



A Gripping 40-Day Devotional
of Real Life Stories Inspired
by the 39 Lashes of Jesus

39 Stories

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of Real Life Stories
Inspired by the 39 Lashes of Jesus*

By Prague Christian Fellowship
praguefellowship.cz
Directed by Kelsie C. Mullen

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Endorsements

The greatest misconception of Christianity seems to be that faith in Christ is the answer for all life's problems, trials, and tribulations. Whoever holds that view has not studied the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. True discipleship is actually an invitation to self-denial, suffering and persecution. Christ does not offer to remove our problems, instead He offers to help us walk through them with Him. In contrast our culture would prefer to walk around them and avoid any emotional or physical pain. This book is dedicated to the Christians who took Christ's hand and walked through their difficulties. The intention is that these true stories will inspire hope in all who read it, and faith for those who need it. Enjoy!

Pastor John Mullen

PragueChristian Fellowship

Acknowledgments

Thank you Prague Christian Fellowship, my spiritual community. What a long journey we've had together – over 2 decades of countless stories! It is impossible to measure what God has done through this little, ever-changing combination of diverse and amazing people. Our intercessors especially encouraged me and prayed for this project.

Thank you to my husband, John, who gladly supports and encourages the completion of the visionary projects God gives me. We are a great team and I am so thankful for a partner like him! I could not have finished this project without him.

Thank you to the team of editors who helped contact the writers and do the first round of edits and translations: Alex Alderman, Meggan Miracle, Zuzana Reviero, John Mullen, Garth Wright, and Doug Hart. Final editor Jack Zagorski¹ deserves special recognition not only for his talent and patience, but for willingness to tackle a crazy job like this. My husband also spent days formatting and editing to make Jack's job easier.

Many were asked to write their stories, and many declined. Apparently, it is not an easy task. For that reason, I would like to extend the greatest thanks to the writers. It is through their courage that this compilation has come together (many emails, calls, coffee dates, and even counseling sessions later!). Thank you for being willing to put yourselves "out there" for the readers. May your recollection of painful memories bring further healing through God.

Special thanks to Adam Potter² for creating the cover graphics and website support, and to his talented wife, Tanae, for creating the website (39-Stories.com). I appreciate your patience, love, humor and talent.

Thanks to our friends Joe and Victoria McCall for their generosity and support, and to many others for their contributions such as Gofamodimo Toto, Thomas Knapek, Doug Hart, Sue Williams, Polly Prior and Pat Verbal.

How could any of this be possible without Jesus Christ?

It could not.

This book is written to magnify Him, not us.



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Introduction

*Great faith is a product of great fights.
Great testimonies are the outcome of great tests.
Great triumphs can only come out of great trials.*
– Smith Wigglesworth

This 40-day devotional comes from an unlikely place: a small international church in the most atheistic city (Prague) of the most secular region (Bohemia) in one of the most secular nations of Europe (Czech Republic). Each entry is a testimony to the transforming power of God and was birthed out of a deep need for renewal in a spiritually dark world.

Perhaps you find yourself doubting whether God really *is* good and whether His ways really *are* the best. If so, you are not alone. Regardless of where you are in your faith, the purpose of 39-Stories is to show that He *is* good, and that no matter how messy and painful our stories may be, He makes all things new and beautiful. This is only possible through the life, death, and resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

Our stories of brokenness and backsliding can demonstrate to others that infinite healing and hope can be found only in Him. Our worst moral failures can become victories, and our worst abuses can lead to the deepest intimacy with our Heavenly Father. The purpose of the death and resurrection of Jesus, including His 39 lashes,¹ is that we may have the strength to face our own hurts and hang-ups. If we do this, we are free love others like He did us.

Most of these story-tellers are not writers at all. They're normal people like you and me. They are from all walks of life, many nations, and with various native languages. Some are highly educated and some never finished school. What they have in common is that they have all been affiliated with Prague Christian Fellowship international church in some way or another. My husband and I have pastored this church since January 1, 1997, and you can't imagine how many people have passed through in the last 22 years.

Some of the stories have been translated. Others were dictated and written by friends. Some are more eloquent, while others are less. But each is genuine and worthy of recognition. The authors have been brave enough to relive their past, so that you can know all things are possible with God. I met and spoke with many as they struggled to remember the facts and decide which ones to include. Some even struggled to find the redemptive value of their stories. Yet in the end, they discovered God was always there, even in the mundane.

This book was not meant to be a great literary work, but rather a true account of each person's story with a subsequent devotional to direct our attention to God's work in our lives.

Several years ago, we were part of a home Bible-study group trying to decide what to study next. One dear friend from Northern Ireland suggested that we try something from her church

¹ "Then Pilate ordered Jesus to be brutally beaten with a whip of leather straps embedded with metal." (John 19:1 TPT). Deuteronomy 25:3 states that a criminal should not receive more than forty lashes. In order to avoid potential violation of this commandment, the Jews would give a maximum of 39 lashes. The Apostle Paul wrote of this in 2 Corinthians 11:24: "five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one." Likewise, Pontius Pilate ordered Jesus to be whipped (Matthew 27:26). Although it does not explicitly say that He received 39 lashes, it is generally accepted in Christian tradition that He did.

in Belfast. The church hosted evenings called, “You Know My Name, But You Don’t Know My Story,” where members would share testimonies. One time, the pastor himself stood to speak. To everyone’s shock, he spoke of his criminal past, which included jail time for terrorism. Yet instead of inciting judgement from his fellow church members, his candor endeared them to him, and created an atmosphere of humility, vulnerability, and intimacy.

Our group decided to do the same. Every night, one of us would tell their whole story, and only a few people declined to share. A few days after I shared my story, I was contacted by a Czech lady in our group. She said she couldn’t sleep the night I shared, not exactly because of what I said, but because she had been touched. It made her think for the first time about the value of her life. She had been marginalized for her faith under communism and had never considered that her testimony could be used by God. As she lay in bed, God showed her the beauty of her story.

Telling our stories dignifies us and help us know Christ more deeply. In the process, shame is dismantled, and our souls are freed from evil. These stories are still being written, as are yours and mine.

Our prayer is that you’ll read each entry of this book and complete each devotional exercise. In doing so, your own story will emerge as a vehicle of dignified and glorious praise to God. You will find new hope and determination in your struggles, rather than running back to familiar comforts. We pray that you will cling to God when hardships come, as the writers of these stories have. Our times will require more dependence on God than ever before.

Everyone has a story to tell. What’s yours?

So we are convinced that every detail of our lives is continually woven together to fit into God’s perfect plan of bringing good into our lives, for we are his lovers who have been called to fulfill his designed purpose.

Romans 8:28 TPT

Kelsie Mullen

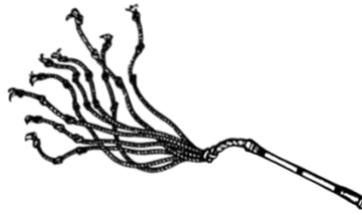
Redemptive Storytelling

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DAY 1



Why 39?

By Kelsie Mullen (USA/Czech Republic)

It is a very unfortunate and inconvenient fact that, despite our desire for comfort and security, we must pass through trials and tribulations to grow spiritually and advance the Kingdom of God. Look no further than the Bible to discover the expansive hardships of our spiritual forefathers and Jesus Christ Himself. As any good parent, our Heavenly Father desires our growth and maturity more than He wants us to be “fat and happy.”

Take the apostle Paul, for example, who wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:24-30 TPT:

Five times I've received thirty-nine lashes from the Jewish leaders. Three times I experienced being beaten with rods.¹ Once they stoned me.² Three times I've been shipwrecked;³ for an entire night and a day I was adrift in the open sea. In my difficult travels I've faced many dangerous situations: perilous rivers, robbers, foreigners, and even my own people. I've survived deadly peril in the city, in the wilderness, with storms at sea, and with spies posing as believers. I've toiled to the point of exhaustion and gone through many sleepless nights. I've frequently been deprived of food and water, left hungry and shivering out in the cold, lacking proper clothing.⁴ And besides these painful circumstances, I have the daily pressure of my responsibility for all the churches, with a deep concern weighing heavily on my heart for their welfare. I am not aloof, for who is desperate and weak, and I do not feel their weakness? Who is led astray into sin and I do not burn with zeal to restore him? If boasting is necessary, I will boast about examples of my weakness.

¹ See Acts 16:2-23

² See Acts 14:19

³ Since the shipwreck mentioned in Acts 27:39-44 happened after Paul wrote to the Corinthians, his total shipwrecks were four. Apparently the three he mentions here took place during his earlier missionary journeys. Some have calculated that Paul had made eight or nine voyages at the time of this writing.

⁴ In vv. 23-27 Paul uses his experiences of enduring suffering and hardships as the validation of his apostolic ministry. He would one day sacrifice his life for the gospel while in Rome. In ch. 12 Paul will use visions and spiritual encounters from God to further validate his role as an apostle of Christ.

Many of us have become professionals at avoiding, insulating, and numbing our pain rather than embracing it with gratitude. At the highest levels of victory, God gives us the opportunity not only to embrace our broken messes and become overcomers in Christ, but to weave them into the fabric of our personal narratives. Redemptive stories turn our trash into gold and are God's revenge against Satan for what he has stolen from us. Moreover, they can become the very weapons that bring victory for others.

39 is the maximum number of life-threatening blows allowed under the Hebraic law of biblical times. Paul was sentenced such flogging five times. Jesus himself probably received the same before his crucifixion.

Last Easter, I was teaching the Easter story to a large group of small children in the park. I recalled John 19:1 - "Then Pilate ordered Jesus to be brutally beaten with a whip of leather straps embedded with metal" - and spontaneously decided to count out loud with them to 39.

"Who can count to 39?" I asked.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen.

"This is going to take a long time," I thought. "I'm going to lose their attention!"

"Keep going," I heard in my head.

Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three. Twenty-four. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. Twenty-seven.

"Oh, my Lord. The pain must have been horrendous. Jesus, you must have been wondering if it would ever stop." I imagined the flesh ripping off his body with each lash.

Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Thirty. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three. Thirty-four. Thirty-five.

Thirty-six.

Thirty-seven.

Thirty-eight.

Thirty-nine.

My eyes almost teared up. In that moment, I felt one tiny step closer to Jesus, and more grateful for the hell he endured for me. Since then, I have often counted to 39 when in need of a reality check during a period of suffering.

Our prayer is that your life will be transformed by the love of God and the hope of heaven as you complete this 40-day devotional book.



Key Verse

And everything I've taught you is so that the peace which is in me will be in you and will give you great confidence as you rest in me. For in this unbelieving world you will experience trouble and sorrows, but you must be courageous,⁵ for I have conquered the world.

John 16:33 TPT

Reflection

Count to 39 slowly as you visualize Jesus suffering on our behalf. With each count, imagine Jesus looking at you with an expression of not only pain, but also deep love. Meditate on today's Bible verse and let the reality of daily hardships hit you. Finally, smile knowing that Jesus has already conquered the world!

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, open my heart to your ways in the next 40 days. Increase my capacity to know and experience you in deeper ways. I give myself to you and believe you will indeed make me courageous as I rest in your eternal victory! In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 2



Liberation from Fear

By Dan Drápal (Czech Republic)

On December 6, 1984, I was walking to the headquarters of the secret police. I expected to be arrested but amazingly, I was quite joyful.

I was born in March 1949, thirteen months after the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. My biological father fled from Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1948, soon after my mother found out that she was pregnant. I have seen him only once in my life, when I was 33. But that is a different story.

I was born with fear in my innermost being. I think it was due to the fact that during her pregnancy, my mom feared that the secret police would come any day to arrest her.

When I was 4, my mother remarried. For years, she was afraid she would be arrested because of her first husband, but soon after remarrying she was arrested because of her second husband (or to be exact, because of his family – his father had been a legionnaire during the First World War and an officer of the Czechoslovak army between the wars). In a show trial in 1951, he was condemned to death. The sentence was later reduced to 17 years in prison, of which he served 14.

When my parents were arrested, I was put into a place for children of political prisoners. I was 4 years old and have very few memories of this. I did not know what was happening. Later someone reclaimed me, and I spent few months with a family in Libčice, a small town north of Prague. Fortunately, my parents were released after several months. This was after the death of Stalin and the term of the first Czechoslovak Communist president, Klement Gottwald, so political trials had subsided.

Of course, this experience did not contribute to my healing. I was heavily dependent on my mom. I needed to know where she was at all times. But here were no mobile phones. My parents could not even leave me to go the movies in the evening. My fears limited them very much.

This state of affairs subsided when I reached adolescence. It was a slow, gradual process. But I was no longer suffering from any fears by the age of 16. I more or less forgot that I had ever had them.

In August of 1969, on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, the situation changed. There were protests in Prague, barricades and fighting, and I was arrested close to Wenceslas Square. I had gone with some friends to put flowers on the grave of Jan Palach, who had burnt himself in January of that year in protest against the invasion. As you can imagine, the police did not take to this very kindly. After that, my nightmares returned.

When I put my faith in Jesus Christ, a gradual process of healing started again. There wasn't a single moment of dramatic change. I simply forgot about my fears.

In 1977 I became a vicar in a mainstream Protestant church. To the great astonishment of both the secret police and the denominational authorities, the congregation started to grow. Then in late November and early December of 1984, the secret police started to interrogate members of the congregation. They either came to their flats or summoned them by letters. The worst moment for me was on one particular Wednesday morning, when secret police came to my office and took away my secretary. I could not do anything about it. Fortunately, she was released later that afternoon.

Soon I myself was summoned to the police. I was to appear at Bartolomějská street (where the secret police headquarters were) on Friday at 2 pm. This was strange. I had been interrogated many times, but always at 8 in the morning. I was sure that this time I would be arrested. It was a chilly December day. I lived in Holešovice, so I decided to go by foot and view Prague from Letná Hill. I had no idea what was going to happen, or if I would ever see Prague again.

When I reached Letná and started to descend into the Old Town of Prague, I suddenly realized that I did not have any fear. Actually, I was quite jubilant. And I knew that Jesus had liberated me from my fears.

To my astonishment, I was not arrested. I was actually not even interrogated. They asked me to sign a paper saying that I would respect Czechoslovak laws. It was just silly. Years later, after

I had gained access to my secret police file, I learned that the whole thing had been intended to intimidate us (it worked with some members of the congregation, but not too many).

For me, liberation from fear is something very, very real.



Key Verse

*Listen to my testimony: I cried to God in my distress
and he answered me. He freed me from all my fears!*

Psalms 34:4 TPT

Reflection

Fear paralyzes us. It is difficult to move forward in life with your foot on the brakes. In what areas are you paralyzed with fear? Has it prevented you from moving forward? Be still and honest. Write down your fears and phobias. Do not assume that because something is dangerous or risky, you should not do it. The apostles of the New Testament intentionally walked into uncertain and dangerous situations. We are not to love our lives more than we love God. Is self-preservation binding you, masquerading as “sensitivity” or “due caution?” Or worse, are you more concerned with the opinions of others than fulfilling the will of God for your life?

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

Today, with the help of Your Holy Spirit, I choose to reject all fear and ask for Your supernatural deliverance therefrom. I bring to You this list of fears and phobias (written in the Reflection). Forgive me for incorporating them into my identity and lifestyle, for they are not me. You died so I could be free, and defeated Satan so that I would not be tormented. Thank you! I receive the gift of Your Son, Jesus. When I am afraid, I will look at Your face. I shall receive Your peace right now. In Jesus’ name, amen.

DAY 3



The Big Question

By Magdalena T. (Czech Republic/USA)

I learnt about the situation in Sudan when I was only ten years old. The fighting started the year I was born, 1983. I imagined kids my age being born on the run, or in some forgotten refugee camp.

God moved my heart in a profound way for them, and I couldn't just do nothing! In my beautifully simple way of believing, I knew I could make a difference. Knowing there were starving kids in the mountains of southern Sudan, I started regularly skipping lunches. For years, I sent the money for those lunches to an agency that provided food to the Sudanese people.

Years went by, and my interest in Sudan grew. I dreamed of visiting. After graduating from high school, I started prayerfully looking for opportunities to go.

Through a series of crazy “coincidences,” I found myself on a plane to Sudan one year later. I spent the summer traveling around, learning about the Sudanese people and God's heart for them.

When my three months were up, I didn't want to leave, but my studies were awaiting me at home. I had enrolled in a school for medical training to become a midwife. It was a hard season, studying and holding down three different part-time jobs. Life seemed overwhelming compared to the simple way of life in Africa.

About a week before Christmas, at the height of pre-holiday havoc, I started feeling really sick. Out of the blue, I was bent over throwing up, with chills and terrible body aches.

I stayed at home for a couple of days, but I did not get any better. By Christmas Eve, I was so exhausted from the constant fevers that I started wondering what kind of weird flu I had. Where was God? It was Christmas, the “God-with-us” holiday, yet God felt very distant and silent.

The days went by, and my health deteriorated to the point where I was almost bedridden. I was hardly eating or drinking anything between spells of blinding nausea and fevers.

New Year's Eve came, and I dragged myself to the emergency room. I desperately wanted to make it to the new year alive. In my weakened state, I began to feel like God had taken a leave of absence from my life, or that perhaps it wasn't really worth living anyway.

I was admitted immediately and put into solitary confinement at an infectious disease hospital. Imagine being behind a heavy metal door with the handle on the outside, and everything is chlorinated white. Even if I had had enough strength to try to leave the room, there was no going anywhere because I was bolted in! After more blood tests, they still couldn't figure out what was wrong with me.

I don't know how other people imagine dying, but at that point, I honestly thought "this might be it for me." As the fireworks outside welcomed the new year, I was behind those heavy white doors, thinking I would never make it out. I was going to slowly dissolve into the crispy whiteness of the medical bed, surrounded by beeping machines and gurgling oxygen masks. Gone were the hopes for my life, including those of ever making it back to Africa. I felt silly dying in a sterile hospital environment when so many people die in the dirt of misfortune, poverty, war. But I at least knew we were all equally lonely.

I had mentioned my trip to Africa when giving my medical history. Once the tests ruled out all other common diseases, the doctors started digging deeper into all the crazy things I could have possibly picked up there.

At the peak of my next fever spell (which was over 41 °C/106 °F), they drew more blood. Finally, they were able to find the evil little plasmodium parasites that had affected me with old-fashioned, treatable malaria.

Despite all my precautions, vaccinations, and prophylaxis, I had picked these bothersome creatures up and carried them around until they decided to act up months later.

I ended up walking out of those doors on my own two (still pretty shaky) legs. My heart, on the other hand, took a bit longer to cautiously venture out of the vacuum. The *big question* was, "how could God allow something like this to happen to me?" It's the age-old question that transcends class, nationality, and age. If God is real, then why do bad things happen to good people?¹ Now I too was asking that question.

I learned the hard way that it is so much easier to trust God to orchestrate our days and meet our expectations. Even when the days are bad, He keeps things under control. This lesson brought me to a much deeper level of trust in Him.

Are you wondering if I ever made it back to Africa? I did! God gave me another wonderful summer to spend among my beloved Sudanese. And I got malaria again! Not even a week had passed when I started feeling that familiar queasiness. I made it to the closest clinic, where they diagnosed me with single prick to the finger. Using medication, I got better in a week... Malaria is an undeniable part of African life.

I'm looking forward to dying at an old, ripe age in Sudan, or wherever else He leads me. Doing life with God is an adventure where I don't get to set the limits of pain. It is an adventure where I choose to trust Him daily. And He is always good and faithful.

¹ For further study, read the book, *The Reason for God*, by Timothy Keller.



Bible verse

For those living in constant goodness and doing what pleases him,² seeking an unfading glory and honor and imperishable virtue, will experience eternal life.

Romans 2:7 TPT

Reflection

Take a moment to evaluate your doubts about God. Remember how Jesus responded when Thomas doubted the resurrection?³ He invited him to touch the holes in his hands and side. Be still and sit with Jesus. Allow him to reveal Himself to you.

Have you ever believed that your Father in heaven will like you more if you perform well? Or that He will love you more if you are a good person? Remember that salvation is not merit-based.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, help me believe in my areas of unbelief! Forgive me for times when I doubted Your goodness, bartered with You, or was angry at You. Forgive me for feeling justified by my good works, which I thought would insulate me from bad things. I choose to trust You with my life today, and forever! In Jesus' name, amen.

² Doing what pleases God comes from faith. We must first believe in Jesus, the Anointed One. Then our life and works will bring honor to him. See also v. 10; John 6:28-29; Hebrews 11:6.

³ John 20:24-30

DAY 4



MALTA

By Suzanne Wallace (USA)

I had lots of errands to run that day in 1999. The grocery store, drug store, and cleaners were all calling my name. To make things even more complicated, I got a sudden phone call from my doctor's office. I had recently gone in for my annual mammogram, and they wanted me to come in again to redo it. "It's probably just a fold on the film," the woman told me. "I don't think it's anything to worry about." One more inconvenience added to my busy day.

It wasn't a fold on the film! A quick stop by the clinic evolved into a blur of sonograms, biopsies, agonizing waits, and an emergency call to my husband. The doctor's words hung in the air like an ominous storm cloud. It was a large breast tumor with several tentacles, reaching for new places to lodge. As we learned later, the tumor had been present in the previous year's mammogram, but had gone undetected because the films had erroneously never been read or sent to the doctor. I felt as though my life were at the mercy of negligence.

Waves of shock and fear rolled over me that evening. The struggle to sleep finally gave way to exhaustion as I drifted off into an uneasy rest. A dream world began to unfold...

There I was, on the shore of the eastern United States, with a backpack secured to my shoulders. Next to me was a woman with the same. She explained to me that we were about to fly to Europe by means of the jetpacks in our backpacks. She assuaged my skepticism with one simple statement: "trust me"!

I slept through the flight and awoke as we were nearing land. Suddenly, the jet packs stopped operating and we both fell into the foamy abyss below. Our efforts to swim were challenged by a huge whirlpool that was sucking us in, but we both eventually made it to the beach. Fighting to move through thick vegetation, we looked for anything that might give us a clue about our location. A hut-like shop appeared before us, and we anxiously asked the man there to tell us where we were. "Why, don't you know?" he asked cheerfully. "You are in Malta!" We were overwhelmed with delight.

But the dreamland joy gradually faded into a sobering realization of the morning light. Reflecting on the dream, I felt certain that it was from the Lord. My heart began to hope that the God of life, not neglect, would be in control. He seemed to be telling me that there was a struggle ahead, like the ominous whirlpool in the dream, and that the destination was symbolized by Malta. What could I understand about that distant land?

I remembered the story of Paul's shipwreck and arrival to Malta in Acts 27-28, and reread the chapters with hungry interest. The storm had captured Paul's ship, and death seemed imminent to all on board. But God intervened and spoke to Paul. Paul gave his crew specific instructions, assuring them that no one would die if they trusted his words. They did, and death was averted. Once on the island, an unfortunate snake found that his resting place had become kindling for their fire. Not at all in a good mood, the poisonous asp attacked Paul's hand. Again, the prognosis for him was certain death. But Paul shook off the snake (i.e. death) like an annoying mosquito, because Jesus had conquered death on his behalf. People on the island thus became convinced that he was a god. Although there is no explicit mention of evangelism, the scripture states that "When the people of the island heard about this miracle, they brought all the sick to Paul, and they were also healed" (Acts 28:9 TPT).

So there you have it. Malta was about two things: escaping death and healing. Eagerly looking up the meaning of "Malta," I found that it meant "refuge." Indeed, it had been just that in my dream.

I began to search out the amazing history of Malta. There was once a group of crusaders called the Knights of the Order of St. John, who came to the island from Jerusalem to establish houses for healing. They were also referred to as "hospitallers" and "warrior healers." While there, they pursued their dual calling by establishing hospitals and successfully averting the Muslims from overtaking Europe. Malta was about healing, and warring against the enemy.

I wish I could say that solid faith for healing anchored my heart, but I cannot. I struggled to get to that place but felt as though I was running only three quarters to the finish line. The mastectomy revealed cancer in my lymph nodes. Rounds of chemotherapy and radiation followed surgery. Somewhere in the mix, we received a call from our friends John and Kelsie Mullen in the Czech Republic. They invited us to come and offered to pay for the trip. Although I was plagued by uncertainty about whether I had recovered enough to go, desire overtook reason and we were on our way only a few weeks after my last radiation treatment.

The turrets of ancient cathedrals and the maze of endless medieval architecture give Prague a mystical beauty. During our time with our friends, I shared my dream with them. The last night we were there was John and Kelsie's anniversary, and we had plans to go to dinner. As we rounded the corner of a narrow cobblestone street, the restaurant that they had carefully selected came into view.

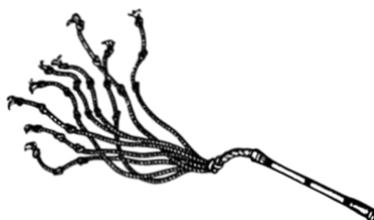
There, on the front door was a visage that had become quite familiar to me: the Maltese cross, a symbol of the Knights of the Order of St. John. I looked at Kelsie for understanding. What was that symbol doing on a building in Prague? She explained to me that the Knights of Malta, as they have now come to be called, made their way to

Prague and settled on the very square before us. On the far side of the square was their cathedral, and the restaurant that we were entering had been their hospital.

In storybook fashion, we descended to the level below and were seated at a table by an archway that had been sealed at some point in its history. The waiter explained to us that the tunnel had been used to take the sick from the hospital across the square to the cathedral for healing prayer. With the history swirling around me, and the crosses adorning the ancient walls of the restaurant, I felt as though I was on the island of Malta.

It was only upon reflection after returning home that faith seemed to wash over my heart. “God, you actually fulfilled my dream. You took me there.” It was as though I heard His tender voice say, “Didn’t I tell you?” Suddenly, I felt I could trust Him for complete healing. I leaped to my feet, and in a loud voice declared, “In the name of Jesus, I am healed.”

No! My life was not at the mercy of negligence, but of a God who heals, speaks, and is willing to go to extravagant lengths to reassure my faltering faith.



Key Verse

The Roman governor of the island, named Publius, had his estate nearby. He graciously welcomed us as his houseguests and showed us hospitality for the three days that we stayed with him. His father lay sick in bed, suffering from fits of high fever and dysentery. So Paul went into his room, and after praying, placed his hands on him. He was instantly healed. When the people of the island heard about this miracle, they brought all the sick to Paul, and they were also healed.¹

Acts 28:7-9 TPT

Reflection

Read Acts 27 and 28. Paul, a hero of the faith, endured many hardships. We can see that he did not play victim to his circumstances. He was actively praying, hearing God’s

¹ Although Paul was technically a prisoner, he was the one setting everyone free. He preached the Gospel with signs and wonders, leaving the island healed in more ways than one.

voice, helping others, and even leading the voyage as a prisoner. We are called to the same radical lifestyle of obedience.

Do not be a victim of your circumstances, your diagnosis, or your upbringing. God has the power to lift you up so that you may see your life from His heavenly vantage point. Do you feel you've been victimized in some way? If so, how? Do you believe God has the power to heal that? Will you determine to praise Him no matter what?

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for being a good God who loves to speak to His children. I choose to be quiet and still today, so that I can hear Your voice, even as I sleep later this evening. Instruct me as I lay (Psalms 16:7), for I need Your wisdom and revelation. Show me where I need to take more leadership in my life, just like You did Paul. Heal and comfort those in my life who are sick with cancer or other maladies (name them). In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 5



Victory in the Night

By Pam B. (USA)

I always dreaded falling asleep.

I was tormented nightly as a child by a skull flying around my room, constantly staring me down. My Mom told me not to be afraid, explaining that it was just my imagination. But that didn't help – *it was real*. I dreamed all the time that somebody was aggressively chasing me, trying to kill me. But I could never get a cry for help out of my mouth. My legs could hardly move. Moments before death, I would awake in terror.

I grew up in church and believed everything I was taught. As a Lutheran, I had reverence for God and knew that I should obey the “Golden Rule” (love thy neighbor as thyself). But getting into heaven always seemed dependent on me being *good* enough. Even though I believed in Jesus, I was constantly afraid that Satan would steal me and take me to hell. I often cried to the Lord about it at night. I wanted to go to heaven, but I was so filled with fear and uncertainty.

My understanding of how to walk with God grew in stages over the years. Even after hearing about the “sinner's prayer” from a Baptist friend, and repeating it later on my own,¹ I struggled to believe that God is able to rescue me from Satan. This lasted into adulthood.

Then something happened. I was a missionary in my 40's, married with three kids, but I still suffered from nightmares and unreasonable fears. One day, the Lord told me that I have the same authority over Satan in my sleep as I do when I'm awake, because my spirit is always awake. I had always thought I was helpless in dreams, since I never managed to win when attacked.

Freedom came in two stages. First, the Lord dealt with my conscience. I had previously believed that if I caved in to temptation in a dream, I was not responsible because I was asleep and therefore helpless. Now I realized that since my spirit is always awake, I am accountable to God for my actions at all times. I started to win in my dreams.

¹ An evangelical Christian term referring to any prayer which includes repentance from one's sins based on the desire to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. An example from the Billy Graham Institute is, “Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. In Your Name. Amen.”

Second, the Lord freed me from the nightmares themselves. The torment ended one night in a victorious dream.

I was in a one-room cabin which had 3 doors to the outside. There were also windows. I assume the cabin represented my life, where I dwell as a spiritual being. In the dream, a small man started coming into my house to harass and hurt me. When I chased him out one way, he would come in another way. Even if I locked the door, he found a way in. Finally, I started to panic and scream at him. He enjoyed seeing me panic and was having fun. Then I recognized that he was not a man at all, but rather a demon, and without waking up, I became aware I was having a dream and that God was with me. I knew suddenly that I had His authority over the demon. I saw a baseball bat on the floor, so I picked it up and started swinging it at him and yelling in the power of the Holy Spirit – "Get out of my house in Jesus' name! Get out and don't come back."

For the first time, I wasn't afraid of the enemy in my sleep! I was confident in the Lord. The demon left and didn't come back.

I have never had another nightmare. That day, I stopped being constantly afraid that Satan might win the battle over my life. It was a turning point for my trust in God the Father.

He truly is Immanuel, or "God became one of us" (Matthew 1:22,23 TPT). He is the God of power, and He will never fail us or forsake us, even if Satan is crouching at our door. No matter how old we are, how long we've battled something, or how long we've known Jesus, He is there to fight with us. *As soon as we know that*, we start winning out over the power of the enemy.

My husband I have dedicated our lives to winning souls back from the enemy. Now we are back in the Czech Republic and work with Youth for Christ and the Immanuel Missions and Conference Centre. We are also starting a prayer initiative where we live called "House of Prayer," which will launch in April of 2019.



Key Verses

For hasn't he promised you, "I will never leave you alone, never! And I will not loosen my grip on your life!"² So we can say with great confidence: "I know the Lord is for me and I will never be afraid of what people may do to me!"³

Hebrews 13: 5b-6 TPT

² Deuteronomy 31:6

³ Psalms 118:6,7

Reflection

Are you sometimes tormented by nightmares, night paralysis, sudden fear, or the sense of an evil presence in your room at night? If so, you are not alone. When I ask people this question, they most often say “yes.” The spiritual realm is real, and so are angels and demons. The enemy of our souls, Satan, loves to torment us in any way he can. You may feel vulnerable in the dark of night, or even in the safety of your own bed. But you are not powerless if you have given your life to Jesus Christ and confess Him as your Lord and Savior. Picture yourself fully protected with the armor of God (Ephesians 6) as you sleep. Stand up to the devil. Resist him and he will flee (James 4:7).

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, You say we should be alert at all times. Even as I sleep, make my spirit alert. Thank You for giving me all the spiritual protection I need against the devil, who is already defeated through the blood of Jesus. I take authority right now, in the name of Jesus, over the enemy. I will sleep in peace tonight and every night, without any interference, because I am a child of God, and this is my inheritance. In Jesus’ name, amen.

DAY 6



The Son of Promise

By Marketa P. (Czech Republic)

After being at my parents' place over the weekend, feeling very miserable and lonely, I decided to buy myself a bottle of wine. While drinking, I cried out to God and asked Him to show me why I was still single.

When I became a Christian at 18, I thought God would bring me a godly mate pretty quickly. Well, things don't always turn out the way we expect. Yet God always has the best ways of showing us His love and care when we trust Him.

I joined PCF when I was 21 and served there as a worship leader with a ministry that lasted a long but amazing 16 years. I remember many times when I prayed with my women's group. We were prophesying over each other, interceding, and asking the Lord to accelerate things in our lives. Of course, being married to a Christian man was our priority and deep longing.

At the beginning of that weekend at my parents', I surveyed my situation. I was in my thirties, still single, and desperate. It was taking too long. Friends around me were getting married or in a relationship, and where was I? I was serving the Lord. Yes, it was a rewarding ministry, but my whole being longed and ached for a partner to love, to love me, and to serve the Lord with.

Don't get me wrong. I had many close friendships with amazing and loving people. I had a great fellowship and church family, and I loved every bit of what I was doing. But something was still missing. I knew I was called to be married and felt incomplete. I cried out and complained to the Lord. "Why? Why this long?!"

I didn't wait for His answer. I expressed to Him that if He didn't show me His way in this matter, then I would do it *my* way. I told Him, "On Monday I will find myself a man, even if he is non-Christian. I really don't care at this point!"

Sunday came, and I don't even know how I got through leading the worship. I don't know what was coming out of me because I was hurting inside. I couldn't wait until the service was over. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I remember silently putting the music cables away and feeling

lonely. That Sunday, PCF had a visitor – Michelle, a lady from Australia whose relationship with Jesus was very intimate. Jesus told her to speak to me, and her obedience had a major impact on my future.

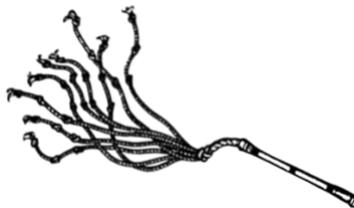
Her words pierced my heart: “Don’t settle for a son of flesh. Wait for a *son of promise*.” I knew it was Jesus speaking to me through the story of Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac.¹ My jaw literally dropped. I was in a shock.

When it seemed impossible to Sarah that she would conceive and bear a son as God had promised, she gave her handmaiden, Hagar, to Abram (later Abraham) as a backup plan. Hagar ended up giving birth to Ishmael, who was considered the “son of flesh” because they were trying to fulfill God’s promise in the flesh, and on their own strength and reasoning. Later, Sarah *did* become pregnant and gave birth to a son, Isaac. He was the son of God’s promise.

I suddenly realized how much God loved me and cared about me! How could I have doubted? I repented and asked Him to forgive me for my angry and rebellious heart. From then on, whenever I felt lonely and desperate, I recalled His promise.

5 years later, I met my lovely husband. God showed His love in a most miraculous way!

So, to all of you who are longing and waiting – it’s not easy walking in faith like Abraham and Sarah did. But if you have heard His promise to you, hold on to it. And if you haven’t heard anything, keep on asking! Our God cares!



Key Verses

Now faith brings our hopes into reality and becomes the foundation needed to acquire the things we long for. It is all the evidence required to prove what is still unseen. This testimony of faith is what previous generations were commended for. Faith empowers us to see that the universe was created and beautifully coordinated by the power of God’s words! He spoke and the invisible realm gave birth to all that is seen.

Hebrews 11:1-4 TPT

¹ See Genesis 16 & 17.

Reflection

Perhaps you are weary of waiting for something. Maybe you see no indication that God is hearing your prayers and cries. But He is! This will be clear when the moment is right. What are you longing for? Take a moment and cry out the Lord. Ask Him to take the longing from your heart if it is not in His perfect will for your life. Be honest with Him about your pain.

Do you struggle with loneliness? If so, ask God for faith and grace to wait for a mate who will love, respect, and honor you. Do not settle for a “son of flesh.” Pray for the gift of discernment.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I give my longings to You. I repent for my angry and rebellious heart. Help me stray away from reliance on my own strength and carnal wisdom. I will be patient by Your grace. My spirit is willing, but my flesh is weak.² Fill me now with Your mind, Your Spirit, and Your power, so that I may live in your ways. I give You everything. Thank You for not withholding good from me unnecessarily. Your gifts are always perfect, and perfectly timed. With Your help, I will wait for fulfillment of Your promise in Your way. In Jesus' name, amen.

² See Matthew 26:40-43.

DAY 7



Immanuel

By Dana L. (Czech Republic)

“We are sorry to inform you that you will no longer be able to have children,” said the doctor to my husband Jon and I in early January of 2014.

The summer before, just after our first child turned 1, I had a very strong desire to have another baby. However, Jon was not yet on the “same page,” as our little girl was still so young. But my desire burned on; I just didn’t know what to do with it! One day, crying out to the Lord with my eyes full of tears, I said, “Lord I can’t take this anymore! Please! If this desire is not of you, please just take it away from me. But if it is, then unite my heart with my man in this matter!” I knew I would not get pregnant without being in agreement with my husband. The Lord answered my cries loud and clear: “One year from now, you will be pregnant with a boy and you shall name him Immanuel.”¹ I got serious and said “Lord, wow, why Immanuel? We always wanted a Matthew” (silly me!). God answered, “For I will be with Him.” Peace began to return to my heart, yet my brain was on fire thinking about what could go wrong and when. I kept my conversation with the Lord secret, waiting for His timing to share it with my husband.

One month later, Jon contracted hand-foot-and-mouth disease. He was suffering from very high fevers that our thermometer couldn't even measure. After the first 10 days, the infection turned into a testicular infection, which started another round of high fevers. Jon was in bed for the next couple of weeks. Months flew by, and we were in and out of the hospital. Some doctors suspected cancer, which would mean surgery, but no one was sure. Jon took many antibiotics and was referred to all kinds of specialists.

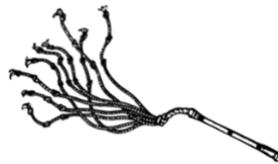
During these challenging times, I shared with Jon the word God had spoken to me about our baby. He was very skeptical. After all the treatments and tests, strong inflammation had caused irreparable damage to his body, giving him zero chance of conceiving.

¹ Matthew 1:23. Emanuel, or “God with us” or “God among us”; that is, God incarnated. See also Isaiah 7:14, 8:8 and 10.

I remember leaving the doctor's office with our final result. I was sad, but in faith and in my heart, I chose to hold onto God's promises, knowing that He is the one who gives life and that everything is possible with Him. My only worry was whether I had heard correctly. Jon and I were waiting and trusting Lord. If it truly was His word, it would come to pass.

At the end of May 2014, while visiting our family in the USA, I started to feel nauseous, tired, and sensitivities to smells. Jon ran out to get a pregnancy test from a pharmacy, and I remembered God's promise. The Lord did not disappoint us! The test was positive! I remember being shocked and thinking, "Is this true? Really? The God of Abraham, the God who made the Earth, us, who sent His Son, Our Lord and Savior? He told me it would happen and it did! He truly gave us a child!" We rejoiced and shared the great news and testimony with everyone. When our doctor confirmed it was a boy, I smiled and said "just as God has told me."

Our son Immanuel was born in December of 2014, and surely, God has been with him from the start. To our great joy, we later had a third son, Timothy. God gave us so much more than we or the doctors could ever expect!



Key Verse

The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.

Exodus 14:14 NIV

Reflection

Is there a dream that you believe God has placed on your heart, yet that seems impossible? Desperate cries to the Lord do not go unheard or unanswered. What is your desperate cry? Hold nothing back as you pray. Reach up as an expression of grasping for what only God can give. Declare your dependence on Him as you read the Key Verse.

Take a moment and allow God to show you all the times He *has* answered your impossible prayers in impossible ways. Refuse to let anger and jealousy ravage your heart when you see God answering other people's prayers, but not your own. Be still and listen.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, Your Word stands above all things, including what doctors say and what man thinks is humanly impossible. I proclaim that with You, all things are possible. Thank You for fighting for me. I will continue to wait and glorify only You, as Your promises are always fulfilled. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 8



The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

By Norm Frederick (USA)

My mind was racing as the head of the hospital and the lead doctor approached me with serious expressions on their faces. They told me that they had done everything in their power. The bacteria had spread into much of my sweet bride's brain and she would not come out of her coma. The best they could do was make her comfortable.

One of my favorite New Testament scriptures was James 5:16 (TPT): "tremendous power is released through the passionate, heartfelt prayer of a godly believer!" I had no idea how the Lord would weave this scripture so deep into me through this experience. I felt that God had been training me in prayer for many years for this moment. That day, I found myself with an army of prayer warriors in a life-and-death battle in a foreign land (Americans living in Germany), just after winning a huge spiritual battle in the city of Geneva. We were living our dream.

Lynn and I have had quite a journey together. In 1980, when I was only 23 years old, I had my eye on this young beauty who attended my church. By the grace of God and His radical kindness, I ended up marrying her that year. She was everything I had hoped and prayed for. Together, we began pursuing the Lord in full time ministry.

The next 26 years involved education in pastoral counseling, and serving as pastors and elders at Shady Grove Church in Grand Prairie, Texas. My first assignment on staff was not as a pastor, but as the janitor (God has a sense of humor), where I learned to truly love and serve the body of the Messiah.

In 2006, we knew God was leading us to the nations, so we sold our home and moved to the island of Cyprus, where we became leaders in a ministry called Gateways Beyond, International.

After several years of prayerful sowing, we sent some of our team to the reformation city of Geneva with a mandate from heaven to see awakening come once again. After much prayer and intentional relationship-building with local leaders, we were able to prepare the ground for a corporate gathering in partnership with Lou Engle and The Call (a John-the-Baptist-type movement calling for prayer and fasting to spiritually awaken this generation).

There was much spiritual opposition. The media was critical, and some of our team was even physically assaulted during the planning phase. However, we pressed on knowing this was the time and place for the Call. We finally received permission to gather on 12/2012 at Calvin's Cathedral in the old city of Geneva, where a record crowd of over 1,500 people packed this ancient place of worship.

We left there knowing something had been birthed that would bring about a new movement of reformation and cooperation. What we didn't know was that there were several demonic assignments that were released during this time, including over our leadership team.

Soon after we returned home to Herrnhut, Germany – another ancient, spiritual “well” of worship, prayer, and mission – we discovered that one of these assignments was directed against my wife. Lynn said she wasn't feeling well (she never complains) and went to bed early (something else she never does).

My conversations with her that night would be the last for the next 10 days. During the night she began moaning and writhing in pain. Early the next morning she was unresponsive. An ambulance took her to a regional hospital where they ran tests and began treating her for bacterial meningitis, which had now gone to her brain. Bacterial meningitis is very serious and can be deadly. It can cause permanent brain damage, or even death in as little as a few hours.

As you can imagine, we were very concerned when, after 4 days of a drug-induced coma, we were told that the hospital staff had done everything in their power. This was the first time in 32 years of marriage I was unable to talk with my sweet bride, let alone face the prospect that she would never recover.

At that moment, the collective prayers of our communities around the world came crashing into my spirit. I heard myself say to the doctor, “I am so grateful for everything you've done on behalf of my wife, but we are a praying people and this is not the end of the story.”

I also assured him that we were praying for him and his staff as well. Four days later, my wife miraculously opened her eyes and began looking around the room at family and friends. She recognized us and even spoke to us. The nurses were flabbergasted, as were the doctors. They simply could not believe their eyes.

Day after day, the doctor would come stand in her room, not to just check up on her, but to simply be in the room because of the miracle that had taken place. She was declared dead, but was made alive!

I cannot explain how prayer released the canopy of grace and peace over us during those difficult days. I can only tell you that it empowered, sustained, encouraged, and led us to receive her back, fully alive and without any trace of having been under such an attack.

Praying for resurrection is only foolish until someone rises back up. In other words, keep praying, beloved. Keep asking. Keep declaring. And keep agreeing with heaven for a breakthrough.



Key Verse

...for tremendous power is released through the passionate, heartfelt prayer¹ of a godly believer!

James 5:16b TPT

Reflection

Has your dream died because it seemed impossible and you finally gave up? Have you stopped praying or believing that God can save a loved one? Is there anything “dead” in your life that God wants to resurrect? Be still and ask Him. Write down what He says and ponder how you can bring yourself into alignment with His Word.

Do you have a prayer partner? If not, find someone you trust and agree together in prayer on a regular basis.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I confess that I have allowed something to die in me that You want to grow. I will carry and give birth to Your dreams. Lord, I will renew my mind with Your Word and my spirit with Your presence. I receive Your resurrection power right now that I may believe in You for the impossible. Help me to take risks when necessary, to see Your Kingdom come and will be done! In Jesus’ name, amen.

¹ Or “energized prayer,” a prayer within a prayer.

DAY 9



Healed and Restored

By Dawn C (USA/Czech Republic)

I moved to Prague a very broken woman.

I had known the Lord since I was a young girl and had matured as a Christian throughout my teenage and young adult years. I was a leader in my church and community. Yet in 1995, I lost trust in God, and made a conscious decision to walk away. I remember telling Him that I knew He was the one who held the keys to life, but that my life had not turned out the way I had hoped, so I would try it without Him. I reasoned it might be better if I was at the helm, like C.S. Lewis so famously described in *God in the Dock*.

Throughout my journey as a prodigal, I lost my marriage, my professional reputation, my relationship with immediate family, and an unborn child. It didn't take long after the abortion to realize what grave consequences I had invited into my life. My heart was suffocating me. I thought I would die just from its weight. The sins that I had committed were paramount on my radar screen, as if the world around me didn't exist. I felt cold and alone and didn't want to live any longer.

I remember going into my bathroom, getting down on my knees, and worshipping out loud, because it was the only thing I knew that would save me from the hell in my soul. When I did that, He placed a seal around my heart, and I knew the enemy would never be able to torment me again. This remains true today, 18 years later.

While I have experienced great grief and sadness thinking about the child that could have been mine, I have experienced no torment. That day, I was truly delivered from the one who wanted to take my soul, and possibly even my life. Along with salvation, this has been one of God's greatest gifts to me. "A thief has only one thing in mind – he wants to steal, slaughter, and destroy. But I have come to give you everything in abundance, more than you expect – life in its fullness until you overflow!"¹

Not long after the loss of my unborn child, I moved to Prague, still in the process of going through deliverance from the suffering of my prodigal years. In January of 2003, I joined

¹ John 10:10 TPT

Prague Christian Fellowship (PCF) and it became my church home where I could continue to heal in the context of relationships. PCF was there to celebrate the birth of my son later that year. What a gift it was to be pregnant at a later age (42), to give birth and hold my little one. Joseph was God's grace personified to me and my second husband.

We attended a church retreat together in 2004, and the photo from the event speaks volumes to His love. There we were, surrounded by Christian brothers and sisters who had come into our lives. The photo demonstrated the truth of the Lord's Word from Psalm 68:6: "To the lonely he gives a family. To the prisoners he leads into prosperity until they sing for joy."

My husband and I had been welcomed into the PCF family, and were continuing in our healing, individually and as a couple. Four years after Joseph's birth, we welcomed another son, James, into our lives – this time through adoption in Prague. Once again, God gave us a child as a gracious gift, and solidified us as a family even though we had started out very broken. I believe a hallmark of the Body of Christ at PCF in Prague is that it earnestly seeks to bring together Czechs and expats and show the community there the tangible family of God.

I became a church leader over the during my 12 years in Prague, and served there until our family left in 2013 to return to the US. I look back on my days at PCF and see the tender mercies of God over our lives and those that make up Prague Christian Fellowship.



Key Verse

To the fatherless he is a father.

To the widow he is a champion friend.

To the lonely he gives a family.

To the prisoners he leads into prosperity until they sing for joy.

This is our Holy God in his Holy Place!

But for the rebels there is heartache and despair.

Psalms 68:5-6 TPT

Reflection

Meditate on the Key Verse. How wonderful is God's design for our wellbeing – the family. Are you lonely? God wants you to belong, not to the world, but to the family of God (the church). Do you belong to a local expression of the Body of Christ? Or perhaps you have been wounded by Christians or the church? Be still and ask God to talk to you. Let Him help you determine your place of belonging. Don't let the deceitfulness of isolation rob you of loving relationships. The risk is real, but worth it.

If you are not lonely, imagine for a moment what that must feel like too be alone. Naturally, you may dream of having a moment to yourself, but what if you lacked belonging in general? Who do you know that is lonely? For example, the elderly are often forgotten. Ask Him if there is anyone He wants you to contact.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for families – Your perfect design for us. Thank You for the Body of Christ, Your Church, which is thriving all over the world. I will not isolate myself or others, Lord. I depend on You for the strength to function well in relationships. Show me who to include in my family and my life. I choose to forgive any Christian or church who has wounded me in the past because I refuse to let any root of bitterness rob me from the joy of being in God's family. Remind me daily who is lonely and in need of my love. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 10



The Marathon

By Bethany B. (USA)

Sleep had always been stubbornly elusive on the nights I needed it most. I shifted from my right to left side for what must have been the hundredth time. Images of the physical and mental challenge that awaited me early the next morning flashed through my mind, eventually settling into a restless knot in the pit of my stomach. Sleep was imperative. I shifted my weight again from left to right shoulder, inadvertently catching a glimpse of my muddy running shoes. My exhale of frustration was audible. I had intended to throw them in the washing machine earlier. It didn't feel right to tackle over twenty-six miles in shoes that looked like they had been recently rescued from a mudslide.

I crossed the empty hall into the community laundry room and tossed my lime green running companions into the washing machine. Home appliances here in Reykjavik were slightly different than what I was used to. But at least my running shoes would be bright and shiny in the morning.

The slow, even breathing of my friend Becca was the only sound interrupting the dark. She was an old friend, the kind that made silence comfortable and new places familiar. We had met at pre-season training camp, and that red-headed spitfire had been pushing me physically and spiritually ever since. With five marathons under her belt, she was going to help me survive my very first.

Becca's alarm clock that rang first that next morning, and she jumped out of bed with a cheerful "happy race day!" greeting. My groggy mind protested her optimistic enthusiasm. Happy was not a word I felt comfortable using to describe the day. I had signed up for several marathons in the past and never made it past the first few weeks of training. My inability to push past physical pain was unfortunately mirrored by a similar inability in several emotional and spiritual areas. I was easily swayed and deterred by difficulty, inconvenience, or the monotony of self-discipline. This marathon was more than just a physical challenge to me; it was a symbolic declaration. I was committing to building a new level of endurance and perseverance not only physically, but mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

It might have been crazy to tackle my first marathon at the end of a European backpacking trip, but the extra challenge had mysteriously created an even higher level of determination. Despite the jet lag, the unfamiliar running routes, and a diet consisting almost entirely of red wine and

cheese, I had somehow gone for one exhilarating run after another. 14 miles in Paris; 16 sun-scorched miles in Barcelona; and an excruciating 21 miles in Copenhagen.

I smiled thinking about the significance of the next several hours and walked across the hall to retrieve my freshly washed shoes. I glanced around the room; empty white tile staring back at me but no shoes. Confusion flooded my thoughts and I checked the grey machines again. Nothing. I scoured the floor with frantic eyes, hoping the intensity of my search would coax the green shoes out of hiding. My stomach sank deeper than I knew was possible, and the reality of the moment began to set in. My running shoes were gone.

After the initial shock started to wear off, I found myself fighting back tears and simultaneously laughing at the irony of the situation. This race was a statement of perseverance, and I had been given a last-minute surprise of discomfort and inconvenience just to see if I really meant it. I hadn't pushed my body and my mind for the past several months only to allow missing shoes to prevent me from finishing this race. I ran through options in my mind, knowing it was too early on a Sunday morning in Reykjavik to buy anything new. I started to pray that there would be shoes to borrow at the start line.

We arrived later than anticipated, and I began sharing the story of my missing shoes with anyone and everyone. Apparently, most people do not bring an extra pair of shoes with them on race day. With five minutes until the start of the race, I had only one option. A generous woman from England had graciously offered me her extra and also brand-new pair of running shoes. They were stiff, not broken-in, and last but not least, a full size too small for my feet. With three minutes to go, I laced up the tiny, cramped, brand new, hot pink shoes. I was already uncomfortable before my first step across the start line.

The gun fired, and Becca and I fell into a slow, steady rhythm. My toes slammed against the front of those unforgiving shoes again and again, informing me that the romantic idea of running mile after mile in someone else's shoes is not as beautiful or as inspiring as it sounds. I could feel the skin on my toes and on the back of my heels slowly rubbing off with each mile. Every step hurt, and each stride served as a brutal reminder of my decision to finish this race no matter what.

Becca's pony tail bounced up and down beside me as she asked me question after question to help pull my mind away from my feet. We reminisced about our college days, our yearly reunions, and all the mountains and valleys we'd been through together. The Icelandic coastline stretched out beside us and the beauty was almost enough to overshadow my agony.

I could feel warm liquid surrounding my feet and I knew that blood from my open blisters had soaked most of the shoe's interior. As we passed the 20-mile marker, I knew I couldn't keep running with the borrowed pair of shoes on my feet. The pain had become unbearable. I took them off slowly, attempting not to look too closely at my bleeding toes, and picked up my pace again, barefoot and resolute, with the borrowed shoes in my hands.

Clapping and shouting drifted towards us as I caught my first glimpse of the finish line. I couldn't believe how close it was. A tired smile broke out over my face and I found it difficult to believe that my legs had actually carried me this far. Becca grabbed my hand and raised it up, letting out a yell as we crossed the line together. I was too exhausted to make any noise and promptly found a place to collapse on the ground. A few months prior I wasn't sure I could ever finish a marathon and yet somehow, I had pushed through the 26.2 miles. Not only had I

fought through the entire distance, but I had finished the race in spite of the pain and frustration of running the race in shoes that weren't my own.

That day taught me that I can decide which obstacles I will allow to stop me from chasing my dreams and convictions across the finish line. The disappearing act of my own shoes had turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The race-day challenge had uncovered a whole new layer of endurance and strength I didn't know I had. I have no idea who decided they needed my running shoes on the day of my marathon, but the lime green, thoroughly broken-in, and freshly washed shoes were returned to the laundry room without explanation two days later. I guess someone knew that a little extra difficulty and discomfort was all I needed to cultivate the persevering spirit I had been praying for.



Key Verse

But we long to see you passionately advance until the end and you find your hope fulfilled.

Hebrews 6:11 TPT

Reflection

This saying is true – “no pain, no gain.” Are you praying for a persevering spirit despite physical, emotional, financial, spiritual, or social pain? With God’s help, you are capable of much more than you can imagine! Don’t let your thoughts or words limit you. Ask God to show you when you are shrinking from pain and discomfort instead of pressing onward towards the finish line.

Think about the key role of Bethany’s friend in this story. God has created us to be in close relationships with others. Who is cheering you on? Who does God want you to cheer on?

Read the Key Verse. Are you passionately advancing towards the end? Are you actively engaging your spirit, mind, and body, or have you become lazy and complacent? Be still and let Jesus talk to you.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I receive Your Holy Spirit as my enabler, both right now and when times get hard. I actively give You permission to take me out of my comfort zone so that I can walk as you walked on the earth. Activate my spirit, mind, and body so that I may run my own race. Forgive me for being passive where I should have taken responsibility for my life. Help me to finish well. In Jesus’ name, amen.

DAY 11



Always There

By Adam P. (USA)

I felt helpless.

My daughter Alyssa was born with hydrocephalus, the accumulation of fluid in the brain. She spent the first few months of her life in the hospital. She was prone to seizures, and had a long list of other medical afflictions, including physical limitations.

I was raised in a Christian home and had a good sense of morality, but my teenage years were full of rebellion and drug use. I dropped out of high school because I was using and selling LSD. Going to raves (wild parties) was just “more fun.” I couldn’t hold down a job, and was in and out of jail. But if I could support my habit and get high, everything was fine for me. My first serious girlfriend was right there with me. We did whatever we wanted, no matter who we hurt. Looking back, I can see that our relationship was all kinds of toxic. Everything was shaken when we learned she was pregnant. I was only 20 years old.

As we adjusted to the prospect of becoming parents, the doctor told us that our unborn baby girl had hydrocephalus and that the chances of her living past 6 months would be slim. I was in no way living a godly life, but when I heard that doctor’s words, I immediately felt faith being deposited in me. I expressed without any doubt that the report wasn’t true and that she would live. As the pregnancy went on, I found myself living the same party lifestyle. Shortly after Alyssa was born, I ended up in jail, and the reality of being separated from my precious little girl was very hard on me. I found myself praying to a god that I hardly knew, yet I hoped He would help.

One night I was laying on the floor beside my little girl, just staring at her with wonder, when she stretched out her arm, and opened and closed her hand several times. It was like Alyssa was flashing “5-5-5” over and over again. At that moment I heard within me, “5...She’ll be walking and talking when she’s 5.” I had received a deposit of faith from God for her healing and shared it with family and friends.

One evening in 2003, I was at our neighbor’s house and we were all high on a drug called ecstasy. I was talking with a friend and I started examining my whole life. I thought about all the times I had had near-death accidents, and that I should have been locked up in jail longer, or even murdered for stupidity. It was like a zipper was slowly going up. At the very top, I heard that familiar voice deep inside say, “I’m your Dad and I love you and have always been there with you!” Hearing those words, I immediately excused myself from the party, went into a private room, and gut-wrenchingly repented for my life, my sin, *everything!*

At that moment, a supernatural event occurred. I felt the drug stop working completely, like a train hitting a wall. I felt it leave my body. In its place, I experienced the Lord's Spirit pour over me and through me, cleansing me. He took me to a new and greater high – His presence. I vowed that night to live for Him, to love and to serve Him whole-heartedly. I felt that, since I had ruined my life, I would at least live wrecked for Him. After my re-generation, I easily quit the drugs, the bad friends, and most of the bad habits, by the grace of God.

Within a week I had a new job waiting tables, and God placed people around me who would shepherd me and help me grow in maturity. I would learn through this job the value of being a servant and what it means to trust the Lord for provision.

My inner world and work life had drastically changed, but everything else was crumbling. Alyssa's mother and I got married because I felt it was wrong to live together unmarried. I should have asked the Lord if we were meant for each other in the first place. Things got bad between us and she eventually had multiple affairs. In my spiritual immaturity, I would condemn her with Bible verses. Eventually her affairs caused my love for her to snap in two, and I knew in my heart and spirit that our bond was broken. One evening, she packed and left for good.

I opened my Bible and landed on Song of Songs 1. I read the whole book right then and there. For the first time, I could feel that Jesus was the lover of my soul. It was then that I really embraced the bridal paradigm.

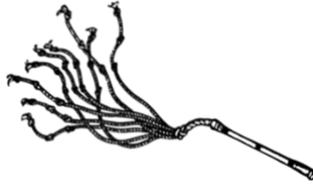
I had been attending a little church and serving with the youth pastor for a while when I was introduced to Tanae, one of the youth group's worship leaders. We had an unforgettable night at a fundraiser as we just talked all night long. I knew she would be my wife one day, which surprised me, because I was still in that "just-me-and-Jesus" mode. But we let our friendship grow over time and through Bible studies, hanging out with friends, or going to the local house of prayer.

Then one day in 2005, we received a call from my ex-wife saying, "It's time." Tanae and I rushed to the hospital to find out that Alyssa had had a huge seizure. She had stopped breathing, but the EMTs had resuscitated her and kept her alive. We were told to wait in the room with her until the attending physician could come and turn off the machine.

I was on one side of the hospital room with Tanae, my parents, and her parents. On the other was my ex-wife with her new partner, her parents, and her friends. We would take turns one by one with Alyssa, saying our goodbyes, holding and stroking her. On my side of the room there was the soft peace of knowing Christ. On the other was turmoil and heaviness. Eventually, the doctor came and turned off the life support. We stood there and watched her life leave her body after only a couple minutes.

Later I came to the realization that my daughter had lived 5 years, 5 months, and 15 days and I heard the Lord say "Grace, grace, grace. She lived the full measure of time." Biblically, 5 represents grace and 10 represents fullness of journey, or completion. In heaven, my daughter was 5 years old when she started walking, running, jumping, dancing, talking, singing, and laughing. I wouldn't wish the death of a child upon anyone, but it happened to me, and I couldn't imagine having to go through it without Christ's love.

It's 2018 now, and Tanae and I have been married for 12 years and have two amazing kids. As I look back, I'm still amazed by how the Father's hands guided me through all my junk. But I'm even more amazed at all the wonderful things He's doing now. I am excited for what's ahead, and all the while, eternally grateful.



Key Verses

Fasten me upon your heart as a seal of fire forevermore.

*This living, consuming flame
will seal you as my prisoner of love.*

*My passion is stronger
than the chains of death and the grave,
all consuming as the very flashes of fire
from the burning heart of God.¹*

Place this fierce, unrelenting fire over your entire being.

*Rivers of pain and persecution
will never extinguish this flame.*

*Endless floods will be unable
to quench this raging fire that burns within you.*

Everything will be consumed.

*It will stop at nothing
as you yield everything to this furious fire
until it won't even seem to you like a sacrifice anymore.*

Song of Songs 8:6-7 TPT

Reflection

Read the Bible verses and meditate on the power of the different kinds of love. Have you allowed rivers of pain and persecution to extinguish your love for God or another person? God's love for us is not extinguished by our junk. His love never changes. God is able to take every mistake and use

¹ The phrase in Hebrew is "a most vehement flame" and is actually two Hebrew words. The first is "a mighty flash of fire," and the second is "Yah," which is the sacred name of God himself. The Hebrew *shalhebet-yah* could be translated as "The Mighty Flame of the Lord Most Passionate!"

it for His glory.

Ask God to fill you with the love of Jesus, the burning heart of God. When you close your eyes and imagine the face of Jesus (if you can), what expression does He have on His face? Does His expression towards you reflect the Key Verses?

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I shall receive Your love. When trials and heartache come, even through something as bad as the death of a child, give me the grace to walk in Your love. I will not let pain and persecution extinguish this flame of love. I will praise You, Lord, even when life makes no sense at all. Show me how to love today. Show me who to love today. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 12



Christ's Strength in Me

By Jessica M. (New Zealand/Scotland)

His eyes were pitch black with evil. My brother was high on the drug “ice” (methamphetamine), and in an uncontrollable rage like I had never witnessed before, lashed out at my sister. She had no idea how much danger she was in. As the situation escalated, I knew that I needed Jesus to help. At that same moment, my brother went to pick up a large, glass ashtray to strike and kill my sister. I stepped between them and shouted, “Jesus can help you.” I walked towards my brother as he hissed, growled, and spoke of the future. I blocked out what he was saying, and slowly moved him towards the kitchen and away from my sister. She was safe!

Unfortunately, not all families are perfect. Our upbringing was particularly turbulent. My siblings and I all took very different paths in life. I chose a life in Christ.

My parents married at 16, and after having my two older siblings before the age of 18, they decided that they didn't want another baby. Despite the fact that my father had a vasectomy, my mother became pregnant several years later. In December of 1979, I was born into to a family that didn't want me; rejected before I even came into the world.

My mother refused to breastfeed me, and my birth father was called away from home to work on a large-scale national emergency. Shortly after he returned home, they separated.

My brother, sister, and I stayed with my mom after the separation. However, after several years of struggling to raise three children on her own, my mother decided that this wasn't the life she wanted. So, she packed up our belongings and delivered the three of us to my father's doorstep while he was out. I was only three years old at the time. Not only was I rejected, but now also abandoned.

My father did his best to raise us even though he lacked the means to support three children. Unfortunately, this involved several failed business attempts, as well as several failed marriages. My dad's bad luck in business left us skinny and underfed, and his bad luck in love left us feeling rejected and craving attention.

My siblings and I suffered through many years of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of our various step-mothers. As teenagers, all three of us coped with this in different ways. Both of my older siblings got mixed up in drugs, crime, and prostitution. Fortunately, I found

a much safer outlet: sports. I got into karate and athletics, and my coaches acted as good role models for me. They helped me stay out of any major trouble, and they did their best to support and encourage me. But despite their efforts to convince me otherwise, I had it in my mind that I would never amount to anything. In order to hide my shame, I became very lonely and isolated.

At the age of 18, I had a baby with a boyfriend. We had been dating for two years, and we cared about each other. Still, our relationship didn't survive the challenges of having a baby. The break-up made me feel even more rejected, embarrassed, and lonely than I had ever felt in my life. But I was determined to be a good mom.

The one thing that I knew with complete certainty was that I didn't want my child to have the same experience that I had growing up. I wanted her to be loved and not know the hurts that my siblings and I had endured. Without having ever gone to church, God still placed Christian friends into my life. And it was through these people that God showed me His love.

After having many conversations with these friends, I began to visit church from time to time. It was there that I had my first true encounter with the living God. His love was the first thing that ever broke through a lifetime of hurt and rejection. I finally felt love and acceptance, and I was comforted in His presence.

Not long after, a friend gave me a scripture, which to this day is still special to me:

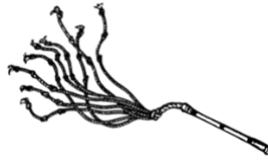
You can buy two sparrows for only a copper coin, yet not even one sparrow falls from its nest without the knowledge of your Father. Aren't you worth much more to God than many sparrows? So don't worry. For your Father cares deeply about even the smallest detail of your life.

Matthew 10:29-31 TPT

Over time, God continued to work on my heart. Gradually, I began learning that I was precious and worthy of true and unfailing love. Another Bible verse that was especially empowering for me was Philippians 4:13 (see Key Verses below). As a single, young mother, this scripture gave me purpose and dreams of a better future. It also gave me the courage to step in when my sister's life was threatened. During my brother's rage, Jesus gave me the strength and courage to intervene.

Over time, I shed my embarrassment of the past and started to live a new life. I learned how to walk in the grace and love that God had so freely offered me. I went to college and earned a bachelor's degree in education. The day after my final exam, I married the man who is now my husband. We've been married for 15 years and are living a fun-filled life as a family of five. I have since earned a master's degree in educational leadership, and I love my current job as a deputy principal.

I know that I am far from perfect. But without a doubt, I am where I am today because of God's grace, mercy, and love. Every day I am thankful to Him for His blessings and direction. It is because of God that I can confidently say I am loved and can do anything I put my mind to!



Key Verses

I know what it means to lack, and I know what it means to experience overwhelming abundance. For I'm trained in the secret of overcoming all things, whether in fullness or in hunger. And I find that the strength of Christ's explosive power infuses me to conquer every difficulty.

Philippians 4:13 TPT

Reflection

Meditate on the Key Verses. Do you also find that the strength of Christ's explosive power infuses you to conquer every difficulty? Unless we are in need of his explosive power, we usually don't cry out for it. But we are in a spiritual battle every day and cannot win without Him.

Think of some areas in your life where you feel ashamed, intimidated, or overpowered. Invite Jesus' explosive power to infuse you to conquer those difficulties. Be still and allow God to show you what He can do through you. And just think – your story will be used by God someday, too!

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for your awesome and majestic power. How You make all things beautiful is amazing. Just when we think something is impossible or hopeless, You light the path. Your methods are mysterious, and leave me in awe of You. I fix my eyes on You right now instead of on my problems and shortcomings. People may see me as weak or faulty, but You see me as Your royal son or daughter, with full authority and power vested by You, the King. I will walk in Your ways, not those of the world. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 13



The Freak Part 1

By Jimmie Bennet with Hulda Bennet (USA/Czech Republic)

I remember the blood on the guards' hands as they dragged me off to a small cell and locked me up for 26 days. It was my 5th fight and 3rd time being locked up in solitary confinement at the county jail. This time, it was the late and cold prison food that had set me off. I'd gone over to the inmate who had stolen my marijuana and started pounding on him.

The jail cell they took me to had just enough space for two beds and a toilet in between. I sat there like a wild beast locked away from the rest of humanity. No one cared that I was awaiting a court trial, facing charges that could get me a total of 350 years in prison. My dad and other family members were on the other side of the country. Even if they had known, they probably would have thought I was getting what I deserved.

I grew up in a violent home. Once, my stepmom (my mother died of a drug overdose when I was only 3, so I have no memories of her) got so angry with my older brother at the dinner table that she stabbed him with a fork in his chest. My father was a Vietnam War veteran and he would rage over trivial things. I remember being taken to the emergency room once because my hands were so swollen after a beating. I was told to say that I had fallen.

One day after school when I was about 12 years old, my brother and I were warming our hands over a can of burning gasoline. Being the type to speak whatever was going through my mind, I said, "If I kicked that on you, it'd kill ya." "Like this?" he replied. And he kicked the can of burning gasoline on me. The gasoline soaked my clothes and I caught on fire!

That day was one of the most painful days of my life. It has taken years to work through the physical and emotional torment of it. My brother nearly killed me by burning me alive!

I'd watched TV commercials about dropping and rolling if your clothes catch on fire, so I did just that. I saw the nearby creek that ran through our 80-acre farm, so I scrambled towards it and jumped into the ice-cold water. When I came out, nearly all my clothing had been burned off. My socks had melted to my legs and dead skin was hanging off my body. My legs and stomach were already hugely swollen. Seventy percent of my body was burned to the 3rd

degree. I was hospitalized for 4 months and endured over 20 operations. The doctors said I'd never be able to have children, and even considered amputating my leg.

On my first day out of the hospital, my stepmom drove me to the baseball field to show off my scars to her friends. The year before, I had been the pitcher (the guy who throws the ball) and helped our small-town team win against bigger towns. This was the one place where I felt accepted, where I was good at something. But now my stepmom wanted to show my scars to everyone.

I begged her not to. "Please mom, no!" But she pulled my shirt up and exposed my hideous scars. I hated her for it. I was so ashamed of how I looked, and I became the laughing stock of all the kids. I felt like a "freak."

The fire left ugly scars from my chest down to my feet. I was so ashamed and paralyzed by fear that I couldn't speak at times. I found it hard to concentrate, and failed miserably at school. I was kicked out at the end of my 8th grade year.

The pain and embarrassment caused by my scars and family problems were intense. I hated looking like a freak, and I was always searching for a way out. I found it in an older group of kids who regularly got into trouble. I began stealing nice clothes to cover up my scars. Eventually, smoking, drinking, and using marijuana became a part of my everyday life.

I was only 14 years old when the police came and arrested my friend and me for theft. The judge sentenced me to live in a foster home with jail time on weekends. But that didn't last long. I was eventually sent to St. Anthony's, the hardest juvenile prison in the state of Idaho at the time, where I spent 6 months and 3 weeks. I was angry at my parents and the world at large. I felt abandoned, and soon hated myself and everyone else around me.

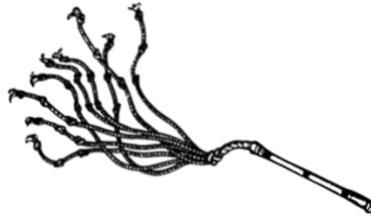
After being released on strict parole conditions, I continued on my path of destruction and went back to my lifestyle of crime. This time I was using harder drugs such as crack cocaine, which is highly addictive. I wanted it every time I got drunk, and would do whatever it took to get it. I had no purpose in life other than to get high and numb the pain in my heart.

One day when I was about 23, I met a guy in a pub who wanted me to help him rob some drug dealers. We ransacked their house, took their money, and used crack cocaine for several days. We then kidnapped the drug dealers themselves, and used their credit cards to stay at a hotel smoking crack for days. What we didn't know was that the police had been watching these dealers, and we were soon arrested and locked up. The charges against me included kidnapping, armed robbery, and handgun charges. Suddenly, I was facing a total of 350 years in prison for all my crimes, with a bail of half a million dollars.

By now, I was a violent, hardened criminal, and being in jail did not bother me as it had when I was younger. I gambled, and even ran a "2-for-1" store on the inside with stolen wares from the kitchen. Drugs were also fairly easy to get. The inmates called me "Freddy Kruger" (the scarred villain from the 1984 film, *Nightmare on Elm Street*). I used my scars to intimidate, and often got into fights which landed me in solitary confinement.

Possibly for the first time, I began to realize how low I'd gone.

Continue reading Part 2 in the next chapter.



Key Verses

But I discern another power operating in my humanity, waging a war against the moral principles of my conscience and bringing me into captivity as a prisoner to the “law” of sin—this unwelcome intruder in my humanity. What an agonizing situation I am in! So who has the power to rescue this miserable man from the unwelcome intruder of sin and death? I give all my thanks to God, for his mighty power has finally provided a way out through our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One!

Romans 7:23-25a TPT

Reflection

“Explore your history and your heart with a commitment to pretend about nothing. Tell the story of your childhood, not to shift blame or to find yourself, but rather to admit the turmoil and rage and fear that grew in you over a long series of disappointments...Replay the events in your history that stand out as especially difficult or joyful, or perhaps simply intense and hard to forget. Spend time reflecting on those memories with a few good friends. You may find yourself engulfed by strong emotions that you have never felt so deeply before. Some of those emotions will be ugly. Keep in mind that the root of ugly emotion does not lie in how others have treated you, but rather in your demand that they treat you well. Admit that demand – then face how that demand fed hatred for all those who have let you down. Explore whether you have handled disappointment by taking a strong kick at yourself for not being worthy of better treatment. If so, you are now filled with self-contempt. Notice how hard you work to protect yourself from more pain and to preserve whatever self-esteem still remains...The real enemy – doubt of God – remains hidden. Doubting God is a far more serious problem than whatever mistreatment you have endured: it is the root of all sin.” – Taken from *Finding God* by Dr. Larry Crabb.¹

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, help me be honest with myself and others about my past. Forgive me for pretending. Thank You for being my “safe place,” and for showing me which people in my life are safe. I praise You for Your power and wisdom to transform my mistakes into a beautiful

¹ Dr. Larry Crabb, *Finding God* (ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1993), p. 202-203

story for Your glory. What we broken vessels need can be found only in You. Thank You for revealing my true state. It is Your love that matters most. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 14



The Freak Part 2

By Jimmie Bennet with Hulda Bennet (USA/Czech Republic)

An elderly man who visited the county jail came by my prison cell. I'd seen him before and remembered how the inmates would mock him, insult him, spit on him, and even throw their urine on him! But he kept coming week after week. When I met him, I think Brother Tabler was in his 70s. As I sat alone in my cell, he stopped and asked if he could pray for me. I had nothing to lose and so I said, "Sure, why not?"

He told me that God loved me, and that He had sent His Son Jesus Christ to die for my sins. He prayed for me, and then asked if I'd like to pray too by repeating his words. I prayed a simple prayer, calling God to forgive me of my sins and to come into my life.¹

I had seen religious people all my life, but what I saw in Brother Tabler was eyes of love. He had nothing to personally gain from coming to the county jail, but he came faithfully whether anyone listened to him or not.

The Bible says that the kindness of God leads to repentance; and the kindness of God through that little old man lead me to repentance.² No one needed to tell me that I was a criminal. I already knew that. What I didn't know was that God loved criminals like me *so* much that He sent His one and only Son into the world.³

That day in the county jail, March 6, 1990, I prayed Brother Tabler's prayer with all my heart, and God began work in me that He is continuing to this day. I had never known love; but now, for the first time, I knew that God loved me just as I was. That was nearly 30 years ago. If not

¹See Appendix for more information about how you too can have a personal relationship with God.

² Romans 2:4 TPT: "Do the riches of his extraordinary kindness make you take him for granted and despise him? Haven't you experienced how kind and understanding he has been to you? Don't mistake his tolerance for acceptance. Do you realize that all the wealth of his extravagant kindness is meant to melt your heart and lead you into repentance?"

³ John 3:16 TPT: "For this is how much God loved the world—he gave his one and only, unique Son *as a gift*. So now everyone who believes in him will never perish but experience everlasting life."

for His grace, I would be dead or locked up in a state penitentiary. But He had mercy and gave me a new life – one full of hope, joy, and love for others.

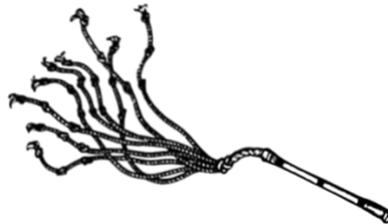
Over the years, I've had to work through my trauma and emotional pain; the day I got burned, the emotional and physical abuse in our home, and later the threats to my life as a drug dealer and inmate. I'm deeply thankful for the many people God has sent into my life to help me along the way. These include spiritual fathers and mothers, pastors, ministers, and professional Christian counselors.

After I got out of prison, I would visit Brother Tabler and help him with his grocery shopping. Wherever he went, he shared the Gospel. All the time. And I began doing the same. I've had the privilege of sharing the Good News of Jesus just as Brother Tabler did with me, be it in prisons, children's homes, hospitals, on the streets, or wherever else God has opened doors. And I've had the joy of seeing precious souls come into the Kingdom of God.

Fifteen years ago, God blessed me with a wife who fears the Lord, and we have three amazing kids. Praise God, the doctors were wrong about me not being able to have children.

Friend, you may not be sitting in a concrete prison cell, but perhaps you live in prison of fear, shame, rejection, bitterness, or unforgiveness. Easter is about Jesus who came to set the captives free! I pray that today would be the day you begin your new life with Him.

This story has been adapted from the booklet, *The Freak*, which you can find at www.heartsfullyalive.org.



Key Verse

So if the Son sets you free from sin, then become a true son and be unquestionably free!

John 8:36 TPT

Reflection

The world needs more people like Brother Tabler. Is God calling you to be a “Brother Tabler” to someone in your life? The Bible says we are blessed when people insult and persecute us.⁴

⁴ Matthew 5:10-12 TPT: “How enriched you are when you bear the wounds of being persecuted for doing what is right! For that is when you experience the realm of heaven’s kingdom. How ecstatic you can be when people insult and persecute you and speak all kinds of cruel lies about you because of your love for me! So leap for joy—since your heavenly reward is great. For you are being rejected the same way the prophets were before you.”

Hence Brother Tabler's persistence. God sees every hidden act of kindness, every tear we cry, every insult and injustice we bear. He will reward each one, if not in this life, then in the next (i.e. in heaven)!

Now meditate on the Key Verse. What does it mean to you to be free? Remember, worldly freedom is not the same as the spiritual freedom Jesus refers to in John 8. Do you see yourself as a mere "sinner"? Or as a "saint," set free from sin and saved by Jesus? This will determine your actions, behavior, and lifestyle choices.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for setting me free from the power of sin by the precious blood of Your Son, Jesus. I am no longer a sinner, but a saint who sometimes sins. Thank You for breaking my chains. I renounce all addictions and habitual sin, and look to You, Father, to live the overcoming life that You have for me! I can't do it alone, so I depend on You and my brothers and sisters in Christ. Show me how to set myself up for victory.⁵ In Jesus' name, amen.

⁵ See Appendix C - How to Set Yourself Up for Victory.

DAY 15



Head Held High

By Lizel P. (South Africa)

I woke up to two coin-sized, smooth bald patches on my scalp. What could this be?

I was troubled with a rare condition called Alopecia Areata. This is the medical term for an auto-immune condition causing hair loss, which first began to affect me in my teens. It affects approximately 2% of the population.

Over a period of about 4 years, smooth bald patches periodically appeared across my scalp. Although I managed to cover them with my remaining hair, it looked like a mouse had been munching away! But there was no such hair thief to catch!

By the age of 22, my condition worsened into Alopecia Totalis (total hair loss on the scalp). We are all born with approximately 100,000 scalp hair follicles. I was astounded that mine had all vanished. It was *hair-raising*! Seeing my smooth scalp in the mirror was sheer agony. The idea of wearing a wig was strange and awkward. I chose a bob-style wig with straight, artificial hair, which was in contrast to my own long, dark curls. Nothing felt more unreal. I was devastated by the loss of my own hair. A painful but transforming journey had begun.

I spent the next 3 years on board the MV Doulos, the world's oldest ocean-faring passenger ship at the time. I served as a volunteer alongside 300 crew members from 40 nations. I opened my heart to the crew, sharing my struggle with Alopecia. My cabin mate, Becky Johnson, was especially supportive and fun. We were like one, big family. This spiritual community started praying for my hair to grow back. Great were the jubilations when we noticed the appearance of new hair!

We persisted, and although re-growth was slow, it was certain. Prayers were answered, and more and more hair started appearing. Eventually, all my hair had grown back, and great was the celebration when I could finally step out with my natural hair. The ship sailed into Durban, South Africa, where my family and friends back home were able witness the results of their prayers and praise God with me. In January of 1997, I boarded the ship bald and broken. Three years later, I left my floating home with a full head of hair! God is so good! Great is His faithfulness!

Sadly, tragedy struck again 5 years later, as my hair continued to fall out. I was devastated and discouraged! I thought I had closed that nightmarish chapter of my life, and never imagined that a smooth scalp would come back to haunt me. Distressed, I opted for cortisone scalp injections. Although I speedily grew a full head of hair, it all fell out again shortly after the treatment was terminated. Despite the same trauma and disappointment as before, I kept crying out to God, "Please, Lord, rescue me!" And He did.

God divinely intervened by orchestrating my next employment. I became the assistant for the founder/head mistress of South Africa's leading finishing and etiquette academy. It was a position hand-picked by God to take me to the next level of personal growth. My new boss, Corrien Baumgardt, mentored and guided me. She helped me recognize my hair loss as an opportunity for personal growth instead of a burden to be ashamed of. Her constant Spirit-filled affirmations forever changed how I view myself.

This inspired me to do the unimaginable: be bald in public. Taking that first bold step was so liberating! It felt like a giant leap into victory. No more shackles. No more fear of what others might say and think of me. I began to believe all that the Bible says about us. For example, Psalms 139 describes us as being fearfully and wonderfully made and explains how God's thoughts towards us are precious. Jesus set me free! Hallelujah!

Most importantly, I discovered my true identity in Christ. Now I know who I am, with or without hair. With my life and identity in God's hands, He has used me to help encourage others and build them up in their identity in Christ. He has even opened up doors for me to share with girls at the finishing school and at 2 academic schools. Ultimately, I gained far more than the hair I lost.

I wrote this poem as an expression of my experience and an encouragement to others.

Head Held High

Oh no, I have lost my hair!
But I am no more in despair,
For a woman ought not to be without her crown,
Upon the people's faces they may frown.
"What good is this?" I wonder,
This is such a major blunder,
Drawn-on eyebrows, half my eyelashes,
Memories of good-bad hair day flashes.
I cannot even fathom not to use a comb – Must I stay at home?
Nah, nah, nah, I am not a victim!
This is what I dictum –
Smooth arms and legs without the Veet
Clap, clap, clap this is a different treat,
For I know indeed, in Christ, I am complete.
I've kept my sane throughout this pain.
I thank God who healed my shame
He is the lifter of my head, so with my head held high
Softly I whisper, "look to Him and you too will fly"
Yes, YOU too will fly, fly, fly!

Whatever you might endure in life, always remember that God is with you. Trust that He has a good plan for you. Realize that your problem might seem daunting and your pain unbearable, but it can become the very instrument that transforms you and makes you victorious. Take God's Hand in your battle. Let *Him* guide your steps and never give up!



Key Verse

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. So no wonder we don't give up. For even though our outer person gradually wears out, our inner being is renewed every single day.

2 Corinthians 4:7-12, 16 TPT

Reflection

How much of your identity is based on your physical appearance? Compare how much time you spend focusing on outward versus inward beauty. Society puts great emphasis on outward beauty; but beware – vanity is a subtle trap.

Spend some time being honest with yourself about any prideful habits. Allow God to expose areas that need His attention. Ask yourself, “Is my life about promoting myself, or promoting the Kingdom of God?” “Could I praise God if all my hair fell out (or in case of some other physically altering condition)?”

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, teach me to be more grounded in what *You* say about me than in what others think. I choose to be content in obscurity and hiddenness. Forgive me when I draw attention to myself instead of glorifying You. I will always praise You, Lord, even in the face of physical suffering, like Job did. I will always bless my Creator! In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 16



Purpose in Weakness

By Deepti A. (India)

In a foreign land, dressed in white and thinking countless thoughts, I stepped into the cold water, and within minutes was immersed in a shallow river. A few years ago, I was baptized at a spiritual retreat in the Czech countryside. I got the sudden sense that I had become one with my Maker. I was overwhelmed with affection for Him, and Him for me. In His love, He had guided me to this place through a host of trials. I was finally free after 4 difficult years of inner conflict between my cultural beliefs and my love for Jesus. It had been a spiritual battle. But now, what joy and peace I felt! Friends were clapping on the shore and celebrating my reception of a brand-new life and fresh start! I was re-born.

I had never felt this peace and joy when worshipping and performing various religious rituals for Hindu deities. Trying to please them with flowers and incense, i.e. Aarti, was how I lived in India.

As a child, I held so many doubts about myself. I felt incapable, unworthy, depressed, hesitant, insecure, weak, timid, and afraid to speak to strangers. I had almost no words to express my deep, inner feelings. It was as if I didn't possess the language to explain my heart. What was so easy for others was so difficult for me! My family had always loved me unconditionally, so I was totally unaware of why I was carrying all these burdens.

As a teenager, when others were filled with a zeal for life, I was filled with low self-confidence, suicidal thoughts, and apathy. I never spoke of these feelings, and hid them from the world while smiling and pretending to be fine. My focus was on school. I studied very hard, so that later in life I could obtain all the worldly comforts for my family and myself. I was completely blind to the beautiful colors and blessings of life.

At the age of 18, I decided it was time for me to move out and get away from my parents, so I went to college in a different part of India. Once there, my situation got even tougher. My engineering studies were difficult, I had limited finances, and all sorts of negative thoughts swirled in my head. I still had an intense fear of speaking in public for my oral exams. However, somewhere deep in my spirit I was searching God.

After my studies, I took a technical job where I just had to communicate with a machine because I felt so incapable of talking to people. I believed this was my biggest weakness. I was deeply depressed in my soul. I was simply too weak and thought of myself as a faulty unit!

Dozens of friends came into my life, but I made good memories with only a few. Almost all my relationships left me disappointed and heartbroken which added to my despair. All the while, no one knew about my inner conflict.

One day I had an encounter with Jesus through one of his messengers. I had never heard or experienced Jesus previously, as I had come from a different culture. But I mustered the courage to take a half-step towards Him. I was scared to accept, trust, or love Him, wondering if one day He would eventually leave me like all the others.

As He took big steps towards me, I took tiny steps towards Him, and I began to grow in my knowledge and understanding of Him.

A few years later, I moved to Prague from India for a job. I left all my family, friends, and familiar culture behind. I experienced unbearable situations in my new job. Darkness and loneliness surrounded me. Each day was just like the last; morning turned into night again and again. Yet I was able to put a smile on my face and push through it. It was very hard, but deep in my spirit I always heard, "I am with you and will never leave you or forsake you. Wherever you go I will go with you, and I have a plan for you." He loved and accepted me even when I couldn't accept myself!

He became my only friend and walked with me. I started to feel His presence and understood that He is alive in me. It was then that the veil of despair over my heart and eyes was removed. I was able to see His blessings, love, gifts, and miracles in my life. Gradually, He gave me new hope. He filled me with peace, joy, and taught me to pray. I received several promotions at my job, and I gained the ability to speak to strangers. Most profoundly, He set me free from my thoughts of unworthiness and gave me a new identity in Him.

He introduced me to new friends and family at church who loved me with all their hearts. Believe it or not, He provided me with a new job where I only communicate with new people and speak publicly. He teaches and guides me each day. He gives me the words to speak and the strength to fight my weaknesses, especially when I feel overwhelmed and ready to give it all up!

He continues to transform me each day. It hasn't been an easy journey for me, but I know that my weaknesses have had a purpose. I know that if I hadn't gone through all these trials, I would have been lost in the world and I wouldn't have recognized the voice and love of Jesus. He gave me a voice, and now I can use it to say, **all of my pain and suffering was worth meeting Him!**



Key Verses

Or have you forgotten that all of us who were immersed into union with Jesus, the Anointed One, were immersed into union with his death?

Sharing in his death by our baptism means that we were co-buried and entombed with him, so that when the Father's glory raised Christ from the dead, we were also raised with him. We have been co-resurrected with him so that we could be empowered to walk in the freshness of new life.

Romans 6:3-4 TPT

Reflection

Have you been baptized in water? This act of obedience is for *all* who put their trust in Jesus Christ.

If you have, think about all God did to bring you to that place. Meditate on the above verses, especially the words “so that we could be empowered to walk in the freshness of new life.” How is this statement reflected in your life?

If you haven't been water baptized, open your heart and let God talk to you now.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You that Your mercies are new every morning. Thank for making a way for us to be reborn, so that we can have a fresh start in life with You. Thank You for choosing not to remember our sins or hold them against us when we repent and turn away from our old life. Empower me now, by Your Holy Spirit, to walk in the freshness of new life. (For those who have not been baptized yet – Father, lead me to water baptism. Show me the way and I will obey.) In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 17



Stranger in a Foreign Land No More

By Dorothy L. (Uganda/Czech Republic)

It was winter of 2003. I had just landed at the airport in Prague, Czech Republic to study medicine on a scholarship. It was freezing cold, and all I had was a thin sweater. I did not understand winter. But I was so relieved to have made it to my new home. All I wanted to do was find my room, take a shower, and rest. I was met there by a man who seemed really friendly but spoke no English.

He took me to a university office in the centre of Prague. After about two hours of waiting, I was told that I would be taken to my school. I assumed it was just around the corner, but the nice man took me to the station, put me on a coach, and chatted with the driver. To my surprise, as soon as the engine started, he jumped off the bus and waved goodbye.

I didn't know where I was going, or whether he was going to be there when I got there. I was tired, cold, and starting to get frustrated. I sat on the bus for almost four hours watching nothing but snow, hills, and darkness. When there were only four passengers left, the driver pulled into a field on the side of the road and told me to get off. I was all alone with my suitcase.

That was not long after my 20th birthday. I had just graduated with a diploma in clinical medicine back home in Uganda and had refused my parents' wishes to accept the scholarship. I was living in Soroti, a city in the eastern part of the country. Rebels were attacking and killing during night raids, and the place was filled with a demonic fear. People were sleeping out in the open, since homes were targets. One day, I refused to bow to fear and slept in my own bed, knowing that God was with me. People were shocked and wondered how I could sleep in peace while others were fleeing in fear. Then I started to reflect on whether I was running from God's will by refusing to study in the Czech Republic.

I finally decided to surrender. I had been planning to go to work, find a husband, and move on with my life, but I was destined for a different route. My parents were happy when I applied for

the scholarship, but I never actually thought I would go anywhere because the competition was too high. I was more concerned with pleasing them.

But now there I was – far away from home, far away from Prague, and at the doorstep of a university language centre somewhere in the Czech countryside. I soon found out that my medical degree would be taught in the Czech language, which was just one of many surprises I would encounter in this strange land. There were so many obstacles, I was ready to give up before I even started. I called my mum after the first day. I was ready to come home! Of course she said “No, stay my daughter!”

So, instead of returning home, I survived six months of grammar, chemistry, and biology in Czech, and started university the next autumn. I did not like the weather or the people. They were rude, looked down on me, and I felt judged wherever I went. I really had no love for the place.

I got depressed and felt abandoned. Yet in the midst of my suffering, I kept hearing a small voice saying, “pray for the Czech Republic.” I didn’t want to, because I hated the Czech Republic.

But God did not give up.

After two trying years, I decided to let go and asked my loving Father for help. Deep inside, I was sure that He had a good plan for me, and I wanted to live that plan. “Daddy, if you don’t help me, I cannot love this country or these people. I do not know how. Teach me.” That night I went to sleep knowing that the love could not come from me.

I woke up changed. It was strange, but true. I walked into the streets and felt like hugging strangers. I was so overwhelmed!

It is now out of *His* love that I pray and encourage others. I believe He brought me to this land to help bring spiritual transformation!

Another miracle happened in my life as a student. I met a Christian man who is also from Uganda! We got married and 15 years later we have two children and are living happily together as Czech citizens in our new home country.



Key Verses

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Jeremiah 29:11-13 NIV

Reflection

Some people are very hard to love. Who do you have a hard time loving? Take some time and make a list. Then ask God to help you love those people. Pray for and bless them. Remember, God can do in you what you cannot do yourself, even the impossible.

Have you noticed that we rarely pray for those we gossip about? Do you pray for those who ignore or hurt you? Be still and think about Jesus’ love for the unlovable. Ask Him to put a secret act of kindness on your heart for someone you don’t like. When we pray for and love our enemies, our hearts are changed.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for loving me enough to take me out of my comfort zone during this 40 days. I proclaim that I am ready for You to touch my heart show me what love really is. Show me how and whom to love. Oh Lord, people can be so wicked and dark, and it makes me so angry. Only the miracle of Your sacrificial love can change my heart. I am ready to receive it. In Jesus’ name, amen.

DAY 18



A Gift of Grace

By Jennifer T. (USA)

Today I can write; but there was a season when I had forgotten how to write part of the alphabet. I can now speak and can communicate easily; but I once stuttered so badly that my closest friends and family had difficulty understanding what I was saying. I can now drive a car alone; but there was a time when I found myself crouched in a fetal position on the passenger-side floorboard, screaming, shaking, and crying.

Life can change in an instant. And for me it was changed by a man who committed suicide.

One night, on a particularly dark stretch of road, a man ran across three southbound lanes, a median, and then two northbound lanes, only to run right in front of my SUV. I hit him, and then watched helplessly as he was thrown over my vehicle onto the pavement behind me. He died on impact. At this horrific moment, God gave me a gift. It was the gift of certainty. Sometimes after a traumatic event, people can't remember anything about the event. I remembered every detail. And while I don't want to relive it, I believe God allowed me to remember it as part of my healing. It was as if God had immediately attached a steel support beam to me and anchored it into the ground. I was certain that I had been paying attention, and not looking at the radio or phone. There was nothing I could have done to avoid the accident.

While I did not experience any physical injury, I instantly began to scream, shake, and stutter severely. My thought processes, memory, and personality were instantly altered. This was the beginning of my walk with PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

For months after the accident, my arms would involuntarily jerk when they "felt" the impact again during flashbacks. I was like one, large, raw, nerve ending that twitched at the slightest stimulation.

Everything took great effort because of the way my brain was now thinking. I couldn't read a comic strip because I couldn't remember what was happening from one frame to the next. Bible scriptures, recipes, and other things that I knew by heart had been completely erased. My new memory was full of large pot holes. I knew something used to be there, but I didn't know what. Sequential thought was gone. At first, there seemed to be no reprieve from the trauma. I couldn't pray. My thoughts were so chaotic and overwhelming that anytime I tried, the only word that came to mind was "Jesus." I could neither worship nor engage in lengthy prayers. Yet I felt the Lord's presence during those long moments of complete brokenness and vulnerability. And then there were the nightmares.

I couldn't work because I couldn't speak or drive. During the day I had flashbacks, and any time I slept I had nightmares. The kind where you suddenly awake gripping the sheets and gasping for air. One day, a friend who was new to Christ asked if I was still having nightmares. I said yes. And with the most childlike faith, as if he were understanding things for the first time himself, he said, "God wouldn't give someone nightmares. God wouldn't do that. I rebuke the nightmares in Jesus' name." That was it. 95% of my nightmares and flashbacks stopped simply because God had revealed His heart for me, His child, and given my friend authority through Jesus Christ.

Over the years, God continued to divinely orchestrate healing for my mind. For example, a client I worked for turned out to be a nursing education expert who taught new nurses how to help patients suffering from brain injury and PTSD. Or on one particularly bad day, I unexpectedly received several emails from friends (and friends of friends) from the U.S. and other parts of the world, who felt that God had told them to pray for me. Their emails were words of encouragement and their prayers were exactly what I was crying out to God for at that moment.

One day I attended a conference where Bill Johnson was speaking. At the end of his messages, he usually calls out two or three specific areas where he feels the Lord wants to heal the audience. That night, the first area was healing of the brain (ADD, ADHD, memory loss, etc.). Slightly shocked, I raised my hand for prayer. The second area was related to the first – healing of the brain as a result of trauma or injury. I instantly began to shake and cry uncontrollably. A woman came over to me. She said that at the beginning of the service God had pointed me out and wanted her to pray for me. I could barely stand, broken and wailing before God and everyone. She prayed. Then all of a sudden, I stood straight up, took a huge breath, and exhaled a sigh of relief. The shaking and wailing stopped. I was calm and at peace. I closed my eyes and my thoughts were clear. It was as if my head weighed less. The split screen I had been seeing in my head for years was gone. Next came tears of joy, relief, and peace. Over the next couple of days, I recognized that the confusion was gone and that parts of my memory were being restored.

It has been 14 years since the accident. And the restoration God has brought to my life is truly amazing. Close friends later stated that they never expected me to fully recover from the trauma. Now when I forget my words, stutter, or become anxious, God is faithful to remind me that I can give my burdens to Him. He continually gives me the grace to persevere, and the authority through Jesus Christ to overcome, while He finishes the good work He began in me. I'm so thankful that it's not all up to me, nor has it ever been.



Key Verses

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2: 8-9 NIV

Reflection

Where do you feel crushed? Are you troubled by anything that you just cannot seem to get away from? Are there things you feel you have to do in order for God to love you? Here is the Good News: God's grace is readily available. It is a gift. Not earned, but received. It may seem difficult at times, but we are called to trust in God's provision. We don't earn His love by doing. When you have nothing to give Him or do for Him, He still loves you.

Ask God to show you the areas in which you are trying to do things without Him. If you do not trust Him with some aspect of your life, ask Him why. Be vulnerable and let Him show you His unmeasurable love for you.

Prayer

Lord, I'm tired. I need You to save me from my circumstances, from the thoughts that torment me, and even from myself. Forgive me for not trusting You fully. Increase my faith. Help me to let You love me, and love You more in return. In my brokenness, draw me nearer to you. In my grief, comfort me. In my weakness, be my strength. Heal my heart so that I might receive every good gift You have for me. In times of worry, remind me of Your faithfulness so that I may be at peace. Thank You for never tiring of me and endlessly renewing Your mercies. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 19



Not a Cave, But a Tunnel

By Staysee C. (S. Korea/USA)

Tears were flowing down my cheeks as I sat on the couch one morning. I felt hopeless and totally useless. Extreme fatigue made even opening my heavy eyelids difficult, and my painful, stiff fingers restricted me from doing anything.

For almost six months, my husband, Jason, had been coming home during his lunch break to feed me. Glancing at his teary eyes filled me with pain, and my physical condition made me feel even worse.

I had been sick and skinny my whole life, but for the last 6 months, I had been showing signs of a serious illness. I had flu-like symptoms daily – fever, chills, aches, and eye twitches. My husband decided to take me to the doctor. It was January of 2003. My doctor knew me very well because I had visited her often. She did many tests and could not find the cause of my sickness. She was sure I didn't have the flu, and blood tests revealed an inflammatory response. After many visits, she apologized that she couldn't help me anymore and suggested I might have Lupus (an autoimmune disease that causes your immune system to attack tissues, affecting the joints, kidneys, heart and blood). She referred me to a Lupus specialist. I went, but things only got worse. I was finally diagnosed with Lupus, but I refused to accept that as my new identity.

For 3 months, my condition was so severe that Jason had to help me change my bedclothes several times each night due to night sweats. I spent my days in bed, unable to do normal daily activities. Every time Jason helped me take a shower, it would take me 3 days to regain my strength.

I didn't know it, but I was depressed. Tears fell effortlessly from my eyes. Even though I was a follower of Jesus, hopelessness began to take control. The enemy (Satan) wanted me to give up. I began to think about death, even though I was only 40 years old. I felt like such a burden to my family, especially Jason. Sometimes we wept together. I decided it would be better for me to be in Heaven with Jesus, and let Jason go on with his life and be happy with someone else.

Between my fatigue and his exhaustion, we needed others to lift us up in prayer. Thankfully, my sister attended early-morning prayer meetings at her Korean church. One morning, she was burdened to pray for me like never before. She gathered another sister and a friend, and together they committed to pray for us for 40 days. The end of the 40 days was right after my birthday, and for the first time I began to feel a little flicker of hope.

During one of my devotions right after that, my heart began to beat intensely (this has happened to me only twice), and I knew it was the Holy Spirit. He was about to speak. I heard God clearly tell me to go to a certain healing conference in my region. I was full of reasons why I shouldn't do it (it will be sold out, it was too late to register, etc.). But in the end, I knew I had to go.

Sure enough, the conference was full. I was sitting in the back of the "overflow room." I listened as a man of God taught about the courts of heaven and how we can bring our case before Him in these courts. Jesus is our advocate and pleads our case for us. I realized that I must take my case before the Lord as never before. Then, another minister had a "word of knowledge"¹ about someone in the back of the overflow room. The person he described was me! Faith rose up and I knew it was for *me*. Suddenly, I felt the powerful presence of God engulf me, as if in a whirlwind, and I clearly heard Him say, "Staysee, don't you know you're my friend? I'll stay with you forever!"

Those are the dearest words I have ever heard. And though they did not speak directly of my healing, I soon healed rapidly. Jason came and got me that night and took me to the car, piggyback style. I felt joyfully drunk in the Holy Spirit. I looked in the mirror and instead of seeing myself as thin and pale I saw a beautiful woman, as God sees me.

I happened to have a doctor's appointment scheduled for the second day after the conference. When I went into her office, she asked, "What happened to you? You look 95% better." I replied, "No, 100%! God has supernaturally healed me." Blood tests confirmed that I was 100% healed, as all my lab values were suddenly within the normal range. Even my blood pressure was normal – a first! The nurse couldn't believe that there hadn't been a mistake in the results. She thought they belonged to someone else. So, I had to repeat the blood work, and the results were again the same. I was healed! Soon, Jason and I were taking walks together around the neighborhood, and praising our healing, miracle-working God!

It occurred to me that my experience of being sick was like being trapped in an eternal, dark cave or pit with no way out. After my healing, God showed me that I had actually been traveling through a purposeful tunnel. Looking back, it seems like just a flash.

Like it says in Psalm 30, I have not kept silent since God healed me! I've shared the goodness of God to anyone who would listen on airplanes, in churches, etc., and in many different countries. I will give thanks to Him forever! One of my greatest joys is leading others into His presence through praise and worship.

¹ A spiritual gift, mentioned in I Corinthians 12:3.



Key Verses

O Lord, my healing God,

I cried out for a miracle and you healed me!

*You brought me back from the brink of death,
from the depths below.*

Now here I am, alive and well, fully restored!

O sing and make melody, you steadfast lovers of God.

Give thanks to him every time you reflect on his holiness!

I've learned that his anger lasts for a moment,

but his loving favor lasts a lifetime!^[a]

We may weep through the night,

but at daybreak it will turn into shouts of ecstatic joy.

*Then he broke through and transformed all my wailing
into a whirling dance of ecstatic praise!*

*He has torn the veil and lifted from me
the sad heaviness of mourning.*

He wrapped me in the glory garments of gladness.

How could I be silent when it's time to praise you?

*Now my heart sings out loud, bursting with joy—
a bliss inside that keeps me singing,*

"I can never thank you enough!"

Psalms 30; 2-5, 11,12 TPT

Reflection

Deep, intercessory prayer is one of the most important elements of this story. Leonard Ravenhill said, “Prayer in its highest form is agonizing soul sweat.” Our prayers can change the world. Spend a moment in God’s presence. Ask Him to share His heart with you, and then you will know how to pray.

Do you feel like you are trapped in the dark in any area of your life? God said He will always provide a way out. Spend some time asking Him to show you if and where you feel trapped. Now ask Him to show you the light at the end of the tunnel. Though it may seem hidden, it is there! Wait on God’s light to break into your life.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I need You and I need others. I need Your intercession on my behalf, and I need others to pray for me. Help me to humble myself and ask for prayer. Help me to let others into my life and ask for help when in need. Thank You for Your Church, which functions so beautifully. Lord, I reject right now the lie that I am trapped, and that there is no way forward. Pave the way and show me the steps to take. I will obey, not by my own power, but by the power of Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ name, amen.

DAY 20



Unexpected Gladness

By Jennifer B. (The Philippines)

A house falling off a cliff and a child desperately crying for help – this was my recurring childhood nightmare.

I will never forget the sunny morning my father left us, even though I was young. I didn't feel much love as a child. I thought that my mother only loved my younger sister, and that my father was the only person who loved me. Seeing him with his new family tormented me throughout my childhood.

As time went on, I started to accept his absence. But when I was 13, my sister went to be with the Lord. The hurt was compounded when my mother completely forgot about me because of my sister's death. I felt abandoned and unloved. Not a day went by that I did not cry or ask why I had to hurt so much.

When I was 18, God saved me from my deep depression. I completely fell in love with Jesus as my Savior and Lord. It was through his love and grace that I learned to forgive.

Even though I was walking with God, there were old wounds that just wouldn't heal. I was still feeling rejected by others and losing people who were important to me. This led me back to the pain of my childhood nightmare in a cycle that eventually consumed me. I have no words to describe it. Many times I planned my own death or asked God to just take me. For years, I saw myself as Hannah begging God,¹ weeping as I prayed. I was so desperate for joy that I saw no reason to live without it.

And hallelujah, God rescued me with His perfect timing. He surrounded me with the right people and gave me the strength I needed to stand back up. While I was praying one night, He gave me a word from Ecclesiastes 5:20:

¹ 1 Samuel 1:10

They seldom reflect on the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.

God used this verse to free me from pain, depression, and suicidal thoughts. He also promised that my childhood nightmare would be a testimony; that He would bring back sevenfold the joy the enemy had taken from me as a child, so that I could share it with my future family.

If you are struggling with the pain of your past and have lost the joy you deserve, God can restore it in ways unimaginable.²

The falling house and the screaming child are no longer in my dreams. My life is now secure in Christ, like a house built on a strong foundation.³

* *For more information and practical advice on depression, read the next story by John Wallace.*



Key Verse

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Romans 12:12 TPT

Reflection

Depression can rob you of all joy and veil your mind to the truth. Do you or does someone you know struggle with this serious condition? Unless you have experienced it first-hand, it is difficult to understand. Be still and let God mend any wounds on your heart.

Mediate on the Key Verse. Write down how you do these three things in your life.

Prayer

² For further study, read the book *Emotionally Free; a Prescription for Healing Body, Soul and Spirit* by Dr. Grant Mullen.

³ See Matthew 7: 24-27 and Luke 6:46-49.

Dear Heavenly Father, shine Your light into my body, soul, and spirit! Turn the tides on any oncoming depression. I cannot navigate this alone. Give me the humility and grace to seek help, Lord. By faith and with the help of Your Holy Spirit, I will praise You even when my mind is clouded by depression and I feel like giving up. I will cry out to You, knowing You will deliver me. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 21



Freedom from Depression

By John Wallace (USA)

Nineteen years ago, immediately after my wife Suzanne was diagnosed with breast cancer, I found myself in a deep, dark pit. Suzanne told me she felt I HAD to do something about my condition. At the time there was a Licensed Professional Counselor in our church so I made an appointment with her. This wonderful sister in Christ, in addition to her professional training, heard the Spirit's voice. The first thing she had me do was fill out a "psychological quiz." I completed it, handed it to her, she took it to the other room to evaluate it, and returned. She said, "John, if I didn't know you personally and just looked at these results, I would recommend that you be institutionalized for therapy!"

I suffered for many years from chronic depression which goes back at least three generations in my family. My one sibling, my older brother, and I both have taken anti-depression medication at one time or another. My mother and her three sisters and my mother's father all moved in and out of depression.

Depression is suffocating and exhausting. My depression's symptoms would range from just wanting to withdraw from social interaction and conversation to remaining in bed or just sitting in a chair staring into space. I was lifeless, drained of all energy or motivation, sometimes imaging that "darkness was closing in" around me. Most of the time I had to force myself to perform the responsibilities I had from parenting to operating my dental practice to attending seminary classes and, later on, leading a church plant and growing church as head pastor. But, all in all, my depression was . . . depressing!

My counselor was sure that, given my mental and emotional state, my body chemistry was messed up and urged me to see my medical doctor to be put on anti-depressant medication to replenish depleted acetylcholine and serotonin. I did so.

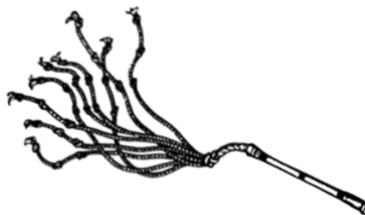
At the same time, I began to earnestly seek our Lord about the cause or causes of my depression. By His leading, I launched into healing steps to gain my freedom from this debilitating condition:

1. As I have written, I took medication to stabilize and re-vitalize my system (I took this medication for a little over two years and then, after accomplishing the following steps, I weaned myself off.)
2. I broke agreement with and pronounced freedom from generational sins carried down through my family line. I'm in a new household now, God's household (Ephesians 2:19). I declared the benefits of His family and broke off the effects of my natural family.
3. I told all demons of depression to leave me and go to where Jesus commanded them to go. I did this repeatedly until I sensed in my spirit a release from heaviness. (Although not the primary cause of my depression, demonic forces - from my study and experience - -"piggy-back" on issues in our lives to make them more potent.)
4. I sought the Lord for the "trigger(s)" to my depression. "Lord, is there something that regularly ushers me into a depressed state?" He showed me a vision in which I was walking down a spiraling staircase into a deep pit. Many times I wouldn't realize I had walked down this staircase until I was already at the bottom. Then he showed me - that for ME - what initiated this descent was DISAPPOINTMENT(S). When I became disappointed with things or people I started down that staircase. This revelation alerted me to the dangerous potential of this dynamic in my life.

After a few months' processing of the above 4 steps, I gained a glorious freedom! After dealing with depression for over 50 years of my life, I am rid of the heavy and immobilizing power I've had to live under. Although I still have disappointments, I now give those to our Lord quickly. I am much more aware when I have taken a step or two down the staircase to say, "Oh, I've been here before. I'm not going there!" My trigger was disappointment(s). Other people dealing with depression probably have different triggers. But a key component in gaining freedom, I've found, is to be alert to what that trigger is.

Not just one thing was the answer. It took God's servant (my friend the counselor), temporarily taking medication, release from generational sin, spiritual warfare, and revelation from Him about the trigger to set me free. It also took perseverance and daily walking out my freedom.

As we exchange our lives for the life of Christ within us, He powerfully brings liberty and freedom from those things that have enslaved us. Blessed be His name!



Key Verse

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,¹*
Isaiah 61:1 NIV

Reflection

Be still and ask God to show you any triggers. It may not be a trigger for depression. It may be a trigger for something else like bingeing on food, defensiveness, shame, gossip, extreme isolation or suicidal thoughts. Be truthful with a humble heart, knowing He will sustain you and lift you up.² Read over the steps above and ask Him if He wants you to take any similar steps. If so, begin to put them into motion today. Remember, depression is a serious disease and can even be life-threatening.

Reflect on the key verse. Imagine Jesus doing those things for *you*.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I bring to you now my friends and family who suffer from depression. Show me how to pray for them and how to be a light in this dark world. Show me also what *not* to say and do; those things which are not helpful. I am in awe of worshiping a God who doesn't require me to come up to where You are, but You came down to set the captives free! Your love is overwhelming. Your love is active and passionate for me. Thank you! I receive my freedom, Lord. I want You to use me to help set others free, too. In Jesus' name, amen.

¹ Hebrew; Septuagint *the blind*

² Psalms 145:14 TPT, *Weak and feeble ones you will sustain. Those bent over with burdens of shame you will lift up.*

DAY 22



A Deeper Love

By Heidi (Australia)

My dreams for the “love of my life” had evaporated forever. Bruce was supposed to be my soulmate. But instead, he drove me home as I sobbed. I was devastated. Two tender years of deep connection ended that night, and I did not see him again for the next 16 years.

We met in physics class at the University of Western Australia in 1973. I had been out of an abusive marriage for two years and was enjoying my study of physics. Bruce brilliantly helped me understand the mystifying lectures. He was sensitive, intelligent, and in time allowed me to see deep into his heart. There was only one problem: his lack of faith. During our nine months of friendship, I had gradually regained a joyful and radiant faith in Jesus Christ. But he was a self-proclaimed agnostic.

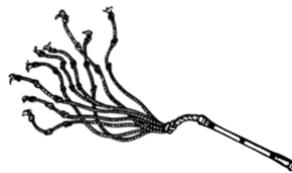
One night as we drove from the university library, it dawned on me that I had actually fallen in love. Feeling surprised, I began to laugh. He must have known what I was thinking, because as I opened the car door he blurted out, “Heidi, I love you, and I wanted to tell you first.” We drove down to the Swan River and talked about our future. I shared with him that I didn’t believe our relationship would work unless he became a Christian, and he agreed. He decided that if he wasn’t able to receive Christ, he would leave and go overseas. During the following six months we enjoyed our new closeness. I was very careful at first to not even hold hands. I told myself that if he came to faith before the end of the year, we could continue our relationship. But it didn’t happen. I tried three times to end it, but it always seemed that he was my best and only true friend, so we kept getting back together. Eventually, I caved in and started sleeping with him against my moral convictions.

After that, the Holy Spirit fell away from me and a black emptiness filled my soul. It was conflicted by my human love for a man and my craving for God. Although we genuinely loved each other, Bruce and I were on totally different spiritual planes. I felt hollow without the Holy Spirit’s tangible presence. On Easter morning I had a complete meltdown. I smashed many of my personal items, and then drove to the Royal Perth Hospital to check myself into the psychiatric ward, afraid that I would become violent. After two weeks at the hospital, an older Christian lady heard about my plight, and offered to let me stay at her home. It was a place full of peace, laughter, and the presence of Christ. I decided I could not go back to the double life I had been living. I could no longer live without the Holy Spirit. This was the beginning of my final journey back to Christ.

Bruce did indeed go overseas. Eight years later he called me on Christmas from South Africa. Although I was excited to hear his voice, I told him that Jesus Christ was my husband now. That revelation had come to me prophetically after I moved overseas in 1975. But accepting it certainly wasn't easy, as I had often dreamed of Bruce coming to Christ, and then back to me! Another eight years passed. During some counselling, my pastor suggested that I had built a shrine to Bruce and our relationship in my heart, because I couldn't stop dreaming about him. So, I sought the Lord, and with His help, I was able to renounce that shrine. I also learned that Bruce was married. Finally, I felt I could get on with my life.

Since Jesus told me prophetically that He would be a husband to me 43 years ago, I have been on an unexpected and thrilling journey of intimacy with Him. For many years, I thought of Bruce as the love of my life, someone who understood me on all levels except the spiritual. But gradually, my experiences with the love of Christ taught me that I could joyfully give him up to God. Intimacy with Jesus has been well worth the sacrifice of an earthly relationship.

Jesus is so sweet to me. One very lonely and dark season, I felt Him washing my feet as I lay crying on my bed. God has also provided financial security for me. I often wake up at night with a strong sense of His presence around me. Now that I am 70 years old, I can tell you His love is worth every sacrifice I've made. My life has turned out different from the dreams of my youth, of being married with children. But I am now content to allow God to shape me into whoever He wants, for His glory.



Key Verses

“Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame.

Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.

You will forget the shame of your youth

and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.

For your Maker is your husband—

the LORD Almighty is his name—

the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;

he is called the God of all the earth.

Isaiah 54:4,5 NIV

Reflection

Nothing threatens our love and devotion to God more than extramarital sexuality (including pornography) and intimate relationships with the “wrong” people. Even the strong emotions of falling in love with the “right” person can naturally pull our affections away from Him for a season. Take some time to open your heart to the Father. Allow Him to speak, heal, and pull the spiritual “splinters” from your past. Repent if you have allowed yourself to establish false allegiances. Confess your secrets to a trusted friend or counsellor and watch the weight of them crumble.

What has disappointed you in life? Who has disappointed you? Be honest. Give it to God now, trusting that He has a plan.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I give You my body as a living sacrifice.¹ I give You my mind, heart, and soul. Although my flesh is prone to wander, I love You the most, Lord! I love You more than any person, pleasure, or comfort (including food and entertainment). Thank You that You have designed me to find pleasure and intimacy with You *first*. Keep me on Your straight and narrow path. Forgive me for my sins. In Jesus’ name, amen.

¹ *Beloved friends, what should be our proper response to God’s marvelous mercies? I encourage you to surrender yourselves to God to be his sacred, living sacrifices. And live in holiness, experiencing all that delights his heart. For this becomes your genuine expression of worship. Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the culture around you, but be inwardly transformed by the Holy Spirit through a total reformation of how you think. This will empower you to discern God’s will as you live a beautiful life, satisfying and perfect in his eyes. Romans 12:1-2 TPT*

DAY 23



Say “Yes!”

By Kelsie Mullen (USA/Czech Republic)

I sat alone with my head in my hands, praying. I’d prayed many times before and often since. But some cries to God are etched into our memories- usually the *desperate* ones. Should I accept this challenging job offer?

I had spent the mandatory 24-hour trial period with a group of girls at the state-operated Hope Center for Youth in the Davy Crockett National Forest of East Texas. Once everyone left the campsite, I took a few quiet moments to ponder my decision among the tall, swaying pine trees and chirping birds.

Fresh out of university, I was offered a job as a counselor for emotionally disturbed juvenile delinquent girls as part of a residential program based on wilderness therapy, group therapy, and “reality therapy.” I didn’t know it then, but I was the one who needed help!

I thought to myself, “Father God, I don’t know if I can do this! Should I take this job? These girls can’t live at home because their parents can’t handle them. How can I manage a group of twelve delinquents when I’ve never been a parent myself?! They’re all bigger than me. Some of them are violent. If they were adults, some would be in jail!”

Like Moses in the Bible, I tried to get God to pick someone else.

“I am not a good fit for this job, Lord. I am shy, indecisive, soft spoken. And my own life is a mess! I am broken. How can I do this, Lord?”

“You can do it,” was the reply whispered into my heart. “I won’t allow you into any situation that you can’t handle. I am with you. My grace is sufficient for you.”

“How in the world did I end up here?” I asked myself.

Only four months before, in December of 1988, I had expected to be planning a future with my college sweetheart. But within a few short hours one Sunday afternoon, the rug was yanked out from under me.

James swept me off my feet with his guitar and serenades. With his wavy blonde hair and winning smile. He had even agreed to go along with my future plans. Ever since I was 16, my heart had been pulled toward the “mission field” overseas. We made arrangements to stay for some time in our college town and work, but he knew my dreams. We secured an apartment and were planning to move in together after our wedding, which was only 2 weeks away. I went to Dallas for the weekend to stay with my parents, complete some last-minute wedding plans, and attend a bridal shower. We had already received gifts, and many people were planning to attend from out of town.

Then, on Sunday morning, I got the fateful phone call. It was James’ father. His voice was serious, and he made it clear that he wished to speak to my parents, not me. I passed the phone to my mother and wondered what was going on. She hung up the phone quickly with a bewildered expression. James’ parents were driving into town (a two-hour car ride) to speak face to face with us.

We waited anxiously, and I mulled over all the possibilities a hundred times before they arrived.

“Think the best Kelsie,” I kept telling myself.

When the doorbell rang, I leapt up to answer, and greeted my future in-laws with a smile and some questions. I’ll never forget how disturbed I was when they refused to reciprocate. They insisted on speaking to my parents alone. While waiting in my room, I finally came to the conclusion that I should in fact prepare myself for the worst rather than the best. I thought, “James is dead. He must have been killed in an auto accident.” My mind raced and my heart beat like crazy until I got my answer.

At last, I heard some soft voices, and the front door opened and closed. It was safe to come out. I was ready to hear the truth. My parents sat me down and delivered the news.

James had called off the wedding.

My first reaction surprised me – I was relieved that he was alive and well. My second reaction surprised me even more – I felt an even deeper relief that we weren’t getting married. I immediately knew that in some strange way this was the hand of God. My third reaction left me absolutely confused and bewildered – I felt no anger whatsoever.

Despite my deep brokenness, I had to move on. I decided to take the job in the wilderness therapy camp and worked there for over a year.

My time as a youth counselor was trying, exhausting, and sometimes very scary; but above all, it was a spiritual training ground. In serving others, I healed. God used that opportunity to prepare me for the years I’d serve Him as a pastor’s wife in the Czech Republic. I had waited 25 years to be “sent out” as a missionary, and He knew that James was not the man for me. I call it God’s “severe mercy.”

He had another man named John Mullen.

And God was right. He has never let me into any situation that I couldn’t handle with His help and wisdom.



Key Verse

But he answered me, “My grace is always more than enough for you,¹ and my power finds its full expression through your weakness.” So I will celebrate my weaknesses, for when I’m weak I sense more deeply the mighty power of Christ living in me.²

2 Corinthians 12:9 TPT

Reflection

Do you feel too inadequate to be used by God? His plans for you always require you to be stretched beyond what you think you can bear. He only asks us to do what He can do through us. One step at a time. One hour at a time. One day at a time.

Be still and let the Father show you the areas of your life where you have limited Him. Could you trust Him more than your abilities? Your education? Money? A relationship? All things are possible with Him! He doesn’t call us according to our natural abilities, status, gender or resources. *He calls us according to our willingness to say “yes.”* Smile and say “yes.” Let the adventure begin.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,
I say “yes!” to You today. “Yes” to Your will for my life. “Yes” to anything and everything You want. Lord, I am often strong-willed and think I know best for my own life. Forgive me for this. I confess that *You* know best and I will be open to Your strange yet holy ways. Show me the open doors in front of me, and tell me which ones to close. Give me Your ears to hear You. Give me Your eyes to see as You see. Give me Your heart to feel what You feel. Heal me. In Jesus’ name,
amen.

¹ Or “My grace is continuously sufficient in you” (to ward it off).

² Or “The power of Christ rests upon me like a tent or tabernacle” (providing me shelter).

DAY 24



From Panic to Praise

By Victor H. (Venezuela)

I was maybe 10 years old when it happened for the first time.

It was the afternoon before Christmas, and I was laid out with nausea, chest pains, and a distressful sensation that I could not quite describe. The last thing I remember from that night is going to sleep and praying to God to take away the dread, begging Him to hear me so that I could play with my new toys in the morning. The morning after, feeling much better, I remember thinking to myself, “God heard me!”

Ten years later, again on Christmas Eve, I was getting ready to play a concert with my orchestra, when all the sudden I was overtaken by a sense of dread; a deep fear that seeped into my bones. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I could not understand what was happening. The origin of this feeling was utterly inexplicable, so I decided to separate myself from the group and try to get a grip. At this point, I was already familiar with God and the power of prayer. So, I decided to ask Him for help. Lord, why was this was happening to me? As my distress grew, I could not help thinking that the whole situation was familiar, that I somehow knew it.

Since the concert happened to be at a church, I decided to go inside while the service was still going on and pray. In my prayers, I begged God to turn His ear toward me, to explain to me what was happening. I needed Him. Then, when I looked up, I saw a sign on the wall that read, “I am here, I hear you.” A felt a shiver go through my body, and recalled experiencing the same sensation 10 years earlier.

Psalms 145:18,19 (TPT): “You draw near to those who call out to you, listening closely, especially when their hearts are true. Every one of your godly lovers receives even more than what they ask for.”

As time went by, the symptoms became more frequent, until I finally decided to seek professional help. That is when I learned I was suffering from panic disorder. At last, I found a name for the thing that had been tormenting me for the last 10 years.

It kept getting worse. The treatment became a grueling process that drained me of all my energy and determination. I could not study or work properly because I lived in constant fear of the next attack.

Eventually, I started to feel myself drifting away from God. As I took more and more medication, I felt that the doctors no longer cared about my situation and that nobody understood the extent of my illness. Could God even hear me?

After months of tears, fears, and depression, I began to think that if I continued struggling this way, it might not be worth living. That was precisely when God spoke to me. In my distress, I heard His voice: “I always listen, I always respond, I am always here. Have you heard Me?”

Romans 8:28 (TPT) somehow came to mind: “So we are convinced that every detail of our lives is continually woven together to fit into God’s perfect plan of bringing good into our lives, for we are his lovers who have been called to fulfill his designed purpose.” I began to feel that God had intended for me to go through all that suffering; to fight till the end, through every aspect of the crisis. He had been teaching me everything I needed to know about panic disorders.

From then on, I quit my medication. Every time an episode occurred, I stopped and thought, “I’ve been through this before, and I’m still here. God is good.” I would say to myself, “This one is less intense than the last” or “This one will have to be short, because I’ve got a lot to do today.” Little by little, the attacks decreased in intensity and frequency. They went from 100 per month, to 50, to 10...and one blessed day, they stopped for good.

But the true revelation came when I spoke to a friend of mine who is a psychologist. She told me she had a group of patients who suffered from panic and anxiety attacks. Since she knew I had gone through and overcome the same, she thought I could attend a session with them and share my experience. Those who suffer from these disorders often feel misunderstood and hopeless, so I accepted.

While at the session, I was able to relate to everything the patients said. Praise be to God, I was able to transmit a message of hope to them, and they finally felt understood by someone who had been in their shoes. When they saw I was doing perfectly fine, they understood that it was possible to overcome their illness. They knew that there was no symptom or situation they could tell me about that I had not experienced myself. I saw the relief in their faces. Things went so well, we decided to do it again. With each subsequent session, I better understood that God had been hearing my prayers all along. He had been *preparing me to help others*.

Years later, I discovered that my psychologist friend and the patients from her group had all become Christians! Her prescription slips now contain the Word of God.

Now, no matter how hard things get, I always try to think about what God’s intent might be. This does not mean avoiding problems, but accepting His just and good will regardless of circumstance.

These experiences have transformed my identity and molded my character in Jesus Christ.



Key Verse

We all experience¹ times of testing,² which is normal for every human being. But God will be faithful to you. He will screen and filter the severity, nature, and timing of every test or trial you face³ so that you can bear it. And each test is an opportunity to trust him more, for along with every trial God has provided for you a way of escape⁴ that will bring you out of it victoriously.⁵

I Corinthians 10:13 TPT

Reflection

Meditate on the Key Verse. Think about your worst fears or the feelings of panic and anxiety. Then ask yourself, “What is the worst thing that can happen?” Next, invite God into the scenario. How would He help you? Know that He is always with you, even in the midst of the most severe storm. Close your eyes and sit with Jesus in a boat surrounded by waves and lightening. Then, breathe deep and watch Him calm the storm.

Furthermore, remember that you, as a child of God, have the authority to speak to that storm yourself. In Christ, you will always be victorious, no matter how great the danger. This is clearly stated at the end of the Key Verse. Memorize the verse so you can hold onto this beautiful promise.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, when fear and panic invade my mind and spirit, give me the grace to fix my eyes on You. In difficult moments, help me to hear Your voice and feel your embrace. You will work all of this out, not only for my good, but so that I can be a blessing to other people! May the fear of the Lord⁶ (reverence for Your holiness and awe of who You are) dominate my mind and heart. In Jesus’ name, amen.

¹ Or “which has fastened onto you.”

² Or “temptation.”

³ That is, God’s faithfulness and grace will limit the severity of every test and prevent you from being tested beyond your ability to cope. Unlimited grace is available for every believer who faces hardship, temptations, and seasons of difficulty.

⁴ Or “an exodus.” Trust in God’s faithfulness is the way of escape that empowers us to overcome every difficulty we may experience. We are not told that every difficulty will be removed from our lives, but that God’s grace provides an exit path.

⁵ Or “God bears up under you to take you out of danger” (Gr. *hupophero*), or “God provides a way of escape so that you may be empowered to endure it.” God’s faithfulness gives us both a way of escape and the power to endure.

⁶ See Proverbs 14:26, Proverbs 19:23, and Psalms 112:1.

DAY 25



The Stolen Son

By Pavla Chaloupková (Czech Republic)

I sat waiting at a fountain in the center of a quaint Austrian town called Horn. My husband and son were scheduled to pick me up so we could leave for our holiday in Italy. It was almost 6 pm and they were late. I remember, because the church bells rang six times. “Where are they?” I wondered.

I started to panic and ran as fast as I could (I was relying on crutches due to a prosthetic leg) to the car park. Nobody was there. No car! No husband! No son!

Memories were racing through my anxious mind. Three years before, my husband to-be had announced that his whole family was intending to emigrate to Australia. “We will take you along,” he assured me. I wanted to believe the best, but deep down I felt like my dreams of marriage and family were falling apart.

I exclaimed that I couldn’t “just leave my parents and grandma behind, never to see them again! After all they’ve sacrificed for me? Besides that, I’m all they have! Who else will look after them in their old age?” My only thoughts were “time to get out of this relationship” and “at least you are not pregnant.”

Surprisingly, my husband to-be presented another plan. “I will stay with you” he promised. “We will have a baby, and we won’t go anywhere.” Happily, everything went according to that plan – the pregnancy, the wedding, graduation, a C-section, and then our beautiful son. Two years later, I was diagnosed with leukemia and had to have my leg amputated.

No long afterwards, my husband and I received a gift from his parents – a vacation to Italy. I was a bit scared. They had wanted to emigrate three years earlier, and now this holiday gift? My husband kept reassuring me, “No, no emigration. Nothing like that.” And now I was sitting

here at this fountain, alone. Before my surgery, I had started reading the Bible. I decided to pray. “God, bring my son back!”

People from the embassy took me home to Czechoslovakia the next day, and I started to look for my son. I searched everywhere, in every way I could (the Austrian consulate, letters, TV, radio, and even newspapers).

After an entire year of investigation and waiting for a court hearing, I received a letter stating that a court order could not be delivered to my husband because he had fled to the USA with my son. I felt helpless. All I could do was pray for my son to have a mother and be well.

But life went on. I wanted a family and kids, so I found a new partner, got married, and we had a daughter. In 1989, communism fell in Czechoslovakia. We decided to go to church for the first time, and received our first Holy Communion. Everything was so wonderful because the times were changing, and we were all hopeful.

Later, one quiet January evening, I was sitting alone by a Christmas tree and sensed the invisible presence of someone else. And then I heard this:

“All of these things that happened to you are an answer to the prayer you prayed before your surgery – ‘God, if you exist, change my fate.’ I warned you against that relationship, but you didn’t listen. Divorce would have been tough. You would have fought over your son. My solution was painful, but quick, and I have since made up for it all. I have given you a husband, a daughter for your son (they share the same birthday), caring parents, two stepchildren, and your husband’s ex-wife as a sister.”

I realized that God knew about all my pain and problems and had been with me all along! He pulled me out of my unhealthy marriage and restored me! I forgave my first husband and his parents, who stood behind the emigration, and I blessed them in the name of Jesus Christ.

Of course, I continued to wonder about my son and where he was. If only I could just magically see how he was doing! Later, I received a message: “We know where your husband, son, and family are!” I immediately rushed over to the source of this information, a lady whose cousin had just visited the Czech Republic for the first time after twenty years. They were talking about life in the US and whether there were any fellow Czechs over there. It turned out they knew my son.

Yes. He was alive and well. A ten-year-old who speaks English better than anyone else in the family. While I had not done anything to find him, I was the first person to learn about him and get his address! I wondered, “God, what should I do? Should I disturb his life and everything he knows and loves?” God answered, “Don’t do anything. When the time is right, you two will meet. Just wait!”

So, I waited. One, two, three years. From time to time, I got some information through the family, even a family video, but with barely any shots of my son. Then I received a letter that said, “Your son is returning from Iraq and will study medicine in the Navy.” Then again, silence.

Finally, on October 19, 2017, I received a phone call. “Your son from America is looking for you.”

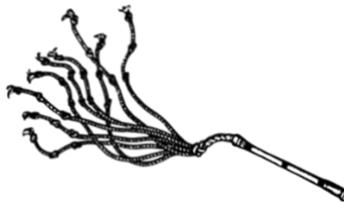
It was happening! God was faithful in His promises. I experienced pure joy when I saw my son for the first time in 34 years on a Skype call. He was 3 when I lost him, and was now 37. What a transformation!

And I have a beautiful daughter-in-law and a 3-year-old granddaughter. Yes, God, this is the right timing. My son is not an abandoned kid anymore, but a father with a daughter who is the same age as he was when he and my ex-husband emigrated.

After a marathon of Skype calls, paperwork, and fundraising (with the help of the church and others), I had enough money to fly to meet him in the summer of 2018.

We spent one month together, getting to know each other and then saying goodbye again. We are far apart, but we call and see each other regularly.

Thanks be to God, we found each other. I shall be eternally grateful.



Key Verse

*Make God the utmost delight and pleasure of your life,¹
and he will provide for you what you desire the most.*

*Give God the right to direct your life,²
and as you trust him along the way
you'll find he pulled it off perfectly!*

Psalms 37:4,5 TPT

Reflection

Spend some time meditating on Pavla's story, especially the last sentence. How can a woman have nothing but gratitude for a life of regret and loss? This is the miracle of God's love, and the power of His forgiveness! Meditate on God's perfect timing in your life.

Think about who you need to forgive, as well as who needs to forgive you. Do you need to forgive yourself? Make a list, bring it to the cross in prayer, then destroy the list. You may think that no one would ask you to do that if they knew what you have been through. But we are capable of forgiving others and ourselves when we realize how much God has forgiven us! We don't forgive because someone deserves it, or because they said they were sorry. We do it for ourselves, so we can be free and healthy, and for our Lord, who Himself forgave us.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I admit this burden of unforgiveness (or bitterness, anger, hatred, self-hatred, etc.) to You. I proclaim that this burden is now Yours. It was never mine to carry. I deliver those who have hurt me into Your hands, and I choose not to take revenge in thoughts, words, or actions. Thank You, Lord, that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, I am free to forgive others! I can bless my enemies! I choose to be *free* from all illness stemming from unforgiveness. I trust Your mysterious but perfect timing. Fill my life with gratitude, no matter what. In Jesus' name, amen.

¹ The word *delight* means "to be soft or tender."

² The Hebrew uses the word *commit*, which means "to roll over your burdens on the Lord."

DAY 26



The Greatest Label to Living By

By Andy F. (Canada/USA)

In 1994 I turned 27 and was planning to take a class at a large secular university in preparation for further studies. Although excited by the prospect, I was apprehensive too. In that setting, might I act contrary to the values I professed? And if so, with what consequences? Would I succumb to influences leading me away from God? I felt like a hiker crossing a slope of loose gravel above a precipice. My growing fear of making a wrong move and sliding towards the edge prompted me to seek out a Christian counselor for professional help. I remember clearly how, after that initial phone call, I was sobbing and said repeatedly aloud, “Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy!”

Considering my spiritual condition at the time, it wasn’t a sure thing that I would turn to God for help in a crisis. Throughout my life I had attended church regularly and read the Bible, but I had little genuine love for my Creator. I was persuaded that the tenets of Christianity were true, but such a faith left me feeling intellectually trapped and my heart cold.

For most of the next ten months I met with a counselor every week. For the first time, I fully unburdened myself to another person, sharing honestly about the hurts, disappointments, frustrations, and loneliness that I had experienced. As a child I was much closer to my mother than my emotionally-distant father or my brothers, all of whom were much older. Early on in school I became aware that I didn’t fit in, especially with the other boys. I wasn’t athletic and my classmates often called me *the brain* and *the professor*.

By the age of thirteen I was far enough ahead academically that I skipped a grade. Subconsciously, I compared my body to those of older male classmates and viewed myself as physically deficient. I got along more easily with girls than boys. In my adolescence, I got tagged with labels like *fag* and *effeminate*. I deeply longed to be one of the guys, but that was something I didn’t allow myself to admit because it seemed like such an impossible dream.

In college and afterwards, my social circles gradually broadened. Several times I was interested in dating a woman, but none of them wanted to be more than just friends. With males, I tended to invest a lot of energy into one friendship when I met someone who accepted me. On occasion, I even imagined what life with him would be like if I were a woman and we were a

couple. I knew that I was attracted physically to men, not women, but never confided that to anyone. And any exposure to pornography or sexually suggestive scenes, whether on screen or in writing, made a strong imprint on my mind and left me both feeling guilty and craving more.

My counselor provided a safe space where I could review my past and explore current issues. God was clearly at work to present truth that I needed to consider, and not only through the counseling sessions. Reading the book *Finding God* proved especially significant. The author, Christian psychologist Larry Crabb, describes how a human life can be built on a foundation of either doubting or believing that God is good. I recognized that my life rested more on the former. That was shocking, since I thought of myself as a Christian!

At first I wondered how specifically I had doubted God's goodness, so I asked God to show me, and very soon He did. I was convinced that God had made a mistake in creating me male. In fact, I even resented it! It appeared that he had set me up for continuous failure, because others didn't take me seriously as a man. Perceiving myself as inadequate, I believed that I could have been quite successful in life as a female.

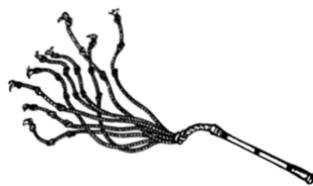
God hadn't given me this insight to condemn me. He was inviting me to move towards Him instead of keeping Him at a distance. Would I confess my doubting His goodness as sin? It was essentially the same as what had motivated Eve to disobey God in the Garden of Eden. Would I affirm that God had done right by creating me as a male and thank him?

That day I responded with a tearful, heartfelt "YES!" It was one of several powerful moments during that year. I was living the refrain of Psalm 107 (TPT): "Then we cried out, 'Lord, help us! Rescue us!' And he did!" It doesn't matter how we get into trouble, whether from factors beyond our control or our own rebellion against God. All the same, He's willing to rescue us.

To my surprise, after that I began to develop affection for God, reflecting His love and care for me. I didn't sense that I had arrived at some destination, but rather that I had changed course, and was looking forward to wherever that would lead me. Six years later I met and married an amazing woman, and God has given us two wonderful kids. The issues that I've shared here have not disappeared, but they remind me of my ongoing need for God and meaningful, transparent friendships with other Jesus-followers, in my case especially men.

I've been learning to base my worth a different label, one that elevates rather than belittles. It's spelled out in 1 John 3:1 (TPT, also below) – "Look with wonder at the depth of the Father's marvelous love that he has lavished on us! He has called us and made us his very own beloved children." That identity, *God's beloved child*, does not depend on any life circumstance, personal trait, sexual orientation, anyone's opinion of us or anything we do. It's rooted in who God is and the kind of relationship He wants with us.

And the more fully we let that relationship with our heavenly Father define us, the freer we are to be all that He intends us to be.



Key Verse

Look with wonder at the depth of the Father's marvelous love that he has lavished on us! He has called us and made us his very own beloved children. The reason the world doesn't recognize who we are is that they didn't recognize him.¹

I John 1:3 TPT

Reflection

Take a moment to write down all the labels you may have adopted. This may not be so easy, as certain aspects of your identity may be second nature to you, especially if they arise from family dynamics in early childhood. Perhaps you are the caretaker, the “black sheep” of the family, the sickly one, life of the party, the tough guy, the peacemaker? What about your nationality? Your gender? The list could go on and on. When we accept Christ as our Savior, our identity is transformed as we are adopted into our heavenly Father's household of faith.

Meditate on the Bible verse and let your identity as a son or daughter of God take root. Think of nothing else for a moment. What does this change for you? Let your Father's love protect and keep you in this safe place of belonging and acceptance. Let all false labels fall away. Do you doubt God's goodness, or do you believe He is good?

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for being so good! Reveal to me right now any labels I have adopted that are not in keeping with Your perfect plan for my life. Set me free, Lord, to be who You created me to be. In the name of Jesus, I reject any false identity placed on me by others or myself. Thank You that I am a beloved son or daughter. I want to develop a deeper, childlike affection for You. In Jesus' name, amen.

¹ That is, Jesus, God incarnated in human form.

DAY 27



To Hell and Back

By George K. (Czech Republic)

Was there someone in my room? I turned and looked behind me. The room was empty, but I could feel some presence there.

It was the middle of the night, in the middle of the week. I was high on cocaine, again, and felt like I was on the top of the world. “Nothing can beat this,” I thought to myself. Then a question came to mind – “Why not go one step further and die?” The idea sounded so intriguing. I hadn’t tried that yet. I didn’t have anything to lose. There’s nothing after this life anyway, right?

The next day I thought about it some more. What (or who) made me think like that? The more I pondered it, the more I believed I should do it. I thought I found what I had been looking for. I thought, “I am the master of my own destiny in this pointless world. I will live my meaningless life to its fullest with cocaine. After all, I have everything under control, I am the ‘King,’ and the others are losers.” The trajectory was set. Nothing could stop me.

There was, however, one thing I didn’t count on: my conscience. I would sometimes ask myself, “What if I am wrong, and death is *not* end?” I could not get rid of that notion. It kept bothering me and spoiling the joy of my independence! It was ruining my plan to enjoy life now, while young with drugs, and later fall into eternal oblivion. I suspected that God existed, even as a child in a very atheistic environment. And in case He did, I thought I was “good enough” not to be sent to hell. In reality though, I was failing to keep my moral standards.

A few months later, I returned home from work and sat at my table; only this time, the table was piled high with crack – more than I had ever seen before. Behind the table were Debi, my beautiful girlfriend and partner in getting drugs, my friend Mark, and another man I didn’t know. They were waiting for me. My conscience started to bother me again for a moment. Oh no! I thought, “I *am* strong, and not afraid of fairy tales about God and judgment.” I decided that I would put my conscience to sleep once and for all. Loudly and confidently I proclaimed,

“There is no God! I will no longer be bothered by this stupid idea that spoils my joy. And I mean it.”

Debi’s face was instantly filled with genuine fear. Mark nodded to my statement. I felt a very strange peace and told myself, “Now I have sorted my life out.” We smoked the crack. It was so potent that I nearly passed out. I had my best high ever. Period.

That night, God intervened. Through intuition, He asked me “George, did you really mean it? Do you really want to say ‘no’ to me? Do you really want to say ‘no’ to all the beauty I created? The beauty you used to appreciate?” I saw in my mind gorgeous mountains, blue skies, endless forests, oceans, rivers, stars, and so on.

At that moment, God withdrew His presence from me. I was instantly overwhelmed with unspeakable terror and guilt. I felt only total darkness and eternal emptiness. I thought that I was literally in hell. It seemed like an eternity.

Then light penetrated the dark room. Dawn! Throughout the horror of the night, I was afraid that I would never see another morning. I was shaking like a leaf. God finally had my attention.

Debi came out of her room. I told her, “Debi, I take back what I said last night. God is real! He showed Himself to me!” He had broken down the lies I believed about Him. That was my turning point.

A chain of divinely orchestrated events ensued, which included meeting the right people. My company had just hired a new employee, Frank, who had served as an evangelical pastor for over 20 years. Another active pastor, Cliff, made extra income at our dealership by promoting sales. They both witnessed to me about God and their faith, as did my other colleagues who were true believers. All this testified to the fact that God is real. Most importantly, God spoke to me through a study Bible that was given to me. I read it whenever I could. After more than three months, the Holy Spirit finally opened my eyes during a reading of John’s Gospel. I finally believed.

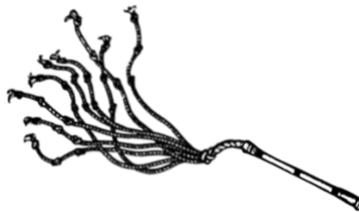
“It is true!” I cried. I was overwhelmed by the revelation. The Bible is not wishful thinking. Jesus is the Truth; the eternal Son of God who took on human nature while never losing His divine nature. I realized that Jesus lived His perfect, holy life for me, and took the punishment for all my sins. Only God could save me. The cornerstone which I had rejected turned out to be the foundation of my new life. I could finally stand in front of the Father and not be crushed. I had received Him and would now live forever. I cried for joy, knowing finally that life has meaning.

The next morning, I came to my boss’ office, and instead of greeting him, I asked, “Frank, can you baptize me?” I had grown up in communist Czechoslovakia and had always dreamed of moving to the USA to explore my own freedom and rebellion. The rebellion had turned out to be real, and the freedom only illusory. But the door to real freedom had been cracked open through faith in the Lord.

God had saved me physically, and most importantly, spiritually. But I still had a wild ride ahead. Little did I know that the journey of sanctification would be anything but easy. The real spiritual battle began after I realized that not everyone would be converted after hearing my testimony. For the first 3 months, He supernaturally protected me against the flesh, the world, and the Devil. Many tribulations followed, including a night at the police station, confinement in a mental institution, depression, backsliding to drugs, and a vicious circle of repentance followed by failure.

But God is faithful, even when we are not. He sent me a Christian woman, Augustina, from Nigeria. She became my wife and changed the trajectory of my life. It was through her example, love, and prayers that I finally found myself free and growing spiritually. It was because of her that I found a home in Prague Christian Fellowship (PCF, the first church I really plugged into). Augustina went to be with her Maker during the birth of our second child, but that is another miraculous story.

By the grace of God and enormous help from the church, I continue to be free and grow spiritually. I am active in church leadership and teach my own children, as well as the other kids at PCF, to know God personally. God is real and He's our only hope!



Key Verse

The only way people come to me is by the Father who sent me—he pulls¹ on their hearts to embrace me. And those who are drawn to me, I will certainly raise them up in the last day.

John 6:44 TPT

Reflection

Do you have a close friend or loved one in the throes of addiction? If so, you know how hard it can be to sustain love. Or maybe you are the one struggling with addiction? Only a deep connection with God can begin to heal your mind, body, and soul. Sit in His presence and consider how good He is. Imagine His total absence, as George experienced in the story.

¹ The Greek word is “drag” or “pull by force.” The name Moses means “pulled” (from the Nile). The Aramaic is “ransom” or “save.”

Remember that we will spend eternity *with Him* or *separated from Him* depending on where we put our faith.

Meditate on the Key Verse. Is the Father pulling on you to embrace Him? Think of those you have been praying for and ask God to pull their hearts towards Him. Don't give up. Your prayers for yourself and others will make a difference for all eternity.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I lift up (name) to You and ask You to pull them into Your embrace. May Your love and freedom set them free from addiction! Break any generational curses. You are the only hope. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 28



From Lost to Found

By Alex A. (USA)

This is a story for all the parents going through hell on earth watching their children struggle.

I was prayed for long before I could ever appreciate it. I can't say that my parents were perfect, but my mom fought hard to keep Jesus in my life. Her struggle culminated in my baptism when I was 13 years old. She cherishes the photo, even though the beginnings of a rebellious life were on full display – I had half my head shaved in a defiant gesture only an early adolescent could come up with.

Three years later, I was smoking pot every day before getting on the school bus, again before my first class, and again when I got home. I tried to commit suicide, but it didn't work. I woke up with a pumped stomach and handcuffed to a hospital bed next to my crying parents. Counseling and drug rehab followed, and despite my continued recklessness, I still somehow managed to pass high school.

At 18, I was standing on the yellow footprints at Marine Corps boot camp. It was my decision. I had no interest in going to college, and I was thankfully aware enough to realize that I somehow had to counteract my inner impulses, because I wasn't going to survive living the life of indulgence that I so desperately wanted.

After surviving the Marines, I got married and my parents got divorced. Then my dad got remarried and I got divorced. And all of this by the age of 23! With the generous post-military stipend from the government, I had plenty of gold to make new idols. No more wife, no more Marine Corps, no more restraints on my own inner creature. I was unleashed.

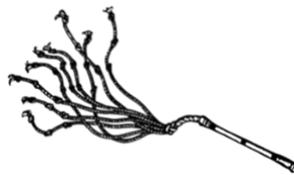
I started college and soon found a tribe of like-minded self-worshippers. We became chemical connoisseurs and a millennial homage to the 1960's "psychonauts." After trying every possible combination of LSD, mushrooms, and ecstasy, we decided to branch out into something a little more avant-garde: trying the newest "research chemicals." These were super-potent, untested (and untestable), lab-made drugs. We had no idea what was in them, are lucky to still be alive.

After graduating college, I used my degree in psychology to convince a handful of doctors to prescribe me whatever I wanted. Adderall to go up, Xanax to go down. For over a year, I drove myself into the ground...until I crashed. Again, I woke up in a hospital bed next to my crying mother. But before I could go on to kill myself or someone else, God helped me stop using drugs.

The next three years were the hardest in my life. I needed an idol big enough to fill the horrible, haunting hole in my heart. Then, at the height of my despair, God introduced me to my wife. How we met on the Prague metro is a cute story, but we usually leave out the soul-wrenching misery that I was wading through.

She re-introduced me to Jesus. I was initially skeptical, but I soon fell in love with Him. Although I still have an internal graveyard full of broken idols, He is giving me the strength and the tools to continue tearing them down. It's difficult and exhausting, and there is always a temptation to piece together new ones among the rubble. But things get a little easier every day as I learn more and more about His love for me. His grace has given me a feeling of worth that I have never felt before. And for the first time in my life, I can say that I am genuinely hopeful about what the future will bring.

There are still times when I feel like my old self – alone, beaten, empty, and hopeless. But I know that I am clean by the blood of Jesus. The void in my heart is filled by His indescribable love and acceptance. He answers our prayers and keeps His promises.



Key Verse

You are to love the Lord Yahweh, your God, with every passion of your heart, with all the energy of your being, with every thought that is within you, and with all your strength. This is the great and supreme commandment.

Mark 12:30 TPT

Reflection

Meditate on the above verse. Remember a time when you fell in love and think about how your priorities changed. The power of love shows us how we can combat our innate defiance. When we love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, there is simply no room left for rebellion and sin. We yield to those whom we love.

Think about how to love well – the Lord, your family, your wayward child, your colleagues, and even strangers you encounter each day. But first, we must receive His love. We cannot give what we have not received. Breathe deep, open your hands to receive what only He can give, and accept it by faith. Don't focus on the *feeling* of love. Focus on His *demonstration* of love for you in His one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

My heart often grows cold and unfeeling, but I give You permission to ignite passionate love in my heart right now. I love You, Lord, with all my strength. I confess that only Your love will allow me to love others well. I lift up to You my family, especially those who live under the same roof with me, and place them in Your hands. Drive rebellion and sin away of us. Pour out Your gifts of repentance and faith today. We need You so much, Father! In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 29



Either Fear or Faith

By John Mullen

Pastor of Prague Christian Fellowship (USA/Czech Republic)

I had already waited an hour. Socialized medicine has its advantages and disadvantages. Having to wait is normally considered a disadvantage. But not this day. Waiting ended up saving me a lot of time and effort.

In between sips of ionized water (for the CT scan), I was dealing with my boredom by playing around on my phone. A new message! How exciting. My neurologist finally got back from her four-week holiday and was writing about the results of the last MRI scan of my spine. It was short and succinct: “Lumbar spine and discus are the same, but there are changes in the bones of the spine described below – please contact your GP for a screening examination and a urological check.” The next part was in Czech. But there were suspicious words like “myelom, melanom, ca prostaty,” which all indicated a suspicion of cancer. A CT scan from my chest to my small pelvis was recommended.

I probably would have panicked were it not for the task in front of me – to modify my current CT scan so I wouldn’t have to do it twice. A call to the prescribing doctor was all it took. The nurse brought me an extra liter of ionized water and told me to DRINK IT (socialized medicine is sometimes very direct). It takes some time to put away two liters of water. Time to think. Do I have cancer?

For a month my jaw bone had been hurting. The dentist couldn’t find the cause. It was odd. Now I was here in the CT clinic, because a few weeks earlier I’d had a sonogram and the doctor discovered a 3.5 cm cyst in my pancreas. Needless to say, we had already been praying for healing. However, now I was faced with the real possibility that I was approaching a battle with cancer. In my spirit, I knew fear was the wrong direction. I needed to look up.

Early the next morning, I was at my doctor’s office. My wife and daughter were in the car downstairs. We were on our way to the annual pastors’ camp of our Czech denomination. But I needed to hear from my doctor first, so we would have to be a little late to the camp. I needed to know what the MRI showed.

My doctor explained that a comparison of MRIs indicated I had some kind of blood cancer. She said, “John, it’s not of question of *whether* you have cancer, it is a question of *where*.” I expected an emotional shock. Somehow, I knew I *needed* time with Lord at that moment. I tried

to politely explain this to my doctor, but it was obviously not registering. Then, she *upped the ante*. She explained that she'd be on vacation the following week, so if I did not start the test now, then the tests for cancer would have to wait until after she returned. I smiled and said, "OK, no problem." I'm not sure who was more surprised – my doctor (by my lack of fear), or me (by the peace that I was walking in)!

Jesus said, "I leave the gift of peace with you – my peace. Not the kind of fragile peace given by the world, but my perfect peace. Don't yield to fear or be troubled in your hearts [...]" (John 14:27 TPT).

At the camp several friends offered to pray for my back. Each time, they spontaneously ended up praying for my whole body. One Czech elder came up to me during a ministry time and said something like, "There is a saying in Czech that you can't teach old dogs new tricks, but I feel like the Lord is telling me that is not true for you. It is like I see a starting line, and you are about to run a new race."

Later in the week, the main speaker stood three pastors up and spoke "prophetic words"¹ over them. I was one of the three. On the last night, he announced that he wanted to pray for people with cancers, and explained that the Lord had often used him to pray for healing of people with blood cancers. The next day, my wife and daughter went home due to a prior commitment, but I stayed and received prayer ministry.

Since then, I have undergone lots of blood tests, another CT scan, a colonoscopy, endoscopy, and bronchoscopy (all three while awake – socialized medicine can be no fun!), a biopsy via the bronchial tubes, and finally, a video-assisted biopsy via thoracoscopic surgery (VATS) to remove a 5.3 x 3.2 cm section of my lung. The last surgery left me in ICU for four days. It has been a long haul.

Looking back, I spent six months enduring one test after another to satisfy the doctors' suspicions. Yet, I had peace almost the entire time. It was not logical. My wife had supernatural peace also. This reaction to a cancer threat was emotionally upside-down. But we live in the upside-down Kingdom, and are called to walk by faith. James says, "and the prayer of faith will heal the sick" (James 5:15 TPT). Maybe in context this means "prayers offered from a lifestyle of faith" will heal the sick. I chose not to walk in fear. That requires a walk of faith.

Guess what? The cyst in my pancreas disappeared. My lung biopsies were benign. God answered our prayers.

Everyone has trials. Everyone faces the choice to either walk in fear or walk in faith. It happens again and again. What will you choose today? What will you choose tomorrow?



¹ Prophecy is a spiritual gift mentioned in the New Testament. Verses about this gift include 1 Peter 1:21 and 1 Corinthians 14:1, 29-33, 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, and 1 John 4:1-3.

Key Verse

*I leave the gift of peace with you—my peace. Not the kind of fragile peace given by the world, but my perfect peace. Don't yield to fear or be troubled in your hearts—instead, be courageous!*²

John 14:27 TPT

Reflection

When life feels out of control (and it will at times), what is your common response? Peace or fear? Think back to a recent incident.

Now, read the Key Verse. When Jesus left the earth, He knew first-hand how hard life is here, and how hard it would be for His disciples. Consider His pronouncement, “I leave the gift of peace with you – my peace.” This is one of most perfect, thoughtful, comforting, and necessary gifts of all time. He gave it, and it was His to give. Think of His peace in the boat during the storm. That peace will always be here for us. But that peace is only experienced when we relinquish control and surrender to Jesus. Will you surrender and receive His gift?

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I say “yes” to Your peace and “no” to fear. I choose not to yield to fear in situations when I feel threatened or powerless. Lord, when I encounter trials, tests, and unexpected circumstances, bring that peace to me. Thank You for always bestowing it freely. In Jesus’ name, amen.

² These are the same words Moses gave before he died, and the words God spoke to Joshua as he entered into his life’s plan of taking the Promised Land for Israel. See Deuteronomy 31:8, Joshua 1:8-9 and 10-25. God has not given us a spirit of cowardly fear. See also 2 Timothy 1:7.

DAY 30



The Long Journey Together

By Michaela (Czech Republic)

Today, I bless my ex-husband, his wife, and their kids. This, however, has not always been the case. For a long time, I could not forgive (let alone bless) my ex-husband. But the amazing and undeserved love and grace of God changed that.

The toughest part of my life journey started the day I was left alone with my three small kids.

I never imagined that my husband and I would end up getting divorced. We had been through so much during our seventeen years together. And I loved him. If only he hadn't been a drinker, all would have been almost perfect. But he was.

Suffering from depression since childhood, he even considered taking his own life at one point. Unfortunately, he didn't want to get help, and especially not from God. He wanted to forget his pain and trade it for a few fleeting moments of drunken joy. Although I prayed for him daily, I realized that it was not in my hands to change him.

One day, he left me, saying that I would be happier without him (as an alcoholic). And that he would be happier with his new girlfriend. He told the kids that nothing would change. But of course, everything changed.

The kids cried. They didn't want daddy to move out. We prayed together and I asked God to save our marriage if it was His will. But I had to understand that God gives all of us a free will and honours our choices.

It was hard.

I had to accept that my marriage was over. I owed rent money (I thought he had been paying, but it turned out he hadn't). I lost the car (he left with it). I had no money. I had no flat (when you don't pay rent, you lose your flat, right?). I now had to feed my kids from my income alone.

Despite all this, I could feel God's protective embrace. I knew deep inside that He would not give me more than I could handle alone.

But to believe that He uses all things for my good was just beyond me. *How?* There were even times I doubted that God was really good. My kids were heartbroken. They missed their dad, and didn't like his new "woman." Feeling betrayed and disappointed, they had no motivation to go to school. They loved him so much! Was there any help for them?

The one thing I never lost was hope. Somehow, I felt that the Lord had never left me. He had been graciously and patiently encouraging me with His perfect peace and love – even in the form of miracles!

With the help of both friends and complete strangers, I paid off the rent. We moved into a small flat that was just perfect for us. It was the only flat available for rent at the time, and as such was quite barren. But I turned it into a home for my kids and me. The renovation was a miracle in itself, and I enjoyed being creative. The labourers were like angels. They did everything exactly the way I had imagined, even without being told, and for a very favourable rate. I also found good family therapy. It was grace upon grace upon grace. If only I had learned to appreciate it then, maybe things would have been different. I still had such inner pain and fear from all the years of being in constant "survival mode." Joy was far from me, and I was not able to imagine that I could forgive.

But all that time, God had been working on my heart, moulding and renewing the pieces that had been broken. He had to heal me from many fears, as well as the fierce independence I had developed after years of being an alcoholic's wife, and then a single mother.

Looking back today, I can finally see His grace and goodness! He saw us through all those years with His wisdom. All my kids are adults now. They have their partners and are doing well. Not only did we survive, but we have been very blessed.

I have passed through a great transformation. I had to change my relationship with God completely. I had to learn to recognize evil, and to respond with forgiveness instead of revenge. I had to learn to stand strong and not allow abuse. I finally forgave. I have even learned how to "love [my] enemy, bless the one who curses [me], do something wonderful for the one who hates [me], and respond to the very ones who persecute [me] by praying for them."¹

Today, I know how sweet it is to depend on Him. He can clearly see and direct my path even when I am lost in a haze. When I cannot see ahead and do not know my next step, He carries me. He is my radar, my control tower. Through our long journey together, He has taught me to wait, listen, and surrender. Now I know what I was waiting for and why.

¹ Matthew 5:44 TPT



Key Verse

So we are convinced that every detail of our lives is continually woven together to fit into God's perfect plan of bringing good into our lives, for we are his lovers who have been called to fulfill his designed purpose.

Romans 8:28 TPT

Reflection

Make a list of some of the times you have been wronged. Now write down how you responded. What defensive mechanisms did you use? Revenge? Slander? Bitterness? Violence? Maybe forgiveness? Perhaps God even gave you the grace to *bless* the offenders in some way?

Read and meditate on the Key Verse. Next, take your list from the above step, and write "forgiven" next to each offense as you give it to God. Release any lingering hurt to Him. Then, ask Him how you can bless the offenders. All things are possible... *with God*.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I don't know how to forgive and bless my enemies. I need Your help now. I don't want to live another day with unforgiveness, bitterness, or fantasies of revenge. I release these offenses into Your sovereign hands, knowing that I can trust You with my hurt and my heart. Vindicate me, Lord, