



THE CHURCH • MY STORY • TRANSFORMATION  
PRAYER • CHRISTMAS • OF FREEDOM

**JESUS  
AT THE  
CENTER**

**DAILY DEVOTIONAL**



One of the most repeated commands in Scripture is to remember. As we move into a new year, let's remember the faithfulness that God has demonstrated not only in His Word but in our lives. He wants to do great things in and through us as individuals, but also collectively as a church. I'm praying that we will see miracles in our midst this year.

One particular miracle I'm praying for is that we would see many people set free. For those who are still enslaved to sin, I'm praying that God would break through their unbelief and transform their heart and minds. For those who do already have a relationship with Christ, I'm praying that they will experience even greater freedom—from shame, fear, oppression, doubt and even illness. Remember that all authority in heaven and on earth has been granted to King Jesus. Let's place our faith and trust in Him!

I'm anticipating how God will move in our midst. I hope that these devotions will continue to be helpful to you as you seek to keep Jesus at the center of your life. Recall the promise of God in James 4:8—if we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. Join me in praying He'll continue to do mighty things in the future!

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'B' followed by a horizontal line and a cursive 'J'.

Bryan Jones, Senior Pastor



# DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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*"... Our Father in heaven..."*

Matthew 6:9b (NLT)

- What do You want to say to me today as my Father?

*"... may Your name be kept holy."*

Matthew 6:9c (NLT)

- What do You want to reveal to me about Your power today?

*"May Your Kingdom come soon."*

Matthew 6:10a (NLT)

- Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.

*"Give us today the food we need,"*

Matthew 6:11 (NLT)

- Is there anything specific You want me to do with my time or the people I'm around today?

*"and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us"*

Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

- Reveal to me anyone I need to forgive or ask for forgiveness.

*"And don't let us yield to temptation..."*

Matthew 6:13a (NLT)

- Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?

## THE COST OF BELIEF

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*Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If any of you wants to be My follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow Me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for My sake, you will save it."*  
**Matthew 16:24-25 (NLT)**

Have you ever noticed the first word Jesus says when calling His disciples? He says *If*. *If anyone would follow Me*. Today, in our sales/consumer-driven world, we're almost numb to sales pitch. We've been bombarded by products promising that for three easy payments, our lives can be fundamentally better. We go on social media and look at people *selling* the best part of their lives, but deep down, we know life isn't always picture-perfect, is it? Jesus never oversells and under-delivers. In fact, from a sales perspective, pitching this would have been terrible. He doesn't press, negotiate or try to convince; He simply lays it out there, *If*. And then He jumps straight in with the cost, *Oh, by the way, if you want to be My disciple, then you must die to yourself*. What?!? Jesus, couldn't You have made it sound a bit more compelling? The truth is Jesus wasn't interested in creating fans. He wanted disciples. He wanted men and women whom He could share the Kingdom with.

It's interesting that Jesus offers a death-to-life kind of life. We die to ourselves so we can live for Him. The irony is those who die to themselves find a life from Jesus that's far greater than anything they could have found themselves. The alternative is to try and live now and then one day you die, but the truth is people who've been living for themselves die on the inside long before they do on the outside. Jesus has an amazing life planned for you, but He's clear that there is a high price. Surrender isn't optional. It's a necessity in our faith. Remember what John the Baptist said: *I become less so that He can become more* (John 3:30). God can only fill you with belief, power and His Spirit when we first lay down ours. This is the way of the Kingdom.

**APPLICATION:** Today, become less and let Him become more. Let His light shine.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Lord to help you surrender your time, talents and treasures to Him. Ask Him if there is anything that is blocking you from laying your life down, then give it to Him. Ask for deeper power and belief.

## BELIEF IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

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*Jesus told her, "Your brother will rise again. "Yes," Martha said, "he will rise when everyone else rises, at the last day." Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in Me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in Me and believes in Me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?"*

John 11:23-25 (NLT)

I often talk about situational atheism. What I mean is that I believe God holds the whole world in His hands, but I don't know if I can trust Him with *this* situation. I believe God can do anything for most people, but sometimes I doubt He'll do it for me. This is what's happening with Martha. She believes in the power of Jesus, but she isn't convinced it can help her in this moment. It's one thing to have a general belief *about* something but another to believe *in* something. Jesus doesn't want us to believe things *about* Him. Instead, He wants us to believe *in* Him—to have a trust that defies what our physical eyes can see. We all trust in something; what Jesus is saying is, *Trust in Me, believe in Me even when it doesn't make sense*. If you have a trust in Jesus, you don't have to see things with your physical eyes because God has given you spiritual eyes to know that when you're with God, He's always good.

Difficult times allow our faith to grow in new ways, but it also reveals the level of faith we have. In the same way a game reveals what the practice cannot, pain reveals what the good times simply cannot. No matter where you are in your faith journey, God will continue to grow your faith if you keep your eyes on Him and live in His love. Faith isn't something you stir up in yourself. It's something God stirs in you as you draw near. If you hang around with certain people, they affect how you speak, think and live. In the same way, being with God allows us to become like Him. You cannot become like Him with willpower. You only can by being with Him. Make a decision today to draw near to God. Make a decision today that you will believe in Him regardless of what you see in your circumstances. Let your faith grow deeper in the difficult times so that the life of Jesus is your life. Let faith rise up.

**APPLICATION:** Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to reveal where God has been faithful to you before during difficult times. Ask God where the enemy is creating doubt and fear, and ask Him to replace it with faith and hope. Ask the Spirit to help you believe in Him more than ever before.

## BELIEF COMES FROM GOD

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*God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For 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 2:8-10 (NLT)

In middle school, I played football, or I should say I stood on the sidelines while my teammates played football. God has blessed me with several gifts, but football isn't one of them! I always found it interesting that although I never really played, I still got the results of whatever happened on the field. If we won, we won as a team; if we lost, we lost as a team. Even though I didn't contribute to the outcome, I was still rewarded when we won. I was a part of the team. In your faith, you didn't do anything to earn the grace and victory. All you did was show up, but you are a part of the team, and you get the reward. Jesus did all the work on the cross, the only thing you contributed was your sin. On the cross, the grace and forgiveness are given to everyone who is a part of the team. You don't do anything, but you also get everything. What a gift!

This is important because when you understand everything comes from God, it frees you from two snares of the enemy: pride and shame. When we start to think, *It must be easier for God to love me because I'm serving Him*, or when we become judgmental of others, we need to slow down and realize where our faith has come from. If we think that God can't use or love us for any reason, we need to look at Ephesians 2:10 above, where we are called *masterpieces*. Think about it: appliances are mass-produced, but a masterpiece is handmade and displayed. God has perfectly created you. He knows what He's doing, and He didn't make a mistake. He puts you on display because you are His, but always remember where you came from! If you're a part of the team, you get the rewards, and as a child of God, one of those rewards is that you can boldly approach God and ask anything in His will. So, what are you asking for? Ask for more of Him! Ask for more faith! Ask for more power!

**APPLICATION:** Let God's grace keep you from pride or shame today.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit if there is any pride in your life. Give that area to Him. Ask the Spirit to reveal if there is any shame. Give that area to Him. Thank God for His grace.



## BELIEF IN ACTION

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*How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.*

**Hebrews 11:32-34 (NLT)**

Love isn't a sentiment; it's an action. There is a big difference between active and passive love. I want to make a case that what drove the action of Hebrews 11 was love. As a guy, I've always struggled with the concept of God's love and showing love. Honestly, it just seemed a little too flowery for me. All we do is sit around and talk about our feelings? That's what I thought. I realized, though, that love always shows itself. If we love a sports team, we attend the games and take interest. That love drives us to action. If we love a hobby, we study that hobby and then take any moment we can to participate in that hobby. Love drives us to action. If we love our family, we desire to spend time with them. Love drives us to action. If I love Jesus, it will move me to action. I will want to serve. I will want to reach those far from Him. I will want to pray for healing. Here's the important part: some of you are exhausted. Don't start with action. Start with love. Take a moment to remember who and what you have in Jesus. Let His joy fill you until it overflows from you. Take a moment just to relax in His presence. Once you realize who you are in Jesus and what you have in Him, it will move you to action. Too many people start with action and hope it leads to love. This leads to exhaustion and burnout.

The point is if I want to do what Jesus did, then I need to first be with Jesus and become like Him. If those two things are right, I'll always do what Jesus did. I'll always operate with a faith in action. In being with Jesus, He gives me His heart and courage, and I give Him mine. It's a great exchange for us! Let the Spirit have His way with you. You never know how He might use you each day. May the love of God propel us into action, not our adrenaline or determination. Let God's love drive you to action today.

**APPLICATION:** Look for the small doors God will open for you today.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to give you a boldness you've never had before. Ask Him to lead and guide you each day in the power of His love. Ask that His love would drive out any fear, worry or doubt.

## A MOMENT OF UNBELIEF

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*Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." A week later His disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe."*  
John 20:24-26 (NIV)

I don't know if anybody's mistake has ever been more branded than Doubting Thomas. He has one bad moment, and now he's got a name that he can't seem to escape. I think Thomas is often unfairly criticized and used as a negative example. The truth is, Thomas didn't stay in his doubt. He went on later to be bold for Jesus and was martyred for his faith. Plus, the unsavory secret is I relate a lot to Thomas. There's a part of me that believes anything is possible, but another part of me believes most things are impossible. We don't silence doubt by suppressing it. We silence doubt by speaking to God about it. Listen to what Tim Keller says about doubt: *A faith without some doubts is like a human body without antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection.*

Faith, like any relationship, has to be stretched and tried. Nobody gets a divorce on their honeymoon, and no one quits following Jesus on the mountaintops. It's in the difficult times when faith is forged. There are doubts that destroy and doubts that deliver. God isn't afraid of your doubts. You don't honor Him but pretending they don't exist; you show He's Lord by taking those doubts to Him. I only take something I want fixed to someone who can fix it. I wouldn't take my broken car to my 4-year-old daughters and ask them to repair it, but I would take it to a mechanic. Taking your doubt shows that you believe God can change that doubt into something good. He's good. Take whatever you're carrying to Him!

