JESUS AT THE CENTER OF THE KINGDOM

DAILY DEVOTIONAL

There's something powerful about being in Jesus' presence. It changes us. Just as we're shaped by the people we spend the most time with, we're transformed as we spend time with Him. The more we draw close, the more His heart becomes our own.

As a church, let's commit to slowing down and intentionally pursuing a deeper relationship with Jesus. Let's allow our love for Him to grow, and from that love, let our care for others overflow. It's a beautiful thing to realize that the God of all creation wants to meet with us, speak to us, and walk with us daily.

My prayer is that Brookwood becomes known as a church that seeks God above all else, that we hunger for His presence and long to hear His voice. The greatest calling on your life is simply this: to know God.

May these daily readings draw you closer to Him, stir your spirit, and awaken a deeper desire to know Jesus. Let's make space for Him–and watch how He shapes our hearts.

Bryan Jones, Senior Pastor

Devotional writings by:

Miriam Beard Gene Beckner Sandy Grinnell Ryan Hendrick Bryan Jones Michelle Simmons J.C. Thompson Doug Wildman

DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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

Matthew 6:9b (NLT)

- What do You want to say to me today as my Father?
- "... may Your name be kept holy." Matthew 6:9c (NLT)
 - What do You want to reveal to me about Your power today?

"May Your Kingdom come soon."

- Matthew 6:10a (NLT)
- Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.

"Give us today the food we need,"

Matthew 6:11 (NLT)

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

"and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us" Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

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

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

Matthew 6:13a (NLT)

• Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?

GOD'S APPROVAL OVER MAN'S

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Galatians 1:10 (ESV)

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a cartoon called *Recess* followed the adventures of a group of kids learning life lessons on the playground. Each episode used childhood situations to explore different aspects of growing up, navigating social difficulties, dealing with change/loss and learning to accept yourself. The show wasn't a staple in the household growing up, but the message from an episode called *Nobody Doesn't Like T.J.* has stuck out over the years.

This episode follows a kid named T.J., who's popular and well-liked by everyone on the playground–except by a kid named Gordy. T.J. doesn't know what he did or didn't do to be disliked by Gordy, but bends over backwards to improve Gordy's opinion of him. After spending an entire episode taking Gordy on adventures and exhausting every charismatic weapon in his arsenal, T.J. asks again, and the answer is still the same. When T.J. asks why, Gordy can't give a reason–he just doesn't like him.

Reflect on what you've done to earn someone's approval, only to have it fall flat. Many of us are like T.J.-so much effort with disappointing results. Have you bent over backwards to earn approval, only to discover it would never happen? This could have been unrequited love, a one-sided friendship, a demanding parent, or an ungrateful spouse. These scenarios can leave us feeling inadequate and questioning our value.

Thankfully, God is different. You don't have to perform to earn his approval. God knows exactly who you are and accepts you as you are. You can't do anything to make Him love you more, and you can't do anything to make Him love you less. If you can truly grasp how God feels about you, the need for man's approval won't matter as much because it can never compare to how God feels. How can you seek to please God and know his approval today?

APPLICATION: Search your heart and ask God where you're seeking approval from others. What is that doing to your heart? Spend time with your Father and ask Him how He feels about you.

PRAYER: God, show me where I'm seeking approval from others instead of You. Give me a heart that seeks approval from You and to please You. Thank You for loving me as I am. Thank You that I don't have to earn Your approval. Amen.

GOD'S GLORY OVER MAN'S

Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in Him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. John 12:42-43 (ESV)

When writing this scripture, what do you think John was feeling toward the authorities who believed in Jesus, but rejected God's glory for the glory of man? Disappointment? Anger? Disgust? Resentment? Sadness? What about you? When reading this scripture, do you feel one of those emotions, or something completely different?

God revealed His glory through Jesus, a humble and amazing man, but these authorities didn't care enough about the truth to fight for it. It was easier, more agreeable, more convenient, more popular, more lucrative, more fill-in-theblank to side with the Pharisees. They were more focused on what they'd lose from the glory of men rather than on what they'd gain from the glory of God.

You cannot be neutral when it comes to Jesus. Romans 10:9 ESV says, *If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*. The authorities believed, but they weren't willing to act on it. Sadly, this is the legacy these men left for those of us reading this scripture. By highlighting their decision, John draws a line in the sand. He was willing to stake His life on the truth of who Jesus is.

This is a sobering and humbling confrontation for us as readers. We have a choice–seek the glory of the living God, or the glory of the people around us. Thankfully, we know and serve a God who loves us more deeply than we'll ever know. God fought and died for us, and He gives us *the desire and power* to do what pleases Him (Philippians 2:13 NLT). Choose Jesus, and walk in the life that God has for you. It's infinitely better than anything man can provide.

APPLICATION: Keep an eye out for moments of decision today. Ask God to help you choose to please Him today. This may mean dying to what someone else expects of you, or what you may expect of yourself, but ask God to help you choose Him today.

PRAYER: Thank You, God, for sharing Your glory with me through Jesus. Help me choose Your glory today, above anyone or anything else. Amen.

GOD'S PLEASURE OVER MAN'S

For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts. **1 Thessalonians 2:4 (NLT)**

Think back to a time when you did something that made someone happy. You may have bought your spouse the perfect gift, given your kid an amazing experience, pulled off an amazing project at work or simply made a drive-thru worker laugh when you could tell they were having a rough day. It feels good to help and please others, to know that something you did made a difference in someone else's life.

Pleasing people can be a noble pursuit, but it can be destructive as well. If you're a people pleaser, you most likely can remember a time (or times) when you went to great lengths to please someone else to your detriment or the detriment of people you care about. All of us can think of examples where we did something to please someone–a spouse, a family member, a friend, an employer–only to feel like a doormat once we were finished.

Examining our motives on the other end of one of these experiences can be a humbling exercise. For example, have you ever held a door open for a stranger, only for them to walk through without a word of thanks? If you were expecting a *Thank You* for your kindness, the person's ingratitude can be frustrating. I've seen door holders yell *You're welcome!* after the person walked through. If you're the door holder and you get frustrated when you don't get a *thank you*, you need to ask yourself: Are you helping others for the sake of service or the accolade on the other end of the service?

God sees your actions AND your motives. He knows what you did and exactly why you did it. And he always knows your heart better than you do. Truly coming to terms with this can be humbling, but it can be equally freeing. You know and serve a God who knows you intimately and is fiercely committed to your growth and development. You can't hide anything from Him, but you don't have to hide anything from Him. He knows, and He's still rooting for you anyway. That's a God worth pleasing!

APPLICATION: Are there any areas of your life where you do the right thing for the wrong reason? Ask God to speak into that part of your heart.

PRAYER: God, thank You for knowing me inside and out. Give me a heart that wants to please You with every breath I take. Help me care about Your work, Your priorities. Let me feel Your pleasure and pride as Your child when I do a good job for You. Amen.

GOD'S REFUGE OVER MAN'S

The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes. **Psalm 118:6-9 (ESV)**

What can man do to me? When reading this, you can probably think of plenty of examples. If you set out to think of a time when someone burned you somehow, it would take about .001 seconds to bring something to mind. Whether you're the kind of person who can shake things off well or who has to fight to keep them from sticking, you know firsthand what a person can do to someone else. And that isn't even counting the horrific things you may hear about on the news: scandals, murders, miscarriages of justice, wars, and the list goes on and on.

What can man do to me? The evil inflicted in this world can never outweigh the good that God is pouring into it. It may be tempting to view global events and feel the sky is falling, but God is in control. None of the difficulties in this life surprises God. God knows the suffering we'll experience, which is why the Bible is full of people crying out to him for justice, help and relief.

Scripture constantly provides sobering and comforting reminders that God doesn't just know our struggles–He experienced them. Jesus came to the world, lived a perfect life, died an undeserving death at the hands of the very people He came to save and still retained hope. Hours before the death He knew was coming, Jesus still encouraged his disciples: *"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in Me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33 NLT)

This is where you find refuge. Remember who God is and what He's done, and trust that nothing flies under His radar. Cry out to Him honestly and lay it all at His feet. Every time it comes to mind, bend, take your thoughts captive and offer them back to Him.

APPLICATION: What in your life is causing you grief and weighing you down? It could be a demanding boss, things you're hearing on the news, an injustice you recently experienced, etc. Write that thing down. It could be on a 3x5 card or a slip of paper. Pray Psalm 118:6-9 over it, then let it go. Throw it away, burn it or turn it into a paper airplane and send it flying. Tell God you trust Him with it and ask Him to be your refuge.

PRAYER: God, life is hard. Thank You for overcoming the world and for being on my side. Help me to trust in You for refuge, not anyone or anything else. Amen.

GOD'S KINGDOM OVER MAN'S

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

Matthew 6:33-34 (ESV)

If you read the preceding verses to Matthew 6:33-34, you see that Jesus is discussing God's provision. He's referring specifically to clothes and food, and draws on nature to show God's goodness in providing the essentials for all creation. If the God of the universe intimately cares about birds and grass, imagine how much He cares about you! If He's able and willing to give the lowliest of creations and creatures what they need, why are you so worried?

Hopefully, you can think of plenty of times when God came through for you, when He provided just the right person or thing at the right time. In that moment, you can't imagine ever doubting God again. He just came through, so how could you ever think otherwise? But that was yesterday, and today has insurmountable problems, with tomorrow looking even more uncertain. The pressure builds, your head spins, the problems and busyness persist, and the doubt grows. Sure, God came through yesterday, but today's been a whirlwind. God, where are You, and will I struggle with this forever?

There's a saying that can clarify the spiral we can experience: *Guilt is an attempt to control the past. Anxiety is an attempt to control the future.* How many of our worries and fears ultimately result from our desire to control the world around us? Our worries and fears are based on real issues that need to be addressed, but we're often so focused on asserting or regaining control that we lose sight of the simple truth: *control is an illusion*.

Everything in our lives comes from God. Everything that crosses our path, lands in our grip or slips through our fingers–all from His storehouse of riches. It's easier said than done, but instead of focusing on what God isn't doing, appreciate what He is providing today.

APPLICATION: What's something causing you anxiety right now? Take a moment to confess your need to control that thing and pray for a greater trust in God with it. Ask Him to take it from you and to help you focus on what He wants for you today.

PRAYER: God, help my unbelief! I have such a short memory when it comes to Your provision and faithfulness. Strengthen my trust in You, and help me see what You're doing today. Amen.

GOD'S COMMENDATION OVER MINE

"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

2 Corinthians 10:17-18 (ESV)

The confidence of children is mind-blowing and hilarious. My brother has two boys, ages 4 and 6, and they love to show how strong they are. They'll flex their biceps, throw sticks, push furniture, squeeze toys as hard as they can, help move heavy things around the house and challenge the adults several times their size to wrestling matches. Watching them grow by testing their strength, experimenting and pushing their limits is awesome.

The boys have often boasted about how strong they are, challenged me to a test of strength and gotten clobbered (yeah, I'm that uncle). Sometimes they pout about their crushing defeat, but more often than not, they're excited to see how strong I am. But their eyes light up when I tell them how strong they've gotten. How they almost had me, or it's only a matter of time before they can beat me. Sure, they want to show off their strength, but more than anything, they want my approval. They want to hear me tell them that they have what it takes.

This childlike desire for affirmation from the people we love is beautiful. Unfortunately, far too many people lose this as they get older. Their confidence turns to arrogance, and the need to prove oneself is no longer a natural step of growth, instead becoming a desperate need to measure their value by their success, especially compared to others.

Sadly, this arrogance also bleeds into the church. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul addresses people in the church of Corinth who lift themselves up by putting him down. He provides a sobering reminder: Everything good that you have, have ever gotten and will ever get is from God-the place you were born, the benefits of your upbringing, your abilities, your intellect, your experience, your opportunities, your successes, the learnings from your failures, your home and the things in it, your body, your salvation, your faith, your relationship with Him, and so on.

God's approval matters more than anything else in this life. True confidence is knowing where every good thing in your life came from, and humility is giving God the glory for His provision.

APPLICATION: Each time you pray for the next few days, list out a few things God has given you, no matter how small or trivial, and give Him glory for those things. Offer them back to Him to remember how much He's given you.

PRAYER: Father, You've given me so much. Give me eyes to see where You've provided and a heart that constantly gives You the glory for it. Amen.

WEEK ONE • SATURDAY

AN INVITATION TO THE SECRET PLACE

But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer. Luke 5:16 (NLT)

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, **Psalm 103:2 (ESV)**

This week, we're looking at God's *reward* for private prayer (Matthew 6:6). It's one of three examples Jesus gave of doing good deeds with right motives. All three examples Jesus taught (giving to the poor, prayer and fasting) are spoken in the negative, *Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them...*(Matthew 6:1a NIV). Pastor Rick Warren once said that when he teaches, he always tries to look at Biblical passages from a positive angle. I think that's a good approach here. Rather than focus on what we are not supposed to do in prayer, let's look at what we are invited to do in private prayer.

According to the early church father Origen (185-254 A.D.), Jesus was teaching metaphorically when He said, *go into your room and close the door* (Matthew 6:6 NIV). He believed Jesus was saying that we need to intentionally separate ourselves from the noise and clammer of everyday life and simply sit in the presence of God. According to Origen, the *room* is the heart (or mind), and closing the door means intentionally placing all of life's distractions outside of that sacred time with God. This is certainly a discipline that's well worth the effort. It is, according to Matthew 6:6, where God sees and *rewards*. It's a call to intimacy, not performance. The felt presence of God is its own reward.

APPLICATION: In a world inundated with a cacophony of competing voices, we are invited to enjoy God's simple presence. Take time to turn off your phone and enjoy God's company.

PRAYER: Lord, I give You my full and undivided attention. Teach me the value of unplugging from everything the world system says is important, and teach me to value hidden time with You more than public approval. Amen.

THE SHELTER OF THE MOST HIGH

Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. Psalm 91:1 (NLT)

There is no safer place in all the universe than under the wings of the sovereign, all-wise, all-loving God. John Piper

I met a man in Winnipeg who the Iranian government had sent to spy on a certain convert to Christianity. As the spy hid behind the hedges, trying to catch a glimpse of the infidel, he was startled by a voice speaking over his left shoulder. *Maybe you'd like to come in for a cup of tea*? It was the man he was sent to spy on! Flustered, the spy said, *I was sent here to spy on you*, as surprised as anyone else when he heard the words come out of his mouth. *I know. But would you like to come in for some tea*? With that, the two men went inside and started talking about Jesus.

The spy went into the house to discover incriminating evidence. By the time he left, he was a brand-new follower of Christ. What could have been a tragic end to the convert's story became yet another demonstration of God's protection over this man of prayer. Private prayer is the platform of God's powerful and all-encompassing protection. Maybe you have a story about God's amazing protection over your life?

The word *abide*, suggests a continuing and lasting presence. This isn't about those who call on God when everything falls apart. No, we're talking about the people who know where their protection comes from and stick close to the One who can truly offer security. Psalm 27:5 (NIV) says, For in the day of trouble He will keep me safe in His dwelling; He will hide me in His sacred tent and set me high upon a rock. Psalm 31:20 (ESV) says, In the cover of Your presence You hide them from the plots of men; You store them in Your shelter from the strife of tongues. Even when our situations seem dire, we can have confidence that God will watch over us and help us in our time of need.

APPLICATION: Are you worried about something? Why not turn it into a prayer? God is much more able to handle your problems than you are. The truth is, God has always been in control. The problem is misplaced trust.

PRAYER: Lord, help me remember that nothing that hasn't passed through Your fingers first can touch me. Help me to trust that You always have my best in mind, even when I can't see it at the time. Amen.

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

Blessed are those who listen to Me, watching daily at My doors, waiting at My doorway. Proverbs 8:34 (NIV)

Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and approach to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil. Ecclesiastes 5:1 (NASB)

Several years ago, Brookwood offered a class called *Hearing God*. It remains one of the most well-attended classes that Brookwood has ever offered. It far exceeded the expectations of our staff. We had to open new spaces and times for people who wanted to attend. It speaks to the intuitive sense that there's more to being a follower of Christ than just following Biblical principles. Jews and Muslims do that. No, we understand that as Christians, our faith has an experiential component because the Holy Spirit lives in us.

Sometimes the issue we face is the busyness that crowds out the voice of the Spirit. Make no mistake, if the Spirit of God can knock Saul off his horse (Acts 9:3-4), He's more than able to cut through any distraction we might face. But often God chooses to speak to those who are intentionally seeking Him. At least three of the seven key practices of hearing God involve going to your prayer closet. They are:

- Spending time in God's word (John 14:21).
- Prayer and stillness (Psalm 46:10).
- Seeking Him in the secret place (Matthew 6:6).
- Obedience to God's commands (John 3:22).
- Desire and ask to hear (Jeremiah 33:3).
- Fasting (Acts 13:2).
- Discernment by the Holy Spirit (John 10:27).

If you're serious about hearing God's voice, getting away from people is key to creating a receptive posture for God to speak. Our natural tendency is to be overly concerned about appearances. Sequestering yourself away is a great way to remove that temptation. It allows us to be free and open with God, but also helps bring clarity when God speaks in a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:11-13).

APPLICATION: Do you want to hear from God? Separate yourself from others and seek God in a secret place. Start with prayer, letting God know you're available if He wants to speak. Slowly read through one of the Psalms and see what God's Spirit highlights for you.

PRAYER: Lord, I come to You as I am. I give You my full attention. Please speak to me. What do You want me to know? Your servant is listening. Amen.

WEEK TWO • WEDNESDAY

A SACRED HATRED

But let none think that public prayer will make up for closet communion. George Muler

But the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the Word, and it proves unfruitful.

Mark 4:19 (ESV)

During a particularly difficult time in my life, I took to reading the Philokalia, a collection of the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. For those of you unfamiliar with the Desert Fathers and Mothers, they were Christians who decided to escape the corruption of Greek culture by moving into the Egyptian desert. They were the first Christian monks, and their unique experiences gave them space to develop spiritual practices lost to most of us in the West. A man known as Evagrios the Solitary spoke about the practice of Watchfulness, which helps train the mind to focus on Christ when it is bombarded with intrusive thoughts. I still implement some of those practices in my walk with God.

Here is something Evagrios said,

To help man He has given him incensive power (anger) and desire (passion), so that with the first he may drive away wolflike intellections, while with the second he may lovingly tend the sheep, even though he is often exposed to rains and winds.

Incensive power is anger at sin. But specifically anger toward intrusive, unwanted thoughts. As we know, not every thought comes from within us. Sometimes they're directed by demonic forces against us. The warfare we wage is in the realm of our thought life. Thoughts are projected into the mind to discourage us and make us ineffective. We drive away those demonic thoughts, according to Evagrios, by our anger against them. We must not be passive about anything or anyone threatening to pull us away from our prayer closet.

APPLICATION: What things, even good things, seem to take your attention away from time alone with God?

PRAYER: Lord, help me prioritize our time alone in prayer. Help me see it for what it is: a lifeline between us. Amen.

CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING PRAYER WARRIOR

"And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words." Matthew 6:7 (ESV)

For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve. James 5:16 (CEB)

I used to identify myself as a prayer warrior. I never really knew what that meant, but I liked the designation because it made me feel important. The problem is that prayer isn't really about the one praying. It's about the one we pray to that matters. Earlier this week, we addressed the importance of getting away from the crowd to avoid viewing prayer as a performance. Focusing on the length of our prayer time can become a way to measure ourselves against each other. In the verse above, we read that the pagans had gotten the idea that the more they repeated mindless phrases, the more the gods would hear them. The focus was on their performance, rather than on the God who can intervene on their behalf. I think this is a trick right from the pit of Hell.

James 5:16 says that as we receive confessions from others, the power of the Spirit is unleashed and burdens are released as an act of God's grace. That's the power of prayer at work. It then goes on to say that the prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve. Speaking words of grace changes the world. But notice that it doesn't talk about how long we pray, or the style of prayer. It simply says that the prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve.

Who is *the righteous man*? Not a single one of us (Romans 3:9-20). Rather, righteousness is accounted to us when we trust in Him (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:1-22, Galatians 3:6-9). Our effectiveness in prayer is all about our trust in Jesus, not our ability to pray well. Thinking of ourselves as prayer warriors only puts the focus on us. This is the same sin as the one who prays publicly *to be seen by others*.

APPLICATION: Write down three things that can only be accomplished with the intervention of God. Pray by yourself over this during the next month. Record what happens.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to put no confidence in the flesh, but simply to bring my requests to you. Amen.

INTIMACY WITH GOD

Come near to God, and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners. Purify your hearts, you double-minded. James 4:8 (CEB)

Call to Me and I will answer and reveal to you wondrous secrets that you haven't known. Jeremiah 33:3 (CEB)

in-ti-ma-cy (n) close familiarity or friendship; closeness: *the intimacy between a husband and a wife*.

Our capacity to love is determined by our willingness to risk. It takes courage to allow ourselves to take that first step of vulnerability. It is also a great honor and responsibility to be entrusted with a person's innermost person. God knows you better than a husband loves a wife. He knows you better than you know yourself. Nothing is hidden from His sight, yet He loves you enough to send His Son to take the penalty you deserve.

Does knowing that change your relationship with Him? For me, there's an impulse to cover up my brokenness, but He tells me, *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you* (John 15:3 NIV). All I can say is thank You, Lord! Gone are the days when I tried to impress Him with all kinds of good deeds and self-discipline. He sees right through it all, inviting me to come and sit at His feet with Mary, who has chosen *the good portion* (Luke 10:42 ESV).

This is what happens when we enter the prayer closet. We become conscious of our union with Him. In Ephesians 5, Christ is pictured as a bridegroom. True intimacy with Him happens behind closed doors. It is a beautiful thing between you and your Lord. It cannot be reduced to human language. *Call to me, and I will answer,* says the Prophet Jeremiah, *and I will reveal to you wonderous secrets that you haven't known.* Jeremiah 33:3 (CEB). God wants to reveal Himself to a receptive bride. I will never forget how tenderly God revealed to me truths that I had not known before, which upended the trajectory of my plans. I am forever grateful for a God who cares enough to reveal Himself in the silence of my closet.

APPLICATION: Visualize yourself sitting before Jesus. Take whatever time you need to clarify the picture. What is Jesus doing? What is He saying to you? Whatever He says will align with the Scripture, but I believe He has something specific He would like to say to you.

PRAYER: Lord, I love You. I'm here ready to receive from You. I hold nothing back. Show me what it is You want me to know. Amen.

But I have trusted in Your mercy; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation. Psalm 13:5 (NKJV)

School playgrounds at recess are fantastic! Monkey Bars. Swings. Slides. Teeter Totters. That contraption that spins you around and around at 100 miles an hour, and you try your best to stay on it by holding onto a metal bar... otherwise known as a Spinner, Roundabout or Merry-Go-Round. As fun as those rides were, maybe a bit dangerous too, you probably remember the childhood friends you played with as much as the rides themselves. Maybe your best friend wasn't in your class, but you got to play with them at recess! The bell would let you know you had 15 minutes of freedom to run and play. Can you feel the memories?

You got to spend time with friends who knew you. You knew each other's favorite rides and games to play. How often did you run around with reckless abandon, laughing until you ran out of breath? I know I got many scratches from falling in nests of pinecones. Nevertheless, they're called playgrounds for a reason. Those fun times would help you get to the end of the day, until you could see each other and play again.

As we get older and presumably more mature, why do these playtimes get less frequent? Those wonderful experiences of having fun and being known can be a part of our everyday lives with God. Our lives with God are meant to be fulfilling and exciting, not dull and full of drudgery. Unlike waiting for 15 minutes of recess, we can experience Him right now. The *bell* has already rung. All you need to do is run to Him.

APPLICATION: Spend a few minutes with God today, thanking Him for good memories in your life. Thank Him for the experiences and how they've blessed your life. Consider sharing one of those experiences with a friend.

PRAYER: Father, help me experience You in a new way today. As I approach You, show me a side of You that I haven't seen before. Show me a side that encourages me to keep coming back to You. Amen.

So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ. Romans 10:17 (NLT)

Remember when phones were connected to the wall and had a cord? The sound of the phone ringing and running breathlessly to answer in hopes that someone might be calling to talk to you! Only to realize it was someone for your parents, siblings or a telemarketer...bummer. Being the youngest of five, I'd rarely get a call and often got rushed off the phone when it was for me. So unfair!

But when those calls were for you and someone was on the other end who knew you and had a relationship with you-the feeling was almost indescribable. Maybe your grandparents wished you a happy birthday, or your dad was away on business, and called to check in to say goodnight. Sometimes you'd stretch that curly phone cord and unkink the knots to duck into the hall closet to get as much privacy as possible to talk. Many phone cords were ruined at my house because the cord wrapped around the banister on the steps so often that it would snap.

It didn't matter what you were talking about. It was just that feeling of connection with someone. You and the person on the other end of the line were connected even though you weren't in the same house. Many memories were made with those phones.

Our connection to the Lord is similar to the phone. Are we looking forward to God calling us? Do we run toward His call breathlessly? He calls us, but do we answer? If we do answer, how do we respond? Are we elusive? Angry? Scared? Quiet? The better our connection with the Lord, the better the conversation and the experience will be when we talk with Him. Take a step to make your connection clearer today.

APPLICATION: Ask God to show you any steps He wants you to take to remove the *static* from your conversations with Him. Then enjoy the conversation.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for *calling* me. Help me to be more aware and available when You call. Remove the static from my mind and heart so our time together can be even more rewarding. Amen.

Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me in the shadow of Your wings... Psalm 17:8 (NIV)

Some say that the eyes are the window to the soul. What exactly does that mean? Looking into someone's eyes can reveal much. Oftentimes, the eyes say something more than what words can communicate. Our words may say we're happy, but our eyes can communicate excitement or sadness. Seeing someone looking at us as we process the loss of a loved one cannot be measured. The eyes of someone we care deeply about, letting us know that we're loved, is priceless. Meeting the eyes of a friend when we're hurting provides much solace. A newborn baby looking into the eyes of a parent starts the creation of a lifelong bond.

Pictures and videos reveal much about how you or others felt at a particular time. Consider times of celebration in your life. What do you see when looking at pictures, watching graduations or vacation videos? When I look at photos from my high school graduation, I see proud parents and excited friends. When I look at pictures from the first time my kids experienced a roller coaster, I see sheer delight. When I look at the videos of my grandkids experiencing Japanese food being cooked in front of them, I see wonder (and some anxiety, to be honest).

Research says that the pupil of the eye expands when it sees something that captures interest. The Bible says that we, you and I, are the apple of God's eye. God's eyes are forever upon us. His eyes are open and engaged. He is interested in us. He desires to have His love for us received. We must only look back at Him to experience His love for us.

APPLICATION: Spend some time imagining how God views you. If you feel negative, condemning feelings, ask Him to correct those feelings into truth. Thank Him for making you the *apple* of His eye.

PRAYER: Jesus, the Bible says You are the lover of my soul (mind/will/ emotions). Help me meet Your gaze today and find love and acceptance for my soul. May my soul begin to heal and experience joy. Amen.

Christ now gives us courage and confidence, so we can come to God by faith. Ephesians 3:12 (CEV)

My father told me a story about my Nanny that changed how I viewed my father and grandmother. She took care of a boarding house where men from the railroad would stay when their trains came through the area. I can still imagine my Nanny in her long skirt with an apron wrapped around her waist, cooking for them and cleaning after they left.

The train whistle would sound as the train approached the house, and my dad would get nervous. Being very young, my father was intimidated by the loud noises of the men when they arrived. He didn't know what the noise meant, but it threatened his playtime. My Nanny could feel my father's concern. According to my father's recollection, she looked down at him and said, *Now hold on to me because I'm never letting go of you*. My father would then hold on to her skirt as she did her work. My father would go on to tell me that his anxiety and fear would melt away as he thought of his mother's words. As he told me this story, I saw his love and gratitude for his mother. As he told me this story, I could feel Nanny's love for my father.

Jesus says similar words to us in Matthew 28:20 when he reminds the disciples that He will be with them always, even until the end of time. Consider those words. Consider the *heart* behind those words. His presence never leaves us. His presence comforts us. His presence strengthens us. His presence is eternal. Hold onto Him today because He's not letting go of you.

APPLICATION: Ask God to show you situations where He was with you, even though you felt alone or scared. Ask Him what He wants you to know about that time.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for never leaving me. Thank You for always being with me. Help me feel Your presence right now as I pray these words. Increase my faith in You as I am comforted by Your presence. Amen.

WORDS

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. **Psalm 119:105 (ESV)**

Have you ever had someone finish your sentence? It could be annoying if they were wrong, or it could be reassuring because they know you so well. Maybe you wanted to say the punchline, but someone stole your thunder. Perhaps you couldn't quite find the right word to show appreciation to someone, and they were able to insert the perfect word.

Years ago, there was a game show called *The Newlywed Game*. The premise was to quiz newly married couples about their partners. Supposedly all in fun, there would be friction when the husband's answers wouldn't match what the wife expected or vice versa. The couple who got the most correct answers won the game. What was interesting was the look on the faces of the couples when the answers to the questions about them were wrong. The look of shock at their spouse not knowing them well enough. Conversely, the look of happiness when the answers were correct! We all like to be understood, don't we?

A common refrain is that the Bible is outdated and irrelevant to today's world. Yet, the Bible is often called God's love letter to us. God speaks to us through the words in this best-selling book, which are true and helpful in our everyday lives. So, it's possible that the words of God could speak straight to the issues we're dealing with now. God's words could accurately describe how we're feeling inside. God's words might be what we need to get back on our feet. He gets all the answers to the questions about us right...what a blessing!

APPLICATION: Find God's affirming words to you in the Bible. Reflect on those words and ask God to help you believe them. Thank Him for His words. Share them with someone you know to encourage you both!

PRAYER: Father, Your words bring me life. Speak love, life and light to my heart, mind and emotions today. Encourage me to bring my questions and problems to you. Amen.

Even if my father and mother abandon me, the LORD will hold me close. Psalm 27:10 (NLT)

Interesting how people label themselves as *huggers* or *non-huggers*. To hug or not to hug, that is the question. Going in for a hug with a non-hugger can be traumatic for both parties. You know the feeling– the awkwardness of leaning in to hug a non-hugger, and you get a boundary marker with a hand and facial gesture. Or the feeling of not wanting a hug from a *space invader* who doesn't notice the NO on your face as they try to embrace you. (By the way...not hating on non-huggers, just pointing out differences.)

On the flip side, the warmth you experience when hugging someone you love or haven't seen for a while. The beauty of an embrace from a child running into the arms of their mom or dad. The experience of being loved well when we're in the midst of grief or loss. The love of someone who wants to let you really know that you matter to them.

Is Jesus a *hugger*? I believe He is. In Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34, he tells Jerusalem that He has often wanted to gather or hug them as a hen gathers her chicks. He goes on to lament that, unfortunately, Jerusalem was not willing to be held. What does this picture convey to us? What does this metaphor communicate to us? A mother hen will gather her chicks under her wings to nurture, guide and defend. Jesus desires to do so with us. All we have to do is be open to the life His embrace brings.

APPLICATION: Ask God for a tangible experience of His love toward you. If you sense resistance to that request, ask Him why you would say no to His hug? Then hug those closest to you today!

PRAYER: Father, thank You for loving me with an eternal love. As I draw close to You in prayer, will You hug me? Will You allow me to experience a love from You that transcends anything I have experienced? Break down any walls that are in the way. Help me allow myself to receive Your hug today. Amen.

THE KINGDOM AT THE KITCHEN TABLE

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction that comes from the Lord.

Ephesians 6:4 (NLT)

Family is often where our faith is tested the most. It's one thing to be patient with a stranger. It's another thing to respond kindly when your toddler throws oatmeal across the room or your teenager slams a door. But if the Kingdom of God is truly near, shouldn't it appear in our homes first?

Paul's words are aimed at fathers, but the principle stretches across parenting roles and family relationships. Don't lead with frustration. Don't parent out of fear. Instead, create a home where God's voice shapes our responses.

Paul Tripp, pastor, author and speaker recognized for applying scriptural truths to everyday life, writes, *Parenting is about being God's ambassadors in the lives of our children*. We're not the ultimate authority–they belong to God. Ambassadors represent someone or something larger than themselves in authority or influence. We're God's representatives in our family. We come in the name and the power of God to our homes.

The Kingdom doesn't come through perfection—it comes through presence. Showing up. Listening well. Owning our mistakes. Asking for forgiveness when we mess up. That's Kingdom culture. It's not about making kids behave so they reflect well on us. It's about helping them know the love and truth of a God who is slow to anger and rich in love.

Sometimes Kingdom work looks like bedtime prayers, sticky notes of encouragement, or sitting quietly together after an argument. It's not flashy. Those little moments plant big seeds.

APPLICATION: Think about a recent moment in your home when you could have responded differently. Invite God into your parenting or leadership today.

PRAYER: Write a prayer related to this devotional topic. Begin by addressing our Father, add two to three sentences, and then end with Amen.

THE KINGDOM AT WORK

May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us–yes, establish the work of our hands. Psalm 90:17 (NIV)

We often separate our work life from our spiritual life—as if God clocks out when we clock in. But Scripture paints a different picture. From the first pages of Genesis, God is shown as a Creator and a Worker, and He invites us into that same holy rhythm. Psalm 90 reminds us that work, done in God's strength and for His purposes, carries eternal weight.

This verse is a blessing from the Lord: *establish the work of our hands*. It's a call to make our work matter. Whether you work in a classroom, a kitchen, a cubicle, or sales, your labor is not small in the eyes of the Kingdom. God uses your work to shape character, serve others and reveal His goodness. He's present in spreadsheets, serving customers, changing diapers, and building things that last.

Kingdom impact doesn't always mean visible results. It's often quiet faithfulness. It's being honest when cutting corners would be easier. When I worked a job in college, I told my boss, *I don't get paid to think...yet*. Don't dismiss small beginnings. When we work with God in mind, even routine tasks become acts of worship.

This prayer in Psalm 90 is a way of saying, *God, make what I do today count in this world, and have an eternal impact*. It's a reminder that what we do matters most when we do it with Him and for Him.

APPLICATION: Before your next task, pause and ask God to be present in your work. Offer it to Him as worship. Reflect on how your effort might serve others and point them to Him.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for giving me work to do. Please provide me with favor today. Use my work and efforts to bring glory to You. Allow me to view my work as an act of worship to You. Amen.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 2 Corinthians 4:17 (NIV)

Pain has a way of shrinking our vision. When we're hurting physically, emotionally or spiritually, it's hard to see beyond the moment. But Paul, who knew deep suffering, invites us to lift our eyes to the Father. No matter how heavy it feels now, what we're going through is not the end of the story. In God's hands, suffering is not wasted. God is working in our suffering.

Paul isn't saying our pain doesn't matter. He's saying it matters more than we realize. God uses our pain to move things in eternity. God's kingdom is not one without hardship. But God, in His graciousness, redeems our suffering. Struggles can deepen our compassion. Disappointments can drive us to depend on God. Weaknesses can open the door to unexpected strength. And all of it, Paul says, is *achieving for us* a weight of glory that will last forever. Our troubles are working for us.

Joni Eareckson Tada, Christian author, radio host and quadriplegic after a lifechanging diving accident at age 17, once said, *There is nothing that moves a loving father's soul quite like his child's cry*. Her words capture the tender responsiveness of God to our pain. Joni's accident was a pivotal event that launched her ministry and advocacy for people with disabilities.

Think of it like a seed buried in soil. It looks like a loss. It feels like darkness. But underground, something is happening. Roots are taking hold. Life is beginning. And in time, that seed breaks through with beauty. That's the kind of impact suffering can have. Good coming from pain.

When we walk through suffering with Jesus, we receive a unique opportunity to grow. Our growth shines as a witness to others. People notice peace in the storm. They notice hope that doesn't quit. That's Kingdom impact.

APPLICATION: What are you carrying today that feels heavy? Offer it to God (again). Ask Him to show you how He might use it to shape something beautiful.

PRAYER: Father, when I'm suffering, I struggle to know how to respond. I trust Your word about my pain being redemptive. Help me use my pain to grow my faith and to help others see You at work. Amen.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Proverbs 1:7 (NIV)

We live in a world bursting with information, with millions of videos, books, blogs and opinions. But information isn't the same as wisdom. We can fill our heads with facts and still miss life-changing insight that comes only from God. According to Proverbs, real wisdom starts in one place: with the fear of the Lord.

To fear the Lord doesn't mean being scared of Him. It means holding Him in awe, trusting His ways above our own, and living like He knows best. That kind of humility is the doorway to wisdom. And when we step through it, everything starts to shift.

Heavenly wisdom shows in how we make decisions, respond to conflict, and use our time and words. It quiets the chaos of competing voices and invites us to tune in to God's whisper. It helps us see what matters most in our lives. Wisdom shapes our character more than just providing answers. It leads us to live in a way that reflects the heart of the Kingdom: with patience, peace, justice and love.

But the verse also warns us. Fools despise wisdom. It's a defensive posture against God's wisdom. It's choosing pride over teachability. God's wisdom requires us to listen, ask and follow even when it's unpopular.

If we want to make a lasting impact in our families, our friendships and our communities, it won't come from quick answers or clever plans. It'll come from a heart that seeks God first and above all.

APPLICATION: Ask God to search your heart for areas where you rely on your understanding. Invite Him to lead you by His wisdom. Then act on one thing He shows you today.

PRAYER: Lord, I want wisdom that is beyond the reach of earth. I want to trust You and rely on Your wisdom rather than mine. Teach me to trust Your voice and to walk in a way that honors You today. Amen. You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You. Isaiah 26:3 (NIV)

We're used to peace being temporary. It's what we feel when the kids are asleep, the email inbox is empty, or the diagnosis comes back clear. But the peace God offers isn't like that. It's not a break in the noise or busyness. It's calm in the middle of the chaos.

Isaiah speaks of *perfect peace*. The Hebrew word *shalom* means more than calm. It's wholeness, harmony, everything in its rightful place. This kind of peace is a signature of God's Kingdom. When Jesus walked the earth, He calmed storms, cast out fear, and brought peace where anguish existed. And now He offers that same peace in our lives.

But peace doesn't happen by accident. Isaiah tells us who receives it: those whose minds are *steadfast*. This is the idea of being locked in on God, not tossed around by headlines, emotions or circumstances. That kind of focus comes from trust. Trust is the doorway to peace. When we stop trying to control everything and believe that God is who He says He is, peace follows. Ann Voskamp, a Canadian author known for her inspirational Christian writing, once said, *Life change comes when we receive life with thanks and ask for nothing to change*.

Kingdom peace has impact. It's contagious. People notice when you walk into a room, calm in the middle of chaos. When your life isn't driven by fear or hurry, it raises questions. Peaceful people become anchors in anxious spaces. They remind others that there's a deeper way to live.

APPLICATION: Where do you feel unsettled today? Take a moment to fix your mind on God. Say a truth about who He is aloud, and ask Him to let His peace settle over you.

PRAYER: God, You are the anchor of my soul. Help me to trust You more than what I can see around me. Remind me today that You are in control. Let Your peace rule my heart today. Amen.

THE KINGDOM'S RESOURCES

"He did all this so you would never say to yourself, 'I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.' Remember the LORD your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful, in order to fulfill the covenant He confirmed to your ancestors with an oath." Deuteronomy 8:17-18 (NLT)

It's easy to forget. We work hard. We study, hustle, save and build. And then, without realizing it, we start to think it was all us. We quietly take the credit for the house, the paycheck, the success. But God cuts through that mindset with a gentle but firm reminder: Remember who gave you the ability in the first place. He gave you the power to be successful.

In Deuteronomy, God prepares His people for blessing. They're about to enter the Promised Land, a place of fruitfulness and abundance. But God knows their hearts. They'll forget the One who made it possible when things get easy. So He warns them ahead of time: Don't forget Me.

Everything we have in this life, our skills, energy, money and opportunities, comes from God. And because it comes from Him, it's meant to be used for Him. That doesn't mean we give everything away or feel guilty for enjoying blessings, but it does mean that the Kingdom of God has a purpose for our success. We should hold what we have with open hands. It means we should ask, *How can I use this to reflect God's goodness*? How does God want to use the resources He has entrusted to me?

Kingdom impact starts with a Kingdom perspective. We become more generous when we see ourselves as stewards, not owners. We look for ways to bless others. We invest in things that outlast us. Something amazing happens when we live like this. When we use our resources for God's purposes, our hearts follow. Our joy deepens–our impact multiplies.

APPLICATION: Take inventory. What's one resource: time, skill, influence or income, that you can offer to God this week? Ask Him to show you where it could make the most impact. Trust Him as you obey.

PRAYER: God, You are the best! You've given me resources to share with the world. Help me remember that all wealth comes from You. Show me how to use what I have to serve Your kingdom. Amen.

FORGIVENESS BEGINS AT THE CROSS

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Luke 23:34a (NLT)

This moment on the cross came after a series of betrayals, trials and unimaginable pain.

- Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, and then He was arrested (Luke 22:47-48).
- All His disciples fled, leaving Him alone (Matthew 26:56).
- He was taken through several trials—before the Jewish council, Pilate, Herod (Luke 22-23).
- He was falsely accused and mocked throughout (Luke 23:1-2).
- Peter, one of His closest disciples, denied knowing Him three times (Luke 22:54-62).
- Roman soldiers beat Him, mocked Him and pressed a crown of thorns on His head (Mark 15:16-20; John 19:2-3).
- He was whipped beyond recognition (Matthew 27:26; Isaiah 52:14).
- Weakened and bloodied, He carried His cross to Golgotha (John 19:17).
- There, He was nailed to the cross between criminals and mocked by the onlookers, religious leaders and soldiers (Luke 23:35-43).

