



# **GROWING STRONGER TOGETHER**

**DAILY DEVOTIONAL**

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Faith is personal, but it's never meant to be private or isolated. From the very beginning, God designed us for relationship with Him and with each other.

One of the greatest gifts of the Christian life is the opportunity to grow together with fellow believers, encouraging one another toward deeper faith and greater love. Something I often say is, *Show me your friends, and I'll show you your future*. As simple as it sounds, it holds true. The people closest to us shape the way we think, speak and live. When we surround ourselves with people who are chasing after God, we're strengthened, challenged and uplifted. But when we try to walk alone, or when our closest relationships pull us away from what's true, growth becomes harder and spiritual clarity gets clouded.

This is why Christian community matters. We need people who will pray with us, speak truth to us, hold us accountable, and remind us of God's promises when we forget them. We need to be those people for others, too.

As we walk through this series, pause and reflect: Who's walking with you? Are your relationships helping you grow in faith, wisdom and love? Is God leading you to invest more intentionally in Christ-centered community? Spend time in prayer each day asking God how you can grow stronger together with others. Growing stronger in Christ is a shared journey. Let's walk it well—together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bryan Jones', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Bryan Jones, Senior Pastor**

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# DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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

**Matthew 6:9b (NLT)**

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

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

**Matthew 6:9c (NLT)**

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

*"May Your Kingdom come soon."*

**Matthew 6:10a (NLT)**

- **Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.**

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

**Matthew 6:11 (NLT)**

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

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

**Matthew 6:12 (NLT)**

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

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

**Matthew 6:13a (NLT)**

- **Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?**

# MORE THAN ONE

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*Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble.* **Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NLT)**

I tend to try to do things myself. Whether we realize it or not, many of us have displayed that tendency since childhood. It's likely you've thought or said something like *I can do it myself* at one time or another.

This attitude might work out okay until you try playing ping pong or get hurt.

I recently had a minor medical procedure in the middle of my back that required stitches. The nurse said I needed to clean the wound and change the bandage daily. However, I wasn't flexible enough to reach the bandage by myself. I needed someone else to remove the bandage, clean the wound, and reapply a new bandage. There are just some things we can't do alone.

It takes humility to admit that I can't do everything on my own. I need others in my life who can help me take steps that I can't take alone.

There's a benefit to both the person in need and the person who helps. When I'm experiencing a difficulty, I feel peace from knowing there is someone who will walk with me through that difficulty. On the other hand, when someone asks me to come alongside them in a time of difficulty, I feel a sense of value and purpose in knowing that I'm helping someone else.

We're designed to rely on and be needed by others. It's good to know someone has your back.

*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him."* **Genesis 2:18 (NLT)**

**APPLICATION:** Who can come alongside you when you're experiencing challenges? Identify a trusted person with whom you can share your thoughts and listen to them share their thoughts.

**PRAYER:** Father, who do you want me to walk alongside? Please show me a person today with whom I can talk about what's going on with me and listen to what's happening with them. Amen.

# HE'S HERE

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*For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them.*

**Matthew 18:20 (NIV)**

Jesus wants us to know that He is with us.

In **Matthew 28:20 (NLT)** Jesus says, . . . *"And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

But sometimes it can be difficult to remember or recognize His presence. What can we do to enhance our experience of Christ's presence? We can experience the presence of Jesus when we get together with a few others in His name.

When two or three people get together in the name of Jesus, it means they're getting together to know Jesus better, to be more like Jesus, and to remember and honor Jesus. If you get together in my name, it means you want to talk about me, you want to talk about what I've said, and you share the experiences you had with me because you're seeking to remember and honor me. Getting together with other people seeking to know Jesus better and honor Him invites the presence of Jesus and helps us experience His presence. When we gather in Jesus' name, we might ask:

1. **What did He say?** That includes not only the words Jesus spoke as a human on earth, but also the whole Word of God because Jesus is God. It includes sharing our thoughts on what we've sensed Him saying.
2. **What did He do?** Let's remember the things Jesus did. Remember when He washed the disciples' feet? Remember when He healed a blind man? Remember when He worked in my life?
3. **How can we be more like Him?** Let's practice the things Jesus did, and let's do it together!

A key step to inviting and experiencing Jesus's presence is to get together with a few others who are seeking to know Jesus better, sharing stories of personal time with Jesus, and honoring Jesus together.

**APPLICATION:** Name a few people you can get together with in Jesus' name. Ask God to show you who you can meet with to experience Jesus by remembering Him and sharing what He's said and done.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for sending Your Spirit to be with us. Guide me to people with whom I can experience Jesus. Amen.

# JESUS' PRAYER FOR US

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*"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in Me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as You and I are one—as You are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe You sent Me.*

**John 17:20-21 (NLT)**

What a gift it is to know the words that Jesus prayed to the Father the night before He was crucified. Jesus knew the time was near when He would sacrifice His life for us, so the words He prayed to the Father must have been extra significant.

Interestingly, Jesus noted He was praying not only for the disciples who were physically with Him at the time, but for all who will EVER believe in Him. He was praying for you and me. He had all His followers on His mind. Wouldn't it seem that whatever He prayed for us in that moment would be highly important?

He prayed for ONENESS—that we would be one, unified in love and purpose—not just earthly love but a unity like Jesus has with His Father—a oneness that doesn't let go, that loves no matter what, a love that is centered in Jesus.

How could we ever have that type of oneness with others? In the last sentence, Jesus takes care of that— *May they be in us*. The only way for us to have oneness with each other is to know and depend on God. When Jesus is at the center, others become more important than ourselves. Our trust in Jesus is best expressed in our love for one another.

Jesus also indicates that our love for God and one another is the greatest evidence that God sent Jesus to bring people back to the Father. The validating factor supporting the truth of the message of Jesus' forgiveness and love is our oneness, our love for one another.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God if there's another Jesus-follower with whom you feel you have a damaged relationship. Ask God to show you a step He wants you to take to express or request forgiveness.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for loving me unconditionally and sending Jesus to die for me. Let me know the name of another believer I should encourage, apologize to, or talk with so we can be one. Amen.

# HARMONY

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*May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.* **Romans 15:5-7 (NLT)**

I love the sound of a quartet singing four-part harmony. A necessary element of harmony is that different people sing different notes. If everyone were singing the same note, it wouldn't be harmony but unison. Another key component of harmony is that all the singers follow the direction of the maestro, or the different notes might sound like noise.

The goal of living in harmony with each other implies that we don't all have to look or act alike, nor do we have to agree on everything. Harmony means that we bring our uniqueness to a fellowship of believers, with a willingness to put others' needs before our own and follow the direction of our Master.

Harmony happens when we bring who we are and what we have to Jesus in response to the love He's already expressed. As we focus on Jesus together, He uses us to show His love to the world.

What's my step toward being in harmony with others? Accept others in the way Christ has accepted you. How has Jesus accepted you? He accepted me just as I am, with grace for my faults and truth to transform me into the person I was created to be. How does it feel to know the perfect Son of God accepts you as you are?

If I can begin to comprehend God's love for me and how He's accepted me, I can begin to show a similar acceptance and love to others. When we begin to accept one another and live in harmony, then God will receive glory. He'll receive the attention and thanks for His work in us and in the world.

**APPLICATION:** Confess to God at least one thing about yourself that's made you feel unworthy of His love. Thank Him for His forgiveness and His love for you.

**PRAYER:** Father, please help me understand the ways Christ has accepted me. Give me the love and perspective to accept others the way you've accepted me. Amen.

# ENCOURAGE ONE ANOTHER

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*When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours.*

**Romans 1:12 (NLT)**

Why do you think God can be trusted?

For me, it's because He sacrificed His only Son to die in our place so that we could receive God's forgiveness. We can go straight into the presence of God as His forgiven children. That's the hope we hold.

When we experience God's forgiveness and love, the Spirit stirs something inside us that moves us to serve or show our love to Him. But sometimes we suppress the thoughts God puts in our minds of how we would enjoy serving others. We may think that we're not worthy of serving God in that way, or that we might fail.

We benefit from being around others who encourage us to express our unique way of serving. Sometimes people can see gifts in us that we don't see in ourselves, and we can see those gifts in others. I may be reluctant to take a step to serve, but I'm more likely to try if someone takes a step with me.

This may be one reason we need to get together with other believers regularly, so we can encourage one another to take the steps God is nudging us to take. What if there were a place, or a set of people, you could meet with regularly to give and receive encouragement? Do you think you could ever receive too much encouragement? It's like eating. I may get full at one meal, but I need more after a few hours. I crave the opportunity to give and receive encouragement from others, and I'm grateful to have people who will serve alongside me.

**APPLICATION:** Who do you meet with regularly for mutual encouragement in your relationship with Jesus? If no one, ask someone today to begin meeting with you to discuss questions like these:

1. What have you heard or read from the Bible that was significant to you this week?
2. How can I pray for you?
3. What do you appreciate about me, or what next step should I take?

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for loving me and allowing me to serve You. Lead me to someone who can help me build my relationship with You. Amen.



# GROWING TOGETHER

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*He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*

**Ephesians 4:16 (NLT)**

The Bible describes followers of Jesus as members of the Body of Christ.

*The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. . . All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.*

**1 Corinthians 12:12, 27 (NLT)**

God causes the members of the body of Christ to fit together perfectly. He designed us so that each of us has different spiritual gifts—different practical expressions of the Holy Spirit. He made us so that we need other believers to help us grow to become more like Jesus.

Years ago, I broke my smallest finger, aka my pinky finger. Though it's my smallest finger, and I have nine other fingers, it hurt so much that it was difficult for me to use any part of my hand or to focus on doing anything else, until the pain in my finger subsided. My other hand grasped my pinky finger to try to soothe it, and my feet walked to the doctor to request some relief for my finger. When one part of the body hurts, the whole body hurts.

When each part of the body carries out its function in relationship with the other parts, it helps the whole body become healthy, growing and full of love. You may feel like an insignificant part of the body of Christ, but when you get together with other members of the body, you're part of something that makes a difference in that group of people. Even your weaknesses and struggles help the members of your group exercise their gifts to show the love of God to one another.

