

Rhonda Cook retired from the corporate world after 31 years and felt God had new opportunities ahead for her. She served as Women's Ministry Director at the First Church of the Nazarene in Birmingham, Alabama, and on the North Alabama District Women's Ministry Council. Rhonda enjoys leading ladies Bible studies as well as hosting ladies retreats at the beach.

Diane Estep is the Director of Special Projects for the South Carolina District. Diane's passion is marriages and families. She has led retreats and enrichment classes for several years. Her husband, Eddie, has served the South Carolina District as District Superintendent for over 10 years. They have two sons, Josh and Jeff (and Brittany).

Rita Jack is a wife and mother of two sons. In addition to being a certified counselor, she worked as a junior high and high school teacher, a school administrator, an academic dean, and a professor. Rita speaks and directs seminars on "Life Is the Great Adventure with God," "Arming Yourself with Right Thinking," and leadership training entitled, "You are Being Followed." She loves sharing God's love with people every day.

Melissa Pickens is an adoring daughter of the one true King, adoring wife of Rev. Andy Pickens, and privileged mom of four. She and her husband co-founded Rally Point Ministries in Warner Robins, Georgia, with the tag "Find Freedom, Find Life! Find Life, Find Freedom!" This is what she hopes to bring to the hearts of those she meets, whether through writing, speaking, or having lunch with a friend.

Vonda Rodeheaver serves on the Southern California District Women's Council and in various ministries at her local church. She absolutely loves ministering to those in need. This year Vonda will celebrate 30 years of marriage to her husband Steve and 30 years as pastor's wife at their urban church in Southeast San Diego. They have three wonderful young adult children. She enjoys reading, gardening, and watching "When Calls the Heart"!

Cheryl Roland is the wife of Dr. David G. Roland, Superintendent of the Northeastern Indiana District Church of the Nazarene. She serves as the NEI District Women's Ministries director and event coordinator for Come to the Fire Conferences. Cheryl also hosts a monthly Bible study for residents of the Open Heart Home, a shelter for homeless women. She loves to read, write, walk, talk, pray, listen, and teach that Jesus is the joy of living.

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Keep Your Commitment
Rhonda Cook

Scripture: [Matthew 6:7](#)

On social media today, we see many prayer requests listed by our friends. We also see many responses that say “praying”, “keeping you in my prayers,” etc. Or, we may hear prayer requests at church and reply, “We will pray for that need.”

How diligently are we remembering to pray for these requests? Are we making notes to remember the requests? Or, are we just hearing the request and giving a standard reply? Let us not reply that we are praying if we are not. Otherwise, we are no better than the pagans in Matthew 6:7, who keep talking just to be heard and to impress.

Whenever we say we will pray, we are making a commitment. We are giving our word! When we give our word, we have a responsibility to keep it! How are we doing at keeping these commitments?

It is an honor when someone specifically asks you to pray for them. It is humbling to realize they respect and trust you this much! Honor that trust with fervent prayer, one that others know they can count on.

Points to Ponder:

- How do you reply when you see prayer requests on social media?
- Do you follow through on commitments you make to pray for others requests?
- Do others ask you specifically to pray for them? If so, how does that make you feel?
- How does God speak to you and instruct you as you pray for others?

Prayer:

Dear God, as I see and hear prayer requests made, direct me on how I should respond. Then help me to follow through on the commitments I make to pray for others. As I pray, let me listen and hear You as You instruct me on how I might need to minister in some way as a response to this need and this prayer. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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From Generation to Generation
Rhonda Cook

Scripture: [Psalm 78:2-7](#)

Children grow up admiring mommy and daddy; they want to be just like us. Children repeat our words (even if we don't want them to) and copy our actions. We have a huge responsibility to teach our children the ways of the Lord, to read to them Bible stories, to teach them right and wrong, and to live a Christian life before them.

[Psalm 78](#) instructs us to tell the next generation about the mighty works of the Lord:

"I will utter hidden things, things from of old – things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands."

What an incredible blessing it is to begin or continue a Christian legacy in our families, and to ensure that those who come after us can look back on our lives and see Christ in us!

One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is to pray for them. We pray for them before they are born, when they are young, and as long as we have breath. We can also bless our children by starting early to pray for the future spouse of our children. Their life experiences will shape who they are and will have impact on future generations of our families.

We also pray for our future grandchildren and great-grandchildren and so on. God will hear and honor our prayers for the generations to come.

Points to Ponder:

- What do you know about the Christian legacy in your family?
- How are you starting or changing the heritage for future generations?
- How have you seen the prayers of a godly parent, grandparent, or other family member make a difference in your family?
- How are you praying for the future of your family and the generations to come?

Prayer:

Oh Jesus, broaden my mind to pray for the future generations of my family. Help me to realize that my prayers today can impact future members of my family and can build a Christian legacy for years to come. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Jesus does the same for us. We don't deserve His kindness or His forgiveness, but He freely offers it. Like Joseph, we may have times when we break down and cry. But God will give wisdom and strength for the assignment. God believes in us. Let's decide to take the assignment.

Points to Ponder:

- In Ephesians Paul is writing to the believers in the city of Ephesus. Paul is trying to get the believers to be kind to one another ([Ephesians 4:31-32](#)). What did Paul tell them they needed to do to begin healing some relationships?
- What advice does Paul give the believers in Thessalonica ([1 Thessalonians 5:15](#)) about how to treat one another?
- In your own words write down ways Dr. Luke ([Luke 6:27-36](#)) advises us to treat our enemies.
- In Genesis why were the brothers of Joseph afraid of him ([Genesis 50:14-19](#))?
- How did Joseph apply what Dr. Luke writes about and Paul teaches in Thessalonica?
- Am I kind to people?
- Am I good to people?
- Do I treat people kindly even when they don't deserve it?
- Have I been hurt by someone? How did I treat them?

Prayer:

Lord, help me to take the kindness assignment. I pray You will give me the courage to follow through on whatever You ask of me. I know it won't be easy. There are several people I know that are so difficult for me to be kind to. But with Your help "all things are possible." Teach me, Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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God Stretches Our Faith Vonda Rodeheaver

Scripture: [Matthew 14:15-16, 21](#), [Luke 9:1-6, 13](#), [Mark 6:31](#)

Jesus had been teaching the crowd late into the day. His disciples realized there wasn't any chance of getting food for the crowd or themselves in such a remote place. Before they arrived in Bethsaida with Jesus, they went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere ([Luke 9:6](#)). There were so many people coming and going that the apostles did not even have time to eat ([Mark 6:31](#))! I'm sure the disciples thought today was going to be the same. No one was going to have a chance to eat. They suggested sending the crowds away to buy themselves some food ([Matthew 14:15](#)).

Jesus didn't seem too concerned about sending everyone away. In fact, Jesus didn't seem too concerned about where to find food for the crowd. Jesus replied to His disciples, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat" ([Matthew 14:16](#)). His disciples were incredulous! Philip was indignant! [John 6:5](#) says Philip answered, "Eight month's wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

Not long before, Jesus called the Twelve together, giving them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases. He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick ([Luke 9:1-2](#)). Jesus tells His disciples, "Take nothing for your journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town" ([Luke 9:3-6](#)). Take no bread? Take no money? How in the world would they get food to eat? Jesus knew God would provide their daily food through the kindness and generosity of the people they stayed with when they were traveling from village to village.

Now Jesus was taking His disciples one step further in their faith journey. He wanted to know if they would trust God to provide food for them and the crowd gathered on the hillside in Bethsaida that day. How would God do it? Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was beginning to get the picture, but he was still a little doubtful. [John 6:8](#) says Andrew spoke up and said, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" The disciples' response was, "We have only five loaves of bread and two fish—unless we go and buy food for all this crowd." The crowd was about five thousand men, besides women and children. Now that's a lot of people to feed! No wonder the disciples were a little amazed that Jesus would tell them to feed everyone.

The disciples might have been thinking . . . did Jesus really just tell us to give these people something to eat? But on the other hand, perhaps they were beginning to wonder . . . could Jesus somehow work a miracle with this small amount of food? Surely they recognized the power Jesus gave them to drive out demons, to cure diseases, and to heal the sick. Perhaps, in the midst of their doubting, they began to have a glimpse of what Jesus might do with only five loaves of bread and two fish.

Points to Ponder:

- How often are we asked by God to do something which seems impossible?
- Why do you think God chooses to stretch our faith?
- What has God been asking you to do today?

Prayer:

O God, help us to see what you want to do in our lives today. Help us to be open to Your calling no matter if it seems impossible. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

God Works through Ordinary People Vonda Rodeheaver

Scripture: [Matthew 14:15-16](#), [Mark 6:37-38](#)

One day a mother packed an ordinary lunch for her son. I'm sure she must have thought she was just performing a normal, every day task. Fixing lunch for her family was most likely part of her daily routine. However this day was no ordinary day! People from all the surrounding villages heard Jesus was crossing the Sea of Galilee. They wanted to see Him and be healed by Him. The crowds ran on foot to arrive at Bethsaida, where Jesus' boat was going to land. Perhaps her son was one of those who needed to be healed? We are not told. We don't know if the boy's mother was in the crowd that ran to see Jesus, but her son definitely was. He must have been present when Jesus was teaching the crowd and healing those who needed to be healed on the hillside late into the day.

As evening approached, the disciples asked Jesus to send the crowds back to their surrounding villages to get something to eat. Instead of sending the crowds away, Jesus asked his disciples how many loaves they had. Then He told them, "Go and see" ([Mark 6:37-38](#)). The disciples began asking around, going through the crowd of people, calling out, "Does anyone have any bread? They eventually found this boy who hadn't eaten his lunch yet. This boy was not only willing to share five loaves of bread but also two fish. What an unselfish act on the part of this boy! Talk about giving your all! I'm sure this boy must have been hungry just the same as everyone else, yet he willingly gave up his lunch. He willingly shared what he had with Jesus.

