

GOD IS WITH US AND FOR US

31 Days of Soul Care for Hard Times

(from the NavPress Archives)

CONTENTS

Foreword

From the Publisher

- 1: Fear with the Scary Element Deleted**
- 2: The Image of God**
- 3: The Goodness of Being**
- 4: Doubling Back Toward Life**
- 5: The Father Is Always**
- 6: Trusting God**
- 7: God's Grace Opening the Veil**
- 8: Promises, Assurances, Comfort**
- 9: The Alchemy of Faith and Persistence**
- 10: Bringing Your Real Self to Jesus**
- 11: Resist the Edit Button**
- 12: Change Your Thought Patterns**
- 13: Being Saved Still**
- 14: Healthy Feelings, Properly Ordered**
- 15: Navigating Your Hyper connected Worlds**
- 16: Be Kind and Not Resentful**
- 17: Loving One Another**
- 18: The Rhythm of Encouragement**
- 19: Wrestling with Distortions of God**
- 20: Something Inside and Something Above**
- 21: Everywhere Is a Divine Appointment**
- 22: Charged With the Presence of God**
- 23: We Really Can Trusting**
- 24: What We Need Most**
- 25: Abide in Christ**
- 26: To Be Human Is to Pray**
- 27: Substituting Prayer for Worry**
- 28: Your Time Is Coming**
- 29: Grace and Training**
- 30: Knowing God is Enough**
- 31: The Need of the Hour**

Afterword

Sources

FOREWORD

GOD HAS A WAY of shaking me up when I get too comfortable, a way of reminding me that he's the King of the universe... and I'm not. This new virus seems to be his latest reminder of where I belong: on my knees, trusting that he still has me—and all I love—in his hands. The threat of not being able to breathe has swiftly reminded me of my need for the One who gave me my first breath.

The One who witnessed me take my first big gulp of air and cry out in shock. The One who has seen me through many illnesses through the years.

For our family, the battle against COVID-19 has resulted in the loss of half our income. We wonder when it might be recovered—if it will be at all. We've had to let go of our two employees, bail on a long-awaited trip, and put our plans to build our dream house on hold, perhaps for years. But we also have much to be thankful for. We still have one income, our family and friends, a cozy rental home, and plenty of food in our pantry. Obviously, it could be much worse, and when I allow myself to consider how much worse it could be—losing a loved one to this terrible virus, losing our remaining income, not being able to afford our rental home—I can get lost in the fear.

When the shock and severity of this first came to light, I got lost in Fear Mode for a couple of weeks. I'm just now getting a grip and entering Acceptance Mode. I hope that by the time this book comes out, I'll be in Growth Mode. Growth Mode is when I'm open and malleable in the Potter's hands, ready to serve him in our hurting world, ready to praise him, come what may.

These devotional entries that follow were a balm to my grieving, frightened soul. Gravity boots for a heart that yet seems too readily set into orbit. Wise words from disciples on the path ahead of me, encouraging me forward, as well as sweet reminders from the path I've already traveled. I hope they are for you too.

Lisa T. Bergren
author of the *God Gave Us* series
Colorado Springs, CO

FROM THE PUBLISHER

I am writing this on the ninth day of our choosing to be self-quarantined in our home. Several large cities are invoking shelter-in-place, and an entire nation is now living with social distancing. A whole new vocabulary has cropped up in a matter of days. We are learning to be resilient in the midst of all of this turmoil.

As my family has been faced with a new normal as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, my mind has been drawn to another family from long ago. I have enjoyed reading the story of Noah in Genesis and how God reached out to one good man, an individual who had the Lord's favor. He has become a good model for me as I read about how Noah and his sons carefully followed God's directions—building an ark, curating creation, putting every bird, beast, and reptile alive onto this boat, and ensuring that enough food was to be had for all the humans on board, as well. And Noah dutifully did so.

I'm not sure I would have been so compliant. While we all think that the timeline was forty days, in reality this poor family was on board this floating menagerie for much, much longer. And Noah was six hundred years old! This is a story of careful living. Of being watchful. Of caring for animals and for one another. Days of trusting. Days of waiting. Listening to God.

Tough times require that. What you have in your hand is a collection of devotional pieces culled from the list of authors at NavPress. Individuals who have been faithful to God's calling— people who have patiently learned the lesson of calm obedience. Of careful listening. Of care-full living. I pray that these pieces, each one, may provide a balm to your soul in troubled times... and, perhaps, when times are less chaotic.

Don Pape
Publisher, NavPress

1

Fear with the Scary Element Deleted

Eugene H. Peterson

We're afraid when we're suddenly caught off our guard and don't know what to do. We're afraid when our presuppositions and assumptions no longer account for what we're up against, and we don't know what will happen to us. We're afraid when reality, without warning, is shown to be either more or other than we thought it was.

... In the Hebrew culture and the Hebrew Scriptures... the *word fear* is frequently used in a way that means far more than simply being scared....

Fear-of-the-Lord is the stock biblical term for this either sudden or cultivated awareness that the presence or revelation of God introduces into our lives. We are not the center of our existence. We are not the sum total of what matters. We don't know what's going to happen next.

Fear-of-the-Lord keeps us on our toes with our eyes open. Something is going on around here, and we don't want to miss it. Fear-of-the-Lord prevents us from thinking that we know it all. And it therefore prevents us from closing off our minds or our perceptions from what is new. Fear- of-the-Lord prevents us from acting presumptuously and therefore destroying or violating some aspect of beauty, truth, or goodness that we don't recognize or don't understand.

Fear-of-the-Lord is fear with the scary element deleted.

God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him.

We stand fearless at the cliff-edge of doom, courageous in sea storm and earth quake,

Before the rush and roar of oceans, the tremors that shift mountains. Jacob-wrestling God fights for us, GOD-of-Angel-Armies protects us.

PSALM 46:1-3+ + + *THE MESSAGE*

May God delete the scary element of all your fears today.

2

The Image of God

Tina Boesch

Lying at the foot of the bed is a book on the iconography of the Transfiguration. The image on the cover is a reproduction of an eleventh-century fresco.... Its center is dark blue, and the radiance emanating from Jesus is represented by two outer rings that are progressively lighter in hue.

My two-year-old daughter is standing at the foot of the bed, her chin resting on the mattress right beside the book cover. I look into her eyes, still teary from a tantrum she just threw. Already this morning, she's stretched my patience thin to breaking.... There is an irrationality particular to willful toddlers that leaves me so frustrated I feel myself teetering in the verge of violence.

And that's when I look up and see in her eyes the same sphere of radiant blue that encompasses Christ in the fresco—her dark inscrutable iris, ringed by smoky blue, surrounded by milky white. The light in her eyes perfectly mirrors the Transfiguration.... This child who whittles my patience down to nothing has that same light in her eyes—if I can see past my frustration to that indelible image stamped into her being—*the image of God*.

Here I am still blurry from sleeplessness but immediately aware that I have to wake up to that image. The shine exposes the flint in my heart —my impatience, my self-centeredness—and it forces me to confront my sin and weakness and ask the Lord to change me. That's the power of the shine—it leaves me longing to be illuminated, more responsive, more radiant.

We don't yet see things clearly. We're
squinting in a fog, peering through a mist.
But it won't be long before the weather
clears and the sun shines bright!

1 CORINTHIANS 13:12 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may leave you shining in the radiance of a God who loves you. whose very image is reflected in the people shining all around you.

3

The Goodness of Being

Brennan Manning

The whole sense of Scripture, it seems to me, is that God the Father has this thing about being. He was absolutely wild about it. He kept thinking up new ways of being and new kinds of being to be. One afternoon the Son came along and said, "This is really great stuff; why don't I go mix Us up a batch?" And God the Holy Spirit said, "Terrific! I'll help You."

So they got together that night and put on a terrific show of being for the Father. It was full of water and light and frogs; pussy willows kept dropping all over the place, and crazy fish swam around in the wine glasses. There were mush rooms and grapes, horseradishes and tigers; and men and women everywhere to taste them, to juggle them, to join with them and love them. God the Father looked at the whole wild party and said, "Wonderful! Just what I had in mind. Yay, yay, yay!" And all God the Son and God the Holy Spirit could think of to say was, "Yay, yay, yay!" They laughed for ages and ages, saying things like how great it was for being to be, how clever of the Father to conceive the idea, how kind of the Son to go to all the trouble of putting it together, and how considerate of the Spirit to spend so much time directing and choreographing....

Creation, Scripture says, is good. Created things are just so many myriad responses to the delight of God who wills them into being....

Admittedly, it is not always easy to see that all being is good. Earthquakes and poison toadstools, cancer cells, liver flukes, killer whales, and loan sharks have to be considered. But there is no going back on what the book of Genesis records: "God looked at everything he had made, *and he found it very good* " (Genesis 1:31, TJB, emphasis added)....

Pain, inconvenience, sin—these are the problems of being, the alarming, embarrassing, even tragic things that God is apparently willing to put up with in order to have beings at all. But whatever the problems are, they are not the root of being. That root is *joy* and now.

"This day is holy to God. Don't feel bad.
The joy of GOD is your strength!"

NEHEMIAH 8:10 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

***May you have eyes to see. today, beyond the problems of being all the way to the root.
Today, may the joy of the Lord be your strength.***

4

Doubling Back toward Life

Catherine McNiel

Lenten means “springtime” in Middle English, which itself comes from the word *lengthen*. The sun arches back toward us, leaning in to life, sun light hours growing longer each day. The darkness has not won; the world will thaw again. It is time to prepare for new life.... We have gone around the circle once more: Life retreated to death, now doubling back toward life.

But not yet.

Hope comes bundled with endurance and long waits in ambiguity. We have been barren and cold, but life was not entirely snuffed out. We endured and held on for the thaw to come. Hope builds the bridge that pulls us out of suffering and points us toward the path—the arduous, winding, uphill climb—leading, eventually, to joy. Hope steps out boldly and brings an umbrella....

Since time began, the earth has spun its inhabitants through [this] yearlong drama of life and death and life again. The springtime chapter of this drama hints at the ultimate redemption: *shalom*. This ancient Hebrew word means wholeness, and it describes a world where everything is put right. Not just one or two things settled and lovely but all creation in harmony....

But our world clearly doesn't overflow with wholeness just now. From our most intimate relationships to the most global affairs—and everything in between—we are at war. Conflict and catastrophe pervade every community, group, and interaction between you and me, us and them, people and nature, children and parents, future and past.

Yet we believe the days are lengthening. From the garden beginning to the eternal city of light at the end, the Christian account of the world is a story of hope. We are a people of eschatology, citizens of a Kingdom that has been promised and begun, but not yet seen. We journey through darkness, bearing crushing burdens and devastating realities, but we have heard the notes of a beautiful song....

Yes, darkness looms palpable. The groaning is real, and despair always whispers at our backs. But the Christian faith centers itself, from first to last, in the hope of *shalom*, that redemption will come not only for you and me but *for all creation*....

On the heels of winter, born out of the broken shell of death, new life bursts forth. We are so vulnerable, so fragile; the risk is high, the chances uncertain. Surely floods and drought, weeds and pests will assail us. Openhearted, we tenaciously offer everything we are to the same world notorious for its fierce tendency to utterly destroy. We believe that in the end, every bit of creation shall be caught up and made new.

As sure as dawn breaks, so sure is his daily arrival. He comes as rain comes, as spring rain refreshing the ground. HOSEA 6:3 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you step out boldly in the hope of shalom and the assurance of God's abiding presence.

The Father Is Always

Sarah Van Diest

Answers. Understanding. Insight. How we long for those! We want so desperately to know what is happening to us and what will become of us. When the days are dark and we feel overwhelmed by pain or sorrow or confusion, we beg for answers. We believe that if we could simply understand, then we would find peace. That relief would come in the same package as the answers to our questions.

The psalmist found insight. He found understanding and answers. And he calls them "sweet" (Psalm 119:103, NASB). But there's a difference between what the psalmist found and what most of us search for. Most of the time we're scouring the temporal, hoping to find the answers to our present pains. Our perspective is short-term. Our search is for a solution to our circumstances.

The psalmist is talking about a different search.

He describes the joy that comes from knowing the Father and the Father's ways. The words of the Father are sweet to him, full of insight and understanding. He delights not in knowing information about his circumstances, but in knowing the Father himself.

Today, may be a hard day for you. Your circumstances may be out of control. Pain, fear, confusion, or sorrow may dominate your perspective. Stop for just a moment. Breathe deeply. Quiet your mind, and listen. What, above all things, does your heart desire? In the depths of your soul, the Spirit calls to you. He speaks the words you already know to be true. What you want most, above and beyond all things, is the Father. You long to be with him – for his embrace to envelop you. More than anything you want to look into his tender eyes and know he is with you, right now.

Answers are good, but they are temporary. Our circumstances change and so do our questions. But the Father is always. Unchanging. Knowing him is life. Knowing him is peace. The things this life offers us do not compare with the life we have in the Father.

In all things dark and difficult, search for him. Sweeter than the relief of the moment are our Father's everlasting words. Rest in his arms and trust him with the circumstances of your life. His eyes are on you.

By your words I can see where I'm going;
They throw a beam of light on
my dark path.

Psalm 119: 105 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you find time and space to stop, quiet your mind, and listen for the words of the Spirit reassuring you of the Father's love for you.

6

Trusting God

Jerry Bridges

As David said in Psalm 138:8 (ESV), “The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me.” Because we know God is directing our lives to an ultimate end and because we know He is sovereignly able to orchestrate the events of our lives toward that end, we can trust Him. We can commit to Him not only the ultimate outcome of our lives but also all the intermediate events and circumstances that will bring us to that outcome.

Still, it’s difficult for us to fully appreciate the reality of God’s sovereignly doing as He pleases in our lives because we don’t see Him doing anything. Instead, we see ourselves or other people acting and events occurring, and we evaluate those events and actions according to our own preferences and plans. We see ourselves influencing or perhaps controlling or being controlled by the actions of other people, but we don’t see God at work.

But over all the actions and events of our lives, God is in control, doing as He pleases—not apart from those events or in spite of them but through them. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery — a malicious act in and of itself—but in due time, Joseph recognized that through his brothers’ actions, God was acting. Joseph could say to them, “It was not you who sent me here, but God” (Genesis 45:8, ESV)....

You and I may never have the privilege in this life of seeing an obvious outcome of God’s plans for us, as Joseph did. But God’s plan for us is no less firm and its outcome no less certain than was God’s plan for Joseph... What God did for Joseph, He will do for us. But to derive the comfort and encouragement from this truth God has provided, we must learn to trust Him. We must learn to walk, as Paul said, “by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7, ESV).

Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart;
don’t try to figure out everything on your own.
Listen for GOD’S voice in everything you do,
everywhere you go;
he’s the one who will keep you on track.

PROVERBS 3:5-6 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you persevere in the trust that God is working not apart from or in spite of but through these challenging times, for your good and the good of the world.

God's Grace : Opening the Veil

Aubrey Sampson

When Jesus' presence seems absent in the midst of my pain, I find that canned spiritual answers and my usual spiritual disciplines, things that once helped me feel connected to him, no longer work. So one day, I try a new spiritual practice, something I read about in a book. Each morning, I stretch out on the floor of my closet, lie there quietly, and will myself to stop panicking.... I find that instead of being still, I end up trying really freaking hard to be grateful and peaceful and present. Mostly, I feel like the bull and God's presence is the china shop....

After a few more attempts at "the closet floor," I realize it's not cutting it. So I decide to meet with a spiritual director.

"You'd be surprised at how different everyone's experience of God's presence is," she says. "But the thread I see through them all, the common theme, is this: grace. Anytime we experience God's presence, it's never because we did anything. It's because God's grace opens up the veil."...

We must attend to and be open to God's presence, certainly. If we ignore him,... we'll miss out on the benefits, treasures, and spiritual blessings granted to us in Jesus. But here's the point: God's grace greets and transforms us, whether or not we deserve it.

GOD guards you from every evil, he guards your very life

He guards you when you leave and when you return,

he guards you now, he guards you always.

PSALM 121:7-8 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

May you experience today the grace of God opening the veil to greet and transform you.

8

Promises, Assurances, Comfort

Donald S. Whitney

On most mornings I turn to the Scriptures as much out of a good, lifelong habit as anything else. On some mornings I approach God's Word with a more keen sense of purpose. And some times I come with a real desire to meet God. But on many occasions—often outside my daily routine of Bible intake—I turn to the Word of God out of an acute awareness of *need*. The world's increasing complexity may have tensed my anxiety and frustration levels close to the snapping point. Or suffering, finances, or circumstances may have drained all my courage, endurance, or heart....

Every now and then my heart is so broken, or my grief so deep, or my burden so heavy that I drop down in my desk chair, open the Bible, put my head in my hands and cry out,... "Lord, I'm so discouraged. I don't know if I can go on. Give me hope!"

How does He answer? Sometimes it's through promises, such as, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5, NKJV). Or He answers through the assurances of doctrinal passages like Romans 8:18 (NKJV): "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Or He may reply through the comfort of psalms penned by writers with the same passions as those coursing through my soul: "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance" (Psalm 42:5, NKJV).

Overall, I think God means for us to draw patience, comfort, and hope from the Scriptures by seeing there how He has always accomplished His purposes throughout the world and at all times, and then believing that He will accomplish them in our lives.... In the pages of Scripture, He gives me the hope of a better world that is one day closer.

In His mercy, the Lord encourages us through people, circumstances, and countless other ways. But there's no simpler, purer, or more direct means of receiving His patience, comfort, or hope than by going to His Word and asking for it.

God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize *us*, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next.

ROMANS 15:4-6 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you experience the patience, comfort, and hope through the words of God found in the Word of God.

9

The Alchemy of Faith and Persistence

Jarrett Stevens

Perhaps one of the greatest reasons we don't ask God for what we want or need is because we're afraid that he won't do it. We fear that he'll say no, that he won't answer the way we asked, or that he won't even answer at all. Unanswered prayer is perhaps one of the most perplexing parts of prayer. Why would God invite us to ask him for anything and promise us that he is listening, only to abandon us at the altar of our asking?...

It is impossible for me to understand why God hasn't answered all of my honest and earnest prayers. And it's irresponsible for me to try to tell you why he hasn't answered yours. It is true that sometimes God uses your asking and waiting and asking and waiting to grow a deeper faith and deeper desires in you. It is true that sometimes God answers your prayers in unexpected ways to lead you to something far greater than you even knew you could ask for. It is true that sometimes there is sin between us and God, sin that keeps us from intimacy with God....

All those things are true—and yet I still don't know why God answers some prayers and doesn't answer others in ways that we hoped for or can recognize. But I do know that right after Jesus taught us how to pray, he taught us how to keep on praying....

Prayer is an unapologetic act of audacity. The willingness to keep on knocking, keep on asking, keep on trusting, and keep on believing, even when you don't get what you want or in the way you want it, is the alchemy of faith and persistence. It means having the faith to take God up on his invitation to ask him for whatever you need—and the tenacity to hold him to it.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled
and aflame. Be alert servants of the

Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit
in hard times; pray all the harder.

ROMANS 12:11-12 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you take God up on his invitation to ask him for whatever you need, and may you have the tenacity to hold him to it.

Bringing Your Real Self to Jesus

Paul E. Miller

Jesus does not say, "Come to me, all you who have learned how to concentrate in prayer, whose minds no longer wander, and I will give you rest." No, Jesus opens his arms to his needy children and says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28, NASB). The criteria for coming to Jesus is weariness. Come overwhelmed with life. Come with your wandering mind. Come messy.

What does it feel like to be weary? You have trouble concentrating. The problems of the day are like claws in your brain. You feel pummeled by life.

What does heavy-laden feel like? Same thing. You have so many problems you don't even know where to start. You can't do life on your own any more. Jesus wants you to come to him that way! Your weariness drives you to him....

... Jesus didn't come for the righteous. He came for sinners. All of us qualify. The very things we try to get rid of—our weariness, our distractedness, our messiness—are what get us in the door! That's how the gospel works....

In bringing your real self to Jesus, you give him the opportunity to work on the real you, and you will slowly change. The kingdom will come... when Jesus becomes king of your life. But it has to *be your life*.

Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God's kingdom.

MATTHEW 18:4 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you bring your real self—your weariness, your distractedness, your messiness—to Jesus. May Jesus work on the real you today, and give you rest.

Resist the Edit Button*Steve Wiens*

"Hannah rose" (1 Samuel 1:9, ESV). What does it mean to get up off the couch when you are still hopeless? What does it mean to wait without being passive?

The Hebrew word... *quwm*... means "to rise up" or "to stand up." It can also mean "to become powerful," "to be established," or "to persist."

Hannah stood up, an expression of her own agency. She chose to rise up above her painful circumstances and persist in her faith....

It is one of the great crimes of the church that we have told people to wait silently in their anguish, to simply accept it without question. Over and over again in the Scriptures, we read about people who pour out their anguish to God, weeping bitterly without even considering the edit button.

Have you ever been told you can pour out your anguish in the presence of God, ugly crying, screaming, or raging your way through it? If we learn anything from Hannah, we learn that you can stand up in these long seasons of waiting and let God know how disappointed you are. We also learn you can boldly ask God for what you want....

Hannah stands up in the middle of her waiting, and you and I need to follow her lead. Eli sees the strength in this remarkable woman, and he blesses her.... "Go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you have asked of him" (1 Samuel 1:17, NIV).

[GOD] puts poor people on their feet again;
 he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,
 Restoring dignity and respect to their lives—
 a place in the sun!

1 SAMUEL 2:8 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you rise up above your painful circumstances and persist in your faith.

Change Your Thought Patterns

George Sanchez

When rain falls on a hill, the water drains off. How does it drain off? In rivulets. Initially, they are just small rivulets, but each time rain falls, the rivulets cut deeper and deeper. They can become deep chasms.

Now let's compare these rivulets with thought patterns in our minds. The longer we think along any given line, the stronger that thought pattern becomes. Every time we react in a certain way, we reinforce that thought pattern. This is how habits are formed....

While we can't cover up our thoughts with a mental bulldozer, we can build a dam in our minds when certain thoughts begin. We can refuse to think them. We can say, "I will not allow myself to think that."...

Changing thought patterns is not just "putting away" by building dams, but also "putting on" by building new patterns. It is not just suppressing, but redirecting our thoughts into healthy, positive ways of thinking....

This is where Scripture comes in. Verses or concepts of Scripture can be used to build these dams which check our thinking:... "Don't think that way; *think this way.*" This redirects those thought patterns into positive directions. "Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right" (Philippians 4:8, TLB)... Then the energy from [God's] enormous source of power flows through us and energizes us to do the very thing we want to do and that He wants to do. Thus, it is not by our efforts that this is accomplished. *He produces the change, but we must make the choice.*

Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground,
absorbed with the things right in front
of you. Look up, and be alert to what is
going on around Christ—that's where the
action is. See things from *his* perspective.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-2 +++ *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right, and may you experience the energy from God's source of power flowing through you.

13

Being Saved Still

Rebecca Reynolds

A perfect new luna, sitting alone in the dark, will make you hold your breath. God made fancier moths but none more ethereal. Lunas are like sea glass or frost on the first two weeks of a garden. They are like Rivendell and powdered sugar. Their wing tails cross at the ends like lace-trimmed sock ankles on a tiny girl sitting still on Sunday morning. And when a new luna moves, she moves with the control of a ballet dancer at the barre.

Not too many weeks before, this same moth was a fat, crawling larva. Then, heavy with her own mass, she lumbered up some branch until she found a spot to attach herself and spin a cocoon. Inside that cocoon, every piece of her old body liquefied into a soup of her own proteins. While she waited, she was formless.... Does God whisper something like hope to all the wee little insects settling down into their own undoing? Do they know that they will soon come together again?

Does metamorphosis feel normal as an itch on the end of your nose, or does it feel like the end of the world?...

Facing a situation that exposed the depth of his vulnerability, the apostle Paul said, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me" (2 Corinthians 12:8, NIV). But God didn't take that situation away. Instead, God said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV).

I'm sure that hearing *no* was tough for Paul.... But the *no* here was more important than a yes ever could have been. The shock of a refusal forced Paul to not only accept his inabilities but also to revel in them. A *no* is what finally gave Paul enough failure to say, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.... For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10, NIV)....

You don't have to despair about the weaknesses pain is revealing. As you walk through this valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with you. You were saved, and you are being saved still. Even this end of your world will be used by the Father who loves you.... For here in this holy place where you are most weak, you are most strong.

We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.

PHILIPPIANS 3:20-21 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you experience the power of God being made perfect in your weakness.

Healthy Feelings, Properly Ordered

Dallas Willard

Feelings are a primary blessing *and* a primary problem for human life. We cannot live without them and we can hardly live with them. Hence they are also central for spiritual formation in the Christian tradition....

... Feelings live on the front row of our lives like unruly children clamoring for attention. They presume on their justification in being whatever they are—unlike a thought, which by nature is open to challenge.... ... In feelings we really know that something is "there," and solidly so. But what it is and why it is remains obscure—though hauntingly present....

Feeling is essential to life. We must accept this and work with it. And you can be sure that harmful feeling, feeling associated with evil—arising from it or producing it—will eventually be taken by a human being as better than no feeling at all. Healthy feelings, properly ordered among them selves, are essential to a good life. So if we are to be formed in Christlikeness, we must take good care of our feelings....

... Full joy is our first line of defense against weakness, failure, and disease of mind and body. But even when they break through into our life, the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10)....

... The task, once we have given ourselves to Christ, is to recognize the reality of our feelings and agree with the Lord to abandon those that are destructive and that lead us into doing or being what we know to be wrong. This he will then help us with. We may need to write out what those feelings are in a "letter to the Lord," or perhaps confer about them with a wise Christian friend who knows how to listen to us and to God at the same time.... We can be very sure that this is God's intent for us. Thus Paul prayed for his friends in Ephesus that they would be "rooted and grounded in love" and "know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17-19, NASB). And we have seen the intent of Jesus:... "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:27, ESV).

GOD met me more than halfway, he freed me from my anxious fears.

Look at him; give him your warmest smile.

Never hide your feelings from him.

PSALM 34:4-5 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may your unhealthy and disordered feelings be exchanged for the joy, peace, and love of God.

Navigating Your Hyperconnected Worlds

Tricia McCary Rhodes

Our ever-increasing engagement with technology is deepening neural pathways that make it difficult to maintain practices that are essential for soul care. For example:

Our habit of continually switching from one thing to another on our device trains our brains to seek constant stimulation, and this makes it hard to spend focused time connecting with God. The way we skim when we are on the internet trains our brains for shallow thinking, so we struggle to take in transcendent truths that reveal the profound beauty of Christ.

Compulsive texting... and engaging in social media train our brains to neglect the person in front of us, robbing us of the awareness we need to be salt and light or to love our neighbors as ourselves....

Studies indicate... that *reflection* contributes to a well-rounded mind and an ability to “thrive in a complex, ever-shifting new world.” Meditation strengthens your brain and is a “stepping stone to becoming more compassionate, calm, and joyful.”!!] *Prayer* can lower your propensity to anger and increase empathy. *Contemplation* can actually cause your brain to grow.

It is a stunning fact that these practices and others were all laid out in Scripture thousands of years ago.... While people bemoan their busyness and lament the distractions that keep them from practices once considered indispensable for spiritual growth, few express alarm about it. Indeed, there seems to be an almost fatalistic assumption that we have no control over the feverish pace that drives our lives....

Because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, be assured that he is committed to helping you navigate your hyperconnected worlds so that you can experience life to its fullest measure. As you walk with him through the mine field of an ever-changing digital landscape, may you move a little slower, ponder a little longer, and connect a little deeper. May you be relentless about creating space—space to see Christ's beauty and experience his love, and space for your light to shine brighter with his glory.

Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.

MATTHEW 6:34 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you move a little slower, ponder a little longer, and connect a little deeper with the God who loves you.

[1] Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2009), 22, 252.

16

Be Kind and Not Resentful

Jean Fleming

Like wind and rain that erodes rock little by little, daily life exacts a toll. Resources are depleted. Buffers wear thin. Slightings, once brushed off, laid aside to press on with the tasks at hand, now sting deeply as life closed in.

I see this as the apostle Paul expressed his great hurts and disappointments in his second letter to Timothy.... As the end neared, Paul reminded Timothy—and, I think, himself—to be kind and not resentful in life's bitter times....

Suffering comes to all people because we live in a fallen world. The Son of God left heaven's perfection to live in this place of suffering for my sake. He suffered for sins not His own. I will (in a far inferior sense) suffer the consequence of others' sins as well as my own....

Paul did not cave in to hurt and disappointment. He did not withdraw to nurse resentment. Instead, he wrote a letter to encourage a young pastor to guard the gospel, to be kind and not resentful, to endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ (see 2 Timothy 2:3). This outward gaze, entrusting oneself to the Father's loving care and seeking to do good, is an antidote to bitterness.

When I was beleaguered and bitter, totally consumed by envy,

I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox in your very presence.

I'm still in your presence, but you've taken my hand.

You wisely and tenderly lead me, and then you bless me.

PSALM 73:21-24 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you not cave in to hurt and disappointment, but instead entrust yourself to the Father's loving care and seek to do good.

17

Loving One Another

Dave Hickman

Jesus longed for his disciples to know from personal experience the joy of sharing in his Father's

love. It was this love that sustained Jesus in life and death; it would be this very same love that would sustain his friends in life and death as well. But surprisingly, the mystery of the disciples' union with Christ turns out not to be for them alone! For the mystery hidden within God from all eternity has been to bring *everyone* who believes in Christ into a perfect union (or "oneness") with him! In this way, God would not be the God of only one nation or race of people, but Father to a brand-new humanity *in* Christ who would reveal his love to the world....

... How would this happen? By the disciples abiding in their union with Christ and extending the *natural fruit* of the Father's love for the Son to one another (see John 15). "By this," Jesus said in John 13:35 (ESV), "all people will know that you are my disciples."....

... How would the world know that Jesus was sent of God and that God loves the world as much as he loved his own Son? It would not come through believers being united in doctrine or on social issues, but through loving one another just as the Father loved the Son. United to Christ by the Holy Spirit, believers would make known the love of the Father to the world!...

... As creatures created in the image of God, we are able, *by grace*, to share in the natural communion of love that has forever existed between the Father and the Son. This is afforded to you and to me as we are united to Christ through the eternal breath, who is the Holy Spirit.

As we love one another with this *type* of love, the world will see (and experience) God's presence on earth as it is (and always has been) in heaven.

I will talk to the Father, and he'll provide you another Friend so that you will always have someone with you. This Friend is the Spirit of Truth. The godless world can't take him in because it doesn't have eyes to see him, doesn't know what to look for. But you know him already because he has been staying with you, and will even be *in* you!

JOHN 14:15-17 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you share in the natural communion of love that has forever existed between the Father and the Son.

The Rhythm of Encouragement

Janice Peterson

Relationship in the body of Christ is where we grow best. Of course, we must pursue our relationship with God day in and day out as well: having a quiet time in the morning, an intentional time with God, and participating in regular worship. But community is vital for spiritual growth; our friends can challenge us, sharpen us, and restore us in unique and powerful ways. We experience his presence with others just as much as when we're alone in prayer with him.

In our friendships, we are pointed to him again and again, we are refined, and we are encouraged, even when we feel like we are failing.

But when we feel isolated, we feel stuck. And I don't want to downplay the struggles of being in that place. I don't want to make it sound like there's some magical, simple solution to your isolation. It's not easy to build spiritual friendships. It's not easy to invest in the lives of those around you in a way that grows both of you more in Christ. But I can promise you this: It is absolutely worth it. The hard work you do now to carve out time, to push through weariness and discouragement,

will enrich your life and your faith in ways you can't imagine. We need each other. It's just part of how we were meant to be....

If we are intentional in our friendships, those people can help us see how God is working in our lives. Good friends challenge us in the areas where we are weak and encourage us forward. Spiritual friendship takes us to a depth of relationship that enriches us both—it's hard to stay shallow when we decide to be honest about our relationship with God and what he is teaching us. When we invest in those sorts of friendships, every part of our lives becomes richer, because we are allowing God to speak into all of our experiences....

... In healthy friendships, we care deeply for our friends, seeking to hold them up in their weak places. We learn to lovingly accept each person's heart and gifts. We develop the desire to serve those around us. We reach out in hospitality, providing a safe and warm space for our friends to be with us. And above all, we learn to live in the rhythm of encouragement, speaking life and hope often.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other.

COLOSSIANS 3:15 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you experience the beauty of giving and receiving in true, spiritual friendship.

Wrestling with Distortions of God

Paula Rinehart and Connally Gilliam

For almost a month, I sat with Jeremiah, who sat with God. I let him do the talking. I read the same passage out of the third chapter of Lamentations every morning, until I almost knew it by heart.

You seem to me a bear lying in wait, ready to get me. You have walled me in, and I am trapped. You've made my chains heavy. My endurance is near gone—and so is my hope. (Lamentations 3:10-11, author's paraphrase...)

... His words mirror what we think in our worst moments of pain and distortion—when it feels like we've been left by the side of the road somewhere and nothing good will ever happen again....

.... *He was wrestling with his distortions of God—with God.* The living God was not striking him dead, or sending him away in shame, but holding him close until he could see reality again....

... When Jeremiah has spent himself, he stops and breathes deep the air of mercy. *Oh, yes, I can almost imagine him saying to himself, I remember.*

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23. ESV)

Some of the most loved words of Scripture are Jeremiah's. They are the words of a man who was in an awful place and washed up on the shore of trust, who was anchored once again by remembering that the Lord is especially good to those who wait for him.

GOD is good to one and all;

everything he does is soaked through with grace.

PSALM 145:9 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you breathe deep the air of mercy and experience a new mercy for the day.

Something Inside and Something Above

Richard A. Swenson

A high view of contentment was a consistent pattern across the ages. This, of course, does not mean that existence was easy and the streets filled with smiling citizens. Quite the opposite. Throughout most of history, life has been marked by tragedy and destitution. But when wealth and health were stripped away, when young children were dead and buried, when me and boys went off to war and returned home broken, there remained the possibility of *something inside* combining with *something above* to give hope. As unlikely as it sounds, peace and rest are possible among the ruins.

... Brother Yun was born in 1958 and became a Christian at age sixteen. He was deeply involved in the Chinese house church movement and, as a result, persecuted, beaten, and imprisoned repeatedly. After four imprisonments lasting seven years, he escaped prison and eventually fled the country only to be incarcerated again in Myanmar. The German embassy was able to secure his release after seven months, and that country today serves as Yun's base for worldwide ministry.

What is his attitude toward his affliction?

... We have learned that God is in control both of our own lives and the government we live under.... Instead of focusing our prayers against any political system, we pray that regardless of what happens to us, we will be pleasing to God.[1]

The gift of contentment says that striving is not inevitable. It is not a given that circumstances should rule our lives. Security is not ours alone to manage. Betrayal might be a fact, but bitterness is neither automatic nor compulsory. Pain is perhaps a daily reality but anger need not be. God controls all, including the margins. He has provided a way. We are not alone. Contentment in Him becomes our "harvest song of inward peace." [2]

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are—no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

MATTHEW 5:5 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you experience God's peace and rest, regardless of the circumstances you're confronted with.

[1] Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man: The Remarkable True Story of Chinese Christian Brother Yun* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002), 286-87.

[2] From a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Voices," 1854.

21

Everywhere Is a Divine Appointment

Robert Gelinas

In English, we slur words and, over time, create new ones. *You all* became *y'all* and *Christ's Mass* became *Christmas*. The same thing happened with the Old English phrase *Godes sonde*. It was a way of describing that which comes from God. Today, instead of saying *godes sonde*, we say *godsend*....

Jesus was a godsend. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

JOHN 3:16-17, NIV...

God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends us. Knowing that we have been sent by Jesus gives confidence, assurance, and purpose to everyday life....

... The Father sent the Son to serve, heal, feed, forgive, and redeem. The Son sends us out to do the same. This is why the twelve disciples are also known as the twelve apostles —“apostle” literally means one “sent with a message.” As his disciples, we, too, become apostles—godsend to the world!... To be disciplined by Jesus is to live a sent life. Jesus intends the church to be a godsend to its community. Together, we as God’s people are sent—knowingly and unknowingly—as instruments of mercy and grace. We are not where we are by accident; everywhere is a divine appointment.

When we trust in him, we’re free to say whatever needs to be said, bold to go wherever we need to go.

EPHESIANS 3:12 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you discover the divine appointment in whatever place and circumstance you find yourself.

Charged with the Presence of God*Michael Frost*

When the world around us insists we be normal and behave like everyone else, what countermands those signals toward normality? Paul insists that the mind is the battlefield in the fight to resist being shaped by the values of the society around us. God demands the renewal of our minds.... When Paul says in Romans 12:2, "Be transformed by the *renewing* of your mind" (NIV, italics added), he uses a Greek term only rarely found in the New Testament....

... In Paul's understanding, doing what is good wasn't the same as doing what is conventional. Doing good, according to Paul, involved bizarre behavior (for the time), like temperance, respect, self-control, loyalty, love, honesty, and trustworthiness....

When the Spirit renews our minds, all of life becomes an act of worship. That's because the Spirit not only opens our eyes to see who Christ really is but also breaks our hearts to see who we really are. And rather than this being some deathly experience of unending humiliation, seeing ourselves as broken and in need of a savior actually liberates us. It frees us from self-aggrandizement and throws us on the mercy of God with gratitude and love. And when that happens, we find within ourselves there's this growing and nurturing sense of the greatness of God and the beauty of God's love. We see that love being offered to us in myriad ways, and not only through overtly religious means. All of life becomes charged with the presence of God, and we find ourselves wanting to offer more and more of our lives to God as an act of sacrificial worship....

... As we steadfastly focus on Jesus, devoting ourselves as his students or disciples, the Spirit renews our thinking and our behavior, and we become more like him. He actually transforms us into the image of the Son of God.

Fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

ROMANS 12:2 +++ *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you find yourself wanting to offer more and more of your life to God. May you find yourself becoming more and more like Jesus.

23

We Really Call Trust

Jerome Daley

God is both good-hearted and strong-handed. We don't have to be afraid. We really can trust.

Fear sabotages all that trust by contracting both the internal and the external. Fear is the language of scarcity; of cramped, compressed living. All our attempts to "seize the moment" play off our anxiety that will lose the moment. Thus the native response of the human heart is to grasp after control, an illusion at the best of times....

The rule of fear affects more than just us. Every time we allow the spiritual dissonance of an internal or external disobedience, we wound the world... wound every facet of relationship with self, with others, with God, and even with the natural world....

... Obedience is the counter-intuitive path to freedom and wholeness. We cannot be our true selves without it, and freedom is what we all long for.

Trust is the only container with enough flexibility and integrity to carry a life of obedience..... We can *trust* this great God of ours with everything: Nothing needs to be held back. Nothing needs to be protected and hedged by our emotional programs for happiness, not even our own freedom. *No, this great and beautiful God can be trusted with our greatest offering: the unfettered surrender of unequivocal obedience....*

Because we are in a constant process of conversion, our obedience is continually won and lost. This is no cause for shame or dismay; it is our path. It is the life of hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Falling and rising again. Learning and transforming. Forgiving and being forgiven.

Whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said,

He made to be their true selves,
their child-of-God selves.

JOHN 1:12 + + + THE MESSAGE

Today, may you hold nothing back from God, and experience the freedom and wholeness you long for.

What We Need Most*Michael Card*

I have a pastor friend who was almost killed in a horrible car accident a few years ago. As he tells

it, he was fortunate to be alive but was sadly paralyzed from the neck down.

In the hospital, the doctors place him in one of those sandwich type contraptions that would allow his whole body to be turned over to prevent bed sores and encourage his otherwise poor circulation. Often this meant he would be left, face down, staring at the floor for hours, unable to move or even turn his head. On one such evening, as he waited patiently for a nurse to come and rotate the bed, he sensed a presence enter the room....

... My friend saw nothing out of the ordinary, no bright light, no outline of an angelic figure. Only the certainty that in an extraordinary sense, Jesus had come to be with him. He had come in answer to my friend's angry prayers of lament..... "I realized at that moment," he said, "that what I wanted most was not Jesus' provision of my healing. That desire had totally evaporated. All I wanted was His Presence."

