or subtracting from what is written in Scripture, but keeping the commands that you give. (Deuteronomy 4:2)*
- *Place your good hand on me, that I may set my heart on studying your Law, doing what it says, and teaching your statutes to others. (Ezra 7:9–10)*
- *Give me a noble character like the Bereans had, that I may receive your word with eagerness and examine the Scriptures every day to confirm what is true. (Acts 17:11)*
- *Make my heart good soil so that I will hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest beyond my wildest dreams. (Mark 4:20 MSG)*
- *May I keep your commands so I will live; write your words on the tablet of my heart. (Proverbs 7:2–3)*
- *Cause me to take delight in your law, meditating on it day and night so that whatever I do will prosper. (Psalm 1:1–3)*

Day 18

Hearing God's Voice

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."
John 10:27

We didn't have family close by when our children were young, and since Robbie and I liked to save the babysitter money for an occasional date night, I took the kids with me wherever I went. Seeing me out in the wild, strangers often felt compelled to offer advice. Like the woman who said it was "not safe" to put four children into one grocery cart, especially when they were covered by boxes of Captain Crunch, Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, and some cheap Chardonnay. ("Can the baby breathe under there?" the woman wanted to know.)

That particular wisdom nugget was not super helpful, but I'll always be grateful to the older mom who told me I would never remember all the cute, funny, or ghastly things my kids said, so I should write them down—on a napkin, a receipt, or whatever scrap of paper was handy—and throw their comments into a drawer. "Later," she said, "you'll be glad."

It's later. And she was right. I stumbled upon the contents of that old drawer recently and discovered a treasure trove of childhood commentary and questions. Our daughter Annesley was just five years old when she began eyeing my wedding ring. "When you die," she asked, "can I have it? Like, if I just slip it off your finger real gentle and quick, would you mind?"

On the plus side, Annesley also showed a keen interest in the Lord. "How," she wanted to know, "can you tell if it's God speaking to you, or if it's just your own voice in your head?"

A fair question, and one that many grown-ups might be asking today. And my answer, I thought, started well.

"For one thing," I said, "God's voice will never contradict Scripture."

Annesley looked a bit blank, so I plowed ahead (and here's where things got a bit dicey). "Like, the Bible says things like 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'Honor your father and your mother.' So if you ever felt like God is telling you to kill your mother, you can be sure this isn't his voice."

(Again, four kids in six years. I was not at the top of my intellectual game.)

"*Kill your mother*?" Annesley repeated, incredulous (which I took as a good sign, given the wedding ring thing). But then she folded her arms and gave it some thought.

"Well," she finally said, "if that *was* God, he'd have to have a *pretty good* reason."

Anyhow.

I know my example may not be the most appropriate one, but it's theologically true. When God tells us something, it will never run counter to what he says in the Bible. That's one sure way we can check to test whether the voice we are hearing is his.

Another plumb line is that God may convict or correct us, but he never condemns. You know that inner voice that says, "You're pathetic . . . You stink . . . Shame on you . . ."? Yeah. That one. That one is not God. That's our enemy, the accuser. Also known as the father of lies.[1] Don't listen.

Listen, instead, for encouraging words. Words that build you up and prepare you to live a purpose-filled life. God's voice is like his written Word, "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training" so that we "may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."[2]

And finally, God's voice is never scattered or frantic, and it's rarely loud. It may even come as a whisper. And it may take a while to discern. "Though [the revelation] linger," Habakkuk 2:3 reminds us, "wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay." Moses knew the value of seeking God's counsel before plowing ahead. "Wait," he said to a group of ceremonially unclean Israelites who were eager to celebrate the Passover, "until I find out what the LORD commands concerning you."[3]

These three signs—consistency with Scripture, convicting rather than condemning, and focused rather than frantic—are hallmarks of God's voice. There are others, of course.[4] But the main thing to remember (and this whole concept kind of undoes me) is that God *wants* to be in conversation with us. He longs to reveal himself. To give us direction. To bend down, incline his ear, and talk with us—as he did with Moses—as "one speaks to a friend."[5]

It can be tempting sometimes to envy the disciples, the guys who got to walk and talk with Jesus every day. They didn't have to wonder whether they were hearing God's voice; they had him right there! And yet . . . so do we. Every time we open our Bibles, we literally access God's Word. We can discover his wisdom, moment by moment, for every relationship, circumstance, or predicament we face. And just as we learn to recognize a friend's voice the more

we hear it, so our ability to discern God's voice grows the more we open our ears. "My sheep," Jesus says, "listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."[6]

Not only that, but if you're new to the Bible—or even if you've been reading it for a long time but it's felt dry and unyielding of late—you're not alone. God knew some of his thoughts could be tricky for us (they are not like our thoughts, he says; they are higher[7]), so he gave us the Holy Spirit to help us understand and apply what we read.

Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "the Helper."

"The Helper," he says, "will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you . . . He will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."[8]

In other words, the Holy Spirit can be counted on to know what's what and to give good advice. And the more we learn to recognize and depend on his voice—his thoughts, his desires, his gentle correction, his leading in our lives—the more we will experience God's peace.

(Even when complete strangers in the grocery store checkout line question our parenting style.)

Read

- Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know. (Jeremiah 33:3)
- Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21)
- Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for GOD's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. (Proverbs 3:5–6 MSG)

Reflect

- What a privilege we have as believers to be able to enter into conversation with Almighty God. The Lord longs to reveal his will to us. He offers his wisdom in the pages of his Word, wisdom that the Holy Spirit helps us apply in our thoughts, our circumstances, our relationships, and in every area of our lives.
- Is there a decision you're currently facing? A situation where you need to know what to say or how to respond? How can paying attention to God's commands instead of having to figure out things on

your own open the door to peace?

- Meditate on the incredible privilege of talking with God. Ask him to show you his will and to provide the direction you need. Allow the Holy Spirit who lives in you to be your teacher. Pay attention to anything the Spirit whispers to your heart as you listen for God's voice, and allow his word—as revealed in the Bible—to shape your perspective and show you what to do.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Help me be still as I listen for your voice, and let me know you are God. (Psalm 46:10)*
- *When I'm faced with a decision, keep me headed in the right direction. Let me hear your voice saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21)*
- *Open my heart and my ears to the Holy Spirit, my Helper, so he can teach me all things and remind me of all you have said. (John 14:26 ESV)*
- *Make me one of your sheep: Let me listen to and recognize your voice [versus the voices of social media, podcasts, movies, or any other sounds]. May I be known by you, and give me strength to follow where you lead. (John 10:27)*
- *Don't let me be like someone who looks in a mirror and then forgets what they look like; rather, let me look intently into your perfect law and continue in it, not forgetting what I have heard but doing it so I will be blessed in what I do. (James 1:23–25)*
- *Help me trust you from the bottom of my heart instead of trying to figure out everything on my own. Let me listen for your voice in everything I do. Everywhere I go, keep me on track. (Proverbs 3:5–6 MSG)*
- *Answer me when I call on you; tell me great and hidden things I have not known. (Jeremiah 33:3 ESV)*
- *Teach me what is best, direct me in the way I should go, and help me pay attention to your commands so I will experience peace like a river. (Isaiah 48:17–18)*
- *Turn my ear to wisdom and apply my heart to the knowledge that comes from your mouth so I will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path. (Proverbs 2:2–9)*
- *Do not let me be conformed to this world, but transform me by the renewing of my mind so I will be able to discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)*
- *When I hear your voice, don't let me harden my heart and turn away; rather, equip me to be faithful to the end, trusting you just as firmly as when I first believed and sharing in all that belongs to Christ. (Hebrews 3:7–14 NLT)*
- *You stand at the door and knock. May I hear your voice and open the door so you will come in and we can share a meal together as friends. (Revelation 3:20 NLT)*
- *Tune my ear to hear your voice, whether it comes as a gentle whisper or like the roar of rushing*

waters. (1 Kings 19:12; Ezekiel 43:2)

Day 19

Resting in God

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
Matthew 11:28

"Granddaddy," three-year-old Hillary said, "can I rest on you?"

My father—who was babysitting my daughter at the time—told me later he wasn't sure what she meant, but he had said yes. And with that, my dad said, Hillary climbed into his lap, put her head on his chest, and fell fast asleep.

And all my father could think about as he sat there with a toddler sleeping on his chest was Deuteronomy 33:12: "Let the beloved of the LORD rest secure in him, for he shields him all day long, and the one the LORD loves rests between his shoulders."

I loved that image—my daughter finding security between my father's shoulders. It dovetailed neatly with the "rest for your souls" Jesus offers in Matthew 11:29—rest that, as Andrew Murray puts it, offers "deliverance from every fear, the supply of every want, the fulfillment of every desire."[1]

Still, though, I found myself scratching my head. When Jesus offers rest for the weary and burdened, it's not like he says, "Come take a nap." He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me."[2] I don't know much about farming, but to me, wearing a yoke implies action of some sort. Pulling a cart. Plowing a field. Doing work.

Where was the promise of rest in *that* picture?

I decided to do a bit of exploring. And as so often happens, checking a familiar passage in a different Bible version helped put things in perspective. *The Message* makes no mention of "yokes"; instead, here's how it renders Jesus' words:

> "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."[3]

A real rest.

That sounded appealing. I liked how Jesus linked rest—real rest—to *walking* and *working* with him. To living a life marked by purpose. To living freely and lightly—not straining or striving, but moving to the "unforced rhythms of grace" as we "keep company" with the Lord.

Which is, actually, the same thing he promises in John 15: "Remain in me and . . . you will bear much fruit." Abiding—staying connected to Christ, not striving in our own strength—is the way we get the job done. It's the key to abundance.

But what does that look like in real life? Can we really rest and work—produce fruit—at the same time?

Several examples—and answers—come to mind.

In Exodus 33, God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses wants some hands-on instruction ("Teach me your ways"), but God offers something better. "My Presence will go with you," he says, "and I will give you rest."[4]

In Leviticus 25, God tells his people to plant fields and prune vineyards for six years but to let the land "rest" in the seventh. No sowing, no reaping, no tending the vines—just let it be. In return, God says, "You will eat your fill . . . I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years."[5]

In Luke 23, we read that women followed Christ to the cross, weeping and mourning, and that once Jesus died, they prepared the perfumes and spices for his body. But sunset came before they could finish the job, and they "rested," the Bible says, "on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment."[6]

In each of these cases, there was work to be done—Moses had people to move; the Israelites had fields to plant; the women had to anoint Jesus' body for a proper burial (or so they thought). But in setting aside their own demands, work schedules, and expectations in order to honor and obey God, each of these people received more than anything they could have imagined. They got to experience God's presence, his provision, and his resurrection power.

Rest, then—*real* rest—is maybe not so much ceasing activity as it is adopting a posture of trust, one where we increasingly depend not on our own strength but on God's. It's yielding our plans—our timetables, our skill sets, our ideas about how things have to go down—to the Lord and actively choosing to abide.

It is to climb into the arms of Everlasting Love, put our head on his chest, and know that when we say, "Can I rest on you?" our heavenly Father will say

yes.

Read

- “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28–30)
- The LORD replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” (Exodus 33:14)
- The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. (Psalm 23:1–3)

Reflect

- God invites us to remain in him. He wants his presence to permeate all that we do so we can experience his rest—even in the face of a too-full schedule or a job we don’t feel equipped to do. It is only through this abiding connection to Christ that we can be fruitful; apart from him, we can do nothing.
- Where have you been striving to be productive apart from the Lord? In what relationships or circumstances do you long to experience his peace? What do you think it looks like, in practical terms, to “take Jesus’ yoke” and learn from him—to walk with him and work with him?
- Don’t think about all the to-dos on your list today. Instead, meditate on God’s power and his presence, and trust him to keep you in perfect peace as you surrender your agenda to him. Open your heart to receive the rest and refreshment Jesus offers as you learn the “unforced rhythms” of his grace.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *When I am tired and worn out, show me how to take a real rest. May I walk with you and work with you. Teach me how to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28–29 MSG)*
- *Give me a steadfast mind. Help me trust you with _____. Keep me in perfect peace. (Isaiah 26:3)*
- *When life feels like it’s pressing in—like I don’t even have a chance to eat—may I heed your call to come with you to a quiet place and get some rest. (Mark 6:31)*
- *You are my shepherd; I lack nothing. Make me (make me!) lie down in green pastures; lead me beside quiet waters; refresh my soul. (Psalm 23:1–3)*
- *Help me observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Grant favor as I labor for six days and do all my work, and then let me honor you on the Sabbath—along with everyone in my household.*

(Deuteronomy 5:12–14)

- *Instead of trying to climb the ladder or elbow my way to the top, help me be quiet and prayerful before you. (Psalm 37:7 MSG)*
- *Wherever I go and in whatever I do, may I find favor with you. Let me sense your presence with me. Give me rest. (Exodus 33:13–14)*
- *Let me dwell in your shelter and rest in your shadow. Be my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust. (Psalm 91:1–2)*
- *When I find myself striving or anxious, remind me of your promise: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." (Isaiah 30:15)*
- *Don't let me give in to the temptation to get up early and go to bed late, working my worried fingers to the bone. Instead, let me rest in your promise—that you enjoy giving rest to those you love! (Psalm 127:2 MSG)*
- *When I am tired and weary, cause me to put my hope in you. Renew my strength. Equip me to run and not grow weary, to walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:30–31)*
- *Thank you for your promise of a Sabbath-rest for your people. Let me enter your rest and rest from my works, just as you did from yours. (Hebrews 4:9–10)*
- *Let my soul be at rest again, for you have been good to me. (Psalm 116:7 NLT)*

Day 20

Using Your Gifts and Talents

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.
1 Peter 4:10

When our children were growing up, we played a homemade game called "Would You Rather?" It's not complicated; it's basically just a conversation starter (perfect for car trips) where anything goes: *Would you rather be considered somewhat annoying or totally dull? Would you rather have Sherlock Holmes's brain or James Bond's cool? Would you rather* (and I won't tell you which kid came up with this one) *suck an old man's toes, or have an old man suck your toes?*

(Yeah. Robbie and I read a lot of "good parenting" books back in the day, but I'm not sure how much really took.)