**APPLICATION:** Take your hard questions and doubts to God. He isn't afraid.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Holy Spirit to create a deeper level of honesty and vulnerability with God. God doesn't want us to pretend everything is great. Ask Him to continue to grow your faith despite the problems you see around you!

## WHEN BELIEF IS TESTED

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*"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me." When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

**Matthew 19:20-22 (NIV)**

There are two mistakes you can make with this passage. One is to assume this applies to everyone. The other is to assume it applies to no one. The reason Jesus says this to the man is that Jesus has taken the backseat to money. Something else is ruling the throne of this man's heart, and Jesus sees it. How do you know what's ruling in your heart today? What's the thing you lie awake thinking about? What's the thing that consumes most of your thoughts, both good and bad? This is the place to start. Money was on this man's mind. Often, our but gets in the way. *I'll follow you, Jesus, BUT if this thing happens, I'm out. I will follow you, Jesus, BUT I need to know that this is going to work out.* This is how we find what's an idol in our hearts, by looking at what's dominating our thoughts and attention.

Jesus isn't saying money is bad. It's the love of money that causes problems. God has called some people to make a lot of money and generously use it for His Kingdom. The issue we'll have is that a good thing becomes an ultimate thing to us. This rich young ruler knew something was off. Do you notice what he asked Jesus? *What do I still lack?* When something else is ruling your life, Christ can't, and His peace, power and love aren't ruling over you either. This man was trying to earn and work towards the grace of God. He was willing to do a lot but not completely surrender. When we're controlled by two things, we become miserable. Maybe the issues in your heart and life aren't with your circumstances but with what's ruling over you. The way to Jesus is complete surrender, and those who do find life and find it to the fullest. Follow Him wherever He may call and at whatever cost. It's worth it!

**APPLICATION:** Give back whatever is competing with God for your thoughts and affections today.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to reveal anything competing for your heart. Ask Him to show why you're putting your trust in that. Surrender whatever He reveals to you. Sit for a moment and let His protection, power and passion fill you up!

## BELIEF THAT MOVES GOD

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*But the officer said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have You come into my home. Just say the word from where You are, and my servant will be healed. I know this because I am under the authority of my superior officers, and I have authority over my soldiers. I only need to say, 'Go,' and they go, or 'Come,' and they come. And if I say to my slaves, 'Do this,' they do it." When Jesus heard this, He was amazed. Turning to those who were following Him, He said, "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel!"*

Matthew 8:8-10 (NIV)

Something that seems always to draw the presence of God is faith. It's like faith is a magnet that attracts the presence of God. Years ago, a mentor of mine said this phrase I haven't been able to shake. He said, *With God, let's have an expectation without an agenda.* This has been impactful to me. Sometimes, I wonder if I miss God because I've put Him in such a box that I missed what He's doing. This Roman centurion had an expectation that God could heal, but he believed that it could be anyway, even with His words. Most of Jesus' healings came by a touch, but this man knew Jesus' power couldn't be boxed in or limited. What if each Sunday we had an expectation that we'd meet with God? What if each day we opened our Bible or prayed, we believed God would truly meet us in that space? May we come hungry and expectant but without our agenda. God's ways are higher than ours, and our agendas can limit the outpouring of the Spirit. I love how Charles Spurgeon says it: *A little faith will bring your soul to heaven; a great faith will bring heaven to your soul.*

God is drawn to faith. In the same way, a lack of belief will limit the miracles we'll see around us. Often, my kids will ask for something, and I give it to them. Other times, they ask for something, and I don't because I know that thing won't be good for them. I have the power to give them what they want, but I have the kindness not to give them that thing even though they can't understand why. The starting point to deep faith is a deep belief in the goodness of God. He isn't some genie in the bottle that you have to rub the right way. He's not a coach you have to please or a Rubik's Cube to be solved. He's a good Dad, a powerful Dad. Start there and ask God to move, but don't limit Him with your agenda. Trust that He'll move as He sees best, so be on the lookout for Him today!

**APPLICATION:** Fix your eyes on Jesus and His goodness today.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to reveal where you have an agenda for God and release it. Tell God you trust Him and expect Him to work, but you trust His ways of working.

# BREAKTHROUGH THE NOISE

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*He says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. ..."*

**Psalm 46:10 (NIV)**

I find it interesting that the psalmist said the way we know that God is God is stillness. Most people, I have found, avoid stillness with everything they can. Our minds are constantly moving, and often, the moment we sit, the noise in our heads gets loud. Some of this is due to our hectic pace; some are pains in our lives that haven't been dealt with, while others are spiritual warfare. The point remains: stillness is hard, yet it's the way to know God. For some reason, God is in the stillness in ways that He's not in a Mach 3 schedule. Sure, God is omnipresent, which is a fancy way of saying He's everywhere. So, it's unfair to say God isn't in the busy moments, but the place we become aware of Him in supernatural ways is in the stillness.

This can create a problem for many of us because our schedules are packed from morning to evening. We have jobs to do, bills to pay, phones that never stop, and relationships that require attention. Many of these things are good but can affect our ability to slow down, hear from God and know His peace. We bring this speed to our time with Him. We can sometimes rush through our quiet time just to check a box and then get on to the next thing. For some of us, our quiet time is another thing we blitz through. The psalmist invites us to slow down and live in a way that is countercultural. I've recently been using the phrase *we go slow to go fast*. When things speed up, the first thing that usually goes is our time with God. The opposite should be true when things speed up. We should slow down and let God speak to us. I have found the irony is that I actually get more done in these times because I'm tapped into His wisdom, power and plan. God honors and multiplies our time when we seek Him first. There has to be a turning point in our lives where we stop trying to slot God in and decide to build our lives around Him. Trying to slot God in will always cause us to move so fast that we miss what He is saying, but to build our lives means we are willing to wake up a little earlier, turn off the TV or cancel a plan because we say there's nothing more important than Jesus. Jesus should be at the center of my schedule.

**APPLICATION:** Take a few moments today to be still and invite God into your life.

**PRAYER:** Spend time listening to the Spirit. Take time to invite Him into everything you're walking through in your head. Ask Him to specifically guide you on a time each day you can meet with Him and be faithful to do it!

## BREAKTHROUGH COMFORT

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*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed.* **Mark 1:35 (NIV)**

Jimmy Carter said *I can get up at 8 am and be rested... or I can get up at 5 am and be President.* I've often noticed people will wake up at an early hour or stay up late for hobbies, working out and sporting events. Yet, the moment you talk about sacrificing something for Jesus, we can scream on the inside, *well, isn't that legalism?* Perhaps it can be, but the point remains true: we'll sacrifice comfort or rest for something we love. There's nothing that makes us more loved or valuable to God about radically seeking Him. However, it does make us more like Him! I think there has to be a fundamental shift in everyone's life where we stop slotting God into our schedules and decide to build around Him. We're busy, no doubt, but so was Jesus. He had the greatest mission the world has ever seen, yet He constantly found time to break away and be with His Father. The night before the verse above takes place, Jesus was healing people and being poured out, yet He chose to wake up early to be with His Father. He had built His life around the Father, and nothing would keep Him from Him.

What have you built your life around? Is it work? Kids? Sporting events? Weekends or home projects? There's nothing bad about those things; in fact, they are good things, but they aren't the best things. The point remains we will make sacrifices for what we consider the best thing. I was recently at a football game and was amazed to hear what time people woke up to tailgate. The prep before and the level of commitment they had, but they didn't do it out of obligation; it was out of delight. The sacrifice didn't seem too large because the payoff was worth it. The turning point in my life was when I chose to say no to certain things if they interfered with my spiritual life. I had to start saying no to the lesser things to say yes to the greater things. Jesus did the same. He constantly broke away and probably disappointed a few of the disciples, His family and the crowds. I've never once regretted waking up early, staying up a little later, taking a risk to talk to someone about Jesus, or making church a priority, but I often regret settling for good but ultimately lesser things, like comfort.

**APPLICATION:** Look at your schedule and evaluate if you're slotting Jesus in or building your life around Him.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to help you desire Him in new ways. Ask the Spirit to stop letting the enemy get you caught up on legalism and dream about what it means to radically seek God! Ask the Spirit to fan into flame a new commitment for God! Ask Him to replace comfort with a boldness!

## BREAKTHROUGH FROM PERFORMING

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*"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.*

**Matthew 6:5-8 (NIV)**

I've noticed that we tend to let our guard down at home. We often put on a mask with our boss, co-workers, neighbors and even people at church. Home is where people see us for who we really are. The freedom of this verse is that God is trying to show us that He wants us to let our guard down. That He's our home and He's our Father, that we don't have to perform in our time with Him. For years, I thought spiritual life was an equation to be solved instead of a home to rest in. I used to think if I didn't pray the right way, do the right things, think the right things, and have enough faith, God wouldn't be pleased. This created pressure and more performance. Recently, my time with Jesus has become some of my favorite time because of verses like the one above. The invitation is to feel as comfortable with God as I do in my home with my closest family. This changes the way I interact with God. Suddenly, I learn to simply sit and enjoy His company.

The Pharisees wanted to be seen; they needed the approval of others. Being alone with God allows us to be seen by Him, so we don't have to be seen by the world. Think about everything people do to get the attention of those who aren't at all interested. Meanwhile, your heavenly Father longs to meet and connect with you as His child. When I'm with my children, most of the time, I don't have an agenda. It's usually about just being with them. Sure, we do things together, but the point isn't the movie, the art project, the scooter ride or the video game. It's about being with them and enjoying each other's company. Why does God want you to be alone? Because He wants you to enjoy His company. The point isn't the Bible, prayer, a journal or a spiritual discipline; the point is Jesus. Break through the performance and step into the freedom that God has. Breakthrough into a deeper life with Jesus.

**APPLICATION:** Just be with Jesus today like you would a friend on a long road trip.

**PRAYER:** Ask Jesus to help you just sit and enjoy His presence. Ask Him to free you from performing and striving to get His attention. Ask Him to help you enjoy your time with Him in new ways. Ask the Spirit to reveal any ways you are trying to perform in your quiet time. Give those to Him!