Jesus used an ordinary mom making an ordinary lunch for an ordinary son on an ordinary day. I'm sure when this boy's mother woke up that morning she had no inkling that the lunch she prepared for her son would be used by Jesus to feed 5,000 men, besides women and children that day. I'm sure when her son woke up that morning he had no idea that he would be asked to share his lunch with Jesus.

Sometimes we might get weary doing the same things day after day, but God often works through ordinary people doing ordinary things in unselfish ways. He is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or think when we give Him our all. He turned an ordinary lunch, a daily routine, and a child's unselfish giving into a means of blessing for more than 5,000 people. Who knows what He might have planned for you in the midst of your routine today?

Points to Ponder:

- How willing are we to share what we have with Jesus?
- Why do you think Jesus chose to use a boy's lunch to feed 5,000 men plus women and children?
- What are some ordinary tasks that could be used for God's glory?

Prayer:

O God, help us to be willing to give our all to You. Help us give unselfishly, even when we might be hungry ourselves. We want to maintain joy in the midst of our daily routines. Please take the ordinary tasks of our lives and turn them into unexpected blessings as You see fit. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

God Provides for Our Needs
Vonda Rodeheaver

Scripture: [Luke 9:11](#), [Mark 6:34](#), [Psalm 23](#)

It doesn't seem like the crowd was concerned about sitting down to eat. Do you get the feeling they were just happy to be near Jesus? They had been listening to Him teach about the kingdom of God. They had been watching Him go from person to person, healing those who needed to be healed. It might have been similar to attending a sports event when the ball flies into the crowd. Everyone is standing on their feet, straining to see who will catch the ball. Everyone is excited! No one wants to sit down. Better yet! If you're the one catching the ball, you will most likely be on your feet, shouting for joy! I can only imagine that people in the crowd were overjoyed to be healed. I'm sure they were straining to hear every word that Jesus had to say.

When Jesus views the crowd, He sees them as sheep without a shepherd ([Mark 6:34](#)). They are in need. He has compassion on them. He teaches them and heals them, and now He is going to feed them. [Mark 6:39](#) says Jesus directed the disciples to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. He cares about their comfort. This is similar to the message in [Psalm 23](#) which says, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name sake." Jesus is our Good Shepherd. In the Old Testament, kings were considered to be the shepherds of their people. The question was – what kind of shepherds were they? Jesus was the messiah shepherd who would usher in God's kingdom. He is the Good Shepherd. He provides all we need.

The crowds were excited to see Jesus because of all the miraculous things He was doing. When Jesus saw them, He realized they needed much more than just miraculous healing; they needed spiritual food just as much as they needed physical food. Through His compassion and mercy, He provided them with everything they needed. In the presence of Jesus, the crowd found that all of their needs were satisfied.

Points to Ponder:

- What do you think the crowd was more interested in – physical healing or physical food?
- Why do you think Jesus had them sit down on the green grass? Is there significance in the green grass?
- How do the miracles point to Jesus as the Good Shepherd?

Prayer:

Dear Lord, we're thankful that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He makes us lie down in green pastures and restores our soul. Thank You for satisfying all of our needs. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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God Is More Than Enough Vonda Rodeheaver

Scripture: [Matthew 14:16, 18-21](#), [Mark 6:38](#), [John 6:10-13](#)

Jesus involved His disciples in the feeding of the 5,000. First He told them, "You give the crowd something to eat." Then Jesus said, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." When the disciples told Jesus they only had five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus told them, "Bring them here to me." According to [John 6:10-13](#), Jesus told His disciples, "Have the people sit down." Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. When they had all had enough to eat, He said to His disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. The number of those who ate was about five thousand besides women and children ([Matthew 14:18-21](#)).

Jesus allowed His disciples to grapple with the question of how to meet the needs of the crowd and how to be physically involved in finding solutions for the needs of the crowd. Jesus helped to stretch their faith. What looked like an impossibility turned out to be a possibility! When Jesus started breaking the five loaves of bread and two fish, it was enough to feed 5,000 people. The disciples were involved in picking up the broken pieces left over from the meal. I'm sure as they picked up the pieces they continued to be amazed at how God could use one boy's lunch to feed so many. Jesus gave them a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. Everyone ate and was satisfied.

The disciples witnessed firsthand what can happen when we offer God what we have. They saw a problem and tried to solve it on their own. Jesus gave them some directions, and they obeyed to the best of their ability. As a result, they were involved in the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. What seemed impossible was made possible as Jesus walked them step by step through a plan of action and then through the realization they had to trust God to take what they had to offer, multiply it, and make it more than enough.

Just as the disciples were able to witness what could happen when they offered God what they had, we too can have that same reality in our lives. If we are able to get past our amazement at what God is asking us to do . . . if we're able to follow God's plan of action . . . if we are able to realize God can take our humble offering and transform it, then we just might be able to witness firsthand how God can take our offering and make it more than enough.

Points to Ponder:

- Why do you think Jesus asked His disciples to participate in the feeding of the 5,000?
- When do you think the disciples began to realize that Jesus was about to do something miraculous?
- How can we get past our amazement at what God is asking us to do?

Prayer:

Lord, we need You to help us get past our amazement at what seems impossible and move into doing what You've asked us to do. Help us to be fully involved in following Your directions for our lives. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Frozen
Diane Estep

Scripture: [Philippians 1:6](#)

A couple of years ago, I woke up and experienced excruciating pain in my right shoulder every time I raised my arm. I thought maybe I had injured it while I was exercising or moving furniture. Then I reminded myself that I don't exercise. And no furniture had been moved. I made an appointment with an orthopedic doctor. After a quick examination, he proclaimed I had a frozen shoulder. He gave me a shot to relieve the pain for a few weeks, but then went on to say the best way to fix the frozen shoulder was with physical therapy. I thought, "This will be easy."

I went for my first appointment and quickly discovered that pushing through pain to "unfreeze" a frozen shoulder was hard work. And painful. I began to lose confidence in the ability of the physical therapist and in my doctor. However, the therapist reminded me that in order for my shoulder to function as it was designed to function, I must be confident of his ability to help me. I must listen to what he said and push through the pain. I needed to be patient because the time I was putting in would produce good results.

Do you ever struggle with being confident about your Christian walk? If you're ever at a point where you begin to lose confidence in what God is doing, you need someone who will remind you of God's faithfulness. Paul was that person to the Philippians.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he wants them to know he is confident of what God has done and what He is going to do. He's not crossing his fingers or hoping for a good outcome. He's confident.

Let's not overlook the word "carry." Paul says, "He who began a good work in you will carry it." We don't have to carry the work. We simply have to trust our Heavenly Father. Paul basically tells the Philippians to hang on, trust in God, and watch Him carry the good work to completion.

If you find yourself in a frozen state in your marriage or you feel stuck in life, remind yourself that our Heavenly Father is with you – you can be confident of that! Go to Him with your needs. Listen for His voice. And push through any pain or inconvenience that you may experience. Trust Him. He began a good work in you and in your spouse and family. He will carry it through to completion.

Points to Ponder:

- Have you ever felt as if you were frozen or stuck in life and you didn't see a way out? What were your thoughts or feelings during that time?
- How would you encourage someone who seems to be stuck in life?
- What good work is the Lord doing in your life these days?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the good You've done in my life. Help me remember that I am a work in progress. Remind me that my spouse and my children are also works in progress. Give me patience as I trust you on this journey. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Gym Floor Seats Diane Estep

Scripture: [Titus 2:7](#) and [Romans 12:9](#)

Several years ago, as a special gift, my husband took me to a University of Kentucky basketball game at Rupp Arena in Lexington, Kentucky. Our seats were in the upper level of the arena. I guess you could say we were in the “nose bleed” section. I didn’t mind. I could still see the players shooting the basketball and running back to the other end of the court. It was so exciting!

A year or so after that experience, friends of ours gave us tickets to a University of South Carolina basketball game. These weren’t your typical seats. They were seats in the front row. We were basically sitting on the floor of the gym! We not only experienced the game up close, but we experienced the game up close and personal. We could hear the coach yelling out plays and the players grunting as they exerted themselves. We could smell the sweat from the players as they ran by our seats. There wasn’t much we missed seeing or hearing sitting in those front-row seats.

Friends and extended family have seats in the upper section of our lives. They see how we live our lives, but at a distance. However, our children have front-row seats in our families. They are sitting around our kitchen tables, observing our family up close and personal. They see how we treat our spouses and hear the words and tone of our voices when we speak to family members. They observe how we treat those we come in contact with at the grocery store or while driving down the interstate. They see the example we are living.

[Titus 2:7](#) tells us about the importance of setting an example. Paul reminded Titus, “In everything set them an example by doing what is good.” Titus, a new Christian, was being mentored by Paul. Paul wanted to remind Titus that he had an opportunity to set an example to those he was influencing by doing what is good.

When you are a parent, you not only have the gift of your children, but you have the responsibility of setting an example of what is good. We are the first teachers and leaders our children learn from. Let’s celebrate that gift and set a good example.

Points to Ponder:

- What are your children learning from you about what it means to be good?
- What example do you want to set for your children, who are observing your life up close and personal?
- What do people sitting in the upper seats of the arena of your life observe about you?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for not only the gift of my children, but the responsibility of setting an example of being good. I realize that on my own, I fall short of being the kind of parent I need to be; but with Your help, I can teach them what is good. Thank You for helping me do just that! In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

It's All about the Rock Diane Estep

Scripture: [Matthew 7:24-27](#)

Building sand castles was a part of every beach vacation when I was growing up. And we continued the tradition when our boys were little. Some of the first things we packed when headed to the beach were the buckets, shovels, and dump trucks. We took all of the necessary tools in anticipation of building our best sand castle. We would find perfectly shaped shells for the windows and small pieces of wood for the doors. I remember one year finding a seagull feather to use at the very top.