When you get together with a group of fellow believers and share whatever God has given you, God uses you to help His body become healthy, growing and full of love.

**APPLICATION:** Find a small group of believers to meet with regularly and share what God has given or spoken to you.

**PRAYER:** Father, give me the courage to show up to a group of believers to share what you've given me, and to receive what you've given them. Thanks for helping me feel Your love through others. Amen.

# A GROWING COMMUNITY

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*With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

**Acts 2:40-41 (NIV)**

In these powerful verses, we witness the incredible moment when the good news about Jesus first breaks into the hearts of thousands. Peter, full of the Spirit, stands up and pleads with the crowd, not with condemnation, but with urgency and compassion. His message isn't polished or soft. It's raw and real. He warns them, pleads with them, and points them to Jesus as the only way to be saved from a world filled with corruption and brokenness.

But one of the things I've often missed in this passage is that *three thousand were added to their number that day*. Peter was calling individuals to make a decision about Jesus, but he was also speaking to them as a larger group. Salvation is for you, but it's also for us collectively. The number doesn't matter as much as the sheer impact of salvation. As God saves us, we join an ever-growing, always-expanding community. In other words, you cannot belong to Christ and not belong to Christ's community.

There are more than 8 billion people on the planet. Unfortunately, people now seem to feel lonelier than ever before. Depression, isolation and suicide are all on the rise. It's rare to see a group of people on fire for God together. Today's passage is a reminder that there is hope. God has another way.

God was on the move in the early church, and He has been on the move for centuries. Thankfully, He's still working in our midst. He's saving many and building a growing community that is thousands (millions) strong!

**APPLICATION:** How's your community? Which relationships need attention? Take one step toward forming and strengthening true friendship today.

**PRAYER:** Lord, thank You for calling me out of darkness and into Your light. Soften my heart every day to hear Your voice and respond. Help me turn from anything that draws me away from You, and give me courage to share my faith with others, just like Peter. Use me to help others find new life in You so we can experience a growing community. Amen.

# BACK TO THE BASICS

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*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* **Acts 2:42 (NIV)**

After thousands came to faith through Peter's Spirit-filled preaching, their first response wasn't to scatter—it was to *devote* themselves. This wasn't a casual commitment. It was a deep, consistent, intentional pursuit of God and each other. The word *devoted* is rich. It means persistence, loyalty, and an unshakable focus. These new believers weren't half-hearted. Their lives had been radically transformed, and now their priorities reflected it. The Christian life wasn't something they added to their schedules—it *became* their life.

But what were they devoted to? How did they develop an authentic, growing community? Thankfully, God didn't complicate this. A few simple practices helped these young believers grow in their relationships with God and each other.

I think of it like team sports. I've played and coached soccer most of my life, and one thing is always true: the fundamentals are the key to success. You can have the best game plan, but failure is inevitable if the players can't do basic things like pass the ball and shoot the ball. Mastering the basics of soccer is essential for playing well, and this applies to everyone on the team, not just the captain or star players. Devotion to the basics is essential. This passage highlights:

Teaching: Scripture guides us, challenges us, corrects us and trains us (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Fellowship: True spiritual friendship goes below the surface. Sharing in the victories and struggles of life together. Helping each other grow in faith (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Breaking of bread: This could mean sharing a meal or taking communion together. Or both! (Exodus 24:9-11).

Prayer: Where conversations with God are a regular part of life. Personally and with each other. (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Let's get back to the basics. This is how we experience more and more of Jesus' life.

**APPLICATION**: How consistent are you with the basics of the Christian life? Which area could you grow in: spending time in the Bible, developing spiritual friendships, or prayer? Pick one of these and take steps to move in the right direction!

**PRAYER**: Lord, stir in me a heart of devotion like those believers. Deepen my hunger for the Scriptures. Help me have true friends who share and do life together. Amen.

# FILLED WITH AWE. TOGETHER.

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*Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.* **Acts 2:43 (NIV)**

One sign of a community being brought together by God's hand is that it witnesses and celebrates together God's character and work. Worship was never meant to be reduced to singing songs. Worship was meant to be a way of life where we witness miraculous God moments and are overcome with awe and wonder. Together.

I remember the first time I saw fireworks. The people in our neighborhood spent a lot of time together. This was back when people gathered for block parties, cookouts and parades. People got to know each other and celebrated holidays and big life events together. One of those celebrations was always the Fourth of July. One of our neighbors had a horse farm. Lots of land. Plenty of places to run and play, which was great for me and my sister, especially at a young age. But we couldn't wait for the sun to go down. We grabbed lawn chairs and blankets, sat, and watched the most beautiful fireworks we'd ever seen (yes, with Lee Greenwood and Neil Diamond songs blaring from the speakers, but that's another story!).

God designed us to be filled with awe and wonder. Being in God's presence is the sheer definition of awe and wonder. The closer we get to God, the more we're overwhelmed at His greatness, power and majesty. As Scripture tells us, *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.* **Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV).**

**APPLICATION:** When was the last time you were filled with awe and wonder? Get together with friends and

1. Share the miraculous things you've seen God do, and
2. Go somewhere beautiful - a lake, a beach or watch a sunrise or sunset. Sharing in the wonder of God helps us grow stronger together.

**PRAYER:** God, I know You have made me for beauty and wonder. You're doing miracles all around me, but I often miss what You're up to. I pray You'd help me, my friends and family experience the wonder of who You are together. Help us see You at work and marvel at how awesome You are. Amen.

# FROM CONVENIENCE TO SACRIFICE

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*All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.*

**Acts 2:44-45 (NIV)**

These two verses offer a glimpse into the heartbeat of the early church—a community infused with the Spirit of God, marked by radical unity and sacrificial love. At a time when personal wealth and property were measures of status and security, the believers in Acts 2 turned the world’s values upside down. Their response to the gospel was more than internal transformation. It included external generosity. They held nothing back from each other, not even their possessions.

The worldly community says *what’s mine is mine*. Godly community says *what’s mine is yours*. And to take it one step further, this passage also teaches that *what’s mine is OURS*. In other words, a growing community shares with each other almost without even thinking about it. The early church knew this so well that it became a natural description of how the people lived together. They moved from only giving when it was convenient (or self-serving) to a place where sacrifice was common. People sold things so they could give to others in need. Just imagine a community like this!

This is more than a historical account. It is an invitation.

What would it look like today if more churches embraced this same posture of shared life and radical generosity? Connecting and community are buzzwords these days, but Acts 2 challenges us to consider whether our relationships truly reflect the self-giving love of Christ. The believers didn’t give out of excess. They gave out of devotion to God and each other. Their unity was so deep that someone else’s need became their own personal responsibility.

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.*      **1 John 3:16 (NIV)**

**APPLICATION:** Perhaps God is inviting you to take a fresh look at your resources—not just money, but time, talents and presence. Who around you has a need? How might God be calling you to meet it?

**PRAYER:** Lord, make my heart generous like Yours. Teach me to see others not as burdens, but as family. Help me hold loosely to the things of this world, and tightly to the people You’ve placed in my life. Let Your love flow through me freely. Amen.

# THE RHYTHM OF COMMUNITY

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*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,*

**Acts 2:46 (NIV)**

As we continue our devotions based on Acts chapter 2, notice the words *every day* and *they continued*. Being together wasn't a once-in-a-while thing for these first-century believers. Meeting together became a regular and ongoing practice as they grew in their Christian walk. And this isn't just a description of what the early believers *did*. It reveals how they *lived* and *loved* together in the Spirit of Christ. Their faith wasn't confined to temple worship or corporate gatherings. It overflowed into homes, meals and daily rhythms of life. In a book titled *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, Rachel Held Evans writes, *They reminded me that Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. They reminded me that, try as I may, I can't be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.* Though she had been wounded in a relationship and a toxic church culture, the longing to be known and experience belonging did not go away. It never does.

Something else that stands out in this verse is their *glad and sincere hearts*. Gladness here isn't shallow happiness—it's a deep, Spirit-filled joy that comes from gratitude. Sincerity speaks of hearts without pretense or hidden motives. Where else can we go to be honest and work through our struggles and heartaches? Who else can relate to the victories other than those who have also experienced the love and grace of God? We're not supposed to *go to church* as much as we are to *be the church*, which means staying connected with others who are moving in the same direction.

**APPLICATION:** Reach out to a friend today and talk to them about the kind of community you long for. Either thank them that you have already experienced this with them, or invite them to meet and talk about life on a more regular basis. Whatever you do, seek to build community into the regular rhythm of life.

**PRAYER:** Lord, give us glad and sincere hearts. Help us love one another as You have loved us. Break down the obstacles that keep us from sharing our lives with each other. I pray you'd make spending time with really good people the rhythm of my life. Amen.

# CONTAGIOUS JOY

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*...praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* **Acts 2:47 (NIV)**

How is your level of joy these days? How's it working out for you?

It seems that the troubles and responsibilities of everyday life have a way of invading and stealing the delight and gladness that God came to earth to give us. We live in an unprecedented time of upheaval and destruction. The chaos comes in many forms: unfulfilled desires, wounds from those we love, destructive thoughts and habits we continue to fight, nagging and devastating health issues, politics, war, and the list goes on.

But in the middle of all this, there is joy. The joy of God if we seek it. An endless supply of joy.

Thankfully, God's joy is big enough to sustain us in every circumstance. Salvation isn't only the forgiveness of sin. It's also the restoration of our hearts. The Old Testament prophets often proclaimed the restoration of joy, promising beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness (from Isaiah 61:3). We find this in Jesus and no one else.

The beauty of today's Scripture is that joy is contagious. You don't have to seek it on your own. You can't sustain it on your own. It's a community thing. The people experienced this together. So much so that, according to this verse in Acts, the Lord added to the number of those praising Him and enjoying new life in Christ together. Joy has ripples.

**APPLICATION:** Seek joy today. Write J-O-Y on a notecard and carry it with you. Take a walk in nature. Listen to a stream. As God refreshes you, bring somebody into your experience. Invite your spouse or a friend to lay aside your troubles and burdens of life and draw your attention to God. Read Psalm 16 together and give space for God to bring overflowing gladness and joy.

**PRAYER:** Dear Lord, I long to be filled with Your joy. The pressures of life creep in, and sometimes, they're overwhelming. I say yes to joy today and pray that Your delight and gladness would spill over into the lives of the people I see today. May the joy You give me be contagious! You are more, and I am glad. Amen.

# WHAT ARE YOU SPREADING?

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*Then Moses added, "The Lord will give you meat to eat in the evening and bread to satisfy you in the morning, for He has heard all your complaints against Him. What have we done? Yes, your complaints are against the Lord, not against us."*

**Exodus 16:8 (NLT)**

There's a difference between complaining and lamenting. Lament—seen in stories like David, Hannah and throughout the New Testament—is a form of prayer that expresses deep need and pain and becomes a pathway towards hope. Lamenting invites the Lord's provision. Complaining, in contrast, accuses. Complaining asks, *Why have You done this to me?* Lamenting asks, *Who is the Lord, and how does He want to meet me?*

The Israelites were truly hungry. They were in a barren desert and needed provisions. It wasn't their need that displeased God—it was their complaining.

Why? Because complaining reveals a deep distrust in God's faithfulness and poisons the hearts of the community. Complaining is contagious. Like a wildfire in summer, it spreads quickly, causing great harm.

Our hearts wrestle when things don't go the way we hoped or expected, and there's beauty in wrestling *with* God. However, one complaint can spark a fire of confusion, ingratitude and unfaithfulness—not only in us but also in others whose hearts are vulnerable. When we complain about the Lord—or each other—we measure God's faithfulness by the standard of our wants and expectations. That spark festers and begins to accuse God of negligence. It becomes a breeding ground for entitlement, pride, superiority and control—everything opposed to the fruits of the Spirit.

Suddenly, a minor inconvenience becomes a full-blown war against God's character. A grumbling community is the enemy's playground. Because, at its core, it's not really about the need, the desire or the frustrating person—it's about this question: *Is God really who He says He is?*

That's why we must be careful not to let lament become an attitude of grumbling. Even when it's hard, we're called to encourage one another toward faith, hope, gratitude and love. This posture opens the door to worship and truth, radically different from the world's ways. Complaining spreads, but so does faith. And when our eyes are fixed on God's faithfulness, our hearts grow expectant and our hands open to receive what He provides.

**APPLICATION:** Ask the Holy Spirit to help you turn complaints into an honest lament that invites God to meet you in your need.

**PRAYER:** Lord, help me bring my need to You with trust, not accusation. Teach me to lament with hope and to speak words that stir faith in others. Amen.



# THE OTHER SON

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*"...but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends.'"*

**Luke 15:29 (NLT)**

If you've been around church for a while, you likely know the story of the Prodigal Son. Most versions focus on the younger son who squandered his inheritance and hit rock bottom, only to be welcomed home with open arms by his father.

But there's another son—the older one—who often gets overlooked. He stayed, obeyed and did everything right. Yet when his brother returned, he didn't join the celebration. Instead, he reacted with bitterness, rejecting his brother and his father's grace.

The father noticed his older son was missing from the celebration and went to him. He listened to his hurt, reminded him of his place, and gently explained they were celebrating because the lost had been found.

In all his obedient actions, the older brother lost sight of what it meant to be a son and, in time, a brother. None of us is immune to the quiet trap of self-righteousness and entitlement, which always leads to a bitter attitude when we see others experiencing God's faithfulness. It's easy to start tallying up our good works, thinking we've earned a special place. But we're all saved by grace, and grace alone keeps us. When we forget what it felt like to be met by God at our lowest, our hearts can grow cold, making it hard to welcome others with joy.

If we distance ourselves too far from that first moment we were met by love, the first time we encountered the grace of God at our worst, our lives will drift into the sleepy trap of entitlement and self-righteousness. And from that place, it becomes nearly impossible to extend grace to others, whether in their good works or their failings.

Even the most seasoned saint needs a daily encounter with the forgiveness Jesus extended to us on the cross. Fresh grace fuels and sweetens our relationship with God, but it also empowers us with a joy-filled attitude and ability to receive others as they return home to Him.

**APPLICATION:** Today, ask God to remind you of the grace you received at first, and to help you extend that same grace and joy to others finding their way home.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for Your grace, which reaches both the long-faithful and the newly returned. Help me remember and extend grace to those around me. Amen.

## FAITH FOR A FRIEND

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...four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. They couldn't bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above His head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven."

**Mark 2:3-5(NLT)**

Did you catch that? This moment with Jesus turned miraculous, not because of a disabled man's ability or a heartfelt request, but because of the *faith of his friends*. His four friends, convinced of Jesus' healing ability, literally tore the roof off to get their friend to Jesus. That kind of faith, hope and love for another person is astounding—and Jesus recognized it.

Do we have that kind of faith for those around us—in their healing, freedom and fullness?

There's an attitude of long-suffering that marks followers of Christ. Because of Jesus, we're empowered to endure troubles and trials in our own lives *and* on behalf of others. Jesus himself, the ultimate example, believed in the goodness and fullness of God for our lives long before we ever did. He had faith for us when we didn't. Now, we get to carry that same attitude as we bear one another's burdens—something Galatians 6:2 says *fulfills the law of Christ*.

Many of us have journeyed with people who've wrestled with challenging situations—who've pushed away help, carried deep grief and suffering, and hurt others along the way. When the road is long and marked by disappointment, it's easy to lose faith for another.

But God, in His kindness, has put us in a spiritual family—given us others to hold up our arms, stand in faith, and carry hope when we just can't. As believers, we get to stand alongside others in belief, faith and hope for their healing, freedom and breakthrough.

So, we continue to pray. We hope. We encourage. And then we pray again. Imagine what could happen in our families, our community, our church and for the prodigals if we continued to believe. We carry those we love—tearing off the roof—to the feet of Jesus, just like those four friends.

**APPLICATION:** Who are you believing for? Ask God to triple your faith for their healing, freedom and wholeness.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for those in my life. Please give me greater faith for their healing, deliverance and provision. Teach me how to pray. Amen.

# THE ATTITUDE OF JESUS

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*So He (Jesus) got up from the table, took off His robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, and poured water into a basin. Then He began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel He had around Him.* **John 13:4-5 (NLT)**

Have you ever received an act of kindness so extravagant and unexpected that you didn't know how to respond? Whether the disciples fully understood it or not, when Jesus—God incarnate, the maker and fulfiller of all things—knelt to wash their dirty feet, they were receiving an act of profound selflessness.

Why would a king stoop so low as to do the task reserved for the lowliest of servants? That attitude of humility and mercy was astounding. Only great love could motivate such an action, and it did.

In the Kingdom of God, we often live in paradox. One of those paradoxes is that leadership looks like humble service. Philippians 2 tells us that, though Jesus created the world, He took the form of a servant—of a mere human—and went even further, dying a death reserved for criminals (Philippians 2:1-11). Just before this, Paul writes something astounding:

*Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.* **Philippians 2:3-5 (NLT)**

That same attitude—the one that led Jesus to kneel and serve—is meant to shape how we treat each other. But how? How can our fragile and fickle humanity ever hope to reflect Jesus himself?

Here's the good news: we don't have to fabricate this attitude of humility and love on our own. The same love we've received in Christ Jesus empowers us to love. The same humility, mercy, compassion and strength that met us in our most sinful state also teaches us to live with the attitude of Jesus. As we learn in Scripture, *We love each other because He loved us first.* **1 John 4:19 (NLT)**

If Jesus wasn't above serving anyone, neither are we. As believers, we're called to live with a radical attitude of loving humility, with both believers and non-believers alike. As demonstrated by Jesus, this kind of humility conquers darkness, heals wounds, breaks chains and breathes life into everyone it encounters.

**APPLICATION:** Think about how God has met you with mercy and love. That same grace is meant to shape how you treat others.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, thank You for Your grace. Help me show that same love and humility to those around me. Amen.

# NOTHING INTO SOMETHING

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*So she did as Elijah said, and she and Elijah and her family continued to eat for many days. There was always enough flour and olive oil left in the containers, just as the LORD had promised through Elijah.”* **1 Kings 17:15-16 (NLT)**

With God, anything can be turned into something. Too often, we rely on the greats—those with obvious gifts or abundant resources—to meet the needs around us. We let the pastors do the speaking, the wealthy do the giving, and the *better Christians* lead the small groups. But Scripture paints a very different picture.

It was a young boy with a sling who brought down a giant. A teenage girl who carried God Himself in her womb. A little boy with a meager lunch fed thousands. A poor widow with her last coin, who gave the most. Again and again, God chooses the overlooked and ordinary to do the extraordinary.

We see this again in Elijah’s story. Israel had been ravaged by famine for years, and resources were scarce. The woman Elijah encountered—a widow from Zarephath—would have been in even more dire circumstances, with no husband to provide and little means to survive. Elijah could have approached anyone in the city for help, yet he asked the lowliest.

Instead of reacting from her lack—which was great, as she had only a little oil and flour left—she responded with hospitality and generosity. That simple, sacrificial act fed the man of God and sustained her and her family through the famine.

Given our human limitations and tendency to worry, we can hoard or dismiss our material or immaterial resources. However, an attitude of scarcity not only limits the blessings we can be to others; it also limits the blessings we receive. Scripture makes it clear: there’s a reciprocal nature to a generous, open heart (see Acts 20:35, Hebrews 13:16, Luke 6:38). When we give out of love and trust for God and others, regardless of what we have, miracles happen for everyone.

When we give, it’s not about offering what we see as important or abundant. God never said we had to be rich, wise or strong before we could be generous. He just asks us to give what we have, and somehow, He always makes it more than enough. Every time.

**APPLICATION:** What resources has God given you—time, wisdom, skills, relationships? Ask the Lord to help you see what you’ve been given and how you might share it with someone in need today.