After all that–after the betrayal, injustice, beating and mocking, and before there was any repentance or acknowledgment of wrong–Jesus said, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* (Luke 23:34 NIV). They didn't know? How could they not? By their own hands, they tore Jesus' body apart and slandered His character. And it wasn't only His enemies–some of His closest companions left and betrayed Him. Wounded, rejected and dying, He *forgave*.

What would compel someone to forgive like that? Jesus was God, but He was also fully human. He understood what it is to be wounded by others. It wasn't nobility or religious duty that compelled Him–it was *love*.

Before we begin our practice of forgiveness towards others, we must look at Jesus. Those who abused Him didn't grasp the gravity or the consequences of their actions. And yet, even in their arrogance and unrepentance, Jesus forgave. If anyone can empathize with our hurt, our betrayals, losses, religious abuse, rejection, physical pain, suffering, and refusal to acknowledge wrong done, it's Him. In love, He forgave us, and it's His love that sustains us on our journeys of forgiveness.

APPLICATION: Forgiveness doesn't start with our strength-it begins with Jesus. Reflect on the cross today-on the love that led Him to say, *"Father, forgive them."* Let His forgiveness toward you soften your heart and give you the strength to forgive others.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for the cross. I ask that You teach me the depth of Your forgiveness for my sin and Your great love for me. There is no one like You. Amen.

WEEK FIVE • MONDAY

THE RHYTHM OF FORGIVENESS

"If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins."

Matthew 6:14-15 (NLT)

Forgiveness is easy when it doesn't matter. We can forgive and let go when someone cuts us off in traffic or is rude to us in a store. But what happens when harm is devastating–friends who leave, a spouse who cheats, parents who abuse, a family that rejects, a church that wounds? What then?

The command Jesus gives here isn't another burden. He's not saying, You'd better sweep that under the rug, or else... No, He's inviting us into something deeper. He's teaching us how to live.

Forgiving someone doesn't mean disregarding the pain caused or pretending the wounds don't exist. The forgiveness we extend to others begins with honestly acknowledging the damage done. How can we heal without understanding the pain? A good doctor wouldn't treat cancer with ibuprofenthey'd take a deep, honest look at the issue and begin there. The same is true for forgiveness.

Jesus' command to forgive is a lifeline–because it's in the process of forgiveness that healing, life and fullness truly begin. Forgiveness loosens the grip of bitterness and creates space, sometimes for restoration, but always for peace, joy and wholeness.

In contrast, refusing to begin the process of forgiveness can lead to bitterness, anger and a dulling of our awareness of God's presence. Choosing not to forgive damages everything. Jesus isn't saying our eternal destiny depends on how well we forgive. Scripture is clear: He extended forgiveness to us long before we knew we needed it. It also teaches, however, that our relationship with God suffers when we cling to unforgiveness.

There's a reciprocal nature to forgiveness. As we experience God's deep, lovefilled forgiveness, we're invited to extend that same grace to others. But when we hold back forgiveness, something in us begins to close. In God's Kingdom, giving and receiving go hand in hand-the more we receive His mercy, the more we can offer it. And as we offer it, our hearts open wider to receive again. This is the rhythm of grace.

APPLICATION: Take a moment and ask God if there's anyone you need to forgive. You don't need to have figured it out–just be willing to start. Ask Him to help you receive His forgiveness more deeply and give you the grace to take the next step.

PRAYER: Jesus, teach me how to forgive. Fully and freely. Your way is the best way, and I choose it as my own. Amen.

WEEK FIVE • TUESDAY

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

"And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king's table; he was lame in both feet." **2 Samuel 9:13 (NIV)**

Lo Debar, a town in Israel mentioned in the Old Testament, was desolate. The name means *no pasture* or *no thing*. It was barren and lifeless–a place where the outcast, crippled and forgotten were sent to die. Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan and grandson of King Saul, lived there. He was an outcast–marked by his fallen family and crippled from a childhood injury.

Before becoming king, David promised Jonathan he'd show kindness to his descendants. When David heard Mephibosheth was alive, he summoned him. For Mephibosheth, that summons likely felt like a death sentence. His family had been David's enemies, and he had no compensation for his family's past. But to his great surprise, it wasn't a summons of judgment–it was an invitation to sit at the king's table.

Shocked, Mephibosheth responded, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" (2 Samuel 9:8 NLT). In those days, being crippled meant being disqualified from both religious and royal life. By his own words, Mephibosheth considered himself no better than a dead dog. Yet he was restored-not because of what he could do, but out of love and mercy.

Our culture often promotes self-forgiveness as the path to freedom. But if it is rooted in self-effort, it produces a counterfeit grace. This story offers another option. We, too, come from desolate places, carrying shame, brokenness and regret. Yet God invites us to His table–not because we've earned it, but because He is forgiving. We don't need our forgiveness. We need God's. The gospel is so great, so profound, that it seats cripples with the King.

But we have a choice. What if Mephibosheth had refused the invitation and remained in Lo Debar? He would've missed everything. Likewise, we can have forgiveness and still not live from it, missing out on true life. As believers, we're not called to muster up self-forgiveness. We're invited to release the condemnation we carry toward ourselves and live in the mercy and grace of God. The invitation stands. The table is set. The seat is yours. Will you sit down?

APPLICATION: Where do you struggle to receive God's forgiveness? Take a moment to list the areas where shame still lingers. Ask the Lord what He sees and invite Him to teach you how to live in the freedom He's already given.

PRAYER: Father, Your mercy and forgiveness are great. Help me today to live in the reality You purchased on the cross. Thank You for forgiveness. You're wonderful. Amen.

FORGIVENESS AS WORSHIP

"I tell you, her sins-and they are many-have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love."

Luke 7:47 (NLT)

Before Jesus made this statement in Luke 7, He had been invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee for a meal. According to the customs of the day, guests– especially honored ones–were typically welcomed with a kiss of greeting, oil for their heads, and a washing of their feet. Though not mandatory, these gestures showed honor to one's guests. Although Jesus was known as a teacher of Scripture, a healer and someone who cast out demons, He was offered only the bare minimum of hospitality.

A woman of ill repute in the city heard that Jesus was at Simon's home, and she came to give Him everything she had. Kneeling low, she washed His feet with her tears and hair, anointed Him with oil, and offered the welcome He hadn't received. When the Pharisee saw this, he questioned Jesus' discernment, assuming He didn't know this sinful woman. Rather than shrinking back, Jesus honored the love she showed–a love Simon lacked.

Jesus said, "A person who is forgiven little shows only little love." (Luke 7:47b NLT). The woman at Jesus' feet wasn't trying to earn grace—she was responding to it. Her love flowed from knowing how deeply she'd been forgiven. It's not rule-following that draws us close to God. It's repentance. It's coming to Him humbly and receiving mercy we don't deserve.

The Pharisees were so focused on *getting things right* that they bypassed the nature of God in their effort to uphold the rules of God, rules distorted by misconception and human effort. The result? A loyalty to the things of God without ever encountering the love of God Himself.

It's easy to drift from wonder into routine, trading grace for rule-keeping. But we were never made right with God by effort–only by Jesus. The woman who wept at His feet didn't bring perfection. She brought a heart undone by mercy. May we never lose sight of the grace that saved us. The more we remember His forgiveness, the more our love and worship will overflow.

APPLICATION: Forgiveness opens our hearts to God's love. *We love because He first loved us* (1 John 4:19 NIV). Today, ask the Lord to show you the depth of His forgiveness toward you, and let that truth move you to worship.

PRAYER: Jesus, undo me with Your mercy. Teach me to forgive. Let Your love, not vengeance or effort, heal my heart. I love and I worship You. Amen.

LIMITLESS FORGIVENESS

Then Peter came to Him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!" Matthew 18:21-22 (NLT)

When Jesus told the Hebrew audience *seventy times seven*, He wasn't giving a math lesson–He was revealing a deeper truth. In Hebrew tradition, the number seven represents divine perfection and completeness. The total, 490, is linked to the Hebrew word *tamin*, meaning complete, perfect, or finished.

Forgiveness is a superpower. Jesus wasn't saying we only need to forgive 490 times, which would already be a high bar. He was telling us that forgiveness has no limit. In God's Kingdom, forgiveness is a way of life. It brings healing and wholeness to both the one who receives it and the one who gives it. God's forgiveness of our sin is limitless. Encountering His mercy should stir love, adoration and healing in our hearts. As His people, we're then invited to respond by offering forgiveness to others.

Forgiveness isn't optional for followers of Jesus. In our culture, it can feel like an obligation or something we offer to those who are genuinely sorry. But Jesus calls us to something deeper: a lifestyle of forgiveness that reflects God's mercy offered to us. As we continue to receive the forgiveness offered through His work on the cross, we're called to extend it to others, regardless of whether they repent (Colossians 3:13). Unforgiveness chains us to the past, to hurt and anger. Forgiveness isn't about denial or dissociation—it's about freedom.

There's a process of forgiveness. Forgiveness is hard, especially when the hurt runs deep-but it's also holy. Jesus isn't demanding we instantly forgive or pretend we're not wounded. He's teaching us how to step into the fullness of healing. As we forgive others, a miraculous and divine restoration occurs. We don't have to figure it out at once or force ourselves to act before our hearts catch up. The journey of forgiveness takes time, repetition and daily encounters with God's mercy. But in that space, we experience true, divine and complete healing, wholeness, and freedom-the kind God longs to release on the earth.

APPLICATION: Where are you in your journey of forgiveness? Ask the Lord to search your heart, not for condemnation, but to reveal the places of pain and unforgiveness He's inviting you to explore. Let the reality of God's mercy fuel your next small step in this journey.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for Your example of forgiveness that heals and empowers me. Please give me the grace to both receive and give true forgiveness. Amen.

THE JOURNEY OF FORGIVENESS

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people." Genesis 50:20 (NLT)

The story of Joseph is a powerful example of forgiveness and trust. The faith and forgiveness Joseph walked in not only allowed him to flourish in a foreign land-they kept him clever, earning him a position of power that led to saving thousands during a famine, including the very brothers who betrayed him.

Let's slow down a bit. It's easy to skip to the end when you already know the story.

As Jacob's youngest and favored son, Joseph became the target of his brothers' jealousy, which led them to sell him into slavery. Thirteen years passed before he would see them again, years marked by injustice, imprisonment and being forgotten. It's not hard to imagine his struggle–once a cherished son, now a slave in a foreign land. How often did he wrestle with God? Did the Lord still see him? Why the injustice? Had both God and family abandoned him?

Yet the key to the powerful forgiveness at the end of Joseph's story is that he didn't give up on God, no matter the hardship, confusion or pain. We can assume there were moments of doubt, but Joseph wrestled *with* God instead of *against* Him. In the end, his trust was evident through forgiveness.