Every year we reminded our boys of the same thing: if they built their sand castle close to the water, the tide would rise, the waves would crash, and everything they had built would wash away.

Even when they would build their castles farther up the beach away from the threat of the water, the wind would blow away the sand until eventually, there was nothing left. This is simply a fact about building sand castles. Whatever you build on sand won't last. Build your "castle" on sand and it will not stand the test of a storm.

Jesus used the sand illustration when He spoke to His disciples in [Matthew 7](#). "But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." Jesus was sharing with His disciples what happens when we don't listen or put into practice His Word. He told them that by being hearers and doers of His Word, they *could* stand the test of difficult days and grow in their faith.

It doesn't matter how fancy your "castle" is built. It could appear to those looking from the outside that your house – your marriage – is solid and invincible against the elements of the world. However, if you don't start with a firm foundation, the marriage won't outlast the storms. When we build our marriages on Jesus – the Rock – we can endure the storms of life.

Points to Ponder:

- On whom or what are you building your life? What are the evidences of that fact?
- If an inspector would come and look over the foundation of your marriage, where would they say you needed to make reinforcements?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we are thankful that when we face storms of any kind, You are there. You are our firm foundation, our hope in the midst of life. We praise Your strong and mighty name! In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

One More Chance
Diane Estep

Scripture: [Matthew 18:21-22](#)

Our son, Jeff, was around five years old, and he was upset with me. I don't remember why he was upset, only that I wasn't his favorite person at the time. I figured the best thing to do was to give him space and let him sulk in his room. After some time had passed, I realized he was quieter than usual. If you've ever had a five-year-old boy, you know that if you don't hear him, you need to check on him.

I peeked around the corner of his room and found him on the floor, next to a suitcase he had dragged out of storage. He was in the process of tossing his favorite things into his suitcase: his baseball cards, baseball glove, slingshot, pajamas. Whatever was in his reach was going in the suitcase.

I asked his dad to take a couple pictures of the "scene." Jeff stopped and asked, "What are you doing?"

I said, "Since Christmas is in a couple weeks, I want to show your grandparents these pictures so they'll understand you've run away from home and they'll give your presents to your brother, Josh."

Well, that wasn't what he wanted to hear. He paused, thought about what he had just heard and said, "Mom, I'll give you one more chance, and if you mess up again, I'm outta here!"

Every time I think about this story, I smile at that memory. Then I'm reminded of the importance of offering forgiveness and giving others a second chance. [Matthew 18:21-22](#) says, "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"

Peter thought he was exaggerating and being generous when he asked if we were to forgive others up to seven times. He must have been taken back when Jesus responded with, "not seven times, but seventy-seven times." In other words, Jesus wasn't putting a limit on the forgiveness we should extend to others.

If there was ever a place where grace and forgiveness need to be extended, it is in the home. The folks we live with see us at our best and they see us at our worst. And we see them at their best and at their worst. I need to be willing to offer grace and forgiveness to them. And, I know there are many occasions when I need the same grace and forgiveness extended to me. [Ephesians 4:32](#) reminds us, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you."

If you ever feel like throwing your things in a suitcase and running away because someone in your family upset you or hurt your feelings, remember God is merciful and gracious to you. Let's practice extending the same to our families.

Points to Ponder:

- Why is it sometimes difficult to offer forgiveness to those in our family?
- Can you think of a time when someone extended grace and forgiveness to you?
- How did that make you feel?
- What does grace mean to you?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the forgiveness and grace You extend to me. Help me to give grace and forgiveness to others. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Finding Water in the Desert Diane Estep

Scripture: [Psalm 42:1](#)

Have you ever been busy? I'm not referring to a busy day where you have two meetings at work and a dental appointment scheduled in the afternoon, your children have piano lessons after school, your in-laws are coming for dinner, and you have four loads of laundry to be done so your family can wear clean clothes the next day. I'm not talking about a single busy day. I'm talking about a busy "season" where the hurried pace of life lasts for a while. You find yourself on a fast merry-go-round, and you can't get off. Where it's easy to wake up one day and find yourself depleted. Parched. Empty.

My husband and I raised two active and athletic boys, Josh and Jeff. You name any school sport' and they played it at least once. Baseball was the sport they played the most. And it has the longest season. Conditioning may start in January, and games are scheduled through May. Then summer leagues begin. Josh and Jeff played every year. Two boys. Two different teams. One long season. And then there was basketball season, which began soon after baseball season ended. Looking back, I wonder how we managed! Obviously, we did, but that doesn't mean it wasn't challenging at times.

I remember one July feeling spiritually dry. My soul seemed parched, in desperate need of refreshment. It took me awhile to figure out why I was going through such a dry season until one day it hit me. I was spiritually dry because I had neglected time with God. I was so busy with life that I had neglected the One who sustains.

David wrote in [Psalm 42:1](#), "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." I love the beautiful picture David paints in this verse. A deer, standing along a stream of water, drinking it in as if it had been craving the refreshment of water all day. The picture in my mind's eye is peaceful, yet shows desperation to its fullest.

David reminds us of the desperation, the need we have in our very souls to spend time with God. And not simply because we want to, but because we need to. Our soul longs to be with Him, drinking in all that He has for us. And we need that time with God daily.

Sometimes our family's busy lives draw us away from where we find our stream of refreshment. If you find yourself having a busy day or in the middle of a busy season, remember where your parched soul will find refreshment and rest. Spend some time with your Heavenly Father.

Points to Ponder:

- What keeps you from spending time with God?
- What are some things you and your family could do to make sure each of you experiences refreshment and rest with God?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, You are what keeps my soul refreshed and satisfied. I'm thankful that in any season of my life, my time spent with You supplies all of my needs. You are my source of cool water to my parched soul. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Prepared for the Unexpected

Diane Estep

Scripture: [Psalm 46:1](#)

Eddie and I had an early morning flight. I only had a couple minutes before we had to head out the door, so I thought I better grab something for breakfast. Since we were going to be gone several days, our refrigerator was bare. However, I did see a boiled egg left over from the day before. I thought to myself, "Perfect! I'll simply peel the egg, put it on a paper towel, zap it for 20 seconds and be on my way, breakfast in hand."

When the microwave went off, I quickly opened the door, grabbed the boiled egg and took a bite as I was heading out to the car. And then it happened. I didn't even have time to react. The boiled egg exploded all over my face and my hair. The steam was so intense, it immediately burned my upper lip. I later told Eddie it was like getting instant Botox without paying money for it!

Have you ever been hit by something you never saw coming? Before you knew it, your life or your family's life had been altered by trouble, hardship, or unexpected chaos. We are all faced with some kind of trouble some time in our lives. It may be big and life altering, or the trouble may be small and more like a hiccup on our journey. When those times come, we are told in [Psalm 46:1](#) where to go for our strength and refuge. David says in verse 1, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." When trouble seeks to steal our joy, and knock us down, God is our refuge, our resource and sanctuary. When we don't have the strength to face the day, He supplies us the strength.

David reminds us that God is our "present" help. We don't have to make an appointment, or wait for Him to respond to a text. He is present. He is near. I really like how David leads into [verse 2 of Psalm 46](#), "Therefore, we will not fear." Because we know God is our refuge and present help; even when trouble is looming, we will not fear. Once we truly grasp how great our God is and how present He is in our lives, we don't have to be fearful of today or tomorrow.

I'm thankful that when my family has faced trouble, we knew where to go for help. We knew who our refuge was and we continue to rest on that fact. He is our present help even when the unexpected happens.

Points to Ponder:

- What does it mean to you that God is our refuge?
- How does He help you face the day when trouble is near?
- Find and read scripture that reminds you of God's strength and help. (Examples: [Joshua 1:9-11](#); [Isaiah 41:10](#); [Philippians 4:13](#); [2 Timothy 4:17](#))

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I want to thank You for being my refuge. For the times You have protected me and my family, even for those times when I wasn't aware of needing protection. And thank You for being present. You are all I need. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

The Life of a Never-Ending Prayer Diane Estep

Scripture: [1 Thessalonians 5:17](#)

My prayer life changed when I took [1 Thessalonians 5:17](#) to heart. Paul simply states, “pray continuously.” I’m learning that no matter where I am or what I’m doing, my heart can be in an attitude of prayer.

I hung up the phone, devastated by the news I just heard. I didn’t have to say a word. My face and demeanor spoke for me. Eddie didn’t know the specific need at that moment; but he knew I not only needed to be held, I also needed him to pray for me. That’s what it means to pray continuously—noticing someone needs prayer and then praying with them without hesitation.

My boys were getting on a school bus headed to school, where I couldn’t go with them every day. I wanted God to watch over them, build a hedge of protection around them, and help them make good choices. I wanted God to bless them. So, I prayed those prayers with my boys every day before they headed out the door to the bus stop. And those were the prayers I whispered all day while they were at school. That’s what it means to pray continuously—praying for those things you hold dear every time they tug at your heart.

It was fall, my most favorite time of the year. Our family was riding bikes in a small town in Connecticut. The sky was a brilliant blue and the trees were showing off the spectacular colors of fall. The wind was brisk for me, a South Carolina girl, but I didn’t care. I was with my family, we were all healthy, and I was overwhelmed at God’s goodness and care for each of us. As we rode along that morning, I prayed prayers of thanksgiving, thanking God for the gift of family, health, and His creation. That’s what it means to pray continuously—whispering prayers of praise and thanksgiving throughout your day simply because you recognize God’s goodness to you.