**PRAYER:** Father, teach me to see what You’ve given and how to share it with others. Amen.

# TESTIMONY, NOT SUPERIORITY

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*“Remember that you were once slaves in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you! That is why I am giving you this command.”*

**Deuteronomy 15:15 (NLT)**

The beauty of Deuteronomy can get lost in its intensity. Amid the detailed laws God gives His newly freed people, God teaches them how to live with one another. These laws radically differed from those of surrounding nations, rooted in love, not control. God’s instructions showed His people how to treat everyone with dignity.

After a lengthy instruction on how to treat the foreigner, the slave, and the neighbor with hospitality, care, and protection, God says He’s giving these commands *because* they were once slaves who had been redeemed.

The standard for our lives flows from a response to the love, grace, provision and deliverance we’ve received from God. We defend the defenseless because we were first defended. We give because we were first recipients. We forgive because we were first forgiven. We love because He first loved us.

Our attitude toward everyone we encounter must come from a place of testimony, not superiority. Whether we work, handle conflict, give, share the gospel, repent or raise a family, it flows from our awareness of God’s goodness. Our lives are a living declaration of His faithfulness and power to everyone—believers and nonbelievers.

This isn’t a passive stance, either. From testimony comes great strength because it’s rooted in God, not our abilities. We don’t overcome evil or dysfunction by isolating or judging—we overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony (Revelation 12:11).

Loving your neighbor, turning the other cheek, and showing radical hospitality and generosity aren’t just New Testament principles. From the beginning, God called His people to live radically different from the world—and in that difference, to be a blessing to all: believer, nonbeliever, slave and free. Everyone.

It’s always about Jesus. He’s the greatest teacher and clearest example of how to live. When we respond to His love, Heaven meets Earth. If we want our families, communities and nations to thrive, we must put Him first, not our preferences. Jesus is at the center of it all. Through Him comes true and abundant life.

**APPLICATION:** How can your experience with God shape how you treat others? Take time today to reflect on how God has met you, and ask Him to show you how that can guide your interactions.

**PRAYER:** Lord, help me remember who I was—and who I am now because of You. Let that remembrance move me to love like You, give like You, and live like You. Amen.

# IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE?

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*Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*  
**Matthew 19:26 (NIV)**

When faced with a problem or task, people often fall into the trap of trying to tackle the entire issue all at once. For instance, when they want to live a healthier lifestyle, they make drastic changes to their diet and work out for an hour every day. Two days later, the same people with the best intentions are binge-watching Netflix and eating an entire large pizza. Is it really possible to make changes?

What happened? Why wasn't there consistent follow-through? Sometimes, we don't think through the effort it takes to turn our goals into reality. Other times, we don't take ownership of the goal because it was someone else's idea for us. Maybe we tried to make a big change without any support from others. Or maybe we just like pizza!

There's an old saying: *How do you eat an elephant?* Answer: *One bite at a time.* The idea of actually eating an elephant is probably not appetizing. However, the lesson is about making something that seems impossible possible.

The Bible talks about change occurring over a lifespan. We go through this, and it's called Sanctification. Ultimately, God takes His time to work on His changes in us. And He's with us during those times. Some seasons bring a lot of growth. In other seasons, it feels like nothing is changing or we're even going backwards. Don't lose hope! God is working in you. He's sanctifying you to be set apart for His purpose. Ask for His help to stay close to Him and not quit. He won't let you down!

**APPLICATION:** As you focus on something you're trying to accomplish or change, invite some friends to join you on that journey. Ask them for accountability and encouragement. Approach God together for wisdom on the best path forward.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for being with me as I go through this life. Show me how to let You help me. Amen.

# WHY AM I HERE?

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*And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.*

**Romans 8:28 (NLT)**

Have you ever helped your friends move?—pickup trucks, packing boxes, free pizza and lots of sweat, blood and tears! I know that when I've helped friends move, it felt chaotic. I remember lots of people, a lot of talking, a lot of movement, and a lot of stuff. I would often ask myself, *Why am I here?* I wanted to help, but I wasn't sure whether I should be helping pack or taking boxes to the truck. Maybe I should offer emotional support and tell them they're doing a good job! Usually, the chaos would settle down when I asked the person I was helping move, *What do you need me to do?*

Have you recently asked God that question? *Hey God, why am I here, and what do you want me to do?* Sometimes we end up where we are because of our choices. Sometimes it's because of others' choices. Sometimes we get stuck focusing on our circumstances and become blind to God's bigger purpose and plan for our lives. Your circumstances don't have to determine your future path. God has a plan for you. God has a purpose for you. Your circumstances may be chaotic, confusing or crazy. Don't shy away if that's true. Just don't accept that your circumstances will determine the result.

Ask God for guidance. Grab on to Him and let Him have the last word. Celebrate that He has a purpose and a plan for you!

**APPLICATION:** Write down some difficult circumstances that are currently happening. Next, write down why they're challenging for you. Next, pray to God about those situations, asking for His help. Finally, observe and note how God is working in your life.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for Your purpose and plan for my life. As I navigate circumstances, please strengthen me to walk the path You have set for me. Help me keep my focus on You and You alone. Amen.

# DO YOU *LOVE* ME?

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*We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in His love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.*

**1 John 4:16 (NLT)**

How do you know when someone loves you? Some would say words spoken; others would say actions expressed. Both are vital to someone experiencing love from another. Many will say that they just *know* that they are loved. They will talk about their feelings, butterflies in their stomach, and just wanting to be with that person. All of these can certainly contribute to believing they are loved.

What's missing in all of those characteristics is something of extreme importance: motive. What's the motive behind how someone treats us? Are they in it for themselves? Are they trying to impress us? Or do they have our best interests at heart? Sometimes it is hard to tell at first. But time usually shows us motive. There's a saying that talks about character being revealed during a crisis. Who someone really is shows up when they're squeezed. What happens to *love* when you're having a bad day, losing your temper, ignoring someone, or not reciprocating love in return? Nobody can be expected to be always loving except one: God.

God is Love. The Bible tells us and shows us that. God's motive in loving us is simple: because He made us. We don't have to perform for Him. We don't have to be perfect. We do need to receive His love and draw close to Him. What's great about His love is that it never leaves us. His love for us is eternal. So even on your worst day, you can be assured that He loves you because He is love!

**APPLICATION:** Spend some time thinking about the love God has for you. Write down examples of how He has shown love to you. Praise Him for that love. Share those examples with someone as a testimony.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for loving me. Encourage me to love others the way You have loved me. Amen.



## CAN I TRUST YOU?

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*So God has given both His promise and His oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to Him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us.*

**Hebrews 6:18 (NLT)**

Have you ever had someone lie to you? How did that make you feel? Sometimes, people find lying easier than telling the hard truth. They say, *Well, I didn't want to hurt his feelings, so I just told him I was too busy to be in a relationship or I just told her the company was going in another direction instead of telling her she wasn't qualified.*

While a *little white lie* is easier in the moment, the long-term effects can be deadly. Deadly? Really? How so? The Bible says that Satan is the father of lies. So, our character becomes corrupted, and lying becomes easier and easier the more we do it. We start to avoid hard conversations. We rationalize lying because we believe that telling someone the truth about a situation doesn't help them. It's *easier* for everyone involved. Then, our identity changes, and we don't just lie; we become liars.

Yet, the Bible tells us that God doesn't lie. He can't lie...it's impossible for Him to lie. And we were made in His image. Our character is aligned with Him. So when we lie, we're denying the image inside us. That's why when we first lie we feel something inside that says, *NO! Don't do this.* We can put our trust in the Lord because He is trustworthy. He may tell us things we don't like, but He won't lie. He may tell us things that challenge us, but He won't lie. And that's the truth!

**APPLICATION:** Spend time with God and be completely honest about your feelings. If you're mad, tell Him. If you're sad, tell Him. Then ask Him to heal you and to have more of Him.

**PRAYER:** Father God, thank You for making me in Your image. Thank You for being trustworthy. Create in me the desire to be trustworthy and truthful. Amen.

# WILL I EVER BE *HAPPY*?

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

**Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)**

Have you ever had a new car? The experience of something brand new that's yours can be awesome! You get to sit in the driver's seat first. You get to blast the radio to your favorite song. The smell of a new car can be a lifetime memory. By the way, our strongest tie to memories is our sense of smell. Every time you get into a new car and the smell hits your nose, you get a high. You're happy!

Eventually, the smell fades. The car gets dirty. You get a scratch on the door. Someone spills a drink in the passenger seat. You leave your gym bag with dirty clothes in the back seat. Your happiness begins to fade. To top it off, you still have a monthly payment. Ugh!

Some people experience buyer's remorse. That new car smell is replaced with a cloud of discontent. We know it can't stay new forever, yet we're surprised at how quickly the happiness fades. What can we do to stay happy? Are we supposed to be happy in this life?

Yes, we can experience happiness, but it's temporary. What we're really after is *joy*. What's the difference? Joy lasts. Why? Because God's Spirit produces it. Joy is a source or cause of delight. Happy is an emotional state that changes.

I become happy, and then it changes. Joy is meant to stay because the source of our delight is Him, and He never leaves me. So start focusing on the reason for your joy, and in the meantime, don't forget to wash your gym clothes...I can smell them from here!

**APPLICATION:** Take time today to give God credit for the good things in your life. If people come to mind, reach out to them and tell them they are important to you.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for Your abiding presence in my life. Develop joy in me. Remind me why I have reason to be full of joy. Amen.

## DOES ANYBODY *SEE* ME?

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*She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."*

**Genesis 16:13 (NIV)**

My wife loves to search the beaches for shark teeth. She'll spend hours looking through the sand and surf for the discarded teeth from Chondrichthyes. (I bet you didn't know that was the official name of sharks, but you can call them fish if you want!).

I've gone with her occasionally, and here is what I notice. My eyes apparently do not work very well because I miss many of the teeth that my wife finds. I walk right past a tooth, and she comes behind me and sees it. I glance at the beach while she has laser vision. Why is she able to see these teeth while I cannot? Because she values the teeth more than I do. They are treasures to her. I can take them or leave them. They're fun to have if I find them. She loves to find them.