## BREAKTHROUGH OPPOSITION

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Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions' den?" Daniel 6:10-12 (NIV)

We live in a culture today where we call what is evil good and what is good evil. More than ever, Christians have to commit that we'll live counterculturally. If your chief desire is to fit in, faith will be very hard for you. We're reminded that we are aliens and strangers (1 Peter 2:11) in this world. If you don't live like that, you'll try to make this place your home and constantly cave in when pressures arise. I love how C.S. Lewis says it: *When the whole world is running towards a cliff, he who is running in the opposite direction appears to have lost his mind.* In the passage above, Daniel had been told to stop praying to God and start praying to the king. This seemed like a good idea to the culture, but it was terrible for Daniel. Daniel had to choose where his loyalty would lie, which cost him something. Make no mistake, to live for Jesus will cost something. Now, for many of us, it won't mean our physical lives, but it might mean comfort, resistance, awkward moments, people calling you narrow-minded, or even cost you some opportunities.

As we face opposition, we must ensure we don't become hardened or calloused towards the world around us. This is, perhaps, my most difficult task. Remember when Jesus was facing opposition and being mocked on the cross? Do you remember some of His final words on the cross? *He said, "Father, forgive them for they know do not what they are doing."* (Luke 24:34 NIV) This is one of the most problematic passages for me. The only way to live like Jesus is to love like Jesus. Jesus didn't just take a stand for truth and call out the evil in the world. He loved and served those who frankly didn't seem worthy of love. We must be hard and strong in our commitment to Jesus but soft and kind to those who aren't like us. Jesus was full of truth and grace. We can't pick and choose; we must be both. May you stay strong in opposition, but may your heart be soft to those who are far from God!

**APPLICATION:** Love today with truth and grace.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit if there is anywhere you are compromising in the opposition you may face in your faith. Are there certain people or places you hide your light from? Ask for boldness and trade in the timidity. Believe in the Spirit, and it will be yours!



## BREAKTHROUGH PRIDE

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*But He gives us even more grace to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but favors the humble." So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

**James 4:6-7 (NLT)**

Have you ever noticed the thing God resists? The thing He opposes is pride. The number one obstacle to people coming to faith in Jesus is pride. In a culture that loves strength, independence and individuality, the Gospel is a threat because only the poor in spirit can make their way to God. The problem with pride is that most people aren't even aware they have it. Tim Keller said this: *Pride is the carbon monoxide of sin. It silently and slowly kills you without you even knowing.* When I was walking through a difficult situation, my mentor said this phrase: *Bryan, humiliation would hurt a lot less if we were more humble.* I didn't like it when he said it, and I still don't, but it stuck with me. He said *Humility allows us to say things like, "I don't know."* Humility makes you more interested in others than always trying to be interesting. Humility allows you to celebrate others' successes as much as your own. Humility will ask for help. These things, for most of us, are things we struggle with.

Pride will kill the life of God quicker than anything. The moment pride walks into the room, God walks out. Humility is really about self-forgetfulness. Have you ever been so busy you've forgotten to eat? It doesn't hit you until later that night. Similarly, humility allows us to walk into a room and see others. It will enable us to forget about our needs and insecurities. It allows us to take our eyes off ourselves and place them on God and others. This is where peace comes from, and this is where power is. If you need to grow in humility (and we all do), just start by focusing on God and others. After a while, you will find that one day, you won't even be aware of your thoughts and how you are being received. Humility will free you up to truly see Jesus because there is room in your heart and mind for humility. Humility will also allow you to truly love others because your heart will be free to do so. Draw near to God today; His humility will fill you if you lay down your agendas. Let Him have His way!

**APPLICATION:** Get your eyes off yourself and onto God and others today.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to help you truly lay down your life. Ask Him to allow you to see people, and Jesus, like you have never done before. Ask Him to help you die to yourself so you can truly live unto Him! This is freedom!

# BREAKTHROUGH THE TEMPTATIONS

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*If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you can endure.*

1 Corinthians 10:12-13 (NLT)

God will allow us to face things beyond what we can bear when it comes to pain because He wants us to draw on Him. Most people will talk about difficult times as a time when God drew them to Himself. This isn't true of temptation, though. It's unbiblical to say you're facing some temptation you can't overcome. God will always be faithful to provide a way out. This is where we must be aware of His goodness. It's important to note that temptation isn't easy to overcome. Listen to what C.S. Lewis said: *No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good... Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is.* This is why we need the supernatural life of Christ inside of us. I used to try to overcome sin with my willpower and determination, which worked a lot, but after a while, sin was persistent, the devil too evil, and the world was too broken for me not to give in. When you draw near to God, then He will show you a way out, and at the right moment, He will give you supernatural strength.

One of the most important parts of finding a way through temptations is being surrounded by people with whom you can be honest. I fear sometimes we project an image that isn't always accurate in church. Do you have people who ask you tough questions each week? Do you have people who are walking alongside you in your struggles? The enemy always picks off the lone sheep, and isolation will lead us to be a target for the enemy. I've found that whatever we struggle with, the key is ensuring we don't struggle alone. It takes courage to share and open up, but if you want the deep life of Jesus, then it's necessary. The first step to overcoming temptation is to bring those struggles into the light. Be honest with God about your struggles and let Him speak to those. Also, bring others into your struggle. They'll encourage you when you don't feel you have the strength to make it through. The spiritual race is individual, but it's also a communal race. No one can run your race for you, but you weren't called to run alone! Bring others into your struggle.

**APPLICATION:** Bring others into your struggle today!

**PRAYER:** Ask God to give you a supernatural strength to overcome temptations. Ask the Spirit to provide you with new victory in Him. Ask Him to help you believe victory is coming!

## BREAKTHROUGH IN TRUSTING GOD'S PLAN

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*You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail.*

Proverbs 19:21 (NLT)

In April 1966, the front page of *Time Magazine* read, **Is God Dead?** These three words created a huge wave with all sorts of reviews and a slew of responses from those who called themselves Christians and those who didn't. Some people said the times were turning, and this was the mark of people no longer following Jesus. People declared as culture evolved, education deepened and tech developed God would simply fade away. The problem is people have said things like this for years, yet God has always sat comfortably and safely on His throne. Christians are more terrified than ever before because it seems like culture is seemingly moving further and further away from God. As the proverb above shows us, God's plans can never fail. Many people have planned, dreamed and created plans, but few would say everything has gone according to the plan. Proverbs tells us that God's plans never fail, not once. There is nothing in human history that has surprised Him. God doesn't evolve, learn or grow because He's already perfect. This should bring calm to the chaos that surrounds us. If I were facing a major surgery, the skill and track record of the doctor would determine a lot of my feelings. We have a God who has never once failed in His plans and never will.

When I watch a movie and don't know the outcome, it creates some anxiousness. Once I've seen the movie, even in the intense parts, I have peace because I know how the story goes. Christian, we know the ending. Jesus wins. He never falls off His throne. No matter what happens in culture or your life, His plans advance. Don't trust what you see or feel. Remember, God has a track record of taking dead things and breathing life into them. So, if your life is great, remember that every good and perfect gift comes from above. If you're struggling and wondering why you're in this situation if you thought life would be different, trust that God's plans for you are good. Keep your eyes on Him and worship Him.

Worship doesn't remind God who He is; it reminds us of who He is. God doesn't need to be reminded of His power, but we do. Every day, start your morning praising God; this is central to keeping your heart and affections fixed on Him throughout the day. His plans don't fail. His plans are good. Trust Him today, and let His peace fill you.

**APPLICATION:** Thank God for the good plans He has for your life regardless of the season.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to strengthen and empower you to trust God's plans. Ask the Spirit to allow you to have calm in the chaos. Let a non-anxious presence rise in you through the power of the Spirit. Ask God to increase your trust.

## THE GOSPEL MAKES YOU ALIVE

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*My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*  
Galatians 2:20 (NLT)

There are a variety of expressions we use for someone becoming a Christian. We may say they've accepted Jesus into their heart. Or that they got saved. Or that they've become believers. While none of these are inherently wrong, there's another phrase that is probably a clearer representation of what's happening: passing from death to life.

Jesus uses this expression when He says: *"I tell you the truth, those who listen to My message and believe in God who sent Me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already **passed from death into life.**"*  
John 5:24 (NLT)

The Bible is quite clear—before believing the Gospel, we're dead in our sin. Paul uses this same language in Romans 6:13, imploring us to give ourselves completely to God since we were once dead and are now alive. He touches on this again in Ephesians 2:4-6, stating that God's rich mercy is what caused Him to lavish love and life on us when we were dead in our sin.

So, in Galatians 2:20, Paul reminds us that our old selves are dead. We're alive in Christ. The old has gone, and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our lives are not about us but about our Savior. We live for Him, committed to sharing the Good News of who He is and what He has done.

**APPLICATION:** Take a moment to thank God for the work of His Holy Spirit within you, initiating your passing from death to life. Reflect on who you were and how He has transformed you. Ask Him to continue to make you more and more like His Son.

**PRAYER:** Father God, thank You for choosing to save me. The life, death and resurrection of Your Son Jesus changed everything—help me not to grow numb to this. Guide me by Your Spirit to those around me who need to experience the Gospel. In Jesus' name, amen.

## THE GOSPEL SETS FREE

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*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.*

**Romans 8:1 (NLT)**

When we pass from death to life, we become a new person in Him. This is a supernatural, miraculous event. We are set free from our sin, no longer compelled to obey the desires of our flesh (see Romans 6). This is truly good news! Unfortunately, we sometimes forget that we've been set free. We focus on our past decisions that are not glorifying to God, and we begin to feel overwhelming amounts of shame.

But shame never comes from God.

The Holy Spirit convicts us and leads us to repentance. But there's a distinct difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is about what you've done. Shame is about who you are. Shame distorts your identity and leads you to believe lies about yourself. *You're not really any different. Same old same old. God is so disappointed in you. Condemnation is coming.*

But Romans 8:1, the first verse of arguably the most beautiful chapter in all of Scripture, reminds us that in Christ, there is no condemnation. The wrath of God was poured out on Jesus at the cross. He took that burden from us. Consider what David wrote:

*He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west.*

**Psalms 103:12 (NLT)**

If God isn't going to remember our sins against us anymore (see Hebrews 8:12), why would we fixate on them? Why would we allow shame to dominate our thoughts? Why would we forget that we're free? Paul encourages us in Galatians 5:1 to stay free, so let's endeavor to do exactly that.