We have the gift of conversation with our Heavenly Father anytime, anywhere. Once we unwrap that gift, we realize it’s easy to pray continuously. Our Heavenly Father is waiting to hear from us by either talking with Him out loud or by our sharing with Him from our thoughts.

When we pray, we take our eyes off our problems and focus on Jesus. When we pray, we take our hearts of thanksgiving and turn them into praise. If we pray continuously, we’ll realize He is listening, waiting to hear us express our need and our love for Him.

Points to Ponder:

- Did you see or hear your parents pray when you were growing up?
- What does it mean for you to pray continuously?
- How can you better practice the gift of praying continuously?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of prayer. Knowing You are waiting to hear from me brings comfort to my heart. Help me keep an attitude of prayer not only in challenging times, but also in good times. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Catch My Heart, Jesus! Melissa G. Pickens

Scripture: [Psalm 88:1](#)

“Catch my heart, Jesus... Catch my heart! *Jesus*, catch my heart!” Those were the desperate words of my mama heart once I was out of earshot from my ten-year-old daughter, Abby, who was quickly going into shock. Someone from a nearby house was calling 911 after hearing the blood-curdling screams above the roar of four-wheelers Abby and her siblings had been riding. Breathless and crouched down to the ground of the pecan orchard, I took advantage of the brief moment to cry out to God.

It had started out a sunshiny, crisp fall day—the end of the kids’ fall break from school. I had been halfway across the country at a women’s retreat in the Colorado Rockies during the first half of their break. So, it was supposed to have been a fun day, a day to reconnect in play before school and strict schedules resumed. Of course, when we set out on our adventure, we had no idea our family’s happy life would very suddenly come to a screeching halt.

Tall grasses had forced us deeper into the orchard where we usually romped and raced. After scoping out the area for safer terrain and giving the green light, I handed over the larger ATV to my son, Drew, and middle daughter, Emily. I didn’t realize our oldest daughter, Ashley, and our youngest, Abby, had already driven out of sight on the smaller vehicle. The other two hurried off to find them. Seconds later, the sound of those aforementioned screams, along with the first sight of Abby covered in blood from her face to her shoes, forever etched in my mind and sent my heart reeling. Then there was the confused, broken look of sheer horror on Ashley’s face, as I instantly knew she would be battling false guilt as the driver.

Both in the orchard and in the ambulance, I thought, *“How could this be happening? This can’t be happening! Oh God, I wish I could stop it and return to the moments just before the accident and continue the day as we had planned—just a day of fun, not all this!”*

The moment suffering sneaks up on us, snatching the rug right out from under our feet and leaving us flat on our back wondering what in the world hit us, is a crucial moment.

Why?

What can be worse than the suffering itself? What it can do to our heart and our relationship with God. We are going to search for security somewhere. It must be in Jesus, the One who has come to give us life ([John 10:10b](#)).

Points to Ponder:

- How have you responded to unexpected suffering in the past?
- How are you responding to suffering now?
- Cry out, “Catch my heart, Jesus! Catch my heart!”

Prayer:

Oh God, this is my prayer. When suffering comes, please catch my heart! When I’m in that moment of shock, help me find my security in You. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Who Is Our Enemy, and Why Does He Care? Melissa G. Pickens

Scripture: [John 10:10](#)

Suffering makes us vulnerable to our enemy, Satan. Jesus warns us in John 10:10 of his insidious intent to steal, kill, and destroy. The apostle Peter also tells us to be of sober mind and be on the alert, for our “enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” ([1 Peter 5:8](#)). A lion scoping out a herd of antelope is going to go for the weak one, the one wounded and brought low, because it is the easiest to kill. Likewise, we are easy prey when we are wounded and suffering.

This is a serious enemy, and a serious threat to our very life, the wellsprings of life from within our heart ([Proverbs 4:23](#)). He doesn’t play nice, and he doesn’t fight fair. He is not satisfied with mere bullying, but rather he wants it all, to utterly destroy. He must be taken seriously.

I remember the first night I fixed my little makeshift bed next to Abby as she lay in the children’s hospital. Only one parent could stay overnight. My husband, Andy, was the last to leave. He tearfully kissed us both goodbye and headed out alone for the thirty-minute drive home. A dark whisper broke the stream of agonizing thoughts as he drove, “If you quit, I’ll quit.”

Almost two years prior to the accident, we co-founded a new ministry. It was a giant leap of faith. The retreat I had attended just before that fateful day in the orchard had also equipped us further for ministry. We felt poised to leap forward, but someone had other plans. Satan was out to strike a deal. “If you quit, I’ll quit,” came the tempting words to a father’s aching heart just wanting his daughter’s pain to go away.

For me, it was subtler and grew over time. A quiet fear, growing louder and stronger with every wave of pain for my daughter, every surgery to repair Abby’s severely crushed face, every scream of Ashley’s fight against depression and suicide, and every search with no answers to relieve her severe wrist pain. Finally, words came with the nameless fear, “You don’t know what else I’ll do if you continue in ministry.” Ultimately, the fear caused me to distrust God’s heart toward us in it all, causing me to question His intent.

That’s what Satan does: Accuses God, makes Him out to be the bad guy. He’ll lie to us at the weakest moments when he knows the lie will *feel* true, hoping to strike a deal, get us to make some sort of agreement with him. He’s been doing this since the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. Not much has changed. Expelled from heaven as Lucifer, the once mightiest and most glorious of all the angels, he’s still seeking revenge against God through His children: *Hit Him where it hurts most; get His kids to distrust Him. He hates God, and would love for us to hate Him, too.*

In addition, our enemy knows who we can be with Christ in us, and he *fears* us. It is no wonder he will stop at nothing to steal, kill, and destroy. He will create doubt about who God is, who we are, even doubts about who he himself is.

In suffering, when we realize we have believed Satan’s lies, we need prayer in the name of Jesus. Doing so breaks any foothold or stronghold the enemy has gained through it, and allows the abundant life of Jesus to flow freely once again.

Points to Ponder:

- Ask God to help you identify any lies from the enemy during times of suffering.
- What lies have you unknowingly believed, and what agreements might you have made with your enemy?
- Spend time in prayer in the name of Jesus. Don't wait until you *feel* like it; we must pray first, then our feelings will follow.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, so much has happened, I don't know where to start. Help me to sift through the ashes, and expose any lies of the enemy I may have believed. I break the agreement with the enemy that _____ (fill in the blank, e.g. "that God cannot be trusted," etc., the Holy Spirit will guide you) in Jesus' name. Replace the lies with Your truth, Jesus. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



GROWTH

ROOTED • GROUNDED • ESTABLISHED

Embrace
Melissa G. Pickens

Scripture: [Isaiah 61:1-3](#)

Something deep inside told me this was going to be a long haul, but I did not want to believe it. The first couple of weeks after the girls' accident, all I could focus on was the end. I cried out: *God, just get this over with, make Abby's face right. Make her face right again! Bring back my daughters!* (For they had been so emotionally and spiritually traumatized they no longer resembled themselves).

I needed help. Unsure exactly how, I reached out to a friend who I knew to be a great intercessor and patient listener in prayer, able to discern the Holy Spirit's movements. In a long email, I spilled my guts of all the happenings since I returned from the retreat, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The next morning, I was both anticipating to read and nervous to read her response. First, she shared in my grief. Then, she reminded me who our enemy is, and even greater, who our GOD is. We'll get to more of that later. I had not explained to her my aching for the end, nor did I have words yet for the fears creeping below the surface, almost unnoticed, but there nonetheless.

This is what she said,

"I went running today at a state park. Running is a spiritual discipline for me; and I as I ran, I asked Jesus about you and your family—how to pray, how to console, how to encourage, how to help, how to offer anything of value to you. Jesus told me to talk to you about the journey. He wants you to embrace what is happening now, and not just long for the end. Those are difficult words to write because I don't know how they are going to hit your heart, but I am trusting that He has prepared you in advance to read them. Stop and breathe. Our God is good. He is good. He is good."

Tears. I had been kicking and screaming, refusing any and all embrace.

Why in the world would we want to embrace what is happening when suffering comes?

We fear it will be the death of us, we fear the weight will be too much and will crush us. Some would accuse to do so is a sign we lack faith. The positivity movement would say to do such is to focus on the negative. Sadly, much of the church has become far too skilled at diminishing pain and suffering, having lost the life-giving art of lament.

Why would God want us to embrace what is happening?

When the ministry of the Messiah is described in [Isaiah 61](#), comfort for those who mourn and healing for the broken-hearted are at the center of his mission. [2 Corinthians 1:5](#) tells us that when suffering overflows in our life, so does the comfort through Christ. Yet, in the initial shock, we tend to reject God's comfort because it isn't resolution to our situation yet. Not to mention, God's goodness has often been called into question. So, sometimes we're not sure we want to embrace Him either.