Genesis 16 tells the story of Abram, Sarai, Hagar and Ishmael. Abram is promised an heir from God through his wife, Sarai. Ultimately, Sarai grows impatient waiting on God and suggests that Abram have a child with their handmaiden, Hagar. Eventually, Ishmael is born to Hagar and Abram, but Sarai mistreats them. Hagar runs away with Ishmael into the desert. Everyone has forgotten about them. No one comes looking for them.

However, the Angel of the LORD looks for her, finds her, speaks to her, and helps her. Hagar responds that the LORD is the one who sees her. Her encounter changed her life.

Like the shark's teeth my wife values, Hagar is valued by the Angel of the LORD. We are valued by the LORD. He gave His one and only Son, Jesus, to die on a cross for our sins so we could live in eternity with Him.

**APPLICATION:** Pray about important people in your life. Find a way to let them know they're important to you. Let them know that you see them.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for making me valuable in Your eyes. Thank You for looking for me and finding me. Help me see myself the way You see me. Amen.

# THE JOY OF GENEROSITY

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*And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.*

**2 Corinthians 8:1-5 (NIV)**

Today, let's experience the joy that comes from giving. God, the giver of all grace, desires to fill us with joy so that it might overflow through us as we care for others.

In today's passage, Paul highlights the generosity of the Macedonian churches. Even though they were experiencing extreme poverty and trials of many kinds, they gave liberally and sacrificially. However, notice also that they did not give merely out of obligation. They were eager. They pleaded for the privilege to participate in supporting fellow believers and the work of the church. They gave not only according to their ability but even beyond it. Paul emphasizes that this generous spirit came from their wholehearted devotion to God. Paul uses this example to encourage the Corinthians, and us, to adopt the same attitude of sacrificial generosity. And as a result, they were filled with gratitude and joy. As Jesus teaches us, *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* **Acts 20:35b (NIV)**

May we be like the church in Corinth, which entered into the joy of God as they gave.

**APPLICATION:** Today, seek the joy of God. Look for opportunities to give—offering your time, sending an encouraging message, or helping someone move. No act of generosity is ever wasted, because it draws us closer to God and fills us with joy.

**PRAYER:** Lord, lift my eyes above my circumstances, and create in me a desire to be generous in all things. Help me give with a joyful heart, knowing that I reflect Your love in giving. Show me ways to bless others and remind me that everything I have is a gift from You. Amen.

# THE GENEROSITY OF GOD

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*For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (NIV)**

*He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?* **Romans 8:32 (NIV)**

I can't imagine giving my son into the hands of cruel people, knowing they would kill him. Brutally. Yet that's what God did to His Son. He saw the world's desperate need and gave without question or hesitation. He gave in abundance—more than we can fully comprehend or repay.

I wish I lived with a greater remembrance and awareness of God's feelings toward me. I think I would fear less and love more. I would experience a greater sense of awe and wonder. And even more, if I lived in a more continual experience of God's incredible generosity, my giving would be filled with grace.

This makes me think of our neighbors. We live in a small subdivision, and houses are very close to each other. It's not uncommon to see people walking up and down the street, walking their dogs, and talking with each other. I usually offer a smile and a wave, but I wonder what would happen if I went beyond small talk and offered them attention and generosity the way God does.

Today, remember that we are loved by a God who never stops giving. Let's also remember that people all around us need God's unending love. As caregiver Tracie Braylock writes, *You are deeply and unconditionally loved by God, and your ability to love others is an extension and demonstration of your relationship with Him.*

**APPLICATION:** Who are you praying for? Who are the specific people God has put in your path that He's leading you to love and care for? Name specific people and begin looking for intentional ways to express the unending generosity of God.

**PRAYER:** Father, thank You for giving us the amazing gift of salvation. I pray You'd deepen my awareness of just how good You are. Bring specific people across my path and help me show them Your generous love. Amen.

# A HEART OF GENEROSITY

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*Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."*  
**Mark 12:41-44 (NIV)**

This story in Matthew provides a glimpse into the heart of Jesus. Reread it and notice the tender, loving heart of God. Notice how He honored the poor widow. I can only imagine what it felt like for her to be noticed. The gift of the woman truly moved Him. He praised the widow who gave two small coins, not because of the amount, but because she gave out of love and trust. She gave all she had! In the same way, our giving—whether to the church, to someone in need, or simple acts of service—pleases God most when it's a gift from the heart. Even the smallest act of kindness, when done in love, moves us beyond checking a box to a life that reflects the heart of God, inspires hope, and extends the love of God to a lost and hurting world.

When we understand how much God has given us—His Son, His grace, His constant presence—our response becomes an overflow of gratitude. Today, let's remember that generosity is a gift from the heart. As Moses instructed the Israelites, *Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.*  
**Deuteronomy 15:10 (NIV)**

**APPLICATION:** How's your heart today? Spend a few minutes quietly allowing emotions to surface. What words would you use to describe the nature of your heart today? Bring those to God and ask Him to restore union with Him so the heart of God would flow in and through your life.

**PRAYER:** God, thank You for the gift of Your Son. Thank You that I don't have to do anything to earn Your love. Help me receive Your love today, so my heart will be full and able to spill over into the people around me. Amen.

# GENEROSITY IN SECRET

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*But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

**Matthew 6:3-4 (NIV)**

*But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.*

**Luke 6:35a (NIV)**

In a world where recognition is often the measure of success, Jesus offers a radically different approach to generosity. In today's passages, He challenges us to give without seeking approval from others, for applause or even acknowledgment. True giving, He says, is quiet. It's personal. It's not to be seen and admired by crowds, but by God alone.

Giving in secret seems to mean, among other things, that humility matters. It's not about the amount I give, but the attitude and motivation of my heart. Giving in secret reminds me that it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks of me. Giving in secret allows me to slow down and be present with God. Giving in secret also creates space for God to cultivate a love for my enemies that I otherwise might not have. Giving in secret also means letting go of the need to have the good deed reciprocated.

I remember the first time I met Ed. He was an older man. He started as a mentor and became a dear friend over time. He taught me how to pray and read the Bible. He had a special chair where, every morning, he sat quietly alone with God. Something I noticed and appreciated about him was that he was a giving man and never expected anything in return. He noticed several times when I loaned something to someone how irritated I became when the item wasn't returned or when the person didn't seem thankful. He taught me to freely give without seeking anything in return.

Today, be encouraged to live before an audience of one. The One who made you and sees you also delights in you. His approval and reward are enough.

**APPLICATION:** Give to the church, a person or a cause without letting anyone know. Slip a gift card in someone's mailbox, or send an anonymous donation. Seek to privately meet a need, pray over it, and walk away quietly.

**PRAYER:** Dear God, You've given me so much. May I share what You've given me with a sincere heart out of love and care for others. Show me when I'm looking for applause or something in return, and lead my heart back to You. Amen.

# THE MULTIPLYING GENEROSITY OF GOD

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*“As surely as the LORD your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”*

**1 Kings 17:12 (NIV)**

Today’s passage teaches us that God can make something out of what seems to be nothing. He takes what we have and makes it more.

A drought had struck the land, and Elijah found himself by a dried-up brook. God tells him to travel several miles where he’ll meet a widow who will provide him with food. This had to have been a confusing set of directions! But Elijah’s next move was an act of faith. He does as he’s told and locates the widow. When Elijah asks for water and bread, the widow reveals her dire situation. *I don’t have any bread*, she said. What? I thought God would use the woman to give bread to Elijah.

Elijah encourages her not to fear but to trust in God’s provision, first preparing food for Elijah and then for herself and her son. Though the widow assumes this will be the last meal she and her son will have, God has a different outcome in mind. The jar of flour and the jug of oil do not run empty. God continues to fill both containers with what was needed to bake more bread, not just for that meal, but for the duration of the drought.

God is a multiplying God. Jesus fed more than 5,000 people with 12 baskets of leftovers from 5 loaves and 2 fish given to him by a boy! (John 6:1-14). Every good seed we plant reaps a harvest far greater. (Matthew 13:8). God takes what we have and makes it more.

**APPLICATION:** Trust God to take what you have and multiply it. Give to someone in need and be on the lookout for how God provides.

**PRAYER:** Lord, thank You for Your abundant love and provision. Help me to give freely, knowing that You always provide. Let my generosity reflect Your heart and bring glory to Your name. Amen.



# OVERFLOWING GENEROSITY

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*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.* **Luke 6:38a (NIV)**

*And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.* **2 Corinthians 9:8,11 (NIV)**

Today's Scriptures reveal at least four great truths.

*First*, God is not holding out on us. Notice the words and phrases that reveal God's overflowing generosity. These stand out to me: running over, poured into your lap, abundantly, in every way. God's unlimited generosity is available for anyone who opens their hearts and hands to God.

*Second*, God gives us what we need. Even though I often feel like I don't have enough, God takes care of me and enriches me in every way in all things and at all times. I can rest in the fact that God sees my need. I don't have to worry about not having enough.

*Third*, notice that what God gives is meant to bless others. God's gifts are not only intended for me. They're meant to help and care for others. I'm simply a manager of what I usually think is mine, mine, mine. Sometimes, the world encourages us to hold tightly to what we have, but like holding sand, the more you squeeze, the less you have.

*Fourth*, giving is a way to thank God. We can thank Him with our words. We can thank Him as we sing songs. But we can also thank God by how we think about and handle our resources.

Today, let's remember that God has overflowing generosity. He loves to take care of His children.

**APPLICATION:** Set aside time to meditate on today's Scriptures. Write down words and phrases that are significant to you as you reflect on God's abundant generosity.

**PRAYER:** Dear God, I lift my eyes to You. All that I am and all that I have comes from You. May Your overflowing love move me to overflow with generosity to others. Amen.

# THE SOURCE OF ALL GROWTH

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*"I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without Me."*

**John 15:5 (CSB)**

Jesus gives His listeners a foundational image of true spiritual growth and maturity. Growth and maturity are not produced by relentless effort. Instead, our growth comes from abiding in Jesus. John Calvin called this idea, union with Christ. Calvin taught that all Christian growth flows from this mystical union. Jesus taught that just as a branch cannot bear fruit apart from the vine, we cannot grow in holiness or maturity apart from Christ's life flowing into our own.