Anyhow.

I remembered this game when I read the list of different gifts Paul highlights in the Bible. In his letter to the Romans, he talks about prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, financial giving, leading, and showing mercy.[1] Writing to the Corinthians, he adds things like offering guidance or help, along with a catalog of more supernatural-sounding manifestations of God's grace: things like words of wisdom and knowledge, healing, working miracles, and speaking in tongues.[2] Even the Old Testament showcases a variety of skills and talents. God gave one guy—Bezalel—wisdom, understanding, and all kinds of artistic metalworking and woodcrafting skills.[3]

Reading about all of these cool-sounding endowments, I couldn't help myself. I started cataloging. Some of the gifts, I thought, sounded more useful (and less potentially awkward) than others.

I was fine, for instance, if God wanted to give me the gift of teaching, encouragement, or even hospitality (as long as having only eleven good placemats was not a deal breaker). But when it came to the more mystical stuff

—things like the gift of interpretation (which is where somebody speaks in tongues and you translate)—I balked. Way too much margin for error right there.

(I mean, I barely made it through French.)

But it's almost like Paul knew we'd one day be playing "Would You Rather?" with the myriad forms of God's grace. Likening our spiritual gifts to various parts of the body, he writes this:

> Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.[4]

Just as he wanted them to be.

Ahh. There was the rub. Did I think it was up to me to tell God which gifts I would "rather" have? Or was I willing to let him do the picking—to make me a foot, an eye, or a kneecap? And if he shaped someone else into a more honorable part, could I live with that? Could I—as the Bible puts it—*rejoice* about that?[5]

I knew there was only one answer. I had to put myself in God's hands. I had to let him decide how to "grace" me, even if he nudged me well beyond my acceptable margin for error. And I had to celebrate the graces he showered on others. Because honestly? God knows precisely how we are each formed—and he's got a plan for the part we will play in the body of Christ.[6]

Which is, actually, the whole point of God giving us gifts. Our talents and skill sets are not meant to bring us attention or fame, or open the door to financial blessing. Our gifts are meant to help others. "To each one," Paul says, "the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."[7]

And at the end of the day, *what* we do doesn't seem to matter as much as *how* we do it. Givers are to give generously. Leaders are to lead diligently. Those who are gifted in showing mercy are commanded to do so cheerfully.[8] "Whatever you do," Scripture says, "work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters."[9]

Our gifts should be embraced, cultivated, and handled with excellence. When we do that, giving credit to God and trusting him to help us employ our talents wisely and well—strengthening the church, meeting people's needs, pointing others to Jesus—we get to fulfill both parts of what Jesus said was the greatest commandment. We love God with all that we have, and we love others as well as we love ourselves.[10]

Which sounds infinitely better, I think we all can agree, than being somewhat annoying, totally dull, or having an old man suck your toes.

Read

- In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. (Romans 12:6–8 NLT)

- Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4–7 ESV)

- Every good and perfect gift is from above. (James 1:17)

Reflect

- We're all different and all have different gifts, but God intends for us to use our diverse talents and abilities for a common purpose. He wants us to glorify him and bless others. That lines up perfectly with what Jesus says is the greatest commandment: to love God with all that we have, and to love others as we love ourselves.[11]

- Are you a talented singer? A discerning counselor? A whiz with numbers or in business administration? How are you using your gifts and abilities to honor God? To benefit other people? Do you thank God for how he has created you, or do you struggle with a sense that your gift isn't as valuable or as important as someone else's?

- Confess any areas of envy or discontent you may feel, and allow God to show you your talents—your unique giftings and abilities—as *he* sees them. Meditate on the fact that God knows *exactly* how you are formed (and that he wired you that way on purpose). Ask him to open your eyes to the way he wants you to use your gifts for his kingdom. Record any thoughts or impressions that come to mind.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Whatever I do, equip me to work at it with all my heart, as working for you, Lord, and not for human masters. (Colossians 3:23)*

- *Show me how to use my gifts to equip people for works of service so that the body of Christ will support each other and be built up in love. (Ephesians 4:11–16)*

- *Prompt me to be diligent in developing the gifts and talents you've given me so that I will become skilled in my work and equipped to serve before kings. (Proverbs 22:29)*
- *Equip me with everything good for doing your will. (Hebrews 13:21)*
- *Thank you that I am your handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which you prepared in advance for me to do. (Ephesians 2:10)*
- *Don't let me take credit for my gifts and abilities, but help me realize that every good and perfect gift comes from you. (James 1:17)*
- *Let my light shine before others, that people will see my good deeds and the talents you have given me and glorify you. (Matthew 5:16)*
- *Don't let me be envious of the talents and abilities you give others, since all gifts are given for the common good, according to what you have determined. (1 Corinthians 12:7–11)*
- *Show me how to use my gifts and talents wisely, being faithful with the abilities you have given me so I can share in your happiness. (Matthew 25:21)*
- *May I use my gifts and talents for your glory. (1 Corinthians 10:31)*
- *Equip me to be like James, Peter, and John; make me quick to recognize and affirm the unique gifts and grace you give others so I can work where you have called me rather than trying to compete with someone else. (Galatians 2:9)*
- *Don't let me seek attention or credit from others, but let me exercise my gifts quietly and unobtrusively, in such a way as to earn your approval. (Matthew 6:1–4)*
- *Help me use whatever gift I have received to serve others as a faithful steward of your grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)*

Day 21

Praying about Your Work and Purpose

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
Ephesians 2:10

"How do you make your money?"

The question caught me off guard. Robbie and I didn't know most of the other guests at the dinner party, and it took me a moment to realize that the gentleman who had just introduced himself wanted to know what we did for a living—what our *work* was. Did we, the question implied, do something that made us important? Worth getting to know? Rich?

People have linked the "Who are you?" question to "What do you do?" since forever. We can't help it; there is something inside us that longs to be valued—to know that our lives count for something—and the easiest way to measure our worth, we assume, is by what we do. Even the disciples tried to define Jesus in these terms, asking him about things like seating charts in his kingdom or whether they should "call fire down from heaven" to destroy his opponents.[1] They had seen how the Roman rulers did things and wanted folks to know that Jesus—their guy—was "somebody" too.

But Jesus, of course, turns things upside down: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant," he says, "and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."[2]

So what does this mean for our work?

Some Christians read a passage like that, or the one that says we can't serve "both God and money,"[3] and conclude that God doesn't care about things like making a profit, or that our work—unless it's in some sort of ministry—does not matter to him. My first job out of college was with a Christian television network. I'll never forget talking to a classmate of mine who had gone into real estate. "You must feel so fulfilled," he said, his envy apparent, "getting to work in a place where you can serve God."

I *was* fulfilled—but not because I had dodged some sort of secular vocational bullet. As anyone who has ever worked for a church or a ministry will quickly tell you, the grass is not necessarily greener on that side. Balancing budgets, setting priorities, dealing with people and their pride and different perspectives—it's all part of the mix. You can serve God (or not) anywhere.

Whether you work in a secular job, a volunteer position, or a full-time ministry, what you do matters to God.

The Bible is filled with workplace how-tos, with wisdom on everything from managing stress and making a profit to dealing with things like lawsuits, dishonesty, and a challenging boss. It also highlights the examples of people who did their jobs really well. Daniel so distinguished himself among the other administrators that the king planned to put him in charge of the whole kingdom; Bezalel's artistry and expertise with metalworking, stonemasonry, and other crafts made him God's point person for the tabernacle; Lydia's success as a woman in business earned her a respected place in her city and equipped her to extend hospitality to Paul, Silas, and other believers.[4]

Again, our work matters to God. He created us to work (to do "good works . . . prepared in advance"[5]), and he hardwired in us a longing for meaning and purpose, a desire to—as Jesus said in John 15:16—"bear fruit . . . that will last."

Which is where things can get a bit tricky.

We tend to look at God (as C. S. Lewis put it) as "a kind of employment committee whose business it is to find suitable careers for our souls, square holes for square pegs."[6] We think that if we can just do (as Tim Keller puts it) "some great thing" we will have been a success.[7] But no "square hole" career or outstanding achievement can answer questions like "Who am I?" or "What am I really worth?" There will always be another project to complete, another ladder to climb, another dollar to make in pursuit of a satisfaction that lasts.

We need to flip things upside down. God doesn't want us to *produce* value; he wants us to *receive* it. He intends for our sense of purpose and identity to stem not from anything we might *do* but simply from our connection to Christ. "I am the vine; you are the branches," Jesus says. "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."[8]

So what does fruit bearing look like in the marketplace? How does our union with Christ impact our vocation? What's most important to do?

We can start by remembering what Jesus said—that if we want to be great, we need to serve.

And then instead of asking "How will this or that job benefit me?" we can

ask, “How can my work equip others to flourish?”

Finally, we can focus on what matters most to the Lord. The most important command, Jesus said, is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” and the second is to “love your neighbor as yourself.”[9]

If we do these things, it doesn’t matter what our particular vocation or ministry is—or what we say at a dinner party when somebody asks us how we “make our money.” We can be confident that we are completing our God-given assignment—bearing fruit that will last.

Read

- Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and not live unproductive lives. (Titus 3:14)
- May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands. (Psalm 90:17)
- Don’t burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don’t quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. (Romans 12:11–13 MSG)

Reflect

- God intends for our lives to be marked by purpose and meaning. He wants us to be productive and fruitful as a natural outgrowth of our connection to him. “Remain in me,” Jesus says, “and you will bear much fruit.”
- Where are you currently experiencing the satisfaction of a job well done? Where do you feel burned-out, or like you might be falling short of God’s purpose for your life? Where are you looking for value or meaning in temporal places? Where are you bearing fruit that will last?
- Take some time to consider your perspective on work and success. Confess any areas where you’ve been self-focused or have been trying to do it all on your own. Ask God to help you see your vocational and ministry efforts through his eyes and to show you how to work—and to pray—for what lasts.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Keep me attached to you so I will bear much fruit; apart from you, I can do nothing. (John 15:5)*
- *Fulfill your purpose for me. Do not abandon the works of your hands. (Psalm 138:8)*

- *Help me devote myself to doing what is good, in order to provide for urgent needs and live a productive life. (Titus 3:14)*
- *Whatever I do, equip me to work at it with all my heart, as working for you, Lord, not for human masters. (Colossians 3:23)*
- *Don't let me get burned-out at work, but keep myself fueled and aflame, serving you with alertness, cheerfulness, and a sense of expectancy. (Romans 12:11 MSG)*
- *Look upon me with favor; establish the work of my hands and make my efforts successful. (Psalm 90:17 NIV and NLT)*
- *Give me aptitude for every kind of learning; may I be well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve. (Daniel 1:4)*
- *May I pay careful attention to my own work so I can have the satisfaction of a job well done, without comparing myself to anyone else. (Galatians 6:4 NLT)*
- *Encourage my heart. Strengthen me in every good word and deed. (2 Thessalonians 2:17)*
- *Equip me to work hard, since lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth. (Proverbs 10:4)*
- *Give me the power to accomplish all the good things my faith prompts me to do so the name of Jesus will be honored because of the way I live. (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12)*
- *Help me not grow weary in doing good, since at the proper time I will reap a harvest if I do not give up. (Galatians 6:9)*
- *Thank you that you are always working, Lord. Complete the good work you have begun in my life. (John 5:17; Philippians 1:6)*
- *May I find my purpose in doing what matters most to you—loving you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving my neighbor as myself. (Mark 12:30–31)*
- *Thank you for choosing and appointing me to go and bear fruit. May I do what lasts. (John 15:16)*

Day 22

Praying about How You Use Your Time

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.
Ephesians 5:15–16 ESV

"If you have never missed a plane," a dear friend told me, "you are spending way too much of your life in airports."

As someone who has, in fact, more than once arrived after the jetway door has closed, I appreciate my friend's perspective. Even so, I envy people who seem never to be in a rush, who linger over coffee, who knew all about "margin" before that was even a thing—even as I keep a mental catalog of unfinished projects, untended friendships, and unwelcome thoughts about a too-full calendar. Am I the only person who crawls into bed, turns out the light, and thinks to herself, *If only I'd had more time today . . .*?

I have to believe I'm not alone.

Time is indeed a limited resource, and most of us are conditioned to regard its paucity as a problem. I grew up listening to Jim Croce sing about how there never seemed to be enough time to do what you wanted to do, once you figured out what that was. I reckoned he was right, and by the time I was a teen, I had learned to live by my daily to-do list, checking off what *had* to be done so as to free up time—precious, fleeting time—for what I *wanted* to do (but too rarely did).

As an adult, I did my best to transfer this sense of urgency to my children. We'd play "Beat the Buzzer" to get the kitchen clean or when the bedrooms needed a ten-minute "cabin check." I thought I was being such a fun mom by turning housework into a race, but since we rarely finished the job (at least not to my satisfaction), I can't help but think my strategy backfired. Maybe instead of helping my kids manage time, I only reinforced the idea that it was impossible. Maybe all I did was teach them a new verse in Croce's song: *There never seems to be enough time to do the things you don't want to do when your mom says you have to . . .*

And maybe it's true. Maybe there *isn't* enough time for the housework, or whatever is on your (or your mother's) to-do list. Here's the thing though: there is *always* time to do the will of God.

At least that's what Elisabeth Elliot says.

"If we really have too much to do," she writes, "there are some items on the agenda that God did not put there. Let us submit the list to Him and ask Him to indicate which items we must delete. There is always time to do the will of God. If we are too busy to do that, we are too busy."[1]

The Bible supports this contention. "God is able," Scripture says, "to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."[2]

Can we really count on God to give us all that we need? Even if our need is for *time*? Will he really equip us to "abound in every good work"?

Yes. Yes—as long as we do what Elliot says and "submit the list to him." As long as we seek God regarding what really matters.

Jesus puts it this way: "Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions," he says. "Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes."[3]

So what does this look like? How do we "steep" our lives in who God is and what he is doing? How do we get our thoughts—our priorities—lined up with his with regard to how we use time?

The Bible says we can ask the Holy Spirit to help. We can pray the prayer Moses did: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."[4] And we can turn to Scripture to discover God's purposes so we learn to invest time rather than waste it.

For example . . .

- Philippians 2:3 tells us to value others above ourselves. This may mean we play on the floor with our toddler, being fully present in body and mind, or we put our phone away when we have coffee with a friend.
- Philippians 4:8 says we should think about things that are excellent and praiseworthy. This may mean we stop surrendering our thoughts to worry, envy, or fear and devote those moments to adoring God and thanking him for his provision.
- Hebrews 12:1 tells us to throw off everything that hinders. This may mean allowing the Gardener to take his pruning shears to our schedules, asking him (as Elisabeth Elliot advises) which items we should delete.

When we allow the principles and promises in God's Word to shape our priorities, we'll find our days increasingly ordered by him. We may think the answer for an overwhelmed life is a change in our circumstances or an easing up in our schedules, but it's not. The answer is to spend time with God—and the busier we are, the more time we should spend. As Martin Luther famously put it, "I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."[5]

"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."[6]

When we abide in Christ, drinking deeply of God's Word, we can ask him what he thinks. And when we have his mind, Sara Hagerty writes, we can be sure that he is "ready today to help us have that space in our lives to expand, grow, and carry far more than we do right now, but with great lightness."[7]

Carry *far more?* With great *lightness?*

Forget about beating the buzzer. Sign me up for the victorious life of expanded capacity that God has planned!

Read

- Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. (Colossians 4:5 ESV)
- Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:13–15)
- Teach us to number our days and recognize how few they are; help us to spend them as we should. (Psalm 90:12 TLB)

Reflect

- God dwells in us. He wants to help us order our days so we can be fruitful and productive without feeling burdened or stressed. He wants to expand our capacity, to give us all that we need, to equip us to abound in every good work.
- How do you define success when it comes to using time? Do you tend to take on too much? Or do you hang back for fear of overextending yourself (and then worry that you're not doing "enough")? What would it look like for you to "expand, grow, and carry far more" with great lightness?
- Ask God to show you where you've squandered time, or where your perception of its scarcity has made you fearful, anxious, or stingy. Submit your agenda for the Holy Spirit's review, trusting him to show you what to pursue and what to delete. Commit to spending time with the Lord (especially when you feel too busy to do so). As you do, be alert to the ways God will expand and increase your capacity for doing his will.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Teach me to number my days, that I may gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12)*
- *You've entrusted me with hours and days; let me use time faithfully. (1 Corinthians 4:2)*
- *When I am tempted to let the to-do list define my perception of success, transform me by renewing my mind so that I can discern and do your good, acceptable, and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)*
- *Help me live for you, Lord, being ever mindful of the fact that I belong to you. Don't let me be concerned about what others do or how they spend their time; each one of us will one day give an account of ourselves to you. (Romans 14:8–12)*
- *When I am anxious about not having enough time or not knowing how best to use it, equip me to trust you and say, "You are my God. My times are in your hands." (Psalm 31:14–15)*
- *Equip me to be generous with my time, knowing you are able to bless me abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that I need, I will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:6–8)*
- *May I be a good and faithful servant, managing time and other resources wisely so that I will hear you say, "Well done!" and share in your happiness. (Matthew 25:23)*
- *Help me throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and run with perseverance the race marked out for me. (Hebrews 12:1)*
- *I don't know what will happen tomorrow. Instead of making plans for travel or business, let me submit to your plans, saying, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:13–15)*
- *Strengthen me so that as long as it is day, I can do your work, since night is coming when no one can work. (John 9:4)*
- *Help me be wise in the way I act toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. (Colossians 4:5)*
- *Make me like the ant; may I consider its ways and be wise! Even when no one is looking, may I use my time well, storing and gathering resources wisely. (Proverbs 6:6–8)*
- *As I have opportunity, help me do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:10)*
- *There is a time for everything. Help me know when to weep and when to laugh; when to be silent and when to speak; when to wage war and when to make peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8)*
- *Keep me from striving or spinning my wheels in pursuit of temporal things; let me seek your kingdom and your righteousness first, knowing that everything else I need will be added. (Matthew 6:33)*

Day 23

Praying about Financial Decisions

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
Hebrews 13:5

"Every spending decision is a spiritual decision."

I used to write money management books for a financial brainiac named Ron Blue, and even though I didn't understand half of what he taught me at first (okay, I'm still fuzzy on things like pour-over wills and real estate investment trusts), that statement—and the idea that how we use our money actually makes a difference to God—resonated right off the bat.

Because honestly? God owns it all.

We may think we've earned it, and that we can spend our paychecks as we please, but this perspective misses a huge chunk of the picture. I think King David said it best, back when he was stockpiling resources to build the temple for God. As he looked around at all of the silver and gold and precious gemstones he and the Israelites had donated to the building project (thousands of *tons* of the stuff, all given with joy), all David could do was praise God.

"Who am I," he said, "and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand."[1]

All of which is to say that when we contemplate a financial decision, the question we should ask ourselves is not, "How should I spend/save/invest/give this money?" but "How would God want me to use the resources he has entrusted to me?"

That question is easy, but the answer can often be harder—especially because there will always be unlimited ways to allocate limited resources. It doesn't matter whether you're in your very first job, halfway up the corporate ladder, or have just retired in a blaze of watches and glory, your spending options will always exceed the money you have. Whether it's eating ramen noodles or

feasting on lobster and Dom Perignon, you'll forever have spending choices to make.

And God understands that. He knew we'd need help, and that there would be times when we'd be tempted to chase after material wealth more than we'd want to pursue or serve him—which is probably why the Bible contains more than 2,300 references to money and possessions.[2] Jesus talked about money management more than any other single issue, weaving financial principles—insights on saving, charitable giving, paying taxes, strategic planning, and more—into everyday situations to help us establish priorities and make money-smart moves.

I wish I could say I remembered everything I learned from Ron Blue—or better yet, everything that Jesus said. I don't. I do, however, recall at least three money management pointers that have worked in real life, tips clearly supported by Scripture.

1. Financial freedom comes from spending less than you earn. The Bible warns that the borrower becomes the lender's slave.[3] As young parents, Robbie and I wanted no part of that, but spending less than we earned—and staying out of debt—was harder than we thought it would be. Especially for two English majors.

We found our salvation in the envelope system. After tithing and paying for un-fun expenses like rent, we settled on five categories for our available cash: Groceries, Clothing, Entertainment, Gas, and Miscellaneous. I wanted to honor the Lord with the choices we made, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit I hoped God (and Robbie) wouldn't notice how many times I stole the last of the gas money for pizza, assuring the kids that it would be "way more fun" if we walked to the restaurant.

2. Generosity brings joy and banishes fear. The Bible says we can't serve both God and money,[4] and one of the best ways to keep our focus on serving God—and guard against enslavement to things like worry and greed—is to hold our wealth with an open hand and a generous heart. Scientific studies point to a link between generosity and things like mental and physical health and happiness[5]—a connection supported by Scripture:

> Tell those rich in this world's wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage—to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they'll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life.[6]

3. Finally, time is a tool—and the more we have of it, the better. Thanks to

things like compounding interest, even the tiniest nest egg will grow over time. And if we take the long view in our financial decision making (rather than frantically trying to time the market's highs and lows or pursue "get rich quick" schemes), we can equip ourselves to wait well. "Whoever gathers money little by little," the Bible says, "makes it grow."[7]

These three things—spending less than you earn, prioritizing generosity, and learning to see time as an ally—are just a handful of the money management wisdom we can glean from the Bible. Will they help you know whether or not to buy that new house? Or even a new pair of sneakers? Or whether you're supposed to tithe off the gross or the net?

I don't know. That's between you and God. (And again, English major.)

I do know, however, that the Bible says God will give wisdom to anyone who asks him for it. And that he really does own it all. And that when we make it our aim to honor the Lord with the money he gives us—with the best part of everything we produce—he will fill our barns with grain and our vats will overflow with good wine.[8]

(Which, if I ever decide to go into financial planning as a full-time career, will be the verse I post on my office door.)

Read

- The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it. (Psalm 24:1)
- Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Timothy 6:17–19)
- "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Matthew 6:24)

Reflect

- How we manage our money matters to God. His instructions about things like saving, spending, and giving generously are designed for our benefit. And how we ultimately use our resources speaks volumes about our priorities and what we value.
- How do you think about money? Is it a source of worry for you? Do you equate your financial position with a sense of security? Would you describe yourself as a generous person? A thrifty person? Stingy? Lavish? Do you believe that God owns it all? In what ways are you honoring him with your wealth or your spending decisions? Where do you need God to guide and direct you?

- Take some time to reflect on questions like these. Ask God to show you any areas where you may be allowing the sense of prestige or security that money offers to shape your priorities and even your worship. Give your financial concerns—including any upcoming decisions—to God and trust him to give you the wisdom, protection, and provision you need.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Make me willing to tithe—to trust you with my finances. And when I do, throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough in my life to contain it. (Malachi 3:10)*

- *Help me not to worry about money because you have promised to supply all my needs according to your glorious riches in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)*

- *May I seek you first, knowing that as I do, everything else I need—clothing, food, whatever—will be given to me as well. (Matthew 6:31–33)*

- *Teach me to be content with what I have instead of falling into any sort of "get rich quick" trap or pursuing any harmful desires that come from loving money and being so eager to get it that I wander away from you. (1 Timothy 6:6–10)*

- *As I weigh business partnerships and financial decisions, protect me from any yokes that could attach me to wickedness or darkness. (2 Corinthians 6:14)*

- *Make me a trustworthy money manager. Help me be faithful with little so I can be entrusted with much. (Luke 16:10)*

- *Wealth, honor, and position come from you. Equip me to be generous, remembering that you are the source of all that I have. (1 Chronicles 29:12–14)*

- *As I consider new projects or purchases, show me how to estimate the cost and be sure I have enough money to finish what I start. (Luke 14:28–30)*

- *Don't let me become arrogant or put my hope in wealth instead of in you. May I enjoy all that you have provided and be rich—both in good deeds and in the way I use money to help others. (1 Timothy 6:17–18)*

- *Equip me to manage my finances with wisdom and integrity, since a good name is more desirable than great riches, and to be esteemed is better than silver or gold. (Proverbs 22:1)*

- *Don't let me wear myself out trying to get rich; instead, help me remember that the one who gathers money little by little makes it grow. (Proverbs 23:4; 13:11)*

- *As I regard financial decisions, may I be careful and wise. Help me to make the most of every opportunity and to be able to discern what your will is in every situation. (Ephesians 5:15–17)*

- *Let me be on guard against all kinds of greed and remember that life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. (Luke 12:15)*

- *May I sow and reap generously, giving intentionally and with a cheerful spirit. Bless me abundantly, so that in all things and at all times I will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:6–8)*

Day 24

Asking for Wisdom and Guidance

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
Psalm 32:8

I remember being a young mom and wanting so badly to get it all "right." I longed to be the Proverbs 31 woman: I wanted my husband to have "full confidence" in me, and I wanted to speak to my children with wisdom and always have "faithful instruction" on my tongue.[1]

The thing is, though, I wasn't at all sure what wisdom or faithful instruction looked like. The parenting books underscored the importance of things like routines and discipline, and the Bible talked about "starting children off on the way they should go,"[2] but none of that counsel seemed particularly helpful on, say, a random Wednesday afternoon when the missing cat turned up in the refrigerator ("It's the *orphanage*, Mom!").

There were plenty of days when I yearned for the wisdom of Solomon—especially when my kids started bickering. Thinking of how he had solved that business with the baby, I was willing to try any tactic to bring peace to our home.[3] One time, when Annesley and Hillary were six and seven years old, I duct-taped them together and made them clean all the toilets one-handed. Hillary is a lefty, so it worked.

(Looking back, this may not have been my best parenting move, but the girls quit fighting and the bathrooms got clean, so I'm counting it as a win.)

Maybe you're not a parent. Maybe stopping a squabble is not your chief concern. Maybe you need wisdom for a business decision. Or for navigating a tricky relationship. Or for managing an overly full schedule, making a smart money move, or knowing what words to say to a grieving friend.

Wisdom, writes Eugene Peterson, is "the art of living skillfully in whatever conditions we find ourselves."[4]

Whatever conditions. That cuts a broad swath. Which may mean we'd be

doomed, except for the fact that God is as eager to give us his wisdom—to help us live skillfully—as we are to receive it. "If any of you lacks wisdom," James writes, "you should ask God, who gives generously to all, without finding fault, and it will be given to you."[5]

I love that promise. Wisdom isn't reserved just for Harvard grads, grand masters in chess, or people who know how to work the TV remote. God says he'll give wisdom to any who ask—and that he will do so lavishly.

And God's wisdom comes with so many benefits. It helps us manage time well, makes us better listeners, and provides direction and purpose in life.[6]

It opens the door to things like happiness, riches, and a long life; offers protection from seductions that can lead us astray; and leads to strong, joy-filled family relationships.[7]

It even makes us look better. (Think I'm making that up? Check out Ecclesiastes 8:1 if you don't believe me!)

Most of all, wisdom equips us to respond to life with God's perspective. "We haven't stopped praying for you," Paul wrote to the Colossians, "asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will, and so acquire a thorough understanding of the ways in which God works."[8]

Let's make this super practical. As in, how can we be sure we are acting with wisdom, regardless of the problem or circumstances at hand?

For starters, we can rely on our Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will teach us all things, remind us of what Jesus said, guide us into all truth, and let us know what is yet to come.[9]

We can also use a God-given litmus test as we make daily decisions, viewing the "What does God want me to do?" question through the lens of Scripture. I like how the Amplified Bible explains what real wisdom looks like in our everyday lives:

> But the wisdom from above is first pure [morally and spiritually undefiled], then peace-loving [courteous, considerate], gentle, reasonable [and willing to listen], full of compassion and good fruits. It is unwavering, without [self-righteous] hypocrisy [and self-serving guile].[10]

If what we are thinking about doing (or saying) lines up with these standards, we could have a green light. If it doesn't, the light is definitely red.

So . . . will we blow it? Of course. Will we make bad decisions? (Do you really want someone who duct-taped her own children to answer that?)

We will make mistakes. But that's okay. Because our ability to ruin our lives is nothing compared to God's desire (and his power) to redeem them.

God is the Redeemer. He promises to love us, lead us, and guide us—straight

to his dwelling, the place where we can abide.[11] And the more we recognize our tendency to stumble, the more we will reach out for God's hand, leaning not on our own wisdom or understanding but yielding to his, trusting him to make our paths straight.[12]

Read

- If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. (James 1:5)
- Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21)
- We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9–10)

Reflect

- God longs to counsel us, lead us along the right paths, and fill us with joy in his presence. When we ask him for wisdom, we can count on him to generously provide it, without being condescending or finding fault.
- Where do you need God's guidance today? Where have you made mistakes in the past? Do you believe that God can redeem even the poorest decision? Are you willing to yield your wisdom to his, trusting him to make your path straight?
- Consider the attributes of godly wisdom. It is pure, peace loving, gentle, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and good deeds. It shows no favoritism but is always sincere.[13] Reflect on these qualities as you weigh the decisions before you today, and trust God to instruct you and teach you which way to go.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Whether I turn to the right or to the left, may I hear your voice saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21)*
- *Teach me to number my days—to live wisely and well—that I may gain a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12 NIV and MSG)*
- *May I always speak with wisdom, with faithful instruction on my tongue. (Proverbs 31:26)*
- *Counsel me and instruct me, even during the night. Make known to me the path of life. Fill me with*

joy in your presence. (Psalm 16:11)

- *May your spirit rest on me. Give me your Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Don't let me judge people or situations by what I see or hear, but may I act with your righteousness, justice, and faith. (Isaiah 11:2–5)*
- *Fill me with the knowledge of your will through all wisdom and understanding, that I may live a life worthy of you, Lord, and please you in every way—bearing fruit in every good work and growing in my knowledge of you. (Colossians 1:9–10)*
- *Don't let me look at the things others look at, but help me see the world through your eyes and respond with your wisdom and love. (1 Samuel 16:7)*
- *Give me a wise and discerning heart to distinguish between right and wrong, especially about _____. (1 Kings 3:9)*
- *Instruct me and teach me in the way I should go; counsel me and keep your loving eye on me. (Psalm 32:8)*
- *Help me trust you with all my heart instead of depending on my own understanding. Equip me to seek you in all that I do and show me which path to take. (Proverbs 3:5–6 NLT)*
- *Instruct me in the way of wisdom about _____; lead me along straight paths. (Proverbs 4:11)*
- *Give me the spirit of wisdom and revelation so I will know you better. (Ephesians 1:17)*
- *Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. (Psalm 25:4–5)*
- *Grant me aptitude for every kind of learning. May I be like Daniel: well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve. (Daniel 1:4)*

Day 25

Being Joy-Full

In Your presence is fullness of joy.
Psalm 16:11 NASB

"I need a leaf blower. But for people."

I chuckled when I saw that line on a tea towel—and I think Warren Wiersbe might have laughed too. "People" represent one of four joy stealers the Bible scholar identifies in his commentary on Philippians, a book aptly titled *Be Joyful.* The other three are *circumstances* (a bad day at the office can qualify), *things* (we think having more stuff will satisfy us, but it's often the reverse that is true), and *worry* (which, Wiersbe says, is the worst thief of all because it's an "inside job").[1]

As Christians, we know that God puts a high value on joy. We see Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding, throwing a party when the prodigal son returns home, and talking about joy to his disciples, even as he made his way to the cross. The thief, Jesus says, comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but he came so that we might have life—life to the full![2]

Joy is a by-product of the Spirit-filled life, and we expect that when we trust Christ, we will experience what David called "the joy of your salvation."[3] We *expect* that . . . but we don't always *live* that. Instead of being filled with joy—being joy-*full*—we are often discouraged, fearful, or anxious.

Not all of us, of course. Wiersbe maintains that some people are thermometers, going up and down with the temperature. Others, however, are thermostats, regulating and changing their surroundings. The apostle Paul, Wiersbe says, was a thermostat.[4]

Paul knew how to be content "in any and every situation."[5] Even after he was severely beaten and thrown into prison, his spirits didn't sag; he spent his time praying and singing. So did his companion, Silas. And all the other prisoners heard them.[6] What was their secret?

Their secret was that instead of looking at Jesus through the lens of their

circumstances, they regarded their circumstances with the perspective of Jesus. The fact that they were in chains, Paul said, "served to advance the gospel." It piqued the curiosity of Paul's captors and equipped other believers to talk about Jesus with greater confidence.[7]

Do I, I wondered, *know people like that, people who radiate joy, even in the most challenging situations? People who see their circumstances as opportunities to showcase God's power and his love? Can I point to any modern-day Pauls?*

My friend Heather (not her real name) came to mind.

When a radiologist scheduled an MRI-guided biopsy of her breast, Heather asked God to prepare her heart to receive whatever news the test revealed. Rather than give in to worry or fear, she focused on verses like Zephaniah 3:16–17 (NIV, 1984 ed.): "Do not fear . . . do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

A few days later, I saw a message from Heather in my email inbox. "The biopsy came back with good news!" she exclaimed. I started to rejoice—and then I read on. She had breast cancer.

"I'm so thankful," Heather wrote, "that what was hidden was revealed in the biopsy! 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight.' And when I asked God to equip me to receive this diagnosis, he reminded me of his promise: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.'"

Heather was quoting Hebrews 4:13 and 1 Corinthians 2:9, verses I knew and believed, but I can't say I would have called her update "good news." But to Heather's way of thinking, it was—and she purposed to let the joy of the Lord be her strength and to share God's kindness and his power with (as she put it) "all my new medical friends."

And she did.

Like Paul and Silas in prison, Heather continually talked about the goodness of God. Her message to every doctor, nurse, and patient she met was the same: *Your heavenly Father is for you. He understands. He watches over you and is with you to strengthen you, guide you, and hold your hand.*

I wondered what had equipped Heather to be so upbeat in the face of what most people would consider bad—if not devastating—news.

I found my answer (or part of it anyway) in John 16:24. This passage records some of Jesus' very last words before the crucifixion. He was talking with his disciples, and based on their conversation, it's clear that they didn't grasp what was to come. Jesus said they would weep—but he also promised they would

receive joy. “Until now,” he said, “you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”

“Ask,” Jesus said, “and your joy will be complete.” Prayer, then, is a pathway to joy.

I read that verse, and it hit me. Heather prays more than almost anybody I know. I’ve never once had a visit, a phone call, or even a texting conversation where she didn’t start praying about whatever we were discussing, as if pulling up a chair to the table for God. (It’s hard to tell sometimes whether she’s talking to him or to me!) “May the God of hope,” she said in one recent exchange, “fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Encouraging words, to be sure—and also a powerful Scripture-based prayer.[8]

Does Heather always get what she asks for? No. But in casting all her care upon God,[9] she receives freedom from worry and fear. As she prays, God’s peace guards her heart and her mind.[10] The answer may not be evident yet, but in taking her concerns to her heavenly Father—in praying moment by moment—Heather enters his presence, the place where there is fullness of joy.[11]

And our prayers do the same thing. They establish a connection with God so he can fill our hearts with joy.

I don’t know what sort of trial you’re facing—what circumstances, anxieties, or people you may want to leaf-blow today. I do know, though, that as we take these what-ifs and worries to God, knowing (as Heather says) that he is for us, he is with us, and he understands, we can experience genuine, unshakable joy.

“We know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.”[12]

Read

- Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2–4)
- Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5 ESV)
- For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs. (Zephaniah 3:17 NLT)

Reflect

- God is a God of joy. He rejoices over us and longs to fill us with joy as we trust in him. He wants his joy to be our strength.

- Where are you not experiencing joy? Are there circumstances, people, worries, or things that are stealing your joy? How can seeing these situations or relationships as opportunities to proclaim God's goodness help change your perspective? What role can prayer play in shaping your outlook?

- Take some time to reflect on the joy God offers to those who trust in him. Ask him to show you the path of life—to show you *your* life as he sees it—and allow him to fill you with joy in his presence. Picture him rejoicing over you with joyful songs, and let the Holy Spirit fill your heart with his love.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Teach me to pray in your name, according to your will, so that you will give that to me and my joy will be a river, overflowing its banks! (John 16:24 MSG)*

- *Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy. Let me lie down and sleep in peace, for you make me dwell in safety. (Psalm 4:6–8)*

- *Make known to me the path of life; fill me with joy in your presence. (Psalm 16:11)*

- *Help me wait in hope for you; be my help and my shield. Equip me to trust you so that my heart will rejoice. (Psalm 33:20–21)*

- *Equip me to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer. (Romans 12:12)*

- *Help me be a person who finds joy in giving an apt reply, a timely word to those who need it. (Proverbs 15:23)*

- *When my soul is downcast and disturbed, let me put my hope in you and praise you as my Savior and my God. (Psalm 42:5)*

- *May I keep your commands and remain in your love so your joy will be in me and my joy will be complete. (John 15:10–11)*

- *May I always be full of the joy of the Lord. I say it again: may I rejoice! (Philippians 4:4 NLT)*

- *When troubles of any kind come, help me consider them an opportunity for great joy. For when my faith is tested, my endurance has a chance to grow, making me perfect and complete, needing nothing. (James 1:2–4 NLT)*

- *When anxiety or uncertainty looms, don't let me be afraid. You are with me, a Mighty Warrior who saves. Take great delight in me; rejoice over me with singing. (Zephaniah 3:16–17)*

- *Bring rains to my drought-stricken life. Where I have planted crops in despair, may I shout hurrahs at the harvest. Where I have gone off with a heavy heart, may I come home laughing, with armloads of blessing. (Psalm 126:4–6 MSG)*

- *Be the God of hope in my life. Fill me with all joy and peace as I trust in you, and may I overflow*

with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

- *I haven't seen you, Lord, but I love you. I don't see you now, but I believe in you. Fill me with an inexpressible and glorious joy, since I am receiving the end result of my faith, the salvation of my soul. (1 Peter 1:8–9)*

Day 26

Praying for Health and Healing

I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.
3 John 2

I wish we had caught it earlier . . . We need to get you scheduled for surgery . . . The cancer is back . . .

What would you do if you got some bad news, a diagnosis you didn't expect? That happened to King Hezekiah—twice.[1]

The first time, the news came in a letter. The Assyrian king boasted about all the kingdoms he had already trampled and warned Hezekiah that his would be next. "Do not let the god you depend on deceive you," he wrote—attacking not just Hezekiah's Jerusalem, but also his faith.[2]

Hezekiah's response is one of my favorite scenes in all of Scripture. The Bible says he took the letter to the temple and spread it out before the Lord. He started with praise: "You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth." Then he stated the problem: "It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations." And finally he wrapped up with prayer—not just that they would be delivered, but that everyone would know that God was the Lord.[3] God answered, and the city was saved.

In the second instance, Hezekiah got sick. If he was hoping a visit from the prophet Isaiah would cheer him, he was sorely disappointed. "Put your house in order," Isaiah said, "because you are going to die."

This time, Hezekiah didn't go to the temple. He just turned his face to the wall, started talking to God, and "wept bitterly." Before Isaiah had even left the palace, God intervened. "I have heard your prayer," he said, "and seen your tears; I will heal you."[4]

I am the God who heals you.[5]

That promise about God's nature—first recorded in Exodus and then repeated for Hezekiah—crops up again and again in the Bible. When people

came to Jesus with all kinds of diseases, he laid his hands “on each one” and “healed them.” Later, Jesus gave his disciples authority to “heal every disease and sickness.” Today, the Holy Spirit manifests himself via the gift of supernatural healing. God tells us to confess our sins and pray for one another “so that you may be healed.”[6]

Years ago, I was privileged to write a book about miracles, one where I got to interview people—and their doctors—who had been supernaturally healed. Tumors, blood diseases, and muscular conditions all disappeared in answer to prayer. I spoke with a former Miss America whose leg—which had been crushed in a car accident when she was a child, leaving her with A permanent limp and an inability to have children—grew *two inches* when she attended a healing prayer service. In the miraculous work of a single moment, her legs became the same length, and her hips were realigned![7]

Stories like these, taken together with what I read in the Bible, cemented my belief in God’s goodness and his power to heal—so much so that when my father was diagnosed with a brain tumor (stage 4 glioblastoma), I was not worried. Doctors told us he had three months to live, but I figured that God could—and would—heal him.

He didn’t. (At least not in the way I wanted him to; my mom says God healed my father “to heaven”—which is, I guess, the ultimate win.)

God didn’t spare my dad’s earthly life. Instead, my father would say, God did something better.

During the year of his treatment, Dad spent more time with the Lord—in prayer, in his Bible, and in faith-filled conversations with other Christians—than he had ever before. I watched in amazement as Psalm 27 became real in his life.

King David talked about his desire to seek God and gaze on his beauty. “I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living,” he proclaimed. “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”[8]

Noting the similarities to my father’s experience—Dad sought the Lord’s face every day; he looked like he was seeing God’s goodness; his heart appeared stronger than it had ever been—I had to ask.

“It seems like you’re closer to God now than you’ve ever been,” I began. Dad sat in a beach chair as we spoke; he was too weak to stand, but his eyes sparkled with life. “Would you trade what you know now about God,” I asked, “if it meant that you could go back to the way things were before—like, if you had never had cancer?”

The question was barely out of my mouth when Dad gave me his answer. “No!” he exclaimed. “I would *never* go back—not ever!” His voice grew quiet

as he paused for a moment. “I would never trade this Jesus, the God I know now, for anything.”

God added fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life when he prayed; he gave my dad an extra nine months. Do I wish it could have been more? Of course. I was brokenhearted, and I miss my father’s wisdom—I miss his blue eyes—now as much as ever. But as I reflect on the promise of Psalm 16:11, that God will show us the path of life, fill us with joy in his presence, and give us the pleasures of living with him forever, I realize my father was right: no physical healing—no earthly reward—compares to the complete joy of being with Jesus.

Several years after my father died, I learned the meaning of the word *heal* in that Exodus promise. It comes from the Hebrew word *raphah*, which means “to mend (by stitching),” or “to cure”—to heal, repair, and make whole.[9] God did that for my dad; he *is* whole.

But God’s power to mend and restore is not just physical. When we bring our pain and our grief before God—when we spread them out in his presence, like Hezekiah did with his letter—he answers. “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”[10]

That’s what God did (and is still doing) for me.

Read

- He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)
- Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)
- Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! (Ephesians 3:20–21)

Reflect

- “I am the God who heals you.” Take some time to meditate on God’s love for you and his power to heal. Scripture invites us to pour out our hearts like water before the Lord.[11] God wants us to spread out our concerns in his presence.
- Where do you need God’s healing touch or his deliverance today? How can confessing your sins open the door to emotional freedom or physical well-being? In what specific ways does God’s promise to be with you strengthen or encourage you?
- Ask God to heal you and give you freedom from fear. Pray that he will be glorified in your life. Trust

him to show up in mighty and miraculous ways, doing immeasurably more than anything you could ask or imagine.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Thank you that Jesus bore my sins, and that by his wounds I am healed. (1 Peter 2:24)*
- *May I take refuge in you and be glad; may I ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over me, that I might rejoice in you. (Psalm 5:11)*
- *Help me not be afraid of night terrors, pestilence, or plagues; do not let these things come near me. (Psalm 91:5–7)*
- *Equip me to praise you in my inmost being, remembering that you forgive all my sins and heal all my diseases. Redeem my life from the pit, crown me with love and compassion, satisfy my desires with good things, and renew my youth. (Psalm 103:1–5)*
- *When I feel brokenhearted, heal me and bind up my wounds. (Psalm 147:3)*
- *Don't let me be wise in my own eyes; help me fear you and shun evil, since this will bring health to my body and nourishment to my bones. (Proverbs 3:7–8)*
- *Deliver me from deadly peril. Help me set my hope in you, and prompt others to pray for me. Grant favor in answer to our prayers. (2 Corinthians 1:10–11)*
- *Thank you for your willingness to heal, guide, and comfort us, even when we go astray. Create praise on my lips. Give me your peace, and heal me. (Isaiah 57:18–19)*
- *When I feel harassed and helpless, like a sheep without a shepherd, have compassion on me. Heal my every disease and sickness. (Matthew 9:35–36)*
- *Give me some good news—something that will bring joy to my heart and health to my bones. (Proverbs 15:30)*
- *Bring health and healing to my body. Let me enjoy your abundant peace and prosperity. (Jeremiah 33:6)*
- *Restore my health when I cry to you for help; keep me from falling into the pit of death. (Psalm 30:2–3 NLT)*
- *Give me freedom from fear, since you are with me. Let me not be dismayed, for you are my God. Strengthen me and help me; uphold me with your righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)*
- *Cause me to keep your words in my heart, for they are life and health to the whole body. (Proverbs 4:21–22)*
- *When I cry to you in times of trouble, save me from my distress. Send out your word and heal me; rescue me from the grave. (Psalm 107:19–20)*

- *I love you, Lord. Rescue and protect me. Be with me in trouble. Satisfy me with long life, and show me your salvation. (Psalm 91:14–16)*

Day 27

Aging Well

The longer they live, the brighter they shine.
Proverbs 4:18 MSG

I'll never forget listening to my friend Dee Oliver, the author of a book called *The Undertaker's Wife*, speak to a large church audience about surviving the loss of her spouse. Dee was incredibly honest. She talked about her frustration over everyday things like not knowing her husband's passwords, her fears when she heard unfamiliar noises at night, and her insecurities when, still mourning after more than a year, she agreed to go out on a date (but not before making sure her hair color was good and she had gotten a stiff shot of Botox).

At the end of the talk—which included estate planning tips and how-tos for helping friends grieve—Dee asked if the audience had any questions. At first, nobody spoke. But then one woman, who looked to be at least eighty years old, slipped up her hand.

"Dee," she asked, "where do you put the Botox?"

If there's one thing we may dread more than the prospect of death, it's the prospect of aging. We don't want to feel old—worn-out knees, achy backs, stiff joints, and all that—and we definitely don't want to *look* old. Collectively, we spend well over two hundred billion dollars a year on things like wrinkle cream, hair plugs, and other elixirs of youth.[1] That's billion—with a "B." But hey; I'm not judging. To quote my former pastor when someone asked whether women should wear makeup (who asks that sort of thing?): "If the barn needs painting, paint it."

So again, you'll get no finger-pointing from me. I do think, however, that we may want to adjust our perspective. Because (as God sees it anyway) getting older is not such a bad thing.

Job points to the practical benefits that come with more birthday candles: "Is not wisdom found among the aged?" he asks. "Does not long life bring understanding?"[2]

The book of Proverbs calls gray hair "a crown of splendor."[3] (I remember my hairdresser telling me my crown was "coming in." She thought she was so funny.)

I think my favorite getting-old promise (and the one I'm asking God to make real in my life) is Proverbs 4:18. Here's how *The Message* puts it: "The ways of right-living people glow with light; the longer they live, the brighter they shine."

The longer they live, the brighter they shine.

Isn't that remarkable? I've tried a bazillion different night creams, and none of them even come close to promising that!

But God does.

Because unlike in the physical realm—the one where cells die and bodies decay and we're forever having to go back and repaint the barn—the spiritual realm offers fresh vigor and strength. What begins with salvation (when we become "a new creation") only gets better with time as we are literally "renewed day by day."[4]

I know getting older isn't fun. And if you're caring for aging parents or other loved ones, the promise of daily renewal can feel thin sometimes. But as we regard our own lives—our present circumstances and future outlook—this is one place where it really helps to take God at his word.

God doesn't intend for us to fade quietly into our armchairs; he has valuable work for us to accomplish at every stage—especially when we have the experience to know how he works, the perspective to see things more clearly than we did in our younger days, and the bandwidth to give generously of our talents and time.

Consider what God said to Joshua: "You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over."[5] Likewise, Job was influential and wealthy when he was young—"the greatest man," Scripture says—but God blessed the latter part of his life more than the first.[6] And Psalm 92 points to an encouraging future for all who abide in the Lord: "They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green."[7]

Let's never stop bearing fruit; instead, let's ask that the word of Christ will dwell richly in our hearts, transforming and renewing our minds so we can see the future through his eyes.[8] Here are a few ways this may play out:

1. Rather than worrying about what lies ahead, we can experience peace by believing God's promise: "I will be your God throughout your lifetime—until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and save you."[9]

2. We can ward off loneliness by embracing intergenerational friendships, the kind where we respect older people and seek their wisdom, and invest in the lives of those who are younger, setting an example for them by the way we live.[10]
3. We can abandon the "quit work and kick back" vision of retirement (which is not a biblical concept) and plan to be a difference maker in our old age, working with all our heart at whatever our hand finds to do and telling the next generation all about God and the wonders he has done.[11]
4. When we look in the mirror and wonder whether what we're seeing is a new age spot or just a cruel trick of the light, we can rejoice, knowing that our forever home is not on earth but in heaven—and that when Jesus returns, he will transform our earthly bodies into glorious bodies like his own.[12]

(I don't come from a church tradition where people shout out during the service, but honestly? I feel like we could all use an "Amen!" right here.)

Read

- Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4:16)
- Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:30–31)
- The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming "The LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him." (Psalm 92:12–15)

Reflect

- How do you think about growing old? If you've made it past "halftime" in life (define that however you want), do you intentionally invest in the next generation? Or if you're on the younger end of the spectrum, are you building meaningful connections with people who may have a wiser, more seasoned perspective?
- Think about what it might look like to (as Isaiah puts it) put your hope in the Lord as you age. Be honest with God about your fears and concerns. Can you envision a future in which you flourish and bear fruit, even if your body is not strong?
- Ask God to give you his perspective on aging. Reflect on the legacy you want to build, and look for

God to open doors for you to talk about his power and his love. Be alert to the opportunities—unexpected friendships, projects, and prayer needs—he brings your way, and trust him to make you glow with light so that the longer you live, the brighter you'll shine.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *When my skin sags and my bones get brittle, remind me that you are rock-firm and faithful. Keep me in your presence—how refreshing it is! I've made you my home. Help me tell the world what you do! (Psalm 73:25–28 MSG)*
- *May I flourish as I mature. May I bear fruit, even in old age, and always stay fresh and green. (Psalm 92:14)*
- *Keep my tongue from speaking evil and my lips from telling lies so I will enjoy life and see many happy days. (1 Peter 3:10 NLT)*
- *Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come. (Psalm 71:18)*
- *Prompt me to stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly, and revere you, God. (Leviticus 19:32)*
- *When I retire, give me your new work to do. And whatever I do, may I work at it with all my heart, as working for you, Lord, not for people. (Colossians 3:23)*
- *Provide opportunities for me to tell the next generation about your praiseworthy deeds, your power, and the wonders you have done. (Psalm 78:4)*
- *Grant strength to me when I am weary; increase my power when I am weak. (Isaiah 40:29)*
- *For an older man: May I be a man who exercises self-control, is worthy of respect, and lives wisely. Give me sound faith, and fill me with your love and patience. (Titus 2:2 NLT)*
- *For an older woman: May I honor you by how I live. Keep me from slandering others or becoming a heavy drinker. Equip me to teach others what is good, especially when it comes to training younger women how to love their husbands and children well. (Titus 2:3–4 NLT)*
- *When aches and pains assail (or when wrinkles appear and skin sags!), may I put my hope in Christ, the one who will take my weak mortal body and make it glorious like his own as he brings everything under his control. (Philippians 3:21 NLT)*
- *Thank you for your promise to be my God throughout my lifetime—until my hair is white with age. You made me, Lord. Care for me now. Carry me along. Save me. (Isaiah 46:4)*
- *Fill me with joy and with your Holy Spirit, and with wisdom to make my face light up and soften any harsh lines. (Acts 13:52; Ecclesiastes 8:1 NLT)*
- *When I feel the physical and emotional effects of aging, may I remember that my flesh and my heart may fail, but you are my strength and my portion forever. (Psalm 73:26)*

Day 28

Trusting God in the Face of Unanswered Prayer

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."
Matthew 26:39

"Stop trying to figure God out."

That's the counsel I got from one of my daughters as she listened to me verbally wringing my hands. God hadn't answered another one of my prayers—at least not in the way I had wanted him to—and eager to find a sticking place for my trust, I was sorting through the possibilities. I knew God's ways didn't always parallel mine, but if God had a better plan, what was it? And why was he taking so long to reveal it? And why, if I truly believed in God's goodness, was I feeling so sad?

I felt like David did when he wrote the words found in Psalm 13:2. "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?"

How long indeed?

I know what Scripture says: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."[1] Truth be told, though, I'd just as soon skip the whole thing. No mourning, no need for comfort, no need to be blessed in that particular way.

But no book about prayer would feel honest or real if we didn't open the door to one of prayer's thornier questions: *What do we do with the questions, the disappointment, or even the anger that can box us into a corner when our prayers seem to go unanswered or when the outcome doesn't look like we expected (or wanted) it to?*

I've circled the wagons on this one dozens (hundreds?) of times, and the only answer that ever satisfies is this: lean into God.

I remember crying out to him during one particularly gut-wrenching season, one where God said no to something I wanted for my child—something she wanted even more than I did, something we both believed would be good. I

knew God was for us, that his plan was for hope, and that his purpose would always prevail.[2] Why, then, was my stomach in knots? Shouldn't someone who'd spent twenty-five years writing and speaking about prayer be filled with more faith?

Not knowing what else to do, I took my questions to God. Here's what I wrote in my prayer journal (and I share this for those of you who worry about not sounding holy or good enough when you pray; sometimes you just need to let it rip).

"God," I said, "I feel so spiritually lame. I really am trying to trust you. I don't mean to be sad. I know you love me, and that you are good—"

It's okay.

(Have you ever been interrupted by God? Because I think that's what happened to me as I prayed.)

It's okay, I sensed God say. *Go ahead and grieve. Your sadness is real. Bring it to me, and let me comfort you.*

Talk about a perspective changer. There I was, trying to push my disappointment and pain into a manhole and put the cover on, and God said not to. He wanted me to come to him the way I wanted my children, when they were younger, to bring me their skinned knees and fevers, so I could hug them and bandage their hurts. Or the way I want them to now, with their worries and fears, so I can pray and let them know they're not alone. And I realized that day, as I essentially climbed into God's lap and let the tears come, that I had it all backward.

I thought that disappointment and anger were bad things. Things that had no legitimate place in the life of a "real" Christian. (And just as a sidebar, if we allow these things to shape our identity, dictate our perspective, or become our life's focus, I think they *are* bad.) But if they invite us to press into God—to climb into our Father's embrace—our unanswered prayers can become agents of connection. They become places where God can showcase his tenderness as he heals our hearts and binds up our wounds. They become touchpoints that are surprisingly, exquisitely beautiful.

In his book *How to Pray*, Pete Greig pulls beauty out of unanswered prayers. "The Bible," he writes, "is more honest about unanswered prayers than the church."[3] He cites the example of Jesus in Gethsemane, who pleaded with God, "May this cup be taken from me," as well as Jesus' prayer that we—his followers—would be "brought to complete unity."[4]

"It's an extraordinary thought," Greig writes about the unity prayer, "that Jesus himself sits at the right hand of the Father today, carrying the pain of

unanswered prayer."[5]

So how did he do it? How did Jesus surrender his desires to God, asking for the cup to be taken away, even as he layered another prayer on top: "Yet not what I will, but what you will"?

He leaned into God.

"*Abba*, Father," Jesus prayed, as he climbed into his Father's embrace. "When his soul was overwhelmed, Jesus resolutely anchored himself in the Father's love."[6]

We can—we must—do the same thing. God's love is the sticking place for our trust.

We don't need to know how something works in order to trust it (if we did, I would never get on an airplane again). We don't need to figure God out. All we need to do—all we *can* do—in the face of unanswered prayers is to find our comfort and our satisfaction in his presence.

Read

- How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? . . . But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me. (Psalm 13:2–6)
- God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 NLT)
- "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted." (Job 42:2)

Reflect

- God's deepest longing is for connection with us. He wants to satisfy our desires with good things. Whether your prayer is for a physical provision, a mental health need, or an ache in your spirit that you want God to fill, be assured that he understands. Jesus knows the pain that can come with surrendering a desire or a prayer to God.
- Where have you struggled with unanswered prayer? Have you experienced the comfort of God's presence? If so, how has it equipped you to come alongside others to share with them the same comfort you received?
- It's okay to bring your pain—and your questions—to God. He invites us to pour out our hearts. Ask him to replace your mourning with joy and equip you to trust in his unfailing love. Relinquish your desires to him and allow the Holy Spirit to fill the empty places—the disappointment of unanswered prayer—with God's presence.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *When I ask, "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?" and when I wrestle with my thoughts and have sorrow in my heart, look on me and answer. Help me trust in your unfailing love; let me sing of your goodness. (Psalm 13)*
- *May I place my hope in you and not in any earthly blessing or reward, so I will not be disappointed. (Isaiah 49:23)*
- *When I find myself questioning your timing or wondering what you are doing, remind me that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (Job 42:2)*
- *Thank you for your promise that you will never leave me or forsake me. (Hebrews 13:5)*
- *Be my refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)*
- *Your thoughts are not my thoughts; your ways are not my ways. Help me trust that your ways and your thoughts are higher than mine. (Isaiah 55:8–9)*
- *Crown me with love and compassion; satisfy my desires with good things. (Psalm 103:4–5)*
- *Bless me and keep me; make your face shine on me. Be gracious to me as I wrestle with the pain of unmet longings, and give me peace. (Numbers 6:24–26)*
- *Comfort me as a mother comforts her child. Open my eyes to see your hand on my life so that my heart will rejoice and I will flourish like grass. (Isaiah 66:13–14)*
- *Satisfy me in the morning with your unfailing love, that I may sing for joy and be glad all my days. (Psalm 90:14)*
- *When I call to you for help and you answer, saying, "Here am I," let me rejoice in your presence and provision. (Isaiah 58:9)*
- *Give me a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair in the face of unanswered prayer. Strengthen me. Make me an oak of righteousness where you can display your splendor. (Isaiah 61:3)*
- *May I come before you like Jesus did, telling you what I long for but surrendering my desires to you, saying, "Not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39)*

Day 29

Sharing Your Faith

"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."
Mark 16:15

"Would you like me to tell you about Jesus?"

The man who had just buckled into the seat next to me cocked his head. He looked like he wasn't sure what to say.

I tried again.

"Like, do you know how much God loves you? And how his Son gave his life for you? And how God has a wonderful plan for your life? Do you want me to tell you about that?"

"Um . . ." the man finally said. "No." And with that, he turned his attention to his book.

Looking back on this airplane encounter, I have to laugh. (And I hope you'll laugh with me instead of being appalled by my evangelism technique.) The thing is, I was twenty-two years old, barely out of college and a newlywed. I had a lot to learn about life. But I had recently had a conversation with a fellow named Harald Bredesen, a man whose influence spanned continents and whose ministry had been widely chronicled by media outlets from Walter Cronkite's *News and World Report* to *The Saturday Evening Post* to *Christianity Today.* Bredesen was, according to one former *Time* magazine journalist, "one of the great saints of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries."[1]

And when Bredesen told me that "everyone" wanted to hear about Jesus, I believed him. Honestly? I still believe him. We *do* want to hear about Jesus—we just may not recognize our longing as such. I often think about C. S. Lewis, who came to faith—to Christianity—as a result of a gnawing angst, an ache for joy. "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy," he concluded, "the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."[2]

God knew we would never be satisfied apart from connection with him. He

longs to make known to us the path of life, to fill us with joy in his presence.[3] First, though, he says we have to be "born again"—to be born of the Spirit.[4] And while he could have arranged things so we all heard the Good News directly from an angel or from Jesus himself à la Paul on the road to Damascus, he didn't. He chose to involve us—his beloved children—in his life-changing work.

Jesus told Paul that he was anointing him as a servant, and that his job was to witness to his own people, the Gentiles. "I am sending you," Jesus said, "to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."[5]

Paul received this commission and understood what was at stake. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," he reminded the Roman believers—but since not everyone knew about Jesus, it was up to them to share God's plan for salvation with their neighbors. "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" asked Paul. "And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"[6]

How indeed? How can anyone hear the Good News without someone telling it to them?

We know this in our heads. We recognize the Great Commission, the passage where Jesus looks at his disciples—at all of us—and says, "Go."[7] And yet we balk.

Maybe we're like my college friend's mother, and the idea of worldwide evangelism scares us. When this mom got wind that her daughter might be interested in foreign missions, she put her foot down. ("I did not raise my daughter to go off and be eaten by cannibals" was, I believe, how she put it.) At the time, I thought the mother was overreacting. Now that I have my own adult children—who have traveled to some of the most remote parts of Africa, China, and India on short-term mission trips—I get it. I don't want my kids to be eaten either.

Or maybe we're like one of my neighbors, who wondered why anyone would try to push their personal beliefs on someone else. "Don't all roads lead to God?" she asked me.

Or maybe we know that the answer to this question is no—that not all roads lead to God, and that, as Jesus himself put it, "No one comes to the Father except through me"[8]—but we fall prey to the Goldilocks syndrome. Either we're too timid to tell people how they can be saved (and so we keep quiet when we know we should speak), or we're like I was (like I am?) and carry around copies of the "Four Spiritual Laws" and start jabbering about Jesus on airplanes, even when

our seatmate clearly does not want to listen.

Let's be honest. All of us want our family, our friends, and even strangers on the other side of the world to be saved. But not all of us feel all that equipped, or comfortable, doing what's known as "evangelism." *Shouldn't that,* we say to ourselves, *be left to the professionals? To ministers? TV preachers? Folks who have that particular spiritual gift?*

To borrow a line from my onetime seatmate, "Um . . . no."

The Great Commission—the privilege of introducing people to Jesus—is for all of us. And while there are many different approaches to sharing the gospel (if you read *Praying the Scriptures for Your Adult Children*, you know that, as a first-grader, our Virginia was not at all hesitant to tell kids who didn't believe in Jesus that they were "going to hell" before God softened her style), I find that one of the easiest and most natural ways to bring up the topic of salvation is to simply speak from your own experience. Tell what God has done for you. Take your cue from the psalmist ("My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds, of your saving acts all day long") or from the demon-possessed man Jesus cured, who "told all over town how much Jesus had done for him."[9] All of us have a story.

And like all God's commands, sharing the Good News comes with a blessing. God knows that when we talk about him—when our love for Jesus brims over and impacts the lives of our neighbors and friends—our own faith expands. I love what Paul wrote to Philemon and others in the church that met in his home:

> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.[10]

"You have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people."

Could there be a more encouraging benediction? *Lord, help us share your love with the world. Give us the courage, the grace, the words, and the deeds, that we too might refresh the hearts of your people.*

Read

- We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. (Psalm 78:4)
- Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that

you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15–16)

- "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever." (Daniel 12:3)

Reflect

- One of the highest privileges we have as Christians is to introduce other people to Jesus. But in a world where acceptance of every religion or subjective "truth" is hailed as a virtue, talking about the one true God and his plan for our salvation can be tricky. We may wonder why we should risk offending someone with the gospel. Would a loving God really send a nonbeliever to hell? How does the Bible answer this question?

- Think about your own conversion experience. Did someone talk about—or model—Christ's love with you? What compelled you to trust God? Take a few moments to thank God for revealing himself to you, meditating on the lavishness of his love.

- Ask the Lord to help you recognize opportunities to introduce others to Jesus. If you need boldness or courage, pray for that. If you need to temper your boldness with gentleness and grace, trust the Holy Spirit to produce that fruit in your life. Above all, ask God to make you a gracious and loving ambassador as, compelled by his love, you carry his message of reconciliation to the world.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Let my light so shine before others that they will see my good deeds and glorify you. (Matthew 5:16)*

- *Help me tell the next generation about you—your praiseworthy deeds, your power, and the wonders you have done. (Psalm 78:4)*

- *Prepare me to give an answer to anyone who asks about my hope and my faith. Equip me to speak with gentleness and respect so that anyone who speaks maliciously against me will be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15–16)*

- *Let me be careful and wise, making the most of every opportunity to tell people about you. (Ephesians 5:15–16)*

- *May I be like the apostle Paul, proclaiming your kingdom and talking about Jesus boldly—and without hindrance! (Acts 28:31)*

- *Let me sing of your great love forever, making known your faithfulness through all generations. (Psalm 89:1)*

- *May I never be ashamed of the gospel but recognize that it is your power that brings salvation to everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16)*

- *Equip me to go and make disciples of all nations—whether across the street or across the world—baptizing them in your name and teaching them to obey everything you have commanded. (Matthew 28:19–20)*

- *Help me to follow you, Lord, and make me a fisher of people. (Matthew 4:19)*

- *Let me lead a clean, innocent life as your child, shining like a bright light in a world full of crooked and perverse people. May I hold firmly to your word of life. (Philippians 2:15–16 NLT)*

- *Make me a skillful and loving ambassador for Christ, imploring others to be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20)*

- *Fill me with the knowledge of your will through all the Spirit's wisdom and understanding so I can live a life worthy of you and please you in every way, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in my knowledge of you. (Colossians 1:9–10)*

- *Give me the right words to say so that I can boldly explain your mysterious plan that the Good News is for everyone—Jews and Gentiles alike. (Ephesians 6:19 NLT)*

- *Help me tell people who Jesus is—the way and the truth and the life. May those I speak with understand that no one comes to the Father except through him. (John 14:6)*

Day 30

Praying for Parking Places (and Life's "Little" Things)

The LORD directs the steps of the godly.
He delights in every detail of their lives.
Psalm 37:23 NLT

I love getting to travel around the country and talk about how we can pray for the people we love. And every once in a while, one of the people I love gets to come with me. Which is how our daughter, Virginia, unexpectedly found herself in the spotlight one night.

We had come to the Q&A part of the evening. Everything seemed to be progressing well when someone in the crowd stood up and turned toward Virginia. "How did you feel," the woman wanted to know, "about growing up with a mother who prayed?"

Never one to shy away from an honest question, Virginia got up and grabbed hold of the microphone.

"I didn't like it," she said.

I held my breath. This could go any number of ways.

"For starters," Virginia said, "Mom was always praying that if we did anything wrong, we'd get caught. And we were *always* getting caught.

"And," she continued, "she made us pray *all the time*. Like, if we were going to the mall, we'd pray about the pants or the dress we had to buy. And we'd ask God for a parking space. Or to give us energy if we were feeling tired. It all just felt like . . . a lot."

I could feel the crowd tensing up. I knew what they were thinking. They had been tracking with me during my talk (when I was covering things like asking God to provide self-control in our children, protection for our teens, and help for our older kids as they battled addictions, marriage breakups, and other grown-up issues), but this was new ground. Shopping trips? Parking places? Energy levels? Were those *really* the sort of details we should be bugging God about? Doesn't

he have more important things on his mind?

Happily, Virginia wasn't quite finished.

"It seemed strange at the time," she said. "Looking back, though, I think it was really good for us to hear and to be part of prayers about everyday things. It made talking to God so much more real and relational rather than something we thought of as scary, complicated, or just plain hard to do."

I exhaled, wiped a bead of sweat from my brow, and thanked Virginia for her candor.

Later that week, though, I started to wonder, *Is it okay to talk to God about life's little stuff?*

Like, I would never want my familiarity with the Lord to take away from his holiness, from the fact that he is actually *God.* And if I did not get a primo parking spot, I hoped he knew I'd be okay. It wouldn't derail my faith; rather, I would probably reason that God knew I needed the walk—and maybe even that I needed to thank him for the fact that I *could* walk.

The question still lingered though. One of my professors in college had admonished me for "talking a lot but never saying anything." I didn't want God to see me in the same light, as though my prayers made him think of a small, yappy dog.

And then, as if on cue, the doorbell rang. It was the Amazon delivery guy, bringing me a new book. I opened up *How to Pray* by Pete Greig, and (not making this up) I read this: "One of the greatest theological questions of our time in the realm of petitionary prayer appears to be whether we should ask God for parking spaces."

Seriously? Was Pete Greig—an internationally known speaker and the founder of the 24-7 Prayer movement—really writing about *parking spaces*?

He was.

"It seems to me," Greig went on, "that the answer is clear: Yes, we should indeed ask God to give us parking spots. Why? Because when we pray for places to park, we become the kind of people who worship God for a patch of concrete outside a supermarket on a rainy Saturday in January."[1]

Ahh. I *loved* that. I felt like Greig, a self-described "Scruffy Brit," understood my motivation. In asking God for a parking place (or a new pair of pants, or whatever), it wasn't that I felt *entitled* to one, or that I could "claim it" in prayer. Rather, my request was born more out of relationship, out of an understanding that God knew my needs and that *every* good gift—the big stuff and the small—is, as the Bible says, "from above."[2]

Praying about the small stuff opens our eyes to the "ordinary" blessings God

provides every day. As we thank God for these things, acknowledging him as their source, the path to God's throne room becomes familiar and worn. Our feet—and our hearts—know the way. And when the big things come along—the unwanted lab reports, the financial setback, the feeling of hopelessness when a child or a spouse makes a really poor choice—we can approach God with confidence, knowing that even if we stumble, he will not let us fall.

He's directing our steps, holding our hands, and delighting, Scripture says, in "every detail" of our lives.[3]

Read

- Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. (Ephesians 6:18)
- Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. (Philippians 4:6 NLT)
- The LORD directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the LORD holds them by the hand. (Psalm 37:23–24 NLT)

Reflect

- God delights in the details of our lives. Nothing is too small or too insignificant to warrant his attention; he knows the number of hairs on our heads![4]
- What has been your experience with prayer? Do you pray only about "big" things? Do you feel selfish talking to God about your minor concerns? Are you worried that maybe you'll be bugging God if you talk to him all the time?
- Bring your questions or concerns about prayer to God. Reflect on the ways that praying about life's little things can increase your capacity for worship. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you into a deeper intimacy with your heavenly Father, equipping you to pray—and live—with greater gratitude.

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *You created the stars; you know each one by name. You know my name! Help me put my hope in you. Renew my strength. (Isaiah 40:26–31)*
- *Show me what it looks like to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks to you in all circumstances. (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)*
- *Make me willing to cast all my anxieties and cares on you—even the small ones—because you care for me. (1 Peter 5:7)*

- *As I think about people I love, may I continually mention them in my prayers, remembering their work produced by faith, their labor prompted by love, and their endurance inspired by hope in Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 1:2–3)*

- *No detail of my life escapes your notice; you know when I sit and when I rise. Thank you for caring about all of my concerns, including _____. (Psalm 139:2)*

- *Don't let me worry about clothes or even about what I will eat or drink. Prompt me to seek your kingdom, knowing you will provide for me, even as you feed the birds and clothe the grass of the field. (Matthew 6:25–34)*

- *You keep track of my sorrows and collect all my tears in a bottle, recording each one in your book. Thank you that what matters to me matters to you. (Psalm 56:8)*

- *Don't let me despise small beginnings, for you rejoice to see work begin. (Zechariah 4:10)*

- *Teach me to pray in the Spirit with all kinds of prayers and requests. Make me alert to the needs—big and small—of your people. (Ephesians 6:18)*

- *Because you bend down to listen, I will pray as long as I have breath. Today I come to you with this need: _____. (Psalm 116:2 NLT)*

- *The nations are a drop in the bucket to you; you regard them as dust on the scales. Thank you that no need is too small or too big for you. (Isaiah 40:15)*

- *Direct my steps. Delight in every detail of my life. Take my hand and guide me regarding _____. (Psalm 37:23–24 NLT)*

Day 31

Living with Greater Gratitude

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . And be thankful.
Colossians 3:15

I am thankful for my refrigerator.

At least now I am. Like most of the blessings in my life, I never thought much about the refrigerator. It certainly wasn't something I thanked God for providing. I just . . . used it. And in return, it just stood there, keeping things cold.

Until one day it didn't.

Robbie and I considered calling a repairman until a quick Google search revealed that the average fridge lasts thirteen years. Not to seem unsentimental, but ours had been a good and faithful servant for eighteen years, and we figured it was time to say, "Well done," and move on.

Which was easier said than done. The newer appliances, as it turns out, don't fit the old cabinet openings, nor is the particular model you want likely to be in stock. And when did refrigerators start costing more than my first car? We were stumped.

I realize this sounds like a privileged person's problem (and it is), but we wound up living for six weeks with a big hole in our kitchen where the old stainless behemoth once stood. And as a result of our personal "tragedy," two collateral blessings took place.

First, I lost a few pounds. We have a small refrigerator in the garage to which we transferred the essentials, but it wasn't close to the kitchen, and so whenever I got hungry and thought about going to grab a yogurt or something, I would weigh the time and effort involved and think, *Meh. Not that hungry.* After a while, the yogurt expired, and I didn't even think about going out there anymore.

The second blessing happened when the new fridge finally arrived. I found myself taken aback—not by the internal water dispenser (although that was a major upgrade), but simply by how *grateful* I was. I would look at that thing every morning and say, "Thank you, God."

Seriously.

And it hit me. What kept me from feeling that grateful before? Why did it take *not* having a refrigerator to make me so glad—to the point where I wept in my coffee one day—when I *did* get one? Why don't I count the ordinary, unremarkable blessings in life?

Alexander Maclaren was one of Great Britain's most influential preachers back in the nineteenth century. "Do not let the empty cup be your first teacher of the blessings you had when it was full," he said—as if he'd lived through an appliance crisis of his own—but rather, "Seek, as a plain duty, to cultivate a buoyant, joyous sense of the crowded kindnesses of God in your daily life."[1]

The crowded kindnesses of God.

Isn't that a great phrase? I decided, based on how happy I was about a big cooler, that I should give thanks for more stuff. That I should do what the Bible says and give thanks "in everything," even the things that might normally bug me.[2] If Robbie left his undershirt on the floor, for example, I resolved not to complain; rather, I would try to see the dirty laundry as a thanksgiving prompt: *I have a husband! I have a washing machine! Thank you, Jesus!*

Psychologists tell us that gratitude is really important—that it reduces stress, fatigue, and inflammation; produces better sleep; and even lowers depression for those with chronic illness.[3] We know all this stuff, even without science saying so. But there's a darker side to the dynamic. If giving thanks makes things better (and it does), failure to do so can compound our problems.

That's what happened, Paul says, to some people. They knew who God was—creation made his divine nature obvious—but they refused to acknowledge his power or provision. And chaos erupted as a result:

> Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.[4]

One thing led to another, and eventually God just let people have what they wanted. You can read the whole sordid story in Romans 1. The nutshell version is that when people stopped being grateful to God, things got ugly. Sexual perversion, greed, envy, murder, arrogance, family dysfunction—you name it. "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie," Paul says, "and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator."[5]

Their world got turned upside down—all because people failed to thank God.

Gratitude matters.

And I wish I could say, based on my experiment with Robbie's dirty T-shirts,

that I've changed. That I've learned to focus on God's provision instead of what I perceive as my lack. That I readily give thanks in all circumstances—even when the hurt is still there or I don't understand what God is doing.

I wish I could say that, but I can't. Not all the time anyway.

Maybe you know what I mean. Maybe there are days—seasons, even—when you struggle with disappointment, uncertainty, or the ache of an unanswered prayer. You want to enter God's gates with thanksgiving—to proclaim his goodness, his power, his crowded kindnesses—but the words just won't come.[6] You feel like you're on the outside, looking in.

You know what? That's okay. Because God is still at work in our lives, giving us the desire and the power to do what pleases him—including the desire and the power to give thanks.[7] Our mouths may fail, but God hears the cry of our hearts.

He bends down to listen, opens his arms, and says, "Come."

Read

- Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. (Psalm 100:4)
- So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (Colossians 2:6–7)
- Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)

Reflect

- Like all God's commands, his exhortation to "give thanks" is not so much for his benefit as it is for ours. God doesn't *need* our gratitude; he wants us to give thanks because of how it orients our worship and shapes our understanding of his presence in our lives.
- What do you think it means to "give thanks in all circumstances"? How can praising God—giving thanks—change your perspective or equip you to trust God, especially during a painful or challenging season? What role does thanksgiving play in your private time with the Lord? Is it part of your public (church) worship?
- Take some time to reflect on God's provision in your life. Use your prayer journal or another notebook to record examples of God's faithfulness—big or small—that come to mind. Return to these pages in the weeks to come as you add to your list, and allow the Holy Spirit to help you cultivate a "buoyant, joyous sense of the crowded kindnesses of God."

Respond

Heavenly Father . . .

- *Let your peace rule in my heart, no matter what I'm facing. May I be thankful. (Colossians 3:15)*
- *Equip me to give thanks in all circumstances, even about _____, for this is your will for me in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:18)*
- *Let me live with wisdom and care, making the most of every opportunity, understanding your will, and giving you thanks for everything. (Ephesians 5:15–20)*
- *Help me not to worry about anything, but in everything (including _____), by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, may I present my requests to you. And may your peace, which transcends understanding, guard my heart and mind. (Philippians 4:6–7)*
- *Everything you created is good; remind me to thank you for my food. (1 Timothy 4:4)*
- *May I continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to you, the fruit of lips that give you thanks and acknowledge your name. (Hebrews 13:15 ESV)*
- *Don't let me take my salvation for granted; instead, keep me mindful of my status as your chosen and special possession, that I may declare the praises of him who called me out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)*
- *Thank you for giving me strength, considering me trustworthy, and allowing me to serve you—and for showing me mercy when I acted in ignorance and unbelief. (1 Timothy 1:12–13)*
- *Thank you for giving me victory over sin and death. Help me stand firm, always giving myself fully to your work, because no labor for you is ever in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:57–58)*
- *May I always give thanks to you and proclaim your greatness, letting the whole world know what you have done. (1 Chronicles 16:8 NLT)*
- *Thank you for making your invisible qualities—your eternal power and your divine nature—clear. May I always glorify you and give you thanks so my heart will not grow dark or foolish, and so I won't worship or serve anything other than you. (Romans 1:20–25)*
- *Prompt me to give you thanks all day long, proclaiming your unfailing love in the morning and your faithfulness in the evening. (Psalm 92:1–2 NLT)*

I'm still in your presence,
but you've taken my hand.
You wisely and tenderly lead me,
and then you bless me . . .
I'm in the very presence of GOD—
oh, how refreshing it is!
I've made Lord GOD my home.
GOD, I'm telling the world what you do!