Everything God does is good, right and perfect. God isn't the author of evil, but He restores and redeems, giving back a hundredfold what was lost. Joseph's ability to forgive was rooted in deep confidence in God's character, forged through years of waiting, wrestling and believing.

Forgiveness often takes time. It likely didn't come for Joseph in the second year or even the seventh. But through every hardship, he stayed close to God. And over time, a heart of forgiveness was formed. The same is true for us. Healing doesn't always happen quickly. But as we bring our pain to God and fix our eyes on Him, He does a deeper work in us. Whether it takes moments or years, we can rest in this: God is with us. He is faithful. His purposes are always greater than we can see.

APPLICATION: God doesn't just model forgiveness; He walks with us through it. Today, take a quiet moment to ask Him where He might want to start–or continue–the work of forgiveness in your life. He'll meet you with the grace and strength you need.

PRAYER: Father, I trust Your plan, regardless of what I can see right now. Teach me to trust and forgive. Amen.

A MEAL WITH THE LORD

"Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear My voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends."

Revelation 3:20 (NLT)

I absolutely love meeting friends for lunch. I work from home, so it's always a pleasure to get out and meet with other Christians for food and fellowship. Plus, I'm what you might call a people person. Not huge groups, but small, intimate groups or one-on-one. I like sharing my life, hearing about what's happening in theirs, and offering one another encouragement. To me, that's true friendship, and I'm blessed to have several.

I also love Revelation 3:20, which invites us to share a meal with Jesus Himself! It's hard to imagine exactly what that would be like. I feel like I'd be speechless, but it might be like the meals I share with friends-because He IS my friend!

Revelation 3:14-21 begins with Jesus describing the church at Laodicea as lukewarm (neither hot nor cold), self-sufficient and spiritually complacent. The church seemed to grow away from needing God's help, His wisdom, and spiritual discipline. They didn't realize or couldn't see that, though they thought they had their lives together. They were struggling, depressed, poor, blind to the Truth, and defenseless.

I see this as an invitation to fast, to sup with the Lord, and to turn my indifference into a passion for spending time with Him and meditating on His Word. It's like pulling out a chair for the Lord at breakfast, lunch and dinner...maybe for one day, three days, or even seven days. We can start small and go from there.

Fasting with this attitude will draw us closer and renew our dependence on the Lord. It's a time of putting ourselves aside to make room for more of Him. He is our sustenance, and fasting is a way to avoid complacency, strengthen our friendship with Jesus, and be aware of our constant dependence on Him.

APPLICATION: What if we set aside a time to fast in our calendars this week? If you're not used to fasting (like me), perhaps begin with one meal or one day. Think of it as having a meal with your best friend and talking with Him about what life would be without Him and how you need Him.

PRAYER: Father, I am needy and want more of You. Thank You for knocking at the door and inviting me to have a meal with You. Help me never to take Your invitation for granted. Amen.

A SWEET AROMA TO GOD

"And the priest shall throw the blood on the altar of the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting and burn the fat for a pleasing aroma to the LORD."

Leviticus 17:6 (ESV)

"The priest must present part of this peace offering as a special gift to the LORD. This includes all the fat around the internal organs, the two kidneys and the fat around them near the loins, and the long lobe of the liver. These must be removed with the kidneys, and Aaron's sons will burn them on top of the burnt offering on the wood burning on the altar. It is a special gift, a pleasing aroma to the LORD." Leviticus 3:3-5 (NLT)

In the Old Testament, before Jesus came to earth as a man, the children of Israel, God's chosen people, made animal sacrifices as sin offerings, guilt offerings and praise offerings, amongst others. It sounds rather disgusting to us now, but they would take animals and splatter their blood on the altar and burn the fat and follow detailed instructions for other parts of the animal's body, including what must not be eaten, what should and where and when it was to be eaten. Many chapters in Leviticus are instructions to the Israelites about sacrifices. Jesus became the final sacrifice for sin and guilt. Now, His people aren't required to make those kinds of offerings.

When we fast, our bodies burn fat. And we know from Leviticus 17:6 that the burning fat of an animal emits a fragrance that pleases the Lord. What if, when we fast, our bodies burn fat, creating a sort of perfume that has a pleasant aroma and is a special gift to Him?

Instead of animal sacrifices, perhaps as followers of Christ, our sacrifice is to go without food, which pleases the Lord in more ways than the scent produced with the burning of fat, but also the laying of our whole selves on the altar in total submission and dependence on Him. In comparison to what Jesus suffered for us, it's a small sacrifice to make.

APPLICATION: Take a moment to thank the Lord for His sacrifice. Consider fasting as a gift to the Giver of life and of all good things.

PRAYER: Father, I know You are pleased with me. I've done nothing to deserve Your Love and can't do anything to make You love me more. Direct me, Lord, on how and when to fast. I want to bless You, Lord. When I do fast, let my sacrifice be pleasing to You. Amen.

LIFE IS MORE THAN FOOD

"But don't be so concerned about perishable things like food. Spend your energy seeking the eternal life that the Son of Man can give you."

John 6:27a (NLT)

"That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life–whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?" Matthew 6:25 (NLT)

These verses from John 6 follow the account of Jesus' miracle of feeding the 5,000+ people after taking and blessing a boy's five barley loaves and two fish. The large crowd had followed Him after seeing His miracles of healing the sick. They were hungry, so Jesus fed them, and they were filled.

They wanted more. They wanted to perform God's works, too. Jesus tells the people to spend their energy seeking the eternal life He gives instead of perishable things like food. Food is perishable, but we need it to fuel our lives. Jesus is eternal, and we need Him to sustain our lives.

We seem very concerned with what we need in this physical world, including what we eat. We collect recipes, shop for groceries, prepare food, cook, bake and fry. Then we clean the dishes, put them away, and do it again the next day.

God created us to need food as fuel, giving us good food to enjoy. But we weren't created to worry about food. In Matthew 6:25, Jesus tells us not to worry about the needs of our everyday lives...like food, drink and clothing. He is our Provider! He satisfies our hunger and thirst and clothes us in His righteousness. What are we to do instead of worrying? Believe...in Him.

When we fast, we look to Jesus as our fuel, our energy, and our sustenance. We say, *Jesus, You are my life, my everything. You are all I need today*.

APPLICATION: Take a few minutes to read through John 6. Make a plan to fast with the idea of God being enough.

PRAYER: Jesus, I need Your help to focus on the eternal more than the perishable. Through fasting, help me learn more and gain a new perspective. I trust You to meet all my needs and more. Amen.

HUMBLE RECIPROCITY

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Luke 18:10-14 (NIV)

What shall I return to the Lord for all His goodness to me? Psalm 116:12 (NIV)

HUMBLE

In Luke 18, the Pharisee (religious leader), comparing himself to the tax collector, pridefully bragged about fasting twice a week. While the tax collector realized his sin and humbly sought God's mercy. Fasting should always be done humbly, with God in His rightful place as Lord. If you feel you haven't been able to sense His presence in your life, fasting could be one way to renew your connection. Other reasons for fasting include repentance, expressing sorrow or grief, dedicating something or someone to the Lord, becoming more attuned or dependent on God, for help while fighting a battle, for preparation for battle, and for safety. Fasting keeps us humble before the Lord.

RECIPROCITY

Psalm 116 was most likely written by King David and expresses gratitude toward God. God saved him from physical harm, from his enemies and encouraged David's heart when he was at his lowest. Like David, God also does so much for us. Like most relationships, it's not one-sided, where one gives and the other receives–it's reciprocal.

Most days, I'm thankful for all God has done in my life. I try to grow closer to Him through journaling, prayer, and spending time with others who love Him, too. These are called spiritual disciplines, and they help deepen our relationship with God. Some others include Bible study, giving, worship, solitude and fasting.

Why not take a step of faith and add fasting to the habits you already share with God? It's a simple, reciprocal way to give back and draw closer to Him.

APPLICATION: What steps are you taking toward a deeper relationship with God? Consider how fasting could enhance your worship and dependence on Him.

PRAYER: Father, You have been so good to me. Help me humble myself through fasting, and may it bless You in return. Amen.

WEEK SIX • THURSDAY

THE GREATEST REWARD

"And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, for they try to look miserable and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I tell you the truth, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you." Matthew 6:16-18 (NLT)

In Matthew chapter 6, Jesus talks about being careful with how we fast. He reminds us not to make a show of it or try to look miserable, so others notice. Fasting isn't about impressing people–it's something personal between us and God.

Interestingly, Jesus says, *When you fast* and not *if you fast*. Having been a Christian for more than 30 years and, probably not unlike many others, I've only fasted maybe a handful of times throughout my walk with the Lord. I typically wait for a prompting or conviction from the Holy Spirit, and to be honest, sometimes even then, I don't do it because of logistics. For example, I may have just taken some meat from the freezer and purchased fresh mushrooms. I dislike letting food spoil and having to throw it away.

My routine can get in the way. There's really no reason not to fast from time to time. I could plan it and set myself up for participating in something extraordinary with my Jesus. If I put other things ahead every time, where does that leave my relationship with God? I want to be able to fast and pray for breakthroughs–for myself, my estranged niece, my friend battling cancer, and many other situations.

Fasting is a way for me to create the time and space to implore the Lord, cry out to Him, praise Him, invite Him into my yuckiness, and open my eyes with expectations of His goodness while closing my eyes to the distractions of cooking, shopping, eating out and the expectations of pleasing my tastebuds. I'd so much rather please my Father-now THAT would be the greatest reward!

APPLICATION: Think about setting aside some time to fast. Just take a moment to reflect on what you want to bring before the Lord.

PRAYER: Father, help me bring my routine into a rhythm of spending more and more time with You. And let fasting be one of the ways. Show me how and guide me closer to You. Amen.

OUR MANNA

And the LORD said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God." In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat."

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is My flesh." John 6:51 (NLT)

I find the correlation of these two passages quite fascinating.

The Exodus passage describes a miraculous bread appearing to the Israelites as a gift from God, straight from heaven. They were to gather only what they could eat that day, and everyone was fully satisfied. The unknown substance was called Manna. In its original Hebrew, *manna* means *what is it*? It can also represent *spiritual nourishment*.

In the next passage (or verse), Jesus describes Himself as *the living bread*. Like the manna, He came from heaven-a miraculous gift from God. He offers His flesh as bread *so the world may live*. He is the bread the Lord has given US to eat, and He satisfies us completely.

Like the Israelites who were freed from slavery, we were saved and freed from the captivity of our sins. As God provided the bread (or manna) to the Israelites for nourishment, He provides Jesus, the Bread of Life, to us as our sustenance.

In Philippians 4:19 ESV, Paul encourages the church at Philippi, saying, And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. He is our bread, our life, our supplier of every need, our miracle from God, and our spiritual nourishment. He is our manna.

APPLICATION: The next time you fast from food, consider the provision of Jesus as your manna. Take enough for that day. Savor it and be filled by it.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for being my nourishment. Help me know each day, especially through fasting, that You are all I need and more. Amen.

Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, for each one should carry their own load. Galatians 6:4-5 (NIV)

Years ago, I used to care far more about what others thought, but I realized people pleasers can't be world changers. It's been said, *Everyone is born an original, but sadly, many die a copy*! Why? Because they compare themselves to others and try to live like them. Social media is one of the worst tools for causing us to live this way. We spend so much time scrolling through social media pages, and our eyes get fixed on the *treasures of this world*. God's invitation to us is to scroll the pages of His word and get our eyes fixed on the *treasures of heaven*.

One of the everyday struggles with money is the tendency to compare our financial situation with others. Insecurity often drives this comparison–when we feel inadequate or lack confidence in our self-worth, we use others' wealth as a measuring stick for our value. However, this is not a financial problem–it's a heart issue.

God is our heavenly Father who gives us our value, not the things of this world. Identity is a simple thing to talk about, but it's easy for us to find our identity in our performance and material possessions. We can be rich in this world and poor in God, and Jesus helps us understand the importance of living well. The Bible reminds us that our value doesn't come from what we own but from who we are in Christ. God's love for us determines our worth, not the size of our bank account. We need to trust that God is a good Father who faithfully provides for His children! Comparing our wealth to others reveals a lack of trust in God's provision and a failure to see ourselves as He sees us. When we anchor our identity to material possessions, our financial status becomes the foundation of our worth. Low self-worth can cause us to compare ourselves to others and can lead to pride and arrogance or envy and jealousy.

APPLICATION: Keep your eyes on Jesus.

PRAYER: Ask God to help you see and trust that He is a good Father. Ask Him to help remind you of how often He's cared for you and your needs. Thank Him for His faithfulness.

THE LOVE OF MONEY

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs. **1 Timothy 6:6-10 (NIV)**

Greed is a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5) because it replaces God with a lust for material things, leaving us empty and restless. When dissatisfaction with God's provision dominates our hearts, especially in the context of money, it brings sorrow rather than peace. Remember, no one wakes up one day and says I'm going to quit following Jesus. They slowly drift away. I have said this before, but I love how C.S. Lewis says it. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one-the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts. I often ask a simple but probing question: God, do I want You more than _____? I fill in the blank with whatever is on my mind, sometimes my home, job or a hobby, and when I can't quickly answer, I know I need to ask God to help me desire Him more.

Paul teaches us the antidote to greed in Philippians 4:11-13: contentment. Whether in abundance or need, Paul trusted God's provision and found satisfaction in Christ, not in circumstances. Paul's heart was fixed on eternal treasures, not temporary wealth, allowing him to live a godly life. His secret? Contentment and satisfaction in God's provision gave him peace and freedom. Remember, He is always good and has the best plans for His children. Money will come and go, but your soul will live forever. Invest in what matters most today. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

APPLICATION: The more you look at Jesus each day, the more He transforms your heart.

PRAYER: Spend a moment asking yourself if God is the top priority in your life. With the Spirit ask, *God, do I want You more than* _____? Whatever He reveals, ask Him to help you long for Him more than anything in this world. Thank God for His faithfulness.

FAITHFULNESS IN OUR FINANCES

Remember this–a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. "For God loves a person who gives cheerfully."

2 Corinthians 9:6-7 (NLT)

Imagine you saw a farmer who never planted a seed sitting around waiting for vegetables to grow. You'd scratch your head because you know the principle: you sow first, then reap. This is the same principle God applies to our finances. It's easy to say that I'll start tithing once I get in a better situation or get another promotion. We are waiting for God to be faithful to us without sowing anything. The more we give, the more we give God the chance to show His faithfulness to us.

When it comes to tithing, God isn't putting you to the test to see what you're made of. He's putting you to the test to show you what He's made of! It's essential, though, that we don't give reluctantly or out of compulsion. Instead, we give as our way of showing our faithfulness to God. I cannot say God is first in my life and not have Him first in my finances. When you have a hobby you love, you give your resources, time and money to it. If we love God, we'll give Him our resources, time and money.

The Bible tells us that we're stewards of our finances. This means that everything we have is God's and we've been entrusted with it. If I view everything as God's, it would be easier for me to tithe. Oftentimes, we can think, well, God didn't go to work for me. God didn't build this company or put the long hours in. True, but where do your opportunities come from? Where did your natural skills and abilities come from? When we slow down and look around, we understand that every good and perfect gift is from above.

Finances reveal where our trust is, because nothing gives us more security, or insecurity, than finances. If I view everything as God's, He has enough to care for me. My job is to be faithful and give what He places on my heart. If you have never given before, start giving regularly. If you give regularly, pray about giving your tithe or 10%. If you are giving your tithe, pray about Spiritled giving, where you ask God what percentage He may be calling you to give. Just remember this truth: You can never outgive God. He is the most generous person in the whole universe.

APPLICATION: Every good and perfect gift is from above. Your job is to steward it.

PRAYER: Everything we have is from God, so ask God to help you be generous because He's generous. Spend time asking God what He might be calling you to give from your finances, or to encourage what you're already contributing. Ask Him to help make clear your next step in being faithful with your finances.

JUST DO IT

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. **Matthew 6:19-20 (NIV)**

Arguably, one of the most recognizable logos in the world today is the Nike swoosh logo. It was introduced about 50 years ago, when a graphic design student was approached about creating a logo. Wait for it- the price they paid for the logo was \$35. In 2020, the company was reported as having \$37.4 billion in revenue. Talk about a return on investment! I share this because it seems like the world's motto is *just do it*, but we've created a motto in Christianity where we say *don't do it*. I think the intentions are good, but most people don't want a relationship where the goal is not to do certain things. We have created a subculture where we talk more about what *not to do* with money than *what to do with it*.

The main point of the verse above is encouraging us to *just do it* regarding our resources. The main point isn't just a defensive posture telling you to stay away from the resources and stuff of this world. It's telling you to invest in the better thing. Stewardship is about living as though you believe everything you have is God's, and you're entrusted to it for a season.

If I watch someone's house, I live in it for a short season, but then they return. Most of us are prone to live as though we hold onto our stuff forever. You don't, so Matthew says, living with eternity in mind. Buy things on this earth, sure, but store and treasure things that last for eternity. If we think a Nike logo was one of the most significant returns on investments ever, the Bible says it doesn't compare to those who invest in eternity. Biblical generosity always lives with eternity in mind. In the same way you plan a financial future, have you ever slowed down and asked God, *How are You calling me to be generous with my resources*? It's the best financial investment you can make.

APPLICATION: Take a step in living out generosity today by giving.

PRAYER: Ask God to help you be generous like He is generous. Ask the Spirit to show you where you're storing up treasures. Ask what He's calling you to give today, and take the step. Don't put off tomorrow what God has told you in the Spirit today.

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me." Matthew 29:21 (NIV)

I was recently speaking at a camp and saw a monument of some key givers that made this camp a reality. That weekend, I spoke to over a hundred kids who said yes to Jesus, and what struck me was how many kids in the space had said yes to Jesus over the years. It is a thin place where heaven and earth meet, where God's presence shows up uniquely. That camp was a thin place that weekend. It was a place where God moved in a mighty way. Most people give the camp directors, the speaker, or the band most of the credit for how God moved, but this thought struck me all weekend: this wouldn't have been possible without legacy givers. Most givers have already passed on and are with Jesus, but their investment still lives on. I could only use my gift because they first gave of their gifts.

While the passage above is directed to the rich young ruler and speaks about his love for money, Jesus' principle is for everyone. Your resources have a chance to outlive you. We talk a lot about depreciating assets in our culture, and the best investment, Jesus says, is in the church and His kingdom. The people who gave still impact people's lives because of their generosity. The church will outlive every one of us.

Jesus says He will build His church, and the gates of hell won't stand. Any church that's Jesus' church will live on, long after a building fades. The lives touched, the people served, and the freedom found all come from Jesus, but it's possible because people decided to be legacy givers. People invested in something that would outlast them and impact future generations. Trying to get the best bang for your buck is not selfish. Jesus wants you to steward your resources well, but Jesus is clear that people need to stop thinking shortsightedly and think of eternal investments. He reminds us there is a better way to give. He invites us to be legacy givers.

APPLICATION: You can't outgive a generous God. Store up your treasures in heaven.

PRAYER: Spend some time thanking God for the people who have given sacrificially to the church, where you accepted Christ. Thank Him for the legacy givers who've marked your life. Ask Him to help you see generosity as a way to impact the world for Christ.

Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf. Proverbs 11:28 (NIV)

Money is a good resource, but it is a terrible master. We often think we'd thrive if we had more money and resources. Interestingly, Proverbs says the righteous will flourish. Why? The righteous trust God to provide and take care of them. Most of my concerns around money are that I don't always believe that God will provide. Have you ever noticed what it says on money? In God we trust, but sometimes isn't it easier to trust money over God?

The other day, my son said that he'll buy a Lamborghini and all the stuff he wants when he gets older. He asked me why I don't have a Lamborghini, and I laughed. But what struck me is how innate it is to trust money even at an early age. The default setting is to think that once you can have this or buy it, life starts. Of course, our desires aren't quite like my sons' for an exotic car, but I've noticed in my life I have begun saying If I just had a little bit more, I could take care of this issue, or buy this thing that would help us. Contentment is hard in the culture we live in. Perhaps the most unsavory secret is that sometimes I wonder if God will truly provide. I don't say this out loud, but my worry and concern show that sometimes I want more money because I'm not sure I can trust God. So what many of us have isn't a money issue. Instead, it's a trust issue.

My kids have never been worried about what they are going to eat, unfortunately, they often complain about what they are eating! I've never heard them worry or stress about what the future holds. So when fear comes in, when the enemy tries to attack about trusting God, remember and draw on His past faithfulness. His track record in your life shows that He's good and He's got this. Take the stress and turn it into rest. Draw on the past provision of your heavenly Father and let confidence grow in you. You can trust God, not only with your finances, but with your entire life. Rest because He wants more for you than you want for yourself, spiritually speaking, and He will provide.

APPLICATION: Look up to God today for your help!

PRAYER: Ask the Spirit to help you walk with Him and trust Him alone. If money or worldly comforts have become security for you, ask Him to help you trust Him alone.

GOD IS FOR YOU

This I know, that God is for me.

Psalm 56:9b (ESV)

If I had a dollar for every time I spoke or thought the words I don't know, I'd have quite a stash of cash.

There are so many situations and circumstances in life that don't make sense to my limited brain that all I can do is sigh and confess, *I just don't know*. The reality of being human is that we don't know what will happen in the next hour, much less the next week, month or year. We won't have the answer to every question thrown our way, and other people's actions will sometimes baffle us. But rather than letting what we don't know discourage us and make us anxious, we can redirect it to the truth we do know.

I imagine King David felt the weight of many I don't knows when he wrote Psalm 56. His enemies were twisting His words, scheming against him, and lurking around in hopes of taking his life, but rather than crumble under the pressure of the unknown, he affirmed what he did know. David knew that God had his back, relieved him from his fear, and provided comfort in his misery. In our unknowns, we can make this same declaration.

I don't know what challenges a day will bring, but *this I know*: God is for me.

I don't know how to solve that problem, but *this I know*: God is for me.

I don't know why certain trials and troubles mark our lives, but *this I know*: God is for me.

When we know nothing else, we can rest assured that we have a God who loves us and is on our side. His greatest demonstration of that is the cross, and He has literally put His Spirit inside of us to be our Advocate, or Helper.

When we let our *I don't know* redirect our focus to *this I know*, our uncertainty gets lost in the sufficiency of our all-powerful, all-knowing, always present, faithfully providing, fiercely protective, merciful and gracious God. We'll never have all the answers, but we can take courage that we know the One who does and rejoice that He is for us.

APPLICATION: Each time you anxiously think or say *I don't know* today, follow it up with, *This I know: God is for me*.

PRAYER: God, I confess that the things I don't know or understand can cause me to worry. Assure my heart that You are for me and are sufficient for every situation I face. Amen.

GOD IS NOT INTIMIDATED BY LACK

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. Matthew 14:17 (NIV)

They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 14:20-21 (NIV)

Summer is typically my favorite time of the year. It carries a certain carefreeness as days are long and schedules flex to accommodate vacations and summer fun. However, a recent summer felt anything but carefree. I had far more to do than time to do it. I felt my limitedness and felt overwhelmed by lack. Lack of time. Lack of understanding. Lack of strength to get it all done.

In that season, God directed my thoughts to the passage of Scripture where Jesus fed the five thousand. For context, crowds had followed Jesus and his disciples to a desolate place where Jesus spent the day teaching and healing. As evening came, the disciples told Jesus to send the people back to their villages so they could buy themselves food. *But He answered, You give them something to eat.* (Mark 6:37 NIV). The disciples immediately felt overwhelmed. The amount of bread it would take to feed this crowd far exceeded their resources. All they had available was five loaves of bread and two fish. But that's not what Jesus saw. Where they saw limitations, Jesus saw miraculous provision. Where they saw *not enough*, Jesus saw overflowing abundance. He took the few loaves everyone deemed insufficient and provided food that satisfied thousands, plus twelve baskets full of leftovers.

This account reminded me that lack is no issue for God. Where I see limitations, He still sees miraculous provision. Where I see *not enough*, He still sees overflowing abundance. He can multiply what currently exists, and He has the power to create something out of nothing. In his Kingdom, there is no such thing as scarcity. He can always step into our lack and abundantly provide what we need.

APPLICATION: Psalm 23:1 also reminds us that we lack nothing with the Lord as our Shepherd. Meditate on this verse using a breath prayer, which is a simple way to connect with God by speaking Scripture while you breathe in and out. As you inhale, affirm *the Lord is my Shepherd*, and as you exhale, declare *I lack nothing*.

PRAYER: Father, help me trust Your power to defy limitations and provide. Nothing is impossible for You. Amen.

REMEMBER GOD'S PAST FAITHFULNESS

You sent Your good Spirit to instruct them, and You did not stop giving them manna from heaven or water for their thirst. For forty years You sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell! **Nehemiah 9:20-21 (NLT)**

When Jesus speaks about worry during the Sermon on the Mount, He specifically calls attention to three areas that can create anxiety: what you will eat, what you will drink, and what you will wear (Matthew 6:31). When He spoke into these stressors, He did so with full authority because He miraculously provided these exact things for forty years while His people wandered in the wilderness.

God met the Israelites' need for food with bread from heaven. Morning by morning, He covered the ground with a fine, flake-like substance that Exodus 16:31 describes as tasting like wafers made with honey. Each morning's portion proved sufficient for their daily needs. When His people thirsted for water, the Lord brought water out of a rock (Exodus 17:1-7). And God amazingly preserved their clothing and sandals for four decades!

So, when Jesus says, *Do not worry about these things*, you can take Him at His word. The same God who cared for the Israelites cares for you. He has the same power and authority to meet your physical needs as He's done in past generations. Not only that, but Jesus also provides for your spiritual hunger and thirst as the bread of life and the living water, and He clothes you with his righteousness to cover your spiritual nakedness.

Remembering and reflecting upon who God is and what He has done in the past will move your heart from worry towards faith in His full capacity to sustain you in your present moment.

APPLICATION: The Bible is filled with accounts of God consistently coming through for His people, and there are likely moments in your life, or the life of your family, where you've experienced God's unique provision. Spend some time reflecting on one of those moments and allow God's past provision to fuel your faith and confidence in His ability to provide for your present and future.

PRAYER: Father, when I start to worry about my daily needs, encourage my heart with reminders of Your faithful provisions in the past. You are the same yesterday, today and forever. Help me trust You to take care of me. Amen.

OVERCOMERS THROUGH FAITH

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world–our faith. **1 John 5:4 (ESV)**

It's wild to me how quickly I can create false narratives in my mind. I recently received an incoming call with the generic description of *Healthcare* on the screen. I'd had a preventative screening the day before, and within seconds, I created this ridiculous story in my head about the bad news the doctor must be calling to give me. It turns out it was just my dentist calling to confirm an upcoming cleaning. I mentally spiraled into worry for nothing.

It's so easy to fill the space of what we don't know with worry, fear and speculation. This is the mindset of our world. But a kingdom mindset offers us another option. We can choose to fill the unknown spaces with faith.

1 John 5:4 tells us that every child of God is an overcomer, and the key to our victory is our faith in Jesus, the ultimate overcomer. Jesus never promised us that we won't have things to worry about. In fact, in John 16:33, He Himself assures us that we will have trouble. However, He doesn't stop there. Jesus immediately follows His guarantee of trouble with encouragement to *take heart; I have overcome the world*. Remaining in relationship with Jesus with a heart that trusts and relies upon Him gives us the power to overcome the pressures and troubles of this world.

- When worry consumes us with *what-if*, faith lets us fix our thoughts on what is true, lovely, and praiseworthy.
- When worry rushes us towards worst-case scenarios, faith assures us that even in the worst circumstances, God is with us and His grace is sufficient.
- When worry paralyzes us with fear and holds us back, faith moves us forward with courage even when we're afraid.
- Where worry creates unrest, faith produces peace.

You don't have to live defeated by worry. Jesus has overcome, and staying connected to Him makes you an overcomer, too.

APPLICATION: Choose to fill the unknown spaces with faith instead of worry.

PRAYER: Jesus, when I start scripting false narratives in my mind that breed worry, fear and speculation, direct me back to You and fill me with faith. Thank You for overcoming the world and for sharing Your victory with me. Amen.

ARE YOU ACTING LIKE AN ORPHAN?

These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and He will give you everything you need.

Matthew 6:32-33 (NLT)

If you listened to Christian music in the 90s and early 2000s, then you're likely familiar with the band Jars of Clay. A line from their song Out of My Hands stuck with me. It says, And I act like an orphan / Forget that You found me.

Now and then, that line pops back into my brain and exposes my orphan mentality. An orphan mindset is one of self-reliance, carrying with it pressure to provide for myself and figure everything out on my own. It's a life of striving and insecurity, and the way of our world.

On the other hand, the Kingdom of God is one of sons and daughters under the care and provision of a loving Father. It's confidence in our good Father to meet our every need and keep us safe. It's marked by receiving rather than striving.

God has not left you alone as an orphan to fend for yourself. You are a beloved child of your heavenly Father, and He is fully aware of all your needs. He's not just aware, He is completely capable of meeting every single one. After all, He has already met your most desperate need, salvation from sin and death, so there is no problem too big that He can't solve.

Push back against the world telling you to prioritize self-reliance and material possessions to satisfy your needs. God has given you a higher priority. Be about the things your Father is about, such as love, humility, righteousness, gratitude and generosity. As you seek those things, He'll give you everything else you need.

APPLICATION: Listen to the song The Lord will Provide by Landon Wolfe and Passion and declare Everything I need, My Father has it.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, show me where I'm living like an orphan and striving to manage life on my own. I confess how quickly I can forget that my Father is the King of Kings. Help me entrust myself to Your loving care and prioritize You and Your kingdom above everything else. Amen.

HE'S IN THE SAME BOAT

He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. Mark 4:39 (NIV)

In Mark 4:35, we find Jesus and His disciples departing for the other side of the Sea of Galilee after a long day of teaching. The Sea of Galilee is well known for the occurrence of sudden, violent storms and the disciples soon found themselves in a ferocious storm in the darkness of night. The wind whipped up waves so intense that they began breaking into the boat, and it started filling with water. The terrified disciples, several experienced fishermen, feared the boat was going down. Meanwhile, Jesus slept peacefully in the back of the boat. The desperate disciples woke Him up, shouting, *Don't You care if we drown*? In response, Jesus got up and rebuked the storm, and the situation completely calmed as the wind and waves listened to their Creator's command to hush.

On the surface, it appears that the disciples' greatest problem in this scenario was the storm. But, as I heard a pastor once put it, the real problem is that they were more certain of the storm's power than of God's power in the boat. Yes, they were in a scary situation, but what threatened and overwhelmed them did not threaten and overwhelm their God, who was with them.

We all face storms that can make us feel overwhelmed, fearful, worried and think we won't make it. Like the disciples, we're prone to fixate on how powerful the storm is, accuse God of not caring about our situation, and forget His power over everything. In those moments, we must shift our perspective from how powerful the storm is to how powerful our God is. He has full authority over every storm, and He cares deeply about you. Take Him at His word that He'll get you to the other side.

APPLICATION: What storm are you currently facing? Declare with certainty that the power of God is greater than the power of your storm.

PRAYER: God, give me confidence in Your presence and power and help me trust in Your authority over the storms in my life. Fill me with Your peace and assure my heart that I am safe in Your care. Amen.