This union occurs when the Holy Spirit enters our lives. This abiding relationship between Jesus and believers is something that we learn to live into. It is about staying connected, remaining in Jesus' teachings and obeying the teachings and commands of Scripture.

Abiding in Christ is a continuous response to the faith within us through the Holy Spirit. When we become a child of God through salvation, abiding is learning to live in step with what God says is true about us.

We're tempted to find other ways to produce results besides our relational closeness with Jesus. But He's clear, nothing is produced apart from Him. How are you growing closer to Him today?

**APPLICATION:** Read through John 15. Allow the Spirit to point out something to you. Ask Him to help you understand the truth it contains. Reflect on where you typically depend on your efforts instead of staying connected to Jesus. Commit to renewing this effort to abide with Jesus today.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, thank You for being available to me every moment of the day. I can get distracted and busy and lose focus on Your agenda and life throughout the day. Please help me stay connected to You today. Amen.

# QUIETNESS AND TRUST

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*This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: "Only in returning to Me and resting in Me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength. But you would have none of it. You said, 'No, we will get our help from Egypt. They will give us swift horses for riding into battle.'*

**Isaiah 30:15-16a (NLT)**

Our journey with Jesus is one of learning and unlearning. How much striving, pushing and independence have we learned before coming to know Christ? The way of Jesus is sometimes counterintuitive to our culture, media and how we're raised. Yet we also have our flesh and desires at war within us!

The Holy Spirit guides us forward, encouraging us to live more dependently. He desires that we stay in tune and step with the Father. This life is much less chaotic than the one we've learned. In Isaiah, God reminds the Israelites that returning to Him in relationship is where their salvation is found. However, the Israelites and many of us have found options that seem better than Jesus.

With noise and ego, we plod our way forward. Sometimes, unknowingly, we're running over people on the way to having our desires met. The way of Jesus offers an alternative. Quietness and confidence are the ways of our Lord. There is no need to yell or get in line first. A loving and protective Father will meet our needs.

**APPLICATION:** Set a timer for 15 minutes. Remove all the noise and sit silently. I know, scary. Take that time to sit in *quietness and confidence* before God intentionally. As you sit with Him, ask, *Where am I striving to get my way instead of yielding to Yours?* Ask God to show you how you can put your trust in Him this week.

**PRAYER:** God, I thank You for allowing me to sit in quiet and confidence because You know better than I do. I ask You to help me live my life more at Your pace than mine today. Amen.

# SANCTIFICATION

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*So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like Him as we are changed into His glorious image.* **2 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT)**

Paul describes sanctification as a gradual transformation accomplished by the Spirit as we behold Christ's glory. The Holy Spirit also makes us more and more like Jesus.

The Westminster Confession shares this idea: believers are *more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces*. This happens because of Jesus' death and resurrection, as well as reading and studying the Bible, and is accomplished by the Holy Spirit that dwells inside followers of Christ.

This is a whole-person project. The Spirit's work leaves nothing untouched. Yet while this reality of change happens over a lifetime, a remnant continues to war inside us to keep us just as we are. But because we are children of God and because of the Spirit's work, we'll prevail and continue to look more and more like the image of Jesus.

This is a cooperative project, but God strengthens us with the same power that raised Jesus from the grave. God supplies us with endurance and patience to see this project through. We should remember that if we are born of God, we have overcome the world (1 John 5:4).

**APPLICATION:** Today, reflect on what part of your life might *resist* the Spirit's work. Is there a habit, attitude or desire you've neglected to surrender? Bring that area before God in prayer, acknowledging your dependence on the Spirit's power. Remember that even the willingness to change is itself a work of grace.

**PRAYER:** Thank You, Father, for making me more and more like You every day. Help me avoid discouragement when I don't see the growth I hoped to see. Help me recognize where You're working and fully commit to a partnership with You. Amen.

# NEVER GIVE UP DOING GOOD

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*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

**Galatians 6:9-10 (NIV)**

Towards the end of the book of Galatians, Paul instructed the Christians in Galatia to do some specific things: love your neighbor as yourself, keep in step with the Spirit, and stay connected to the Spirit by seeing that fruit is produced in their lives. Paul groups all those instructions together in this passage as *doing good*. Why does Paul feel compelled to remind the believers to do good?

I think this is mainly because we get lazy doing good. So many distractions overwhelm us daily. But Paul is emphatically saying, *Don't Quit! Don't get tired of doing good!*

This is such an encouraging and challenging message to those maturing in their relationship with Jesus. Sometimes, everything in us wants to throw in the towel and call it quits. But Paul is saying we might be close to a harvest if we keep going and don't give up. This should set us apart in how we approach life. We do good and don't get tired of it because we never know what God might have up His sleeve to bless us with.

So today, if you've been pouring yourself out for the sake of God and others day after day, year after year, know that God sees you and is cheering you on, waiting to show you His plan.

**APPLICATION:** Take a moment today to reflect on an area where you've grown weary in *doing good*. Perhaps it's serving a family member, volunteering or offering kindness to someone difficult. Choose one act of goodness as a renewed commitment to not give up. Then ask God for new strength to persevere with joy.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, I am so thankful that You do not get weary of me! I confess that I do sometimes get tired of doing good. Please supply me with renewed strength as I commit to what You've called me to do. Amen.

# BABY FOOD

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*Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready,*

**1 Corinthians 3:1-2 (NLT)**

Paul uses unique language to communicate his point. He's speaking to believers in Corinth but cannot address them as spiritual, which is equated with being mature. He calls these believers babies, not because of their age, but because they still look like the world.

Paul visits and writes to the church in Corinth, trying to help these believers change their attitudes and habits. But he can't speak to them as he wants because they act like children. Generally, children or infants don't have a negative meaning in the Scriptures. Being newly minted in your relationship with Jesus is nothing to be held with disdain. But Paul describes a childish attitude in these believers that's keeping them from the wisdom He's ready to provide them. The baby believers are still wooed by substitutes for Christ and His kingdom. Paul wants them to abandon their other proclivities and embrace real, solid, sustaining food in Jesus.

We can still be tempted to embrace a new, innovative *way of life* that promises to change everything. But Christ and Christ crucified is truly the meal that consistently delivers what we need: life and life to the full.

**APPLICATION:** Are there areas where I'm still clinging to spiritual *milk*? Any places where I'm not entirely investing my life into Christ but into another strategy or resource? Ask God to change your taste buds to be fully satisfied with Him and His way of life.

**PRAYER:** Holy Spirit, make me desire more and more of the things of God and His kingdom. Give me an insatiable desire to be filled up with Your presence. Make the things of this world that are opposed to God disgusting to my desires. Amen.

# INTEGRITY

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*Who may worship in Your sanctuary, LORD? Who may enter Your presence on Your holy hill? Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts.*

**Psalm 15:1-2 (NLT)**

David wrote this Psalm to illustrate who receives rest from the toil of daily life. Who may worship in the sanctuary of the Lord? David writes that righteous, mature believers who live with integrity can enter God's rest.

David speaks of inner integrity, which is defined as being whole and undivided. It's less about the outer actions being correct and more about the inner person being pure and blameless. As we grow more closely connected to Jesus, we should begin to see a closer connection between our hearts and our actions. This is the type of person that David describes in this song.

Journalist and Author Sydney J. Harris said, *Honesty consists of the unwillingness to lie to others; maturity, which is equally hard to attain, consists of the unwillingness to lie to oneself.*

Integrity is more than just saying and doing the right things. It is about becoming the mature person described in the Scriptures. This is a worthy goal for us to shoot for. When we become people characterized by integrity, our worship, our relationships, and our ministry are accompanied by a freedom and power only characterized by a servant of the Most High God. This integrity is worth striving for in this life. Praise God that He prunes and perfects our character and Spirit!

**APPLICATION:** Take 10 minutes today and reflect honestly on your life, where you feel your inner character might not align fully with your outer behaviors. Write down one area where you feel tempted to *appear* blameless rather than *being* blameless. Ask God for His help in growing you to become a person whose heart and actions align.

**PRAYER:** Father, take my incongruencies and point them out to me. Renew my desire to be fully myself, the way You originally intended. Please help me to be a person of integrity in every area of my life. Amen.

## TWO IMPORTANT THINGS

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*So get rid of all evil behavior. Be done with all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech. Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness.* **1 Peter 2: 1-3 (NLT)**

Peter wrote this to the Hebrews (Jews) who were dispersed throughout what we know today as Europe and Asia. Peter desired that born-again Hebrews would thrive in their faith while living in exile, where martyrdom was common. Peter had just encouraged his fellow Hebrew believers to *fervently love one another from the heart*. He then directs them to do two things:

1. **Put Away Sin** (...all evil behavior...deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech). Life in Christ allows us to experience His great hope and transforming power through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Our sin, however, breaks fellowship (not relationship) with our Savior and renders us faltering in shame, guilt, strife and isolation. Great news: the Holy Spirit is kind, letting us know when we've sinned and leading us to repentance, the threshold to His grace. 1 John 1:9 (NIV) reminds us that, *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*. Sin is serious. Don't excuse, deny or harbor it. Deal with sin immediately. Repent. Put sin away every day. You will experience His grace, forgiveness and freedom!

2. **Crave God's Word**. As we practice putting away sin that distracts and entangles, we begin to experience freedom and a growing appetite for God's word. In the wilderness, Jesus diffuses the enemy's attempt to distract by invoking the very words He spoke to Moses, *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God*. Jesus, the Word made flesh, underscores the life-giving, life-sustaining essentiality of God's word in the believer's life.

**APPLICATION:** God speaks to us. Listen. Talk to Him. Remember that He loves you and loves to show mercy. What sin is the Holy Spirit leading you to put away today?

- Confess what the Holy Spirit brings to mind. Ask and receive His cleansing and forgiveness!
- Ask God to grow your appetite for His word that you may know Him!
- Don't do life in Christ alone. Join a Community Group!

**PRAYER:** *Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way. Amen. (Psalm 139:23-24 NASB)*



# WHO WE ARE IN CHRIST

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*You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but He was chosen by God for great honor. And you are living stones that God is building into His spiritual temple. What's more, you are His holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. As the Scriptures say, "I am placing a cornerstone in Jerusalem, chosen for great honor, and anyone who trusts in Him will never be disgraced."*

**1 Peter 2:4-6 (NLT)**

Here, Peter further encourages Jewish believers by giving them a picture of who they are in Christ, the Cornerstone that holds the body of believers together. Peter tells them that, in Christ, they are *living stones* and *His holy priests*.

*As living stones:* Each believer, now alive in the Holy Spirit, is living out what it looks like to follow Christ: turning away from their former lives— malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander— and pursuing holy living by obeying God through His word. This forms a beautiful overall image of the spiritual temple God is building through each believer, living stones whose lives bear witness to the good news of Christ.

*As His holy priests:* In ancient Israel, priests primarily served as mediators between God and His people. Priests performed sacrifices in obedience to God's commands, to symbolize atonement and reconciliation with God. Christ, the final, perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice for sin, is the Mediator through whom all believers offer *spiritual sacrifices* that please God. Romans 12:1-2 lets us know that living a life transformed by Jesus and obedient to His word is the living sacrifice that is holy, acceptable and pleasing to God.

**APPLICATION:** Think of one or two actions or attitudes as a Christ-follower that show you are a *living stone* or a *holy priest*. What actions or attitudes do you sense God wants to develop in you as a *living stone* or a *holy priest*?

**PRAYER:** God, thank You for Your redeeming work in my life and for showing me who I am in You, as I grow closer to You. Make my life a pleasing sacrifice to You. Amen.

# STONE OF STUMBLING

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*Yes, you who trust Him recognize the honor God has given Him. But for those who reject Him, "The Stone that the builders rejected has now become the Cornerstone." And, "He is the Stone that makes people stumble, the Rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them.* **1 Peter 2:7-8 (NLT)**

Peter continues using scripture from the prophet Isaiah (8:14) and a Psalm (118:22) that illustrates Christ as both the cornerstone and a rock of stumbling. Peter encourages Jewish believers by reminding them that they came to Christ and believed, evidenced by their obedience to God's word. He also points out that many others consider Christ and then reject Him for who He is. Thus, they stumble and fall as demonstrated through a life of disobedience, the fruit of unbelief. For the believer, Christ is the cornerstone. For the unbeliever, Christ is the stumbling stone. What a sobering difference.

Some years ago, Christian artist/songwriter, Michael Card, wrote the song *Scandalon* (meaning-stumbling block), illustrating Christ as a stumbling block to unbelievers. The following is a Verse and Chorus from the song:

VERSE: The seers and the prophets had foretold it long ago  
The long-awaited One would make men stumble  
But they were looking for a king to conquer and to kill  
Who'd ever thought He'd be so meek and humble?

**CHORUS: He will be the Truth that will offend them one and all  
A Stone that makes men stumble and a Rock that makes them fall  
And many will be broken so that He can make them whole  
And many will be crushed and lose their own soul**

For many of you reading this, your story is that, at some point in your life, you encountered Christ and completely surrendered your life to Him by fully trusting in Him and what He did for you on the cross. Thank and praise God for His goodness and mercy!

God has also placed people in your life who are stumbling in unbelief, and there is a great opportunity to pray for them and to share the good news of Christ.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to bring people who need to encounter Christ to mind and trust Him for salvation. Write down their names. Begin praying for them and ask God to use you to point them to Christ.

**PRAYER:** Jesus, we love You and thank You for being the Rock of our salvation, the Cornerstone of our faith! Give us Your heart for those around us who are stumbling in unbelief so that, in gentleness and awe, we can share the truth and grace of Christ! Amen.

# IDENTITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

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*But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for He called you out of the darkness into His wonderful light. "Once, you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy."*

**1 Peter 2:9-10 (NLT)**

Peter's words here must be such an encouraging reminder to his exiled Jewish brothers and sisters, living out their faith in a hostile culture, as he reminds them again of who they are as Christ-followers: a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, and God's very own possession! What an incredible honor that they, and all Christ-followers, are now ontologically all these as new creations in Christ! Being born into this new identity as royal priests carries with it responsibilities of spiritual offerings of sacrifice:

1. Offering one's own body as a living sacrifice - *holy, acceptable* (Romans 12:1-2)
2. Offering continual praise to God - *the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.* (Hebrews 13:15)
3. Offering our resources for hospitality, care (Romans 12:13)
4. Offering our acts of service for meeting needs (Hebrews 13:16)
5. Offering of intercessory prayer - *pray continually* (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

Living as a born-again believer means that you are now living under God's protection and provision. You have access to Him, and He offers you His mercy! If you're like me, living a life of faith in Christ is difficult, and I often mess up. Even in my best efforts, I sin, but as the song lyric says, ...*my sins they are many, His mercy is more!* What great joy and freedom to live and do what pleases God when we know He is merciful! And we can go to Him daily and receive His mercy!

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to speak to you and show you areas of spiritual offerings where you can bless Him, the church, and those around you. Perhaps there is even a new or additional offering He is showing you to pursue. Thank God for speaking to you and enabling you to serve and make a difference by His power at work in and through you!

**PRAYER:** God, thank You for the life that You've called me to in service to Your Son, Your church, and those You have placed in my life. By the power of Your Spirit, do Your redemptive work in and through me. Amen.

# THE EXCHANGE

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*But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.*

**Philippians 3:7-8 (NASB)**

As a college student, I remember discussing this passage with a friend. We were out and about on a study break, taking a walk around campus in downtown Columbia SC where we eventually ended up on the steps of the State Capitol. As we sat and talked, these words from Paul, writing from a Roman prison, came up in our conversation and began to really resonate with me and challenge me.

Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, just relegated anything of gain to him (status, titles, accomplishments, possessions) to the category of rubbish (trash) compared to knowing Christ. He then goes on to say that he counts **all things to be loss** compared to knowing Christ. Wow! Paul was no societal downcast. He was revered and respected among the Hebrew elite and had much in his *gain* column. For Paul, that all changed one day on the road to Damascus. I started thinking about the value Paul ascribed to knowing Christ compared to his former life, and so for me, how did my relationship with Christ really align with the top items on my *gain* list?

One author and speaker, when discussing her conversion to Christ, often challenges her audience with the following words: The Gospel (Good News of Christ) comes in exchange for the life we love, *not in addition to it*.

Is Christ merely an add-on to all that I have going on in my life, or is He the one thing, so valuable, that He determines the course and content of all else in my life?

**APPLICATION:** Pause and be still momentarily to hear Jesus' voice. Ask Him: *Jesus, what in my life is competing with / distracting me from knowing You?*

**PRAYER:** Jesus, thank You for the gift of eternal life that comes by faith through trusting in You. By Your grace, help me exchange my gains for the supreme value that nothing is better than knowing You. Amen

# HOSPITALITY

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*Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*

**1 Peter 4:8-10 (NASB)**

In this passage, Peter continues to encourage his people to fervently love one another, practice hospitality, and serve one another according to how God has gifted each. Peter was wise and knew first-hand the power behind these practices, both for building the faith of believers and standing as a testimony to the real power and presence of the risen Savior.

Christian author and speaker Rosaria Butterfield describes hospitality as *the ground zero of the Christian faith*. Rosaria came to Christ through the hospitality of a pastor and his wife, Ken and Floy Smith, who invited her into their home when she was a tenured professor of English and women's studies at Syracuse University. She was a self-proclaimed lesbian living with a same-sex partner and was in the process of writing a book on the Christian right and why they were opposed to people like her.

Throughout numerous meals at the Smith's home, Rosaria recalls, *Ken and Floy didn't share the gospel with me, and they didn't invite me to church, and this was wonderful because it showed me that they didn't see me as a project, but as their neighbor*. How Ken and Floy practiced hospitality *became a living and breathing example of the theology they taught*. Rosaria says she did not set foot in a church for another two years, but was in Ken and Floy's home every week. Through this process of table-fellowship and seeing the gospel lived out through Ken and Floy's life, Rosaria testified that she came to faith in Christ because she was convinced that Jesus is who *He says He is*.

**APPLICATION:** Think of people in your sphere of influence—neighborhood, workplace, church, etc. How may the Holy Spirit be leading you to communicate the truth and grace of the gospel through simple acts of hospitality?

**PRAYER:** God, thank You that Your love, expressed through the life, death and resurrection of Your Son, is so powerful that it transforms a human soul from death into life. Help me see the opportunities You provide to serve others and show hospitality that points people to Christ. Amen.

# CREATED FOR COMMUNITY

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*Then God said, "Let Us make human beings in Our image, to be like Us" ...So God created human beings in His own image. In the image of God He created them; male and female He created them."* **Genesis 1:26-27 (NLT)**

Several years ago, I was going through a really hard time where I felt isolated. We were new to Greenville and hardly knew anyone. My wife's job was terrible, and we desperately missed our old friends. I realized more than ever that I needed community. It wasn't just about having people around me, but about meaningful connection, support and being known.

One of the most profound truths in Scripture is that we are made in God's image. But what does that mean? Among many implications, one stands out: we were created for relationships. God exists in eternal relationship, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, living in perfect unity and love. From that divine community, God created humanity, not as isolated individuals but as beings designed to reflect His image in community.

Notice how Genesis 1:26-27 emphasizes both God's plurality ("*Let Us make human beings in Our image*") and humanity's relational nature ("*male and female He created them*"). Being made in God's image is more than intelligence, creativity or having a soul. It's about our capacity for love, connection and mutual care. Just as the Trinity exists in sacrificial love, we are called to reflect that same love and unity in our relationships.

Our culture is full of lonely people. Maybe that's you today. Perhaps you've been hurt and find it easier to stay guarded. But God never designed us to do life alone. The church, our families, friendships and even the broader human community are all ways we live out our divine design. When we love, serve and support one another, we reflect the very nature of God.

**APPLICATION:** Take time this week to ask yourself: How am I doing at living in community? Do I have people who truly know me and walk through life with me? Am I building relationships, or have I been withdrawing? If you feel isolated, take one small step and connect with someone. You were created for community. Embrace it!

**PRAYER:** Lord, thank You for creating me in Your image and making me for relationships. I confess that sometimes I try to do life independently, but I need others. Help me open my heart to people. Teach me to embrace community as You intended and to love selflessly as You love within the Trinity. Amen.

# THE SACRED SPARK OF TOGETHERNESS

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*Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near.*

**Hebrews 10:24-25 (NLT)**

Our culture celebrates independence and self-reliance. One of the most important values we teach our children is responsibility, to carry their own load (Galatians 6:5). While that is important, the Scriptures also remind us that we are designed for community. It appears that even the early church had folks who decided they were too busy for church.

Hebrews 10:24-25 calls us to a life intertwined with others, not as a sign of weakness, but as a reflection of God's design. The writer urges us to be intentional and to *think of ways to motivate one another*. This implies effort, creativity and purpose. It's not passive. It's active engagement in each other's spiritual growth.

Consider a fire: when the logs are together, the flames burn brightly, feeding off one another. But if you pull a log away, the fire diminishes and eventually dies. The same is true for us in our faith journeys. Isolation dims our spiritual fervor while fellowship fuels it.

Meeting together isn't just about attendance. It's about connection. In these times together, we find encouragement, accountability and the gentle reminders of God's promises. Whether through a shared meal, a heartfelt conversation, a Bible study, or corporate worship, these moments knit our hearts closer not only to each other but to Christ Himself.

The urgency in this passage is clear: *especially now that the day of His return is drawing near*. As we face challenges, doubts and the busyness of life, we need the steady presence of fellow believers to help us persevere. We need their voices to speak truth when we falter, their faith to lift us when ours wavers, and their love to reflect Christ when we feel distant.

**APPLICATION:** Think of one person in your life who might need encouragement. Reach out with a call, a text, or a note to uplift them. Consider also how you can be more intentional in your gatherings, not just attending but actively seeking to encourage and support others.

**PRAYER:** Lord, thank You for creating us to live in community. Please help me to see the importance of encouraging others and being encouraged. Show me ways to motivate those around me to acts of love and good works. May my life reflect Your love as I walk alongside others in faith. Amen.

# WALK WITH THE WISE

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*Walk with the wise and become wise; associate with fools and get in trouble.*

**Proverbs 13:20 (NLT)**

Proverbs is part of the Hebrew Bible's poetry section. It's a collection of divinely inspired truths. But remember, Proverbs gives **principles**, not guarantees. Every verse is God-breathed, but not every one is absolute in every case.

Take Proverbs 10:4: *Lazy people are soon poor; Hard workers get rich.* Yet we all know lazy people who inherited money and hard workers who still struggle. That doesn't make the verse untrue. It means the principle stands: laziness leads to ruin, and God honors hard work.

Today's Proverb says that if you walk through life with wise people, you'll likely become wise too. But hang out with fools and you'll get burned. Maybe not right away, but eventually. You've heard the saying, *birds of a feather flock together*. It's not just a warning. It's a reality. If your closest friends think foolishly or live recklessly, you may not be a fool, but you're in training. And you won't see it coming until you've done something dumb.

So, take inventory. Who do you spend time with? Who shapes your thinking? Learn to be discerning without becoming judgmental. Some fools are obvious. The guy lying on his taxes or the party girl on her second DUI. But others are sneakier. Ever met a super religious *conservative Christian* who's mean or petty? They might look godly, but they're toxic. Or an intelligent person who believes every conspiracy on YouTube? Still a fool. Just a creative one.

You're not looking for perfect people, just wise ones. People who know God's truth and live like they believe it. Look for folks who demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. Then watch and learn.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to help you evaluate the people around you. He may lead you to create some distance from friends who are pulling you in the wrong direction, even if you like them. This goes double if you're dating them. Pray for wise friends. And if none come to mind, it might be time to join a small group at church.

**PRAYER:** Father, help me spot foolish beliefs and actions in others and myself. Please give me the courage to walk away from people who pull me off course. Give me friends who know and live Your grace and wisdom. Please help me be one of them. Amen.



# BAD COMPANY VERSUS ISOLATION

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...*"bad company corrupts good character."* **1 Corinthians 15:33b (NLT)**

Jesus prayed: *"I'm not asking You to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by Your truth; teach them Your word, which is truth. Just as You sent Me into the world, I am sending them into the world."*

**John 17:15-18 (NLT)**

Scripture warns us about two equal and opposite dangers in friendships: surrounding ourselves with the wrong people or cutting ourselves off from them entirely.

Paul says that bad company corrupts good character. That's not a suggestion, it's a fact. As we discussed in yesterday's devotional, the people closest to you will shape how you think, speak, and live over time.

But that doesn't mean we're called to isolate ourselves. Jesus made it clear that His followers are not supposed to run away from the world. We were never meant to live in fear or isolation. After all, Jesus spent time with tax collectors, sinners and outcasts (Luke 15). He wasn't afraid of the darkness. He walked into it with the light of truth. He called us to do the same: to be salt and light in a world that desperately needs it. And if all the salt stays in the saltshaker, it doesn't help anyone.

So, how can we balance being in the world yet not of it? We ask the Holy Spirit to help us discern *Who influences whom? Where am I strong enough to shine, and where will I likely be pulled down?*

Some people may never tempt you. Alcohol is not a temptation for me. But put a box of Krispy Kreme doughnuts in front of me and I'll eat every one without thinking. The point is not legalism. The point is honesty and humility. Know your heart. Know your weaknesses.

Surround yourself with wise, Spirit-filled friends who sharpen your faith and stir your love for Jesus. But don't hide from the world. Engage with it. Love people. Let them see what God is doing in you.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to show you where you're needed in the world and where you might need stronger boundaries. Are your closest relationships pulling you toward Christ or away from Him? Are you hiding your light or shining it?

**PRAYER:** Lord, give me discernment about my relationships. Help me love people without losing my way. Show me where I can be salt and light in a dark world, and surround me with wise friends who help me follow You more fully. Amen.

**WEEK EIGHT • THURSDAY**

# FINISH STRONG

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*The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for wisdom. So God replied, "Because you have asked for wisdom in governing My people with justice and have not asked for a long life or wealth or the death of your enemies – I will give you what you asked for! I will give you a wise and understanding heart such as no one else has had or ever will have!"*

**1 Kings 3:10-12 (NLT)**

We often hear preachers say Solomon was the wisest person who ever lived, which is true. That, however, is not the end of the story. Unfortunately, the Scripture honestly tells us that *in Solomon's old age, they [his wives] turned his heart to worship other gods instead of being completely faithful to the LORD his God, as his father, David, had been* (1 Kings 11:4). So, what in the world happened to this king who started so wise and committed to the Lord?

This story teaches us an important principle that knowing the truth and having wisdom for a time does not mean you won't be deceived and become foolish later in life. Knowing the temptations of powerful men and kings in particular, God gave these commands for His kings: *"The king must not build up a large stable of horses for himself.... The king must not take many wives for himself, because they will turn his heart away from the LORD. And he must not accumulate large amounts of wealth in silver and gold for himself* (Deuteronomy 17:16-17).

Kings in those days demonstrated their power in many ways, but they were especially fond of horses, money and women. As we all can see, not much has changed except we have exchanged cars and planes for horses. Over time, Solomon was convinced he needed to be more like the other kings. The book of 1 Kings tells us that Solomon accumulated over 12,000 horses, 1,000 wives and concubines, and tons of silver and gold. He did not just ignore God's command. He did the opposite, and his life ended in shame, rebuke and failure.

If you are a follower of Christ, you want to hear these words from Christ when you see him face to face, *"Well done, my good and faithful servant."* (Matthew 25:23). Don't just start strong; finish strong.

**APPLICATION:** Ask God to show you where you might be drifting. Are there small compromises piling up? Stay alert, stay humble, and remain faithful. Finish strong.

**PRAYER:** Lord, keep my heart faithful. Please show me where I'm drifting and draw me back. Help me not only start well but to finish well. Amen.

# FRIENDS WHO TELL US WHAT WE WANT TO HEAR

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*But Rehoboam rejected the advice of the older men and instead asked the opinion of the young men who had grown up with him and were now his advisers.*  
**1 Kings 12:8 (NLT)**

When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam became king. The people of Israel immediately came to him with a simple request: *Your father put a heavy burden on us. Would you lighten it?* It was a moment packed with potential, a crossroads for a young leader. What Rehoboam did next determined the future of the entire nation.

He made a good first move. He went to the elders who had served his father, Solomon. Even though Solomon ignored their advice, these men had experience, wisdom and perspective. They told Rehoboam, *Serve these people. Speak kindly to them. If you do, they'll be your loyal subjects for life.* Wise words. But Rehoboam didn't like what he heard.

So, he went to a second group, his peers. His friends. The guys he had grown up with. These younger advisers told him what he wanted to hear: *Don't give an inch. Be tougher than your father. Show them who's boss.* And that's precisely what Rehoboam did.

It was a disaster. The people rebelled, the kingdom split, and Rehoboam went down in history as the king who lost half the nation, all because he listened to the wrong voices.

There's a warning here for all of us: when you're faced with a decision, whose voice do you trust? Wise counsel isn't always the most flattering. It often challenges your pride or plans. But if you only surround yourself with people who tell you what you want to hear, you're setting yourself up to fall.

We all have moments like Rehoboam's: forks in the road, where we can choose truth or comfort. God's wise path is never easy but leads to life and peace. The foolish path may feel good in the moment, but it brings regret.

The book of Proverbs, written by Rehoboam's father, says, *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed* (Proverbs 15:22 (NIV)). Rehoboam had access to good counsel. He just didn't want to hear it.

**APPLICATION:** Ask yourself: Who are the people shaping my decisions? Do I only listen to friends who agree with me? Seek out godly, honest advisers who love you enough to tell you the truth even when it's hard to hear.

**PRAYER:** Lord, help me listen to wisdom, not just what's easy or comfortable. Give me the humility to receive correction and the courage to follow Your truth. Amen.