**APPLICATION:** Take a few moments to just thank God for setting you free. Reflect on what He has brought you out of. Then, read the entirety of Romans 8. Be encouraged by this beautiful chapter!

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for the salvation You so freely give. Help me to walk in the confident assurance of Your grace, mercy and forgiveness. Remind me that shame doesn't come from You. Thank You for who You are and what You've done. In Jesus' name, amen.

## THE GOSPEL PROVIDES PURPOSE

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*One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow Me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed Him. A little farther up the shore He saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And He called them to come, too. They immediately followed Him, leaving the boat and their father behind.* **Matthew 4:18-22 (NLT)**

Salvation is about more than just what happens when we die. If it weren't, then at the moment we passed from death to life, Jesus could just *beam us up* to be with Him. But He has a plan and a purpose for our lives while we remain here on earth. The same Gospel that saves us compels us to a life of evangelism. Quite simply, there are people we will encounter who need to hear the life-transforming Good News of the Gospel. And while God could communicate His message in virtually any way, He chooses to use us as His ambassadors (see 2 Corinthians 5:20).

Elton Trueblood, former chaplain at both Harvard and Stanford, once said: *Evangelism is not a professional job for a few trained men but is instead the unrelenting responsibility of every person who belongs to the company of Jesus.*

Jesus didn't select those with the most formal education. He didn't choose those other rabbis clamored to have as their disciples. He chose ordinary men who were working ordinary jobs. While we may think we could never be used by Him because we haven't studied theology or have a background in vocational ministry, that's simply not true. Jesus calls each of us to be fishers of men.

One practical note about fishing—it requires patience. You don't throw your line out and immediately expect to catch a fish. The results come over time. The same is true as we share the Gospel. Don't grow discouraged if everyone with whom you share does not immediately begin to follow Christ. Persevere in praying for them as you share the Good News of the Gospel.

**APPLICATION:** Who is Jesus calling you to share the Gospel with? Ask Him to break your heart for those who are dead in their sin. Pray that He will give you clarity and the courage to speak on His behalf.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for allowing me to be Your ambassador. Help me to remember that my purpose is to glorify You. Grant that I might do this by sharing with those around me about who You are and what You've done. In Jesus' name, amen.

## THE GOSPEL THAT BRINGS FRUIT

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*But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!* Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

How can you tell if someone truly has been transformed by the Gospel? Talk is, as they say, cheap. Someone can claim to have a relationship with Jesus with their words, but their actions will show you whether they've truly passed from death to life. That's not to say they will be perfect and never struggle with temptation. But it does mean their choices and actions will, on the whole, show that they're surrendered to the will of God.

Jesus Himself told us to judge a tree by its fruit (see Matthew 7:15-20; Luke 6:43-45). Our thoughts, words, and, ultimately, our actions demonstrate where our loyalty lies. If it's to ourselves and the ways of the world, then there will be clear signs that are in direct conflict with the fruit outlined above (see Galatians 5:19-21). When our loyalty is to Christ, His Spirit will produce His fruit within us. Not just one or two of the nine that Paul mentioned. All of them together are the fruit (singular) of the Spirit.

The fiery preacher Charles Spurgeon once said the following: *It is of no use for any of you to try to be soul winners if you are not bearing fruit in your own lives. How can you serve the Lord with your lips if you do not serve him with your lives?*

Stated differently, how can we share the Good News of the Gospel in good faith if our lives haven't been transformed by it?

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to continue to grow His fruit within you. Write out the fruit of the Spirit in a journal or on your phone. Then, research some verses that speak to love, joy, peace, etc., with each one. Reflect on these verses as He leads you.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, I want my life to be fruitful for you. Transform me by the renewing of my mind and allow my life to stand as a testimony to your love and power. Sanctify me by Your Word, and make me more like Your Son, in whose name I pray, amen.

## THE GOSPEL EMPOWERS

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*Jesus called His twelve disciples together and gave them authority to cast out evil spirits and to heal every kind of disease and illness.*

**Matthew 10:1 (NLT)**

What are some of the most powerful things you remember Jesus doing? He raised the dead—certainly, that’s got to be toward the top of the list. He walked on water, commanded the wind and the waves, turned water into wine, healed the sick, and cast out demons, just to name a few. We sing about some of these things—declaring that there is power in both the blood and the name of Jesus.

But do we realize that He imparts that same power to us?

The verse above clearly states that Jesus empowered His disciples to work powerful miracles in His name and on His behalf. But you may think that this was granted only to these specific men at this specific moment in history. And yet Jesus said the following: *“I tell you the truth, anyone who believes in Me will do the same works I have done, and even greater works, because I am going to be with the Father. You can ask for anything in My name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father. Yes, ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it!”*

**John 14:12-13 (NLT)**

*Anyone who believes* includes you and me. As redeemed sons and daughters of the Father, we’re empowered by the Spirit in the name of Jesus to accomplish the good deeds He prepared for us long ago (see Ephesians 2:10). So why don’t we see more miraculous things happen in our midst? There are two answers. One is that we do see miracles, but we fail to grasp that they are, in fact, miracles. When someone embraces the Gospel, passing from death to life, that is a miracle to be celebrated! But the other reason is that perhaps we don’t believe that God will work miracles the same way today as He did then. But look at what Jesus says: *“You don’t have enough faith,” Jesus told them. “I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it would move. Nothing would be impossible.”*

**Matthew 17:20 (NLT)**

**APPLICATION:** Today, let’s ask God to grow our faith. Let’s ask Him to work powerfully in and through us for His glory. Let’s read and reflect on Acts 1:8, believing God will grant us power through His Spirit. Let’s also ask Him to help us recognize the miraculous that’s already happening for what it is.

**PRAYER:** Almighty God, grow my faith in You. Help me in my unbelief. Work powerfully in and through me, that my life would bring You much glory. Thank You for what you’ve done, what You’re doing, and what You will do in the future. In Jesus’ name, amen.



## THE GOSPEL GIVES GENEROUSLY

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*Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"*  
Luke 19:8-10 (NLT)

Generosity is not something that comes easily to most of us. The instinct to grasp and hoard for ourselves is deeply ingrained within us. Have you spent any time with toddlers lately? They didn't have to be taught to say *mine* or fight over their possessions. And while we may learn to hide it a little better as adults, it's still there. But a reality of living your life with fists clenched around what you have is that you miss out on what God wants to place in your hands when they're open.

Zacchaeus learned this. He'd been a tax collector for the Roman Empire. This position allowed him to pass on the tax from the Romans to his fellow Jews, plus a little extra to line his own pockets. This was no secret, which didn't exactly make him beloved in his community. He had a reputation for greed, but upon encountering Jesus, everything changed. There's no room for greed in the Kingdom. So, he vows to give away half of his wealth and make restitution to those that he cheated.

Theologian and author J.I. Packer said this: *The measure of all love is its giving. The measure of the love of God is the cross of Christ.*

God has given generously to us, and He, in turn, calls us to give generously of ourselves. How can we give of ourselves for others? What might He be calling us to sacrifice for the advancement of the Kingdom? Who has He placed in our path that He desires for us to bless? Consider the picture of the early church in Acts 2:42-47. These early believers gave generously of their time, resources and comforts for the sake of the Kingdom and those around them. How can we do the same?

**APPLICATION:** Take stock of your giving. This is more than just financial, though certainly our money is part of this. How generous have we been with our time? Our money? Every other resource God has given us? Are we living with clenched, closed fists, grasping onto all we have? Or are our hands open, giving freely, willing and able to receive what the Lord dictates?

**PRAYER:** God, reveal to me the state of my heart. Help me to grow in generosity, blessing others as You have blessed me. Show me how I can give of myself for the advancement of Your Kingdom and the betterment of those created in Your image. In Jesus' name, amen.

## THE GOSPEL BRINGS VICTORY

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*Then the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all animals, domestic and wild. You will crawl on your belly, groveling in the dust as long as you live. And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike His heel."* **Genesis 3:14-15 (NLT)**

Some people enjoy knowing the ending of a story from the outset. They'll flip to the last chapter of the book first or go online to search for spoilers about the movie they're about to watch. You may have mixed feelings about doing this with works of fiction, but when it comes to real life, we should absolutely take a look at the end of the story. Maybe you've been confused or overwhelmed by the Bible's final book. But Revelation, for all its potentially confusing imagery, states some things very clearly. Jesus is returning in power (19:11-21), Satan will be defeated (20:10), and God will establish His eternal Kingdom (21:1-4). It's so encouraging to know these things!

What's even more encouraging is knowing this has been the plan from the very beginning. God wasn't caught off guard in the garden when Adam and Eve disobeyed Him. Jesus dying on the cross wasn't the backup plan once humanity messed everything up. The passage from Genesis 3 above is known as the *protoevangelium* or first Gospel. God is declaring that while the enemy will strike at the heel of Jesus, ultimately, He (Jesus) will strike (or crush in the NIV) Satan's head. So, while Jesus was betrayed and killed, He ultimately rose in power and victory.

The good news is that His victory is our victory. Consider the following: *For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.* **1 John 5:4-5 (NLT)**

Keep the faith. Remember that God has already told us how it all ends. While our enemy has been given power for a season, his days are numbered. And even before his ultimate defeat, we can experience victory over the flesh, the world and spiritual forces through our faith in our Savior.

**APPLICATION:** Revisit Revelation 21:1-4. Slow down and read the verses aloud. Contemplate how wonderful and beautiful this will be. Ask God to sustain and empower you until we make it to the new heaven and earth when He will dwell among us.

**PRAYER:** Father, the victory is Yours. Help me to draw confidence and assurance from knowing that You have already established the end of the enemy's story. Sustain me in the waiting, but come quickly Lord Jesus. I make this prayer in the name above all names, Jesus, amen.

## SOUL AWAKENING JOY

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*You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy, that I might sing praises to You and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give You thanks forever!*

**Psalms 30:11-12 (NLT)**

Following Jesus doesn't mean you'll be problem-free. For years, I believed Jesus came to make me happy, but the truth is He came to make me holy. Happiness is a good thing, but it's fleeting. Happiness is conditional to your circumstances. Joy, however, is a posture of the soul. It's a disposition that the Spirit supernaturally gives to those who follow Him. Think about verses like Hebrews 12:2 (NIV), ... *For the joy set before Him He endured the cross...* Jesus couldn't have happiness about going to the cross because His circumstances weren't great, however, He had joy because the Spirit of God was filling Him. God is the most joyful being in the universe, so He desires us to have that joy. Joy, though in that sense, is found not in the circumstances but in Christ alone.

It's important to note that suffering is temporary, as the psalmist says. We'll all face seasons of difficulty, but the Spirit will use those circumstances to unleash greater levels of joy if we keep our eyes on God. You have two options with pain. The first is to suppress it and pretend it doesn't exist. The problem with this approach is that it's like holding a beach ball underwater. At some point, it will surface with anger, addictions, distractions or busyness. The other option is to face it. Speak to it with God and others. Don't keep hiding it. Instead, bring it to the light. This is especially hard for guys to do; however, the result is a soul at peace. A soul filled with joy. It isn't weak to face your pain. It's actually courageous. It's way easier to run fast and suppress things, but then you never find the freedom you were made for. When you face pain, think of it like the night; it will be over soon, and from that pain, joy will emerge in the morning. You can't skip or suppress the night. You must enter in. The nights are a reality in this life, but those who face the night with the Spirit of God will find that they have a soul awakening joy in the morning. God is faithful to walk with us in every season. Remember that.

**APPLICATION:** Bring others and God into your highs and lows.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to help you follow Him in every area. If you're in a good season, then thank Him. If you're in a difficult season, share what you're feeling and then thank Him that joy is around the corner and that you'll get through this, even if it doesn't feel like it at the moment.

## SOUL AWAKENING COURAGE

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*After breakfast Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love Me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," Peter replied, "You know I love You. "Then feed My lambs," Jesus told him. Jesus repeated the question: "Simon son of John, do you love Me?" "Yes, Lord," Peter said, "You know I love You." "Then take care of My sheep," Jesus said. A third time He asked him, "Simon son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was hurt that Jesus asked the question a third time. He said, "Lord, You know everything. You know that I love You." Jesus said, "Then feed My sheep."*

John 21:15-17 (NLT)

It's difficult to run a race with a broken ankle; you must let it heal before trying to run on it. This isn't a profound thought. But what about our souls? A lot of people try to run forward in life. They try to serve God or their family, but their soul is greatly wounded. We all have seasons where we need to heal. Why? Because it's tough to run the race God has for you if your soul is still carrying some past pain or weight. In the verse above, Jesus knows this with Peter. Peter told Jesus that he would never leave. Yet, when the times got difficult, he completely caved into fear and pressure and renounced Jesus and his faith. As you can imagine, this created embarrassment, hurt, pain and doubt. Jesus wasn't done with Peter, but He did need to deal with his soul.

Do you remember how many times Peter denied Jesus? Three. And notice how many times Jesus says, *do you love Me?* It's three! Jesus isn't trying to punish Peter; instead, He's setting him free. Jesus is surfacing what Peter's trying to suppress so He can heal it. God wants to set you free from your past wounds. He wants the pain, embarrassment and guilt to all be removed, and He wants to replace it with courage. Only the Gospel can do this. Only Jesus can do this.

Like Peter, we often run from our pasts. Peter went back to fishing. He didn't think he had a future because of his mistake. Yet, Jesus found him. Isn't it ironic that Jesus was at the exact spot where Peter was fishing? When you look up and face whatever pains you have in your past, you find Jesus is there. Jesus will surface your past, not to shame you but to set you free. No matter what you're facing, something painful that has happened to you, something you did, or even something done to you, don't run. Let Jesus set you free. He will give you a soul-awakening courage when you bring your hurts, habits and struggles to Him.

**APPLICATION:** Bring your pains into the light.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to reveal anything you're holding onto that's creating pain. Ask Him to set you free from those things. Ask Him what truth He wants to replace the lies with.

# SOUL AWAKENING CONTENTMENT

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*Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.*  
1 Timothy 6:6-8 (NLT)

It seems for many of us, the default setting is discontentment. John Rockefeller was asked how much is enough, and he said, *just one more dollar*. For many of us, it's one more dollar, one more promotion, one more pound, one more weekend or one more purchase. It's not a bad thing to be a driven person. I'm that way. I love the feeling of accomplishing tasks and setting goals, but I've also become convinced that sometimes, in my ambition, I don't experience the contentment we're called to. Contentment is only possible when my eyes are on Jesus. If my eyes are on this world, discontentment fueled by comparison will creep in.

Leonard Ravenhill once said, *when I need the entertainment of the world, it's because I have lost the joy of the world*. I haven't forgotten this statement and think about it often. Contentment in this world only comes from deep joy in the Lord. It's like when someone falls in love, they're content because they have a deep love for the person they're with. Contentment isn't the absence of joy and life; it just means we have those so deeply in Jesus that we don't need them in the world. I personally don't believe you can ever find contentment outside of Jesus because the *voice of more* will start to take over.

In the verse above, contentment is referred to as great wealth. It's because when we allow ourselves to become poor in spirit for this world, we will be full of spiritual life. Also, the more our eyes are on Jesus, the more we become aware of the physical blessings we already have. It's ironic that the more my eyes are off Jesus, the more I think about what I don't have in this world. Yet when my eyes are on Him, I realize how much He's physically blessed me with. I become a person of gratitude and contentment. Put your eyes on Jesus and let joy and peace take over your life that creates contentment, where you can truly say, like the saints before, and like the apostle Paul, *I count it all as rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus* (see Philippians 3:8-10). Truly, if we have Jesus, we have everything.

**APPLICATION:** Put your eyes on Jesus today and let contentment rise.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to reveal where your heart and affections are. Are they for Jesus or more for the world? One will win out. Ask the Spirit to strengthen your love for Him!

## SOUL AWAKENING PEACE

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*You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 1 John 4:4 (NIV)*

Jesus carried the weight of the world on His shoulders, literally and figuratively. You'll never find someone who was more wrongly accused, betrayed and hurt, and yet His life was marked by peace. You'll never find someone whose job was more burdensome and demanding as He literally bore the sins of the world on His shoulders as He carried that old wooden cross up the hill to cavalry, yet His life was marked with peace. Jesus had more reason than any person on this earth to be worried or upset, yet He was a non-anxious presence that drew the attention of people all around Him. We're called to become like Jesus, which means we're to have the soul-awakening peace of Jesus. This is freeing, but it's also not easy. It's freeing because God would never call us to become something we couldn't by the power of the Spirit. It's not always easy because life is hard and full of troubles, but the more closely we walk with the Spirit, the more His peace overflows through us.

The early church exploded because people were being persecuted for their faith, yet they were dying with poise. They were dying with peace. How? The verse above says it. God is greater than anything that comes against you. His love is greater than hate. His joy is greater than problems. His gentleness is greater than anger. His self-control is greater than temptation. His peace is greater than fear. It's not that you won't face things in your life. However, there becomes a point where you realize that the Most High God dwells with you, and He is greater. You have confidence that God will work all things out. You have confidence that God will overwhelm the thing that's overwhelming you only through the power of His Spirit.

The other night, my four-year-old girls asked if I would pray for them. They both said to me, *will you pray that we don't have any more nightmares?* Instantly, I felt fear because I knew the enemy was attacking them because of me. For a moment, I became afraid and even felt a little guilty that my faith was now affecting them. Then I recalled 1 John 4:4, greater is He that's in me than the one who is in the world. Slowly, the fear melted, and peace started to rule in my Spirit. The situation didn't change, but my perspective did. Jesus is greater. Jesus is greater. Jesus is greater. Those three simple words have the power to give a soul-awakening peace with anything you face today or in the future.

**APPLICATION:** Jesus' peace is greater than your problems

**PRAYER:** Ask the Spirit to reveal how you see His Jesus. Ask the Spirit to help you understand that Jesus is greater and His power is unequalled.

## SOUL AWAKENING KINDNESS

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*And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, He has identified you as His own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.*

Ephesians 4:30-32 (NLT)

We live in a culture that's divided. Social media is full of bitter and cutting remarks. Families are often in civil wars over something said or done. Co-workers will cut the legs out from each other to get to the top. Kindness in our culture is viewed as weak, and the weak get crushed. I'm embarrassed to say I thought I had to be a hard boss for years because I was afraid people would walk all over me. Remember that old saying, *If you give an inch, they will take a mile?* Sadly, this was my mindset, which still exists for many people today. Kindness is viewed as a weakness, while harshness is considered a strength. The problem with this is that it's easy to be critical; that's why so many are. It takes power to have restraint, which is why so few people have the ability to restrain their anger or feelings.

Jesus was the most powerful person the world has ever known, but He was kind. He didn't lash out unjustly, and He didn't crush people when wronged. He didn't flash His authority or His ego. He loved and served those in need. Notice the verse above we grieve the Holy Spirit when we are harsh and cruel towards others, but we bring joy to the Spirit when we are kind and tenderhearted. May God awaken a kindness and compassion in you towards others. Kindness is a priority in the Kingdom.

The moment you talk about kindness, somebody will say, *but how do we stand for truth?* You can be honest and kind. You can be transparent and kindhearted. I often speak truth to people, but I wouldn't say I like inflicting pain; however, I want them to grow and be aware of some issue in their lives. Don't use raised voices, angry faces, stiff body language, or a condescending tone to speak the truth. You want truth to be received by another person, and kindness is one of the keys. It's the way of the Kingdom, and it's the way of Jesus we don't often talk about. Be kind and truthful, and watch how God will use you. Know that it brings joy to the Spirit!

**APPLICATION:** Allow the Spirit to give you a kindness, and you speak truth today.

**PRAYER:** Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal your heart during times of conflict. Ask Him how you can show kindness while still speaking the truth. Thank the Spirit for His kindness towards you and your shortcomings.