The moment we embrace what is happening is the moment we can embrace the truth of who God is in our suffering. His heart and intentions toward us *are* good. He *can* be trusted. His mission is to *heal* our shattered

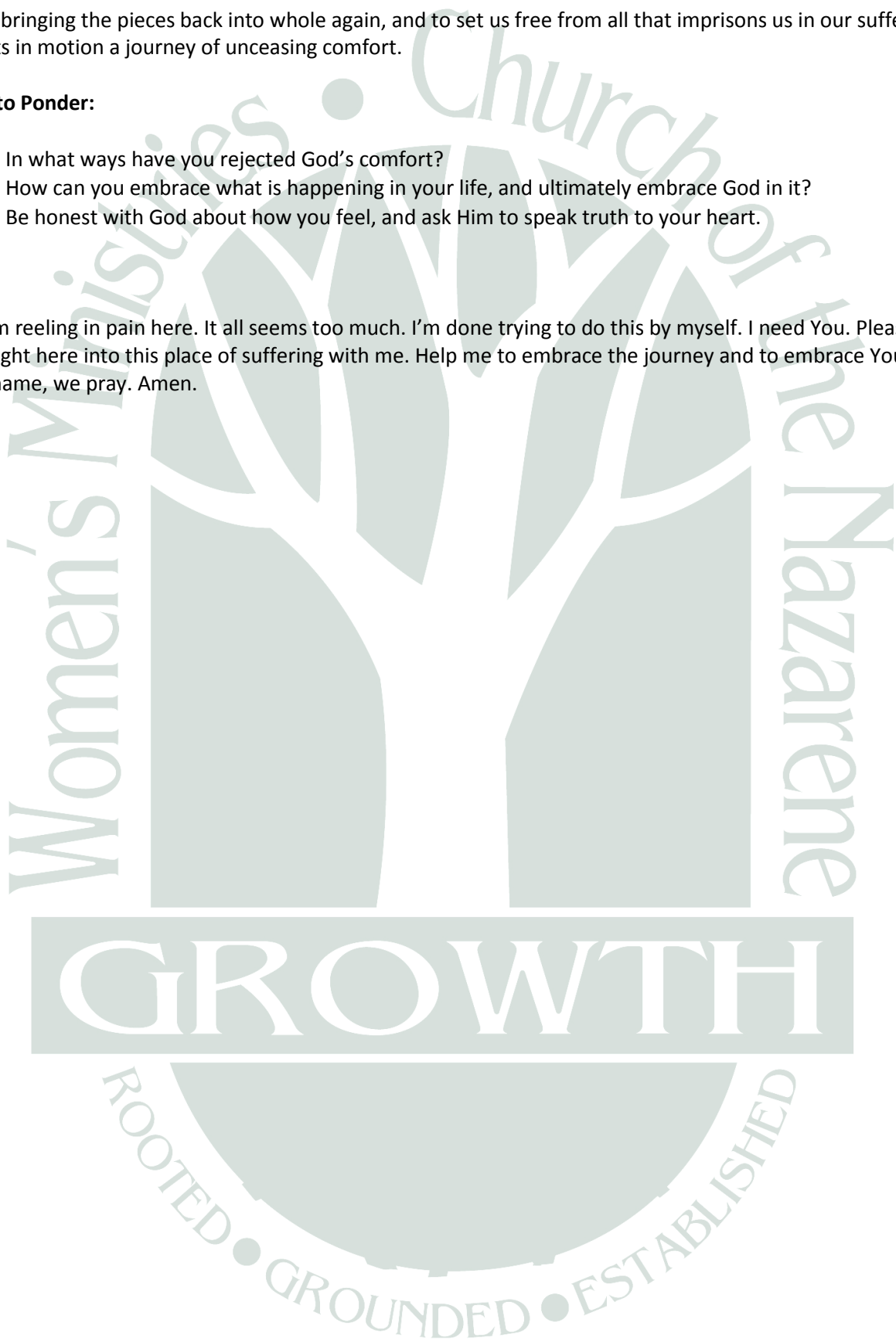
hearts, bringing the pieces back into whole again, and to set us free from all that imprisons us in our suffering. This sets in motion a journey of unceasing comfort.

Points to Ponder:

- In what ways have you rejected God's comfort?
- How can you embrace what is happening in your life, and ultimately embrace God in it?
- Be honest with God about how you feel, and ask Him to speak truth to your heart.

Prayer:

God, I'm reeling in pain here. It all seems too much. I'm done trying to do this by myself. I need You. Please come right here into this place of suffering with me. Help me to embrace the journey and to embrace You. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



What Will God Do About Our Enemy?
Melissa G. Pickens

Scripture: [Exodus 15:3](#), [Psalm 28:8](#), [Zephaniah 3:17](#)

Never had I seen the almost seven-foot, concealed gully the girls sailed into that fateful October day. My husband and son had pulled the small wrecked four-wheeler out late the night of the accident.

It was dusk as I drove my mini SUV right past the site, continuing on the bumpy ride between the rows of pecan trees, deep into the middle of the 200+ acres. Why? So no one would hear my screams. I called the enemy every name I could think of, yelling as loud as I could. Exhausted from spewing all the pent-up anger and hurt, I lay in the back of the vehicle, sobbing. I cried out to God, pleading with Him to come and speak into my pain.

When I grew still, hoping, waiting, and listening, I heard His voice say to read Psalm 18. This is what it says, and this is what God will do about our enemy!

1 "I love You, O Lord, my strength." **2** The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. **3** I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. **4** The cords of death encompassed me, and the torrents of ungodliness terrified me. **5** The cords of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me. **6** In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears. **7** Then the earth shook and quaked; and the foundations of the mountains were trembling and were shaken, because He was angry. **8** Smoke went up out of His nostrils, and fire from His mouth devoured; coals were kindled by it. **9** He bowed the heavens also, and came down with thick darkness under His feet. **10** He rode upon a cherub and flew; and He sped upon the wings of the wind. **11** He made darkness His hiding place, His canopy around Him, darkness of waters, thick clouds of the skies. **12** From the brightness before Him passed His thick clouds, hailstones and coals of fire. **13** The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered His voice, hailstones and coals of fire. **14** He sent out His arrows, and scattered them, and lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them. **15** Then the channels of water appeared, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at Your rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of the breath of Your nostrils. **16** He sent from on high, He took me; He drew me out of many waters. **17** He delivered me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me.

Our enemy may be a vicious beast, but as my friend reminded me in her email, our God is greater ([1 John 4:4](#)), a loving, glorious, and faithful Friend. He is a Warrior. His anger towards our enemy is ferocious and terrible, but His love for us and His healing are amazing and powerful. He lets nothing go to waste—no exceptions. God has the final say over Satan, and He will get the glory.

Points to Ponder:

- Where have you seen God rescue you from those who were too mighty for you?
- Where do you want to see God rescue you from those who are too mighty for you?

Prayer:

I love You, Lord. You are my strength! My only hope! Oh, God, come and rescue me! In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

The Truth about It All
Melissa G. Pickens

Scripture: [James 1:2-3](#)

As far as I could remember, I had heard it all both inside and outside of the church, and I was done with it. Knee-deep in my own family's suffering, I blurted out loud one morning to God, "I want to know the TRUTH. I want to know what YOU have to say about suffering."

[James 1](#) came to mind. I honestly didn't know off the top of my head what it was going to say until I read it. Though it took four years of this journey to fully understand the depths of James 1, at least in the moment I understood there is a purpose to suffering. It isn't for nothing.

We must let suffering have its reward: that by it and through it we can be made perfect and complete, not lacking in anything. That's the transformation God is after. We are told to persevere and endure the journey until our transformation is complete. Wow.

I was not sure if I wanted to shout with glee or cry. How much more might I have to endure to be complete? Yet, James is telling us to take joy whenever we encounter various trials. I remembered how one of the ministry staff at the retreat I attended just before the accident prayed over me before I left, saying repeatedly "Your banner over her is JOY." What did all this mean?

Jesus knows a bit about this. [Hebrews 12:2](#) tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, who for the *joy* set before Him, *endured* the cross (italics mine). He had to endure the cross, and then the joy would come. But it was the coming joy He focused on in order to endure the cross.

His presence is the joy set before us. Even Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ([Matthew 5:3](#)). He is not talking about a faraway kingdom, but of how God comes close, bringing His presence and His just rule into our lives. This is evident in how He taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Right here, right now in this poor, brought-low place, we can have Jesus. We will have Jesus.

How else might we have joy in suffering? It is in knowing "surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried" ([Isaiah 53:4](#)). Is that not what we want? Someone to taste this bitter cup with us, to take in the fullness of our suffering, and swallow it down before it swallows us. When we have Jesus and His kingdom, we know we are no longer alone in our sorrow. We know more of the Father's heart, the One who collects every tear in His bottle ([Psalm 56:8](#)).

The truth is, the point of our existence is to know God intimately, as He truly is, to be made complete, lacking in nothing. This comes by experience, and suffering provides part of that experience.

Take joy, my sisters.

Points to Ponder:

- How have you perceived your sufferings? Have you thought it all for nothing? Pointless? Or as having worth?
- How have you perceived God in your sufferings? Perhaps as far away? Indifferent? Or close?

- How has God been close, sharing in the bitterness?
- You are not alone in your suffering. Write down some of the ways you can see how this is true. If you cannot see it, ask God to show you.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, help me take it all in. Thank you for not wasting my pain. Thank you for coming close, revealing Your heart. Give me a heart to understand. I love You. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Interpretation
Melissa G. Pickens

Scripture: [John 16:33](#)

“How we interpret our suffering is almost more important than the suffering itself.” – John Eldredge

Throughout the Bible, we can identify a few ways through which suffering comes. The first is through the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the beginning of creation, they enjoyed perfect, unhindered, unstained, and unmarred fellowship with God himself. They existed in perfect union with Him. There was no death, pain, or sin. Like us, they were also given the freedom to choose. God needed them to trust Him on this one thing: not to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (I give more explanation at [Breathe Deeply](#).)

Most of us know the rest of the story. After being tempted by the serpent in the garden, they ate, and in doing so fell from glory. It was like opening Pandora’s Box. All kinds of peril came upon humankind and still do to this day because of that fall. You have probably noticed we don’t live in Eden anymore.

Secondly, remember Job. Satan single-handedly stole everything he had, one by one, including his own health. He will steal anything to get us to question God, and then go in for the kill in an attempt to destroy our hearts. That is the reason we must guard our hearts above all else, for from it flows the wellsprings of life ([Proverbs 4:23](#)). It is also why we must be alert to the devil’s schemes, as we learned in a previous devotion, guarding ourselves from making agreements with him.

Lastly, there are the times we bring suffering upon ourselves. Continuing the fall of Adam and Eve, people still make choices that bring suffering upon them and/or others, such as the consequences of sin, sometimes wreaking great havoc and devastation in our lives. It is not the cause of God, for God tempts no one ([James 1:13](#)). Remember, there are other agents acting in this world.

Be careful not to jump to conclusions here. Not all suffering is the direct result of sin. Sometimes, we just do not seek wisdom. We speak at a time when it is not wise to do so. Not every person’s battle is ours to fight, either. Learn to ask God before speaking or getting involved in someone else’s battle, “Is this the time to say something?” “Do You want me involved here, God?” I learned the hard way that asking could save a lot of tension and agony. James encourages in James 1:5, if any of you lacks wisdom, ask of God who gives generously and won’t be condescending when you ask for it.

Some suffering is avoidable, and some is not. Either way, Peter tells us to arm ourselves for suffering—be prepared for it, rather than surprised by it as though some strange thing were happening ([1 Peter 4:1, 12](#)). When we misinterpret our own or others’ suffering, we do more damage and hinder or even prevent the healing process.

Remember Jesus’ words, “In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” ([John 16:33](#)).

Points to Ponder:

- How have you interpreted or misinterpreted your suffering?
- In prayer, ask God to interpret for you. This may take time and patience, as God knows when we are ready to hear.

- Remember, understanding and interpretation do not come immediately after a harsh blow. If you are in that place, you can push to have understanding or you can have God. Choose God! The healing of our heart can come without understanding.

Prayer:

Dearest God, Your thoughts are not like mine, and Your ways are higher. Help me when I misinterpret my own or others' suffering. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Misplaced Hope
Melissa G. Pickens

Scripture: [Proverbs 13:12](#)

During the first year after our girls' accident, our family also lost our home. Yes, we became homeless. The next nine months, we slept on a mixture of air mattresses, couches, a futon, and one real mattress with a bed frame at my parent's house—the six of us shared one bathroom! It is amazing how little space one actually needs when forced to downsize. Whatever we didn't sell or give away from our 3,200 square foot home was crammed into a 20'x20' storage room. While uprooted from most of our physical comforts, Abby continued to have reconstructive surgeries.

That loss added insult to injury for all of us. I remember God distinctly asking me one morning as I made my bed long before the foreclosure was final: "What are you hoping for?"

Well, I hoped for a lot of things. I hoped we would not lose the house, that God would save the day with a miracle. I hoped Andy would land a higher paying job. I hoped Abby's face would eventually be healed to its original, God-given design. I hoped Ashley's pain would be stopped forever. All of these were good things; none were inherently bad or wrong. Yet, something was off.

"You are hoping for something, rather than in Me."

OH! My eyes were opened! God was so very right! How could I not have noticed this before?

I knew God could do any one of those things if He thought it was what would benefit us most. But remember, God is not after the temporal things of this earth, but rather that which is eternal ([2 Corinthians 4:18](#)). This is huge. How many sleepless nights have we wasted away hoping for something temporary, all the while missing what God was up to in the process?

In addition, as long as we focus our hope only on what may or may not come, we miss the importance of grieving our losses. When we hope in God, we do so honestly. We do not deny our pain or loss. Instead, we name our feelings; we grieve, lament, kick, scream, and cry as our hearts need. Then, we will receive what our heart truly longs for – the presence of a good, strong, and tender God who heals and comforts and quiets us with His love.

Therefore we do not lose heart; though our outer man is decaying, our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison ([2 Corinthians 4:16-17](#)). Paul was not diminishing our suffering. Rather, he was well acquainted with it! A few chapters later ([11:23-28](#)), he gives a long list of unfathomable affliction he himself endured. What the apostle Paul meant was that the weight of our sufferings in this world pales in comparison to the eternal weight of glory that is ours in Christ Jesus. You can put your hope in that and take it to the bank!

What could possibly make our suffering small in comparison? Our restoration. First, there is the Great Restoration in which all creation groans for completion. But there is restoration in this life too. Jesus came to give us abundant life now, not just later. "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" ([Psalm 27:13](#)).

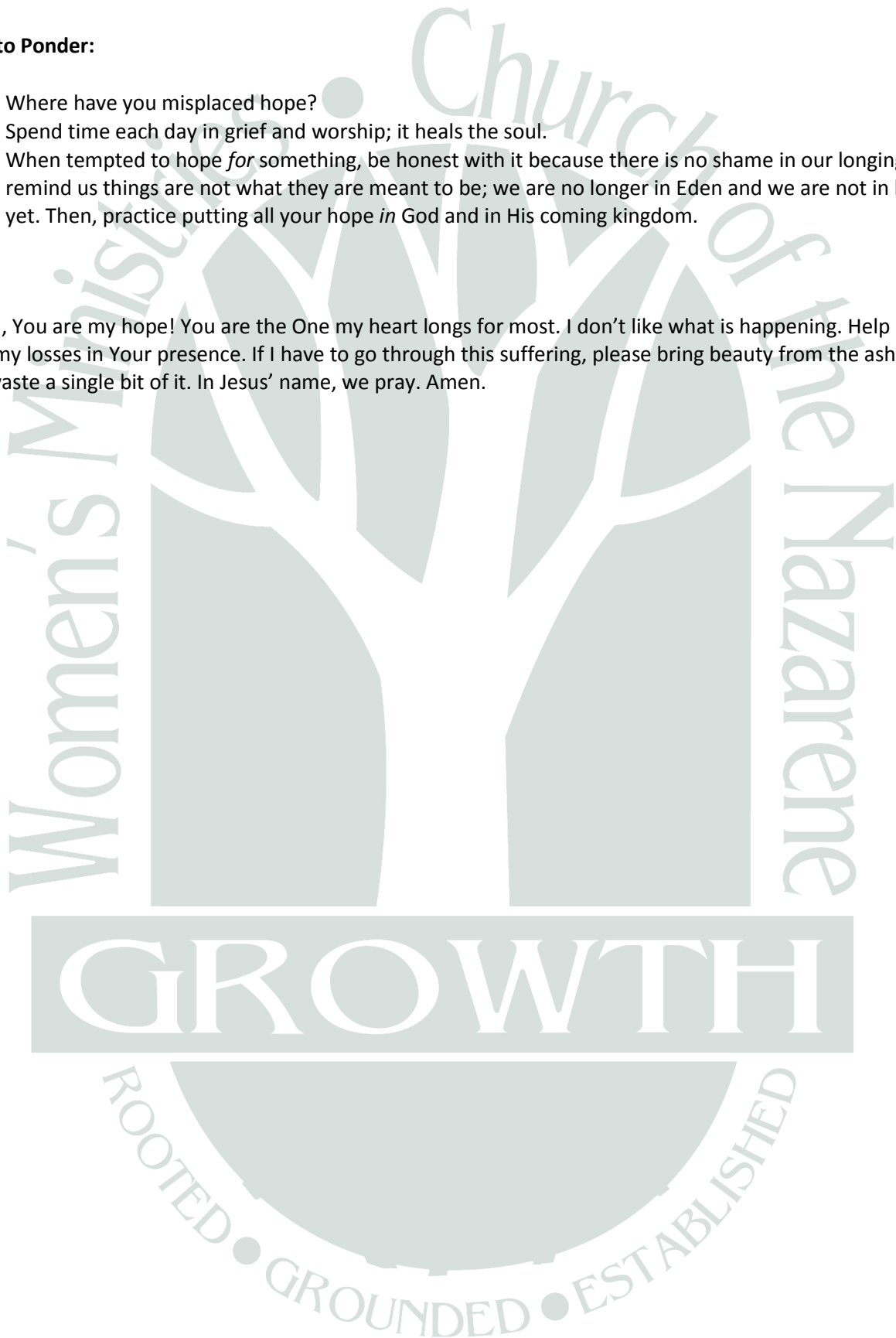
Suffering does not have the final word—not here, nor for eternity. God does. Such hope will not disappoint!

Points to Ponder:

- Where have you misplaced hope?
- Spend time each day in grief and worship; it heals the soul.
- When tempted to hope *for* something, be honest with it because there is no shame in our longings. They remind us things are not what they are meant to be; we are no longer in Eden and we are not in heaven yet. Then, practice putting all your hope *in* God and in His coming kingdom.

Prayer:

Oh God, You are my hope! You are the One my heart longs for most. I don't like what is happening. Help me to grieve my losses in Your presence. If I have to go through this suffering, please bring beauty from the ashes, and don't waste a single bit of it. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Preserve in Joy!
Cheryl Roland

Scripture: [Isaiah 51:11b](#)

With a twinkle in his eye and a warm hand shake, Raymond welcomed us to his church home. The pastor explained that Raymond was a key leader whose contagious joy drew people in like a magnet. As we stepped into the sanctuary, we noticed a beautiful quilt displayed on an easel. The large blue ribbon indicated we were not the only ones who recognized the intricate hand stitching and perfectly coordinated colors. It was Raymond's masterpiece. This remarkable 82-year-old gentleman was a quilter, a gardener, a cook, a farmer, and a home spun author. The small town weekly newspaper proudly featured his column under the pen name "Farmer Stick in the Mud."

Raymond promised to share his inspiration with us. Several weeks later, we received a box packed full of articles and newspaper clippings from Farmer Stick in the Mud. However, the most surprising gift was a tattered old jacket with bold letters stitched across the back. "Farmer Stick in the Mud says, 'I ain't stupid, I just do stupid things.'" Needless to say, I treasure that gift!

We never use the word stupid, but sometimes I also do stupid things. How about you? It often happens when our responsibilities are at their peak; when we are trying to give of our best to the Master, and we leave our cell phone at the store or misplace our car in the parking lot. The Bible warns us, "The thief comes only to steal, and kill and destroy" our joy ([John 10:10](#)). Be alert to the schemes of the enemy. Notice [Daniel 7:25a](#) in the Amplified Version. "And he [Satan] shall speak words against the Most High [God] and shall wear out the saints of the Most High ..."

Spiritual, emotional, and physical exhaustion robs us of joy. When we run on empty, the enemy of our soul creates confusion, and we do "stupid things." A dear saint said, "Satan's got a bag o' tricks, but he don't have no new tricks! God's mercies? They're new every morning!"

[Isaiah 35](#) beautifully describes God's great mercy. Oh, the joy of the redeemed! When we seek Him, God strengthens and refreshes us by the power of His Spirit. I learned that Raymond persevered through terrible trials, a devastating fire, the loss of his precious wife, and a multitude of financial setbacks. But through the power of God's Holy Spirit, everlasting joy crowned his head and spilled over onto all who crossed his path.

Points to Ponder:

- Do you lack joy? Is your soul parched? Read [Isaiah 35](#) and list God's promises.
- See [Isaiah 35:3-4](#). Have you ever experienced God's strengthening power? Share the circumstances and His loving provision.
- [Isaiah 35:8](#) tells us there is a Way of Holiness. Charles Spurgeon marveled: "Engineering has done much to tunnel mountains, and bridge abysses; but the greatest triumph of engineering is that which made a way from sin to holiness, from death to life, from condemnation to perfection. Who could make a road over the mountains of our iniquities but Almighty God? None but the Lord of love would have wished it; none but the God of wisdom could have devised it; none but the God of power could have carried it out." What joy!
- Are you on the Holiness Highway? Read [Isaiah 35:8](#). Who will never travel on it?
- Read [Acts 19:2](#). Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed? Share your testimony.

Prayer:

Oh, Father, we praise You for the Way of Holiness that leads to everlasting joy! In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Preserve to New Life!
Cheryl Roland

Scripture: [Ephesians 2: 4-5](#)

Men, drugs, and alcohol, Sadieⁱ was the life of the party. Her fourth husband was a decent man who loved her, but he too was a substance abuser. One day an officer brought devastating news. Sadie's husband was found dead, lying in an alleyway not far from their apartment – and she was arrested for murder. After spending 18 months in prison for a crime she did not commit, she was released without a home, resources, or family support.

Sadie lived on the streets and traveled along the railroad tracks until she became too sick and too weak to press on. In God's great mercy, someone rescued her from the pit and dropped her off on the steps of a shelter for homeless women. Near death, she required intensive medical and nutritional care.

In the warmth and safety of that loving Christian environment, Sadie thrived. It wasn't long until she discovered new life in Christ Jesus as her Savior. Her bold words of faith and gratitude are forever etched in my heart. She declared, "This place saved my life, and Jesus saved my soul."

From death to life, Sadie's journey reflects God's relentless love. She was dead emotionally, spiritually, socially, and economically; but through the life-giving blood of Jesus, she became new.

There are some who have every resource necessary for life but who are walking dead. Theologian, William Barclay, described the symptoms. To be spiritually dead means:

- To stop trying. To view all our faults as acceptable and all virtues unattainable.
- To stop feeling. To look at evil and feel no indignation; to look at sorrows and feel no compassion.
- To stop thinking. To view new truth, new methods, and new thought as simply a disturbance with which we cannot be bothered.
- To stop repenting. To sin and not grieve. To do wrong without regret. When sin has lost its horror, we are spiritually dead.ⁱⁱ

Because of God's great love for Sadie and the saving grace of Jesus Christ, she moved from death to new life and shared His joy with countless others. Because of God's great love for us, we too can find new life in Him.

Points to Ponder:

- Review William Barclay's symptoms of spiritual death. Is God talking to you about new life in Him?
- Read [John 4:1-42](#). What similarities do you see between Sadie and the Samaritan woman?
- In what ways did Jesus express humility and approachability in His conversation with her at the well?
- What barriers could have prevented the Samaritan woman from receiving new life?
- How did the Lord use Sadie's adversities to reach her?
- Read [John 4:39-42](#). How do these verses impact your life?
- Share ways God has used the testimony of these two women to draw you closer to Him.

Prayer:

In the morning, when I rise, give me Jesus. And when I am alone, give me Jesus. And when I come to die, give me Jesus. You can have all this world, just give me Jesus!ⁱⁱⁱ In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Persevere Through Fear! Cheryl Roland

Scripture: [Psalms 34:4](#)

Fight, flight, or freeze, how do you respond to a pending threat? We all experience varying levels of fear. Most Americans agree that going to the dentist prompts strong emotion. Other top contenders include the fear of dogs, heights, crowds, small spaces, germs, spiders, snakes, and storms. I personally find mice absolutely repulsive! Fear is a natural emotion. When it is confined to healthy boundaries, fear protects us from harm. But when it exceeds the realm of rational thinking, panic attacks and phobias limit our ability and chisel away at our confidence.

Without a doubt, there are situations that disturb us; but there are also fears that affect our inner sense of safety or our ego. There is an internal voice that constantly alerts us to the possibility of failure, embarrassment, or rejection. When our ego is threatened, we are tempted to “Edge God Out” and possibly compromise our Christian character.

For years I struggled with panic attacks and irrational, controlling dread. Fear condemned my efforts to serve the Lord and created a vacuum of disobedience and debate. When God called me to push through the boundaries of my discomfort, often my response was, “Lord, I’m afraid.” Fear bred and fed all my insecurities. Fear affected every relationship. Jealousy, anger, loneliness, and doubt thwarted my ability to love my husband, nurture my children, and develop deep friendships with other women. “Fear is one of the deadliest enemies of the human spirit.”^{iv}

Prior to God’s healing touch, Satan, the voice of fear, was either accusing me or excusing me. Fear was like the rodents I detested, gnawing holes in my heart. It rotted every relationship and robbed me of peace.

One glorious day, I came to the end of my self. Jesus’ voice pierced the darkness of fear and doubt. “Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow” ([Isaiah 1:18](#)). I was cleansed and filled with God’s precious Holy Spirit. Treasures of His grace flowed over me with increased “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Today, the greatest adventure of my life is to declare that God’s perfect love has set me from fear and all of its torments. I am free indeed!

Points to Ponder:

- What are you afraid of?
- Have your fears ever caused you to compromise or disobey God’s will? What were the consequences?
- When we live in fear, our primary focus is self-preservation. In the spirit of prayer, is God asking you to surrender yourself? (Self-absorption, self-centeredness, self-consciousness, self-deception, self-denial, self-governing, self-interest, self-pity, self-protection, self-reliance, self-seeking.) May all self be slain!
- Describe a situation where you felt empowered by the Holy Spirit to persevere through fear.
- God’s Word gives strength and healing. Read and record the following promises. Which one is most precious to you? [Psalms 34:1-4](#), [Isaiah 41:10](#), [Psalms 56:3-4](#), [Philippians 4:4-9](#), [John 14:26-27](#), [2 Timothy 1:7](#), [Psalms 94:18-19](#).
- Ask God to help you memorize His promises. They bring instant strength in the face of fear.

Prayer:

Oh Father, I sought Your peace, and You answered me and delivered me from all my fears! I will forever declare Your praises and live to honor You! In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Persevere in Times of Storm! Cheryl Roland

Scripture: [Hebrews 6:19](#)

Without warning, the tornado swept through their neighborhood in the dark of night. The fierce wind shattered everything in its path, destroying dozens of homes. Nettie^{vi}, her husband, and two teenage children barely got out alive. While embracing each other, they surveyed the damage as the rain drenched all their hopes and dreams. The Pyle's home, their vehicles, and most of their belongings were buried under the rubble. At day break we noticed the forceful wind had tunneled through their bedroom and spewed their clothes to the tree tops across the street. Rain continued for days on end. Mud, muck, and the stench of the storm nearly took our breath away.

Overwhelmed by their great loss, another storm of a different nature was brewing. Their son, a junior in high school, tearfully announced his girlfriend was pregnant. Sorrow upon sorrow brought waves of grief and disbelief. But they, in sincere humility, followed Job's example, fell to the ground in worship, and prayed that the name of the Lord would be praised ([Job 1:20b](#)). Someone said it well, "The storms of life prove the strength of our anchor."^{vii}

Researchers observe that in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, people suffer in multiple ways. Economic and property loss create unbearable stress. There is an interruption to daily routine and inexpressible inconvenience. Emotional and physical exhaustion, depression, fear, and anxiety strain every relationship. In fact, statistics prove that divorce, domestic violence, and child abuse escalate the year following a storm.^{viii}

The Pyle family persevered, and God blessed them with steadfast courage. It took time, a remarkable church, and unshakable faith in the Lord Jesus Christ to help them regain their stability. Within a year, they hosted an open house, and all who entered were invited to write a verse of scripture on their concrete floor. They were overcomers. Their lives reflected steadfast hope anchored in Jesus. When we spend time with the Lord in the calm days of life, we will discover His strength to face the storms. "The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock; And exalted be God, the rock of my salvation" ([2 Samuel 22:47](#)).

Points to Ponder:

- Describe a time of loss or struggle you have faced in the past year.
- An anchor is a symbol of strength and stability. How did God sustain you in your storm?
- At times, we suffer from inner turmoil, doubt, and discouragement that is not always evident to others. Read [Psalms 42](#) and [43](#) and share God's comforting steps to recover hope.
- How can you and your church family be more intentional in helping others following a crisis?
- Read [James 1:2-5](#). What is the result when we persevere?
- What does [James 1:6](#) say about one who doubts? Pray for increased faith in almighty God.

Prayer:

Father, when the storms of doubt seek to uproot the very foundations of faith, there is steady safety in the presence of Jesus Christ. In every storm that shakes the human heart, there is peace with Jesus Christ.^{ix} In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Persevere in Faithfulness!
Cheryl Roland

Scripture: [2 Peter 1:3,4,5,6](#)

It was no secret. Everyone at the ladies' retreat knew Shannon^x was under house arrest for shoplifting. For years, she had made good money by "boosting" then selling stolen items to those in her community. Although guilt plagued Shannon, this highly organized shoplifting method earned her great admiration among her peers.

One glorious day, Shannon met Jesus! The transformation was so remarkable that she soon led her husband and children into His saving grace; they discovered the joys of Christian worship and fellowship. Even though it drastically reduced their income, Shannon stopped the boosting business and got a job working for minimum wage. However, several months later her husband was laid off, and one of their children had some medical problems. The bills began to pile up. Shannon, in a desperate attempt to provide for her family, went back to boosting just one more time. This time she got caught! Deeply sorry for her actions, Shannon discovered that God's grace is greater than all our sin. Her restoration and voice of praise brought Him glory.

The Bible gives a strong admonition to "make every effort to add to your faith ... perseverance." Persevering is being steadfast in difficult circumstances. It is unwavering faith, not in our own striving, but faith in almighty God to give us everything we need for life and godliness through Jesus.

The Scripture urges us to make "every effort to add to our faith." One scholar explained that Peter chose a Greek word that does not imply "try all the things you can think of" but one which says, "do it as fast as you can; hasten, be zealous."^{xi} Peter wants his readers to quickly increase in the Christian virtues of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love. For if we possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep us from being ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.^{xii}

Points to Ponder:

- Read [2 Peter 1:3-11](#) and suggest ways we can add to our faith.
- Of the Christian virtues listed in [2 Peter 1:5-7](#), which one do you most desire to increase. Why?
- How could Shannon and her family have resolved their financial problems without sinning?
- What steps would you take to help one who has fallen regain their victory in Jesus?
- Share scriptures, people, activities that have helped you persevere in your Christian walk.

Prayer:

Oh Father, thank You for giving us everything we need for life and godliness. May our faith increase. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Persevere in Taking Time! Cheryl Roland

Scripture: [Ecclesiastes 3:1](#)

We are driven by the clock. We save time and spend time, make time and lose time. However, only time will tell if we have invested in God, who is timeless and eternal. The Psalmist declared, "I trust in You, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in Your hands" ([Psalm 31:15](#)).

In ancient days, time was marked by sundials. One of the primary responsibilities of the Priests and Levites was to sound the trumpets every three hours to mark time. The blowing of the shofar or ram's horn announced the beginning and ending of the Sabbath Day. Each new month was announced by bonfires lit on specific mountains. Regardless of the method, the people were unified, in sync, and aware of the passing of time.^{xiii}

Roosters, although unscientific, were a tremendous help in ancient days. They were a prized possession by both Greeks and Romans. Roosters instinctively crow several times after midnight but they save their best voice to announce the dawning of a new day.^{xiv}

When Jesus predicted all of His disciples would fall away, Peter emphatically declared his allegiance, "Even if all fall away, I will not" ([Mark 14:31](#)). Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, today- yes, tonight —before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown Me three times." Peter the rock, turned to loose gravel^{xv} in the face of testing.

The scriptures teach that prior to Pentecost, Peter was bold and spirited, impulsive yet slow to understand the mysteries of Jesus. But after Pentecost the contrast was drastic. He displayed courageous love and undying loyalty to Christ the Son of God. Peter is proof of the power of Christ's resurrection and the mighty work of the Holy Spirit.

At one time Peter denied Christ. Is it possible that we deny Christ sometimes? Jesus warned Peter, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So, when you have repented and turned to Me again, strengthen your brothers" ([Luke 22:31-32](#), NLT).

When we neglect spending time in God's Word and time listening for His instructions, we will surely fail. The Bible cautions us, "Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world" ([James 4:8](#) NLT).

Jesus, full of grace and glory, alerted Peter to be on guard against Satan's deadly schemes. He then assured him of His love and complete restoration in the face of failure.

Points to Ponder:

- Read [Acts 1:4-5](#). What did the resurrected Christ instruct the disciples to do? Why?
- What were the results of obeying Jesus' instructions? Have you received the Gift of the Father?
- Read [Acts 2](#). What verses reflect Peter's strength and the power of God's Holy Spirit?
- What time is the best time of day for you to seek the Savior? Read [Psalm 119:147-148](#).
- Share devotional resources you have found especially helpful in taking time to seek the Savior.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, forgive me for denying You at any time. May I discover new heights and depths of joy in You. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.



Preserve in Passion!
Cheryl Roland

Scripture: [Matthew 5:13a](#)

We often tease about our four favorite food groups: salt, sugar, caffeine, and grease. Nutritionists caution us against the excessive consumption of all four, but salt is necessary for good health. Human blood contains salt, and body cells must have salt to function properly.

In ancient days, salt was such a precious commodity it was traded ounce for ounce for gold. It was thought to relieve a multitude of ailments, including toothaches, stomachaches, and “heaviness of mind.”^{xvi} It was used to bathe newborn babies and served as an antiseptic for wounds. They had no refrigeration, so salt was a flavorful preservative for their meat and fish. A slab of salt was placed at the base of their ovens to intensify the heat. Eventually the salt slab lost its heating properties and had to be removed and replaced with a fresh layer. The useless salt was thrown into the road to help absorb mud or to fill in holes.^{xvii}

Salt was an emblem of purity, healing, and the sanctifying influence of a holy life on others. Jesus said to the twelve disciples and He says to each of us who love Him, “You are the salt of the earth!” You are essential! Your contribution to the Kingdom is vital.

In Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting of the Lord’s Supper, it appears that Judas has accidentally knocked over the salt cellar with his arm. It was considered a sign of broken trust since in that day to eat salt and bread together was to form an unbreakable bond of friendship.^{xviii}

It was a custom among the Jews that if one left the faith to live a life of disobedience but returned to repent, he would lie down across the door of the Synagogue and invite people to trample on him as they entered. “Trample upon me who am the salt which has lost its savor.”^{xix}

The people of Jesus’ day understood and we too must understand that when we allow disobedience, apathy, carelessness, or indifference to rule our lives, we are the salt that has lost its savor. When we cease to rely on God alone or are guided by our selfish desires, we are salt that has lost its savor. Paul urged his followers, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt so that you may know how to answer everyone” ([Colossians 4:6](#)). Salt is wisdom that profits others and glorifies God. Salt is our testimony and the power of God’s Holy Spirit that fills us with passion to make a difference for the cause of Christ.

Points to Ponder:

- Share ways you are passionate about influencing others for Christ.
- Who is salt and strength to you?
- Share ways you relate to [Colossians 4:6](#). How are your conversations seasoned with salt?
- Read [Psalm 51:10-13](#). When we are pure, how will God use us?

Prayer:

Father, purify me and renew a steadfast spirit within me that I may be more passionate for others to know You as Lord. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Name changed to protect the identity of the individual.

ⁱⁱ Paraphrased. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John – The Daily Study Bible, John, Volume 1*, page 191-192.

ⁱⁱⁱ African-American song lyrics, Alma Blackman tune, *Give Me Jesus*, 1984.

^{iv} Jan Stoop quoted by Carol Kent, *Tame Your Fears*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1993), page 209.

^v Galatians 5:22-23, The Holy Bible, New International Version

^{vi} Names changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

^{vii} Source unknown

^{viii} Karla Starr, [Medical Examiner- Slate](http://theslate.com/articles/healthandsceince), “Will Sandy Bring a Baby Boom or Baby Bust? How disasters change marriage, divorce and birth rates.” Nov. 5, 2012, <http://theslate.com/articles/healthandsceince>. Accessed Feb. 2, 2017.

^{ix} William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew Daily Bible Studies, Volume 1*, page 324-325.

^x Name changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

^{xi} John Hendershot, *Becoming Closer - Second Peter, Make Every Effort*. www.becomingcloser.org/2Peter. Accessed January 2017.

^{xii} See 2 Peter 1:5-8 The Holy Bible New International Version

^{xiii} Solomon’s Temple, *The Service of the Priests and Levites*, www.3.telus.net/public/kstam/en/temple/priests. Accessed Feb. 5, 2017.

^{xiv} Erick Lyons, Apologetic Press, *How Many Times Did the Rooster Crow?* www.apologeticpress.org. Accessed February 5, 2017.

^{xv} Adapted phrase. *The Christian Advocate*, Vol. 87, May 2, 1912, www.books.google.com. Accessed February 5 2017.

^{xvi} Marta Zaraska, *The Washington Post Health and Science, Pass the Salt Please*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>, May 4, 2015. Accessed February 16, 2017.

^{xvii} John J. Pilch, *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* (The Liturgical Press. 1995. Pp 25-27). <http://liturgy.slu.edu>. Accessed February 12, 2017.

^{xviii} Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread, Spirit of the Master*, August 20, 2012

<http://newepistles.wordpress.com/2008/10/17/acts-14-jesus-eating-salt-with-his-disciples>. Accessed February 16, 2017.

^{xix} William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), page 118.

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