Psalm 73:23–28 MSG, emphasis added

With Thanks To

When God nudged me to read John 15, I had no idea he was planting a book. Nor could I have imagined how many wise friends he would send to help me navigate this scriptural vineyard and savor its life-giving fruit.

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love my life with you.

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Notes

Chapter 1: What Is Abiding?

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6. Matthew 11:28–29.
7. Exodus 33:14.
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9. Romans 12:1 MSG.
10. See Ezekiel 22:30; Mark 10:46–52; 5:24–34.
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Day 1: The Power of Connection

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2. John 15:5, 16.
3. Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ* (1888; repr., Apollo, PA: Ichthus, 2014), 25, http://ccbiblestudy.net/Topics/74Union/74Union-E/740101%E3%80%8AAbide%20in%20Christ%E3%80%8B(Andrew%20Murray).pdf.
4. See 1 Samuel 1:10–20; James 5:17–18; Acts 12:1–19; 2 Kings 20:1–7.
5. John 15:7–8.
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4. Psalm 100:4.
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6. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 93, 97.
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Day 3: Doing What (Doesn't) Come Naturally

1. Isaiah 53:6 NLT.
2. Psalm 119:32.
3. Psalm 1:2–3 MSG and NIV.
4. Romans 7:18.
5. See John 14:26; 16:8, 13–15.
6. 2 Corinthians 3:18 NLT.
7. Catherine Marshall, *The Helper* (New York: Avon, 1978), 90–91.
8. Ephesians 4:24.
9. 1 Peter 5:5.
10. Ephesians 1:19–20 NLT.

Day 4: Loving People (Even When It's Hard)

1. Jewish tradition teaches that there are 613 commandments. For a complete list, visit jewishvirtuallibrary.org. The fact that Jesus condensed these laws to just two is recorded in Matthew 22:34–40.
2. John 15:17.
3. John 15:13.
4. 1 John 4:19.
5. Ephesians 3:17–19.
6. "Pray for You" is a country song credited to Jaron and the Long Road to Love, with lyrics written by Joel Brentlinger and Jaron Lowenstein.

7. Luke 6:27–28.
8. See John 13:34–35.

Day 5: Extending Forgiveness

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Day 6: Living without Shame

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2. John 15:2.
3. See 2 Timothy 3:16 and Romans 15:4 for some of the benefits Scripture offers in the cleansing process.
4. Hebrews 4:12 NLT.
5. See, for instance, Romans 1:18–32 and Psalm 81:10–12.
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Day 7: Your Friendships, Part One (Make Me a Good Friend)

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5. Ecclesiastes 4:9.

Day 9: Praying for Your Marriage

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4. See Tara Parker-Pope, "The Generous Marriage," *New York Times*, Well, December 8, 2011, https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/08/is-generosity-better-than-sex.
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6. Galatians 5:22–23.

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Day 10: Praying for Your Children

1. John 15:7.
2. Deuteronomy 6:6–7; Ephesians 6:4; Luke 22:42.
3. 3 John 4; Matthew 23:37; Hosea 11:1–2.
4. Lamentations 2:19.
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6. Malachi 4:6.
7. Isaiah 55:11.

Day 11: Asking for Help

1. Psalm 70:1–5.
2. 2 Corinthians 1:10–11.
3. Romans 8:26 ESV.
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5. Hebrews 4:16.

Day 12: Praying through Suffering and Grief

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8. Psalm 91:1.
9. 2 Timothy 1:7 NLT.

Day 15: Avoiding the Comparison Trap

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2. Romans 12:6 MSG.
3. Romans 12:15.
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Day 16: Praying about the Words You Say

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Day 17: Praying to Love God’s Word

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3. See John 15:8 ESV.
4. Romans 12:2, emphasis added.
5. Wilkin, *Women of the Word*, 33.
6. John 15:7–8.
7. Hebrews 2:10; 12:2.
8. John 15:7.
9. Psalm 37:4.

Day 18: Hearing God’s Voice

1. In John 8:44, Jesus calls the devil the “father of lies.”
2. 2 Timothy 3:16–17.
3. Numbers 9:8.
4. For a deeper look at ways we can listen to God, I like Priscilla Shirer’s Bible study *Discerning the Voice of God: How to Recognize When God Speaks* (Chicago: Moody, 2007).
5. Psalm 116:2; Exodus 33:11.
6. John 10:27.
7. Isaiah 55:7–9.
8. John 14:26 ESV; 16:13 ESV.

Day 19: Resting in God

1. Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ* (Apollo, PA: Ichthus, 2014), 15.
2. Matthew 11:29.
3. Matthew 11:28–30 MSG.

4. Exodus 33:14.
5. Leviticus 25:19, 21.
6. Luke 23:56.

Day 20: Using Your Gifts and Talents

1. Romans 12:3–8.
2. 1 Corinthians 12:4–31.
3. Exodus 31:2–5.
4. 1 Corinthians 12:15–18.
5. 1 Corinthians 12:26.
6. Psalm 139:13–16.
7. 1 Corinthians 12:7.
8. Romans 12:8.
9. Colossians 3:23.
10. Matthew 22:37–39.
11. Matthew 22:37–39.

Day 21: Praying about Your Work and Purpose

1. Mark 10:37; Luke 9:54.
2. Matthew 20:26–27.
3. Matthew 6:24.
4. Daniel 6:3; Exodus 35:30–35; Acts 16:13–15, 40.
5. Ephesians 2:10.
6. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (1949; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2001), 174.
7. Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 93.
8. John 15:5.
9. Mark 12:30–31.

Day 22: Praying about How You Use Your Time

1. Elisabeth Elliot, *A Lamp unto My Feet: The Bible's Light for Your Daily Walk* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2004), 175.
2. 2 Corinthians 9:8.
3. Matthew 6:33–34 MSG.
4. Psalm 90:12.
5. Quoted in E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer* (Racine, WI: Treasures Media, 2007), 7.
6. John 15:7.
7. Sara Hagerty, *Adore: A Simple Practice for Experiencing God in the Middle Minutes of Your Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 60.

Day 23: Praying about Financial Decisions

1. 1 Chronicles 29:14.
2. See Brandon Park, "2,350 Bible Verses on Money," Church Leaders, November 30, 2017, https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/314227-2350-bible-verses-money.html.
3. Proverbs 22:7.
4. Matthew 6:24.
5. See Amanda MacMillan, "Being Generous Really Does Make You Happier," *Time*,

https://time.com/collection/guide-to-happiness/4857777/generosity-happiness-brain.
6. 1 Timothy 6:17–19 MSG.
7. Proverbs 13:11.
8. James 1:5; Psalm 24:1; Proverbs 3:9–10 NLT.

Day 24: Asking for Wisdom and Guidance

1. Proverbs 31:11, 26.
2. Proverbs 22:6.
3. See 1 Kings 3:16–28 for an example of Solomon's wisdom.
4. Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 862.
5. James 1:5.
6. Psalm 90:12; Proverbs 1:5; Proverbs 3:5–6.
7. Proverbs 3:13–17; Proverbs 7:4–5; Proverbs 10:1.
8. Colossians 1:9–10 MSG.
9. John 14:26; 16:13.
10. James 3:17 AMP.
11. Exodus 15:13.
12. Proverbs 3:5–6.
13. James 3:17 NLT.

Day 25: Being Joy-Full

1. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Joyful: Even When Things Go Wrong, You Can Have Joy* (Colorado Springs: Cook, 1974), 20.
2. John 2:9; Luke 15:24; John 15:11; 10:10.
3. See Galatians 5:22 and Psalm 51:12.
4. See Wiersbe, *Be Joyful*, 141.
5. Philippians 4:12.
6. Acts 16:22–25.
7. Philippians 1:12–14.
8. Heather's prayer is from Romans 15:13.
9. 1 Peter 5:7.
10. Philippians 4:6–7.
11. Psalm 16:11 NASB.
12. Romans 5:5 NLT.

Day 26: Praying for Health and Healing

1. 2 Kings 19–20.
2. 2 Kings 19:10.
3. 2 Kings 19:15, 17, 19.
4. 2 Kings 20:1, 3, 5.
5. Exodus 15:26.
6. Luke 4:40; Matthew 10:1; 1 Corinthians 12:9; James 5:16.
7. These stories are recorded in my out-of-print book titled *Celebration of Miracles* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995).
8. Psalm 27:13–14.
9. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7495.htm.
10. Psalm 147:3.
11. Lamentations 2:19.

Day 27: Aging Well

1. Zion Market Research, "Anti-Aging Market to Touch US $216.52 Billion by the End of 2021, Globally: ZMR Report," August 30, 2018, www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2018/08/30/1563523/0/en/Anti-Aging-Market-To-Touch-US-216-52-Billion-By-the-End-of-2021-Globally-ZMR-Report.html.
2. Job 12:12.
3. Proverbs 16:31.
4. 2 Corinthians 5:17; 4:16.
5. Joshua 13:1.
6. Job 1:3; 42:12.
7. Psalm 92:14.
8. Colossians 3:16 ESV; Romans 12:2.
9. Isaiah 46:4 NLT.
10. Leviticus 19:32; Titus 2:2–3.
11. Psalm 92:14; Colossians 3:23; Psalm 78:4.
12. Philippians 3:20–21 MSG.

Day 28: Trusting God in the Face of Unanswered Prayer

1. Matthew 5:4.
2. See Romans 8:28; Jeremiah 29:11; Job 42:2.
3. Pete Greig, *How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019), 115.
4. Matthew 26:39; John 17:23.
5. Greig, *How to Pray*, 115.
6. Greig, *How to Pray*, 118.

Day 29: Sharing Your Faith

1. Quoted in "Harald Bredesen Dies at Age 88," CBN, www1.cbn.com/about/harald-bredesen-dies-at-age-88.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1943; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1960), 120.
3. Psalm 16:11.
4. John 3:3.
5. Acts 26:17–18.
6. Romans 10:14.
7. Matthew 28:18–20.
8. John 14:6.
9. Psalm 71:15; Luke 8:39.
10. Philemon 4–7.

Day 30: Praying for Parking Places (and Life's "Little" Things)

1. Pete Greig, *How to Pray: A Simple Guide for Normal People* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2019), 76.
2. James 1:17.
3. Psalm 37:23–24 NLT.
4. Matthew 10:30.

Day 31: Living with Greater Gratitude

1. Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Psalms 51–145* (New York: Doran, 1909), 276–77.
2. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 NASB.
3. Suzanne Kane, "How Gratitude Can Affect Your Physical and Psychological Well-Being,"

PsychCentral, October 31, 2019, https://psychcentral.com/lib/how-gratitude-can-affect-your-physical-and-psychological-well-being.

4. Romans 1:21–22 NLT.
5. Romans 1:25.
6. Psalm 100:4; 145:6–9.
7. Philippians 2:13 NLT.

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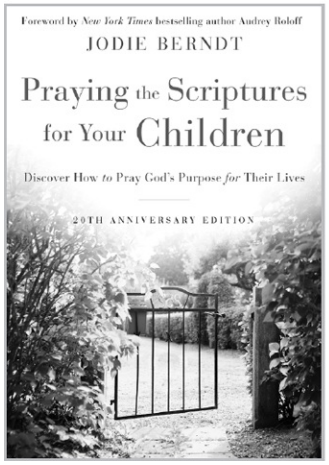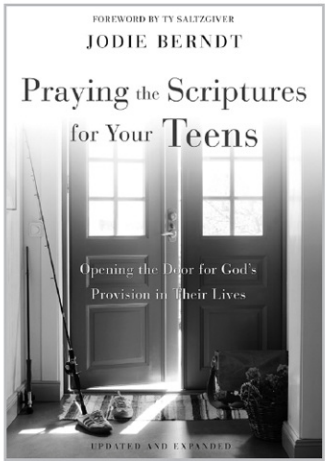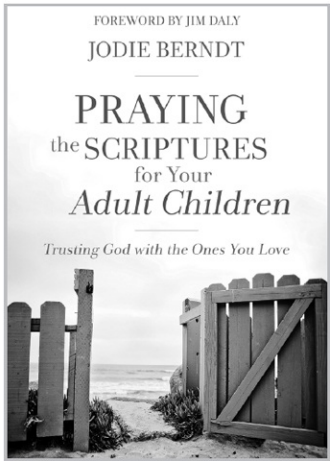
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