## SOUL AWAKENED TO COMFORT

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*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 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. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with His comfort through Christ. Even when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your comfort and salvation! For when we ourselves are comforted, we will certainly comfort you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer. We are confident that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in the comfort God gives us.*

2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (NLT)

When you think of being comfortable, what comes to mind? Maybe it's being in your favorite sweater, or curled up in your spot on the couch with a good book, or just a cup of coffee in front of the fire on a wintery day. All those sound great, but none can compare with the comfort that we find in our Father. According to Paul, He is the source of all comfort.

When everything goes our way, praising God and acknowledging His hand at work is easy. But when it seems like everything, and everyone is against us, are we equally prepared to come to the Father? Do we look to Him to be our source of comfort in the middle of the storms of life? Unfortunately, it seems like we're more prone to take comfort in our devices, friends or what we can do for ourselves. Those things are temporary, but our Father in Heaven is eternal. We should always look to Him first and foremost for comfort.

And this comfort that He provides isn't just for us—it's to be passed on. We're comforted to be comforters. We're blessed to be a blessing. We're loved to go and love. There are people in your life who are suffering. You may be aware of some of what they're going through, but the reality is people are like icebergs: most of who they are and what they're dealing with is beneath the surface. And the people in your life with the brightest smiles and the biggest laughs might be wrestling through the darkest times. Who might God be calling you to comfort?

**APPLICATION:** The Holy Spirit is with us. Whatever you're going through, stop right now and ask God to comfort you through His Spirit. Then ask that the Spirit might lead you to others that you can point to Him.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for the comfort that comes from knowing You. Help me draw my peace and assurance from You, not from the things of this world. Help me to comfort, bless, and love others as You have done for me. In Jesus' name, amen.



## SOUL AWAKENED TO PEACE

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*When doubts filled my mind, Your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer.*  
Psalm 94:19 (NLT)

If you've not been in the valley, you will one day. While we'd prefer life to be only mountaintop experiences, that's just not reality. And in truth, there's tremendous formation that takes place in those valleys. It's in these days (or seasons) of difficulty that we're forced to confront what we truly believe. We will be disappointed if we place our faith and hope in ourselves. But when we trust in God, there's comfort, hope and peace.

God loves you. He is for you, not against you. He knows every decision you've ever made to deliberately disobey Him. And yet He still chooses to love you. He still extends an invitation to His family. He still longs for relationship with you. Perhaps right now, in this very moment, you're in a season of doubt. *Is God really there? Could He possibly love me? Is there hope?*

Yes. Yes. Yes.

The peace that comes from placing your hope in God is unlike any other. Hope, in the biblical sense, is different from the hope that we typically talk about. We hope our team wins or that it doesn't rain. Biblical hope is a confident assurance that God will do what He has promised. He is faithful, even when we're not. We can go to Him, even when wrestling with doubts and difficulties. Consider the words of Paul: *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)*

Are you spending more time worrying or praying? Are you spending more time telling your followers online what you need, or God? Are you lamenting your lack or thanking God for how He has provided in the past? Let's consider our focus—is it on our circumstances or the One who has all authority in heaven and on earth?

**APPLICATION:** Where do you need to experience God's peace, which surpasses all understanding? Whatever relationship, situation or circumstance is in your mind right now—take it to God. Even if you're struggling to believe, take that to Him. Pray what you've got and ask the Holy Spirit to meet you in the midst of that.

**PRAYER:** God, I pray that You would grant me Your peace. Help me to trust You above all else, especially in the midst of the storms of life. Thank You for how You've been faithful in the past; help me to trust that You will continue to be faithful in the future. In Jesus' name, amen.

## SET FREE FROM SIN

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*When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the obligation to do right. And what was the result? You are now ashamed of the things you used to do, things that end in eternal doom. But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:20-23 (NLT)**

Some people completely misunderstand what it means to begin following Christ. They think that the life of a believer is filled with *thou shalt not* and nothing else. In their way of thinking, to follow Christ is to be constrained. You can't do this anymore, or you're not allowed to engage in that anymore.

This way of thinking is completely backward from what Scripture teaches.

Before we begin a relationship with Jesus, we're slaves to sin. It wasn't that we were free to choose to do these sinful things. Our flesh, this fallen world and the enemy all held power over us. We were trapped with no way out. But in Christ, we are set free. His life, death and resurrection make a different path possible. If we trust Him as Lord and Savior, everything changes. No longer are we obligated to listen to our sinful nature. No longer do we have to conform to the ways of the world. No longer is sin our master.

Jesus doesn't bind us; He sets us free. Don't move too quickly past this. Jesus sets us free. This freedom is available for you, not just the *super Christian* that you sit beside at church or your very religious distant relative. You. You can be free in Him.

There will still be temptations. There will still be trials. There will still be times when you struggle to choose what He wants for your life. Consider what Paul writes: *I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.* **Romans 7:15 (NLT)**

If Paul, who wrote over half of the New Testament, felt this way, what hope is there for us? The same hope that Paul had—Jesus (see Paul's words in Romans 7:24-25).

**APPLICATION:** Consider who you were before you met Christ. Think about the choices you used to make and what motivated them. Then, thank God for setting you free. When we've been following Jesus for some time, it's easy to lose our spirit of thanksgiving. Take time to thank Him today for rescuing you.

**PRAYER:** Thank You for redeeming me. Thank You for setting me free from my obligation to sin. Thank You, Jesus, for being a better way. Help me to live fully in the freedom that Your Spirit provides. In Jesus' name, amen.

## SET FREE FROM SHAME

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*The LORD is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; He does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For His unfailing love toward those who fear Him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west. The LORD is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear Him.*

Psalm 103:8-13 (NLT)

You're cruising down the interstate, running a little behind. You can't afford to be late, so you're going a little over the speed limit. Everyone does it, so what's the big deal, right? Then you come around the corner, and there he is. The cleverly parked State Trooper who could see you coming who you couldn't see at all. Those blue lights go on, and your heart sinks. It's not fair! He was just waiting to bust me—why did it have to be me and not any other offenders?

If the above scenario rings true, first of all, I'm sorry for dredging that up. Second, you're not alone. Third—this is not how God operates. But unfortunately, somewhere along the way, we've allowed this image of God as some cosmic patrol officer to settle into our minds. *He's just a list of "thou shalt nots" waiting to bust, shame and punish you when you mess up.*

Look again at how David describes our Heavenly Father in Psalm 103. Compassionate. Merciful. Slow to anger. Filled with unfailing love. Gentle with us. Fatherly. Tender. Paul tells us in Romans 8:31 that God is for us, not against us. He's not hoping to catch you stumbling; He's your advocate!

We said this a few weeks ago in these devotions, but it bears repeating here because we're a forgetful people: shame never comes from God. Shame distorts our identity, reducing us to our worst moments. Holy Spirit conviction and discipline are good and necessary—it's how He leads us into growth. But shame is not the same. It's a lie that comes from the enemy, the father of lies. In the name of Jesus, reject that lie. Psalm 103:12 tells us that *He has removed our sins from us as far as the east is from the west.* That's a poetic way of saying that they're completely gone. In Christ, we can experience forgiveness and restoration. He stands willing and ready to grant these to us—will we allow ourselves to receive them?

**APPLICATION:** What lies are you believing about who you are? Remember—you're more than the sum of your worst decisions. Reject the shame of the enemy. Ask God to convict and lead you, but remind you that your identity is in Him.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for the love, mercy, compassion and tenderness You treat me with. I don't deserve it, but You're a gracious God. Help me walk in the confident assurance of Your forgiveness, resisting the accuser's shame. In Jesus' name, amen.

## SET FREE TO LOVE

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*"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For He gives His sunlight to both the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect."*

Matthew 5:43-48 (NLT)

Right now, in this moment, who do you consider to be an enemy?

Not just some global enemy or political enemy that's distant and will never know your name. Someone that you interact with regularly. Someone that you've come to despise in your heart, even if you've never said a word to indicate that out loud (though some of us may have taken that step as well). When you've got their face in your mind's eye, what do you feel? Probably something along the spectrum of frustration, bitterness, disgust and hate. And yet, it's this person that Jesus wants you to pray for.

He makes the case that it's easy to love those who love you back. Corrupt pagans are capable of meeting this low bar. But to act as true children of our Heavenly Father means loving those who don't love us. And if this seems like an impossible standard, remember that this is what the Father has done for us. Consider what Paul says: *When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

Romans 5:6-8 (NLT)

While we were still enemies of God, He loved us. He sacrificed His one and only Son so that we might be redeemed. Yet you won't sacrifice your bitterness and grudge that you're desperately holding on to. While Jesus was dying on the cross, He prayed for those who were crucifying Him. He asked the Father to forgive them. When was the last time you prayed for an enemy (blessings and not curses)? This is what we're called to do. We have been loved radically by God. We are set free to love others in the same way.

**APPLICATION:** Today's application is easy to say but hard to do: pray for the person you consider an enemy. Pray that God would bless them. Then, take a step toward forgiveness and love. Ask God to show you what that step may be. There may be several steps over a period of time, and that's okay. Just keep taking the next step that He reveals.

**PRAYER:** Thank You, God, for loving me while I was still Your enemy. Help me show the same love and forgiveness to those in my life that I've considered enemies. You've set me free to love—empower me through Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, amen.

## SET FREE FROM BURDENS

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*Then Jesus said, "Come to Me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you. Let Me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."*

**Matthew 11:28-30 (NLT)**

Are you tired?

Not just physically, though certainly that's part of what we're talking about. When our schedules are packed to the max, of course, there's a physical toll. It doesn't help that we don't get the sleep we need each night—choosing to stay up and do the device distraction dance instead. Whether it be phones, computers, TVs, video games—you name it, and we'll substitute it for a good night's sleep.

But are you tired beyond that? In the depths of your heart and soul, are you weary? Do you feel like you're barely hanging on and unsure how much longer you can? If so, you're not alone. And there's good news—Jesus has an invitation for you—an invitation to a better way, an invitation to rest.