"I will do anything," he cried. "Just don't leave!" What we need most, though few of us will ever realize it with the depth and intensity of my friend, is never what we think we need. What we were created at the depths of our souls to need is only the Presence of God....

Lament is the path that takes us to the place where we discover that there is no complete answer to pain and suffering, only Presence. The language of lament gives a meaningful form to our grief by providing a vocabulary for our suffering and then offering it to God as worship. Our questions and complaints will never find individual answers.... The dangerous, disturbing, comforting Presence... is the true answer to all our questions and hopes.

The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way!

ROMANS 8:34-35 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you experience your need of the Presence of God—and the fulfillment of that need.

25

Abide in Christ

Andrew Murray

When storms come, trees strike their roots deeper into the soil. In a hurricane we retreat to the safest, most secure corner of our home. So then our trials ought to drive us more deeply into the love of Christ.

Our hearts are continually prone to wander from God. We are quickly satisfied by experiences of prosperity and entertainment, and our senses dull, so that we are ill prepared to abide in Christ. So then, our experiences of hardship maybe considered a mercy—admittedly a severe mercy —by which God reveals the darkness of the world around us and the brokenness within us.... As we return to abiding in Christ we become better aware that here is our only hope, our only rest. When our afflictions are removed, perhaps we will be less quick to leave God's presence.

Knowing this, God subjects us to affliction even though He takes no pleasure in it. It is wise, then, to pray in every affliction (whether small or great) for grace to see the Father pointing us to Christ and saying, "Abide in Him."...

As we abide in Christ, our little crosses of suffering become the means of fellowship with His cross. We gain access to its mysteries—the mystery of the curse He bore on the cross, of the death to sin in which we participate, of the love in which our great High Priest entered into our sorrows. Abide in Christ, and you will grow in conformity to Him, even as you experience more deeply the reality and tenderness of His love.

If you make yourselves at home with
me and my words are at home in you,
you can be sure that whatever you ask
will be listened to and acted upon.

JOHN 15:7 +++ THE MESSAGE

Today, may your little crosses of suffering gain you access to the great mysteries of the cross and the abiding love of your great High Priest.

To Be Human Is to Pray*Pete Greig*

Our English word *prayer* derives from the Latin *precarious*. We pray because life is precarious. We pray because life is marvelous. We pray because we find ourselves at a loss for many things, but not for the simplest words like “please,” “thank

you,” “wow,” and “help.” I prayed when I held our babies for the first time. I prayed when work over whelmed me, and I knew I couldn't cope. I prayed when my wife was wheeled away down the hospital corridor unconscious. I prayed the night I saw the northern lights. Canadian psychologist David G. Benner describes prayer as “the soul’s native language,” observing that “our natural posture is attentive openness to the divine.”^[1] We see this posture in many great men and women not necessarily known for religious devotion....

From American presidents to Irish poets, from rock stars in London to single mothers in Wichita, prayer has been the argument “that cannot be proven,” the “gaping need”^[2] of every human soul since the very dawn of time....

From primitive cave paintings to the white washed walls of the Royal Academy, the universal impulse to pray permeates and pulsates through human anthropology and archaeology, sociology and psychology. It is no exaggeration to say that to be human is to pray....

Even when you don’t really want to pray, a place of prayer can often make it easier. Merely by showing up, you make a declaration of intent. You say, in effect, “Lord, I don’t want to be here, but I’m here!”... After decades of night-and-day prayer, I have come to believe that 99 percent of it is just showing up: making the effort to become consciously present to the God who is constantly present to us.

Here’s what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won’t be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

MATTHEW 6:6 + + + THE MESSAGE

Today, may you be with God as simply and honestly as you can manage, and from that place of prayer, sense God's grace.

^[1] David G. Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 36. ^[2] From poem by Patrick Kavanagh, “Canal Bank Walk,” 1955.

Substituting Prayer for Worry

Linda Dillow

Paul commands us to have nothing to do with anxiety and everything to do with prayer. Sadly, many of us reverse this and worry about every thing, praying only as a last resort! It's easier to worry, fret, get heartburn, lose sleep, yell at our husband or friends, the kids, or our roommates than it is to pray. We've flip-flopped the biblical prescription, not in belief but in practice. Not only are we to pray specifically, we are to pray with thanksgiving. This is beyond difficult! When I'm worried that I have cancer or that my child is uninterested in school and failing geometry or that my friend has hurt me or that pressing problems have multiplied within me, it is hard, hard, hard to be thankful.

Psalm 116:17 (NIV) helps me to understand what it means to pray with thanksgiving: "I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD." I like this reminder because giving thanks when a black tunnel has enveloped my world is definitely sacrificial!... When confronted with negative circumstances, we have a choice: Will we pray about the problem or will we worry about it?...

We are to practice substituting prayer for worry, the positive for the negative—and the God of peace will be with us!... This was Paul's process, the path he walked in order to learn contentment. I have been privileged to know some dear women who have walked this path. With

Paul they can say, "I have learned to be content in all circumstances."

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying,
 pray. Let petitions and praises shape
 your worries into prayers, letting God
 know your concerns. Before you know
 it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything
 coming together for good, will come
 and settle you down. It's wonderful
 what happens when Christ displaces
 worry at the center of your life.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you experience the contentment that comes freely from the God of peace.

Your Time Is Coming*Tricia Lott Williford*

When God sent his Son to be born into the world, four hundred years had passed since the people had heard a word from the Lord. It's difficult for me to wrap my mind around that much time, that much waiting. Not only had they not heard a word, but neither had their parents, their grand parents, or their great-grandparents.... They likely could not remember the last person in their family lineage who had heard a fresh word from the Lord. That feels pretty hopeless to me. I think I would stop believing—and stop waiting—if I couldn't even find the last person who had any real evidence of good news....

In these four hundred years, God allowed a famine in the land. Not a famine of food, but indeed a famine of his word. In the silence, the people began to burn with a deep hunger for the sound of his voice. Sometimes God does that. He makes us wait so we can remember what we want the most.

After so many hundreds of years, the time came. *Came*. When Luke wrote the account of the birth of Jesus, he used that very phrase: “The time came for her baby to be born” (Luke 2:6, NLT)... When I am in a season of waiting, I can only seem to notice the passing of time in a negative way, like it's slipping through my fingers, and I can't stop it.... It's getting away from me. But Luke turned that whole perspective upside down. Time isn't merely passing. Quite the contrary, my friend. The Time is coming. God wants to do something unique in my heart and in yours, and the process gives him fertile ground to do important work in our hearts, our relationships, and our very lives while we wait for the time to come. Waiting can be sacred space. It does not have to be passive or inactive. Actually, it can be filled with heartfelt anticipation and deep intention, and even sprinkled with joy.

The further you get from the beginning of the wait, the closer you are to what will become yours. A time is coming. *Your* time is coming.

God, the one and only— I'll wait as long as he says.

Everything I need comes from him, so why not?

PSALM 62:1 +++ THE MESSAGE

Today, may you experience joyful hope as you move further from the beginning and closer to the end of your wait.

Grace and Training

Cynthia Heald

Grace is a lovely word; it promises kindness, favor, and goodwill. The word discipline, though, carries the connotation of training, strictness, and correction. Although these words seem unlikely companions, God creatively unites them when he trains and disciplines his children. Certainly it is his unmerited favor that offers and bestows salvation. Our relationship with God begins with his grace and his grace alone. But this unconditional grace he showers upon us spills over into our everyday lives as he purposes to mold and conform us to the image of Christ and to correct us when we sin....

The melding of God's grace and training are clearly exemplified in the life of the apostle Paul. We've studied the blessing of God's grace for Paul as he lived with a humility-producing thorn, which was sent to counteract potential pride from receiving remarkable revelations from the Lord. When Paul prayed for the thorn's removal, God's answer was, "My grace (My favor and loving-kindness and mercy) is enough for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9, AMPC). The thorn was God's chosen way to care firmly for Paul's soul. Although the thorn was undeniably uncomfortable, it was accompanied by the Lord's empowering grace to endure.

God's discipline of Miriam for challenging Moses' leadership was grounded in grace. Her conduct needed to be called into account; she needed to be reminded to say no to worldly ambition and to live a self-controlled life. Miriam was chastened, swiftly and temporarily. I am sure she would attest to this truth: "No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way" (Hebrews 12:11, NLT)....

God loves us too much to let us alone. He is a faithful Father who desires the highest and best for us, and his intention is to reshape us into wise, righteous, and devoted children who live the faithful way.

God's discipline is bathed in grace. We are loved, forgiven, and accepted by our Father, but as our Father, he is committed to training and chastening us. We need his uncomfortable grace; it is for our good.

My dear child, don't shrug off God's discipline,

but don't be crushed by it either.

It's the child he loves that he disciplines;

the child he embraces, he also corrects.

HEBREWS 12:6 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you experience the grace in God's discipline. May you grow in wisdom, righteousness, and devotion to the God who loves you.

Knowing God Is Enough*Jan Johnson*

In the heat and pressure of daily living, it's easy to forget that God is present with us and to slide into self-referenced thinking in which we are consumed with what we want and how (stressed) we feel. Our minds flash from one thing to another as life pulls us in many directions among the demands of work, family, health, and finances. Perhaps that's why meetings of Christians often begin by asking God to be with us, as if God had found something more interesting to do.... Contemplation—thoughtfully considering God's desires, even waiting on and delighting in God—reconnects us with God in the midst of our scatteredness. When I pause in contemplation, I sense that the God who holds the universe together can also hold me together. In the quiet, I recall how God has helped me in the past. I once again remember that I am one whom God *so loves*....

... In contemplative prayer, we begin by bringing our real selves that are focused on our desires, demands, and needs, saying, "I want." Then by fixing our attention on God who loves us, we let go of our desire to manage people, circumstances, ourselves, and feelings. As we acknowledge God's willingness to empower and partner with us, we find ourselves saying, "God, knowing you is enough for me." We sense the peace of God that is beyond human understanding (see Philippians 4:7). When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.

When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.

When you're between a rock and a hard place,

it won't be a dead end— Because I am GOD, your personal God.

ISAIAH 43:2-3 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you be reminded that the God who holds the universe together can also hold you together.

31

The Need of the Hour

Dawson Trotman

Let me tell you what I believe the need of the hour is. Maybe I should call it the answer to the need of the hour. I believe it is an army of soldiers, dedicated to Jesus Christ, who believes not only that He is God but that He can fulfill every promise He has ever made and that there isn't anything too hard for Him. It is the only way we can accomplish the thing that is on His heart—getting the gospel to every creature....

... When Jesus Christ sent the eleven out, He let a situation exist which was so bad that there could never be a worse one. No printing presses, no automobiles, no radios, no televisions, no telephones, no buildings, not one single church, no uniforms, nothing for the vestry. He didn't even leave them a little emblem.

He left them only a job to do, but with it He said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore..(Matthew 28:18-19,

KJV). What does the "therefore" mean? It means, "I have the power to give you the order, and I have the power to back you to the hilt." He has *all power in heaven and earth*.... Earlier Jesus Christ had said to the same little group, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on [me], the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do" (John 14:12, KJV)....

What is the need of the hour, gang? I'll tell you the need of the hour. It is to believe that our God controls the universe, and when He said, "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14, KJV), He meant it. That is exactly what is going to happen. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord!

Blessed is he who comes, the king in God's name!

All's well in heaven! Glory in the high places!

LUKE 19:38 + + + *THE MESSAGE*

Today, may you believe that God controls the universe, and that every hard thing and challenging lime will ultimately give way to the knowledge of the glory of God.

AFTERWORD

Time plays even more tricks than usual in disasters—a moment can feel like a year, two months feel like one long strange day. I’ve spent most of my career working in and writing about humanitarian crises, and in hard times like these, I’m especially grateful for a collection like this that helps me pause each day to consider how God is *with us and for us*. But not in a super-sweet-oh-Jesus-loves-us-so- everything-is-fine-and-dandy way. Superficial nods to God that don’t step into hard reality— the uncertainty, the unjust suffering, the anxiety —make things worse for me. Maybe for you too. When I hear cheap hope in serious situations, honestly, it can trip me into hours or even the rest of a day with a not-sure-I-actually-believe-in-God- anymore hangover.

Thoughtful reflections like the thirty-one in this book have the opposite effect. They help me believe in a way that God’s love comes nearer and then, my own doubt and anxiety quelled, move me to find how I can love someone in Jesus’ name. In these pages:

- We started with Eugene Peterson on fear- of-the-Lord that reminds us that the “Jacob-wrestling God fights/or *us*.” (I added the italics and would also bold and underline if permitted.)
- We received needed reminders that “God’s grace greets and transforms us,” which I’m guessing you need to hear as often as I do.
- We remembered that our mission in this hard time isn’t just to focus on ourselves or our own liberties. Incredibly, we’re invited to participate in God’s mission to put “poor people on their feet again;... restoring dignity and respect to their lives—a place in the sun!” (1 Samuel 2:8, MSG).

In disasters we should face reality, be comforted and strengthened by grace, and then respond to our invitation to God’s mission. These are good ways to respond to pandemics, to ongoing injustice, and to life.

As I’m sheltering in place with my family and writing these words in the midst of a global pandemic, another good thing comes to mind that I’m grateful for. Even in this strange isolation of social and physical distancing, in a way, we got to read this together. I was with each author in their reflections. And in a way, I also feel bonded with you as, in the midst of this pandemic, we shared the experience of reading the same words.

Yes, in hard times, God *with us and for us* also keeps guiding us to find ways to be *with and for* each other.

Kent Annan

Director of Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership,
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