In the above passage, Jesus speaks of His yoke being easy. A yoke is a wooden crosspiece that goes over the necks of two animals attached to a plow or a cart. These burdens can be cumbersome or difficult for the animals to bear. But Jesus promises that when we come to Him, what He lays upon us isn't burdensome. There aren't hoops to jump through or standards to measure up to. We simply have to trust Him as Lord and Savior. When we do, His righteousness is imparted to us. He takes the weight of our sin from us, granting us new life and forgiveness. What a blessing!

Let's place our trust in the One who is humble and gentle. The One who bore our burden at the cross so that we don't have to. The One who shows us a better way because He is The Way.

**APPLICATION:** What's preventing you from looking to Jesus for rest? What obstacle would keep you from the Savior? Pride? Fear? Shame? Whatever it is, ask Him to remove that obstacle. Commit this day to rest in Jesus. Come up with a daily plan to rest with Him and in what He has done.

**PRAYER:** God, You grant rest and relief from my burdens. Help me to rely on You instead of myself. Humble me that I might see my need for You. Your ways are better than mine; help me walk in them. I love You. Thank You for loving me. In Jesus' name, amen.

## SET FREE FROM DEMONIC OPPRESSION

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*But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.*  
1 John 4:4 (NLT)

Let's start with the bad news. You have a very real enemy who hates you. Satan—which means accuser or adversary. John Mark Comer, in his book *Live No Lies*, says this: *But for Jesus, the devil is not a fictional villain... he is a real and cunning source of evil and the most influential creature on earth.*

Cheery, right? We also have many Hollywood-based misconceptions of our enemy. The Bible doesn't depict him as wearing a red jumpsuit while poking people in hell with a trident. Here's how Peter describes our enemy: *Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.*  
1 Peter 5:8 (NLT)

He's actively at work in our world right now. And he's not alone. Other fallen angels, called demons, are also actively opposing you. In Ephesians 6:12, Paul makes it clear that these spiritual forces are very real, even though we can't see them.

But there's good news, too.

As born-again believers who have passed from death to life, we belong to God. His Holy Spirit indwells in us. We see Jesus encounter demon-possessed people in the gospels, and these stories may give us pause. Could that happen to us? In short, no. You are sealed with the Spirit, and He is greater than the spirit of this world. Our enemy's end is already written—the victory belongs to God. As His dear children, we share in that victory.

We must remain on guard, putting on the whole armor of God to resist the enemy and his forces (see Ephesians 6:10-18). While we are set free from demonic oppression, it doesn't mean that we're completely removed from the world where those forces have power. Take heart in knowing that Jesus has overcome and that through Him, we can as well.

**APPLICATION:** How often do you think about invisible spiritual forces? Would you say you're living on guard? Take a few moments to consider the various pieces of the armor of God listed in Ephesians 6:10-18. What would it look like for you to armor up?

**PRAYER:** God, I rejoice that the victory is Yours. Thank You for allowing me to share in this. Please help me to be on guard against the temptations and traps of this world, my flesh, and the enemy. In Jesus' name, amen.

## SET FREE TO SHARE

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*This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to Himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to Him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And He gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making His appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.*

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (NLT)

When we're set free in Christ, we become a new person. This is a wonderful and miraculous gift from God. But the gift is not given to be hoarded. The gift is meant to be displayed to bring glory to the One who gave the gift in the first place. We are to share the Good News of the Gospel.

When was the last time you shared the Gospel? You may want to give yourself a pass because you're not a pastor, missionary or some other type of vocational minister of the Gospel. But you are a *recipient* of the Gospel, and this is enough. All of us, introverts and extroverts alike, are called to share the Good News.

Paul says in the above passage that we have been tasked with reconciling people to God. We act as His ambassadors here in the world. Why does He choose to use us? He could write the story of His love in the heavens. He could speak audibly to every person on earth. He could use any means we could imagine and many more that we could not. And yet He chooses to make His appeal through us. He has set us free so that we might speak through us to others who also desperately long for that freedom.

An old saying goes like this: *Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words.* I understand what someone who was probably well-intentioned was trying to communicate. But the truth is, this statement isn't particularly helpful. We must use our words, of course, in conjunction with our actions to point people to Jesus.

**APPLICATION:** Who do you know that doesn't have a relationship with Jesus? What obstacles stand in the way of you sharing the Gospel with them? Would you commit to praying for that person today? Pray that God would use you to be His voice in their life. Ask Him to give you courage and clarity as you seek to be His ambassador. Then reach out to them and set up a time to have an intentional, Jesus-centric conversation!

**PRAYER:** God, You have chosen to make me Your ambassador. Thank You for Your promise to equip me with the proper words at the proper moment. Help me to live with boldness for You, proclaiming Your goodness not just with my actions but with my words. Please help me as I seek to share the Good News this week. In Jesus' name, amen.

## SET FREE TO STAY FREE

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*So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.*

Galatians 5:1 (NLT)

If you're familiar with the story of the Exodus, you know that God used Moses to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt. There were plagues and demonstrations of God's power left and right. The Israelites had much to be thankful for, and initially, they were. Exodus 14 is where we read about the parting of the Red Sea. Exodus 15 is largely devoted to a song praising God for freeing His people. But by the time a month passes, and we make it to Exodus 16, this is the attitude of His recently freed people in verse 3: *"If only the LORD had killed us back in Egypt," they moaned. "There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death."*

God's newly freed people are sitting around wishing for the good old days of being slaves. We look at that and realize how wild that is—to miss being enslaved. To long to go back to the familiarity of what they'd always known (also a sentiment they expressed *before* God parted the Red Sea—see Exodus 14:12). And yet we're prone to the same way of thinking.

Instead of moving boldly forward in the freedom God has granted us, we sometimes long for the familiarity of what we've previously known—slavery. We might not call it that, but the Bible is clear that before we were in Christ, we were slaves to sin.

Paul warns us here in Galatians 5:1 to remain free. The people he's writing to are being tempted to find justification in circumcision or obedience to the law. But those things are the freedom of Christ, which is the only true way to be free. In the same way, we might be tempted to find justification through our actions or our piety. But to look to ourselves is an exercise in futility. We must keep our eyes on Jesus, the initiator and perfecter of our faith (see Hebrews 12:2).

**APPLICATION:** In what areas of your life are you being tempted to rely on yourself? Where might you slip back to your old ways of thinking or habits? Consider how you might best keep your eyes on Jesus. What steps can you take? What new rhythms and reminders can you put in place? We've been set free—so let's stay free!

**PRAYER:** God, You have set me free. Please help me to live in a manner worthy of my calling. Humble me that I would stay dependent on You and not myself. Help me to fix my eyes on You. In Jesus' name, amen.



## THE PURPOSE OF HEALING

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*Peter and John looked at him intently, and Peter said, "Look at us!" The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting some money. But Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!" Then Peter took the lame man by the right hand and helped him up. And as he did, the man's feet and ankles were instantly healed and strengthened. He jumped up, stood on his feet, and began to walk! Then, walking, leaping, and praising God, he went into the Temple with them. All the people saw him walking and heard him praising God. When they realized he was the lame beggar they had seen so often at the Beautiful Gate, they were absolutely astounded! They all rushed out in amazement to Solomon's Colonnade, where the man was holding tightly to Peter and John.*

Acts 3:4-11 (NLT)

*It's not about you.*

These are the opening words of Rick Warren's seminal classic *The Purpose Driven Life*. And while we may give intellectual assent to the idea that life isn't all about us, in truth, we often live as if it is. We walk around as if life is a movie and we're the stars. We exhibit what Gen Z calls *main character energy*. But we aren't the main character. That honor belongs to Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Even in the miraculous story above, the healing of this paralyzed man wasn't ultimately about him. The miracles of God should always bring us to a place of adoration and worship. Verse 8 shows that this man praised God as he walked and then leaped. Imagine the sheer joy of a man who had never taken a single step, being able to run and jump. Of course, he praised the God who healed him. And when people realized what God had done for this man, they were absolutely astounded.

Unfortunately, we often lose sight of the Miracle Worker by fixating on the miracle itself. Imagine seeing someone physically healed. Of course, we would celebrate this blessing! But we can't forget who ultimately did the healing. The entirety of our lives is to be devoted to glorifying God. A significant part of that is acknowledging His sovereignty and providence. As the classic hymn says, *to God be the glory, great things He has done*.

**APPLICATION:** When was the last time you took stock of your blessings? If the answer is Thanksgiving, then it's time to revisit them. This helps us to keep our focus on the One who has blessed us, not just the blessings themselves. List how God has worked in your life for your good and His glory. Tell Him thank You. Then look for ways to give Him the credit among your family, friends, coworkers, teammates, etc.

**PRAYER:** God, You move in power on my behalf. You do this because of Your great love for me, but also that You might be glorified. Help me to remember You in the midst of every blessing. Show me ways to glorify You with my words and actions. In Jesus' name, amen.

## GOD STILL HEALS TODAY

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*Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven. Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.*

James 5:13-16 (NLT)

When reading the Scriptures, it's easy to read them like a history book. The gospels, which depict the life of Jesus, are around 2,000 years old. And while, yes, a lot of time has passed since Jesus physically walked the earth, He hasn't stopped moving on behalf of His people. While He sits at the Father's right hand, the Holy Spirit of God has come, dwelling in all who have passed from death to life.

That means the same power we see on display in the gospels is still at work today. Healing is possible because Jesus remains the Great Physician. But how can we be healed? We can't walk into the presence of Peter, Paul or James. What we can do is call on our elders to pray over us. That's exactly what James, the brother of Jesus, recommends in the above passage. Brookwood Church has pastors, trustees, and staff who stand willing, eager and able to pray for healing. What might hold you back?

James further pushes in to encourage us into a Christ-centered community. When we can share our lives with others committed to following Christ, we are willing to delve into even the darker days. The sinful choices that we make. We can confess our sins to God first, but then our brothers and sisters in Christ, and they can pray for us. We don't need Peter, Paul or James to pray for us. They were ordinary people just like us. It was never about them—it was about the God they served. The same power available to them then is available to us today.

God still heals today! Do you believe?

**APPLICATION:** What's the state of your community? Are you involved in a Community Group? Do you have believers who you're sharing the highs and lows of life with? Are they praying with you about your sins and struggles? Are they laying hands on you to ask God to heal when necessary? If yes—persevere and continue to invite others into what you have. If no—take a step. There's no such thing as a lone-wolf Christian. We're the body of Christ, and each part is vital.

**PRAYER:** God, You are still active in our world today. I believe, help me in my unbelief. Through the power of Your Spirit, work in our midst so that You might receive all the glory. Help me embrace a community that will push me toward You, praying for and encouraging me. Thank You for the body of Christ. In Jesus' name, amen.

## GOD'S POWER OVER SICKNESS

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*About that time Hezekiah became deathly ill, and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz went to visit him. He gave the king this message: "This is what the LORD says: Set your affairs in order, for you are going to die. You will not recover from this illness." When Hezekiah heard this, he turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, "Remember, O LORD, how I have always been faithful to You and have served You single-mindedly, always doing what pleases You." Then he broke down and wept bitterly. But before Isaiah had left the middle courtyard, this message came to him from the LORD: "Go back to Hezekiah, the leader of My people. Tell him, 'This is what the LORD, the God of your ancestor David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you, and three days from now you will get out of bed and go to the Temple of the LORD. I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will rescue you and this city from the king of Assyria. I will defend this city for My own honor and for the sake of My servant David.'"*

2 Kings 20:1-6 (NLT)

God is all-powerful. We may sing this during worship or agree with the statement if a pastor says it from the stage. But do we truly believe it? Strangely, we may believe on the cosmic scale that God rules and reigns, but do we truly grasp that this includes each of us as individuals? He may sustain the entire universe (Hebrews 1:3), but could He possibly intervene for me?

The answer is assuredly yes. He has total dominion and power, including over sickness in individual bodies. Just look at the story of Hezekiah. He is told that he will not recover from his illness and that he should get his affairs in order. But then he prays to God, who hears and responds. He is healed from his illness and granted an additional fifteen years of life. How gracious is our God!

Jehovah Rapha may not be a name you're familiar with, but it's one God gives to Himself. In Exodus 15:26, God promises not to visit upon the Israelites any of the illnesses with which He afflicted their Egyptian captors. He then calls Himself Jehovah Rapha—meaning the LORD who heals. It was true in the time of the Exodus. It was true for King Hezekiah. And it's still true today.

**APPLICATION:** Read Romans 12:1. We are called to give our bodies to God. Ask Him to help you do this. Ask Him to increase your faith in His power and sovereignty over even your body. Take a few moments to pray for anyone you know who is ill, trusting Jehovah Rapha to heal according to His will.

**PRAYER:** Lord, You are the Great Physician. Help me to trust in You to sustain all things according to Your will, including my own body. Thank You for loving me and hearing me when I come to You in prayer. In Jesus' name, amen.

## ROADBLOCKS TO HEALING

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*You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.*  
James 4:2 (NLT)

Have you asked God about it?

This simple question can make all the difference. We have the tendency to go to anyone and everyone BUT God with our struggles. We may consult with our parents, spouse or best friends when we're facing a difficult situation or choice. We may create a social media poll inviting feedback from a wider range of folks. But have we asked God about it? Have we gone to our Creator, the Author and Finisher of our faith (see Hebrews 12:2)?

Truth be told, if my child needed something that I could provide but asked everyone but me, I'd be hurt. It would make me think that they either don't know how deeply I long to provide for them or that they simply don't think I can or will. No matter the motivation behind their avoidance of their father, it would wound. So why do we do the same to our Heavenly Father? He longs to bless us and demonstrate His goodness in our lives. But we don't ask Him.

Rather than being consumed by jealousy over what others have, let's ask God to meet our needs and wants. Social media draws our eyes to images of our friends with seemingly perfect lives—fancy trips, new gadgets, perfect health and all the things we want for ourselves. Let's first remember that everything we see on social media is carefully curated. Then let's commit to keeping our eyes on Jesus (again, see Hebrews 12:2).

**APPLICATION:** Take your needs and wants to God right now. If it's healing—pray boldly, believing that He can intercede. Let's take our eyes off the world and fix them firmly on Jesus. Consider listening to any of the many renditions of *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* as you commit to focusing on Him.

**PRAYER:** God, You are Healer and Provider. Help me to come to You first. Give me the courage and faith to ask You for what I need and want. Your grace abounds in my life; help me not to forget. In Jesus' name, amen.

## KEY INGREDIENT FOR HEALING

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*And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over."*

Mark 5:34 (NLT)

The gospels are full of accounts of Jesus healing people. Some circumstances are known, while others are a mystery to us. John concludes his gospel by telling us that if everything Jesus did were written down, there wouldn't be enough books in the world to contain it all.

Mark 5:21-43 contains two incredible stories about Jesus healing people. The key ingredient in both healings is faith. Jairus had faith that Jesus could heal his sick daughter. By the time Jesus arrives, she has actually died. But death cannot stand against Jesus, and He resurrects this little girl. All because her father believed that Jesus could miraculously intervene.

The second healing is of a woman who had a blood condition for twelve years. She'd seen every doctor around, emptying her bank accounts along the way and actually getting worse for all her trouble. But then she heard about Jesus. She believed so powerfully in who He was and what He was doing that she believed if she could just touch His robe, that she would be healed. And that's exactly what happened.

On a scale of 1-10, how strong is your faith right now? Not the answer you'd give in your Community Group. Not the answer you'd give if asked by your kids. But truly—how strong is your faith? Do you believe that God can and will move on your behalf? Pastor Tony Evans says this: *Faith isn't merely feeling like God is telling the truth. Nor is it saying God is telling the truth. For faith to truly be faith, it involves acting like God is telling the truth. That's why the Bible calls it walking by faith, not talking by faith or even feeling by faith.*

Belief to the point of action is what we're talking about. Jairus believed Jesus could heal his daughter, so he went to get Him. This woman believed Jesus could heal her body, so she touched His robe. What step of faith do you need to take today?

**APPLICATION:** List the times you've seen God prove His faithfulness. Think of when you desperately needed Him to come through and He did. Reflect on these instances, and then ask Him to grow your faith. The second most repeated command in Scripture is to remember—so let's remember how God has proven worthy of our faith and trust in the past.

**PRAYER:** Heavenly Father, thank You for all the times in my life You've demonstrated Your faithfulness. Help my faith to grow. Help me to believe that You can truly move in power on my behalf. You are good, compassionate and kind. In Jesus' name, amen.

## RESPONSE TO HEALING

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*As Jesus continued on toward Jerusalem, He reached the border between Galilee and Samaria. As He entered a village there, ten lepers stood at a distance, crying out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" He looked at them and said, "Go show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed of their leprosy. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back to Jesus, shouting, "Praise God!" He fell to the ground at Jesus' feet, thanking Him for what He had done. This man was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Didn't I heal ten men? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And Jesus said to the man, "Stand up and go. Your faith has healed you."* **Luke 17:11-19 (NLT)**

Sometimes, we believe that if we could interact with Jesus face to face, everything would be different. Our doubts would be dispelled, our faith would skyrocket, and we'd never question Him or stumble into sin ever again. It's a nice thought, but it's actually a lie we tell ourselves. We need only observe the numerous interactions our Savior had with those around Him to see that not everyone went away equally impacted.

In the story above, ten lepers cried out to Jesus for healing. They suffered from an incurable condition that would slowly ravage their bodies. It turned them into outcasts, cut off from society. They weren't allowed even to come close to people, much less touch them. To be deprived of a handshake or a hug had to have been an awful thing. So, when Jesus heals these lepers, what joy must have filled their souls!

And yet.

Only one of the nine returns to thank Jesus. Only one of the nine has the presence of mind to demonstrate heartfelt gratitude to the one who has restored his body. The other nine are no less healed, but they certainly reveal the state of their hearts. They are more interested in the healing than they are in the Healer. And unfortunately, we often have the same mentality. There's nothing wrong with asking God for things, including healing. In fact, Jesus encourages us to ask in His name (see John 14:13-14). But when He responds, we should demonstrate our gratitude, giving God the glory.

**APPLICATION:** Once again, this week, let's take time just to tell God thank You for all He has done. Take some time to think of specific instances where He moved in power on your behalf. After spending time thanking Him, look for opportunities to testify to His goodness. With a friend or family member, start a conversation about God's faithfulness in your life.

**PRAYER:** Father, You've done so much for me in my life. Help me never to be more grateful for the blessing than I am You, the One who has poured it out. Grow an attitude of gratitude within me. Give me the words as I seek to share how You have impacted my life with others. In Jesus' name, amen.

## ULTIMATE HEALING

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*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."*

Revelation 21:1-4 (NLT)

One day, all things will be set right.

It's easy to grow despondent or depressed when we look at the world around us. There's so much evil and hatred and suffering and brokenness. Our bodies grow weak and begin to break down. Perhaps you've watched a loved one go through cancer treatments or slowly lose their memory. These are heartbreaking situations. But. There. Is. Hope. Not hope in the sense of *I hope this works out*. Biblical hope is the confident expectation that what God has promised will come to pass. And that means that one day, all things will be set right.

John's description of the future in Revelation 21 is moving. Creation as we know it will pass away, and a new heaven and earth will come to pass. Restored to what it was before the fall in Genesis 3. In a word—perfection. God will dwell among His people. And He will wipe away every tear. Think of all the things that have brought those tears to your eyes, and know this—they will be no more. No more death, sorrow or pain. Hallelujah—praise Jesus!

We're not there yet. How long remains between now and this final chapter of the Bible? Only God knows. But in the waiting, we remain steadfast, remembering that God has never failed us and believing He never will. Our ultimate healing will come. Pray that King Jesus would come soon.

**APPLICATION:** Take some time to reflect on the following passages in light of what we've discussed today: Philippians 3:12-14; Colossians 3:1-4; Hebrews 12:12-13.

**PRAYER:** God, You will set all things right one day. Grant me patience and endurance in the waiting. Strengthen my faith when doubt begins to creep in. May Your Kingdom come, and Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, in Your name, amen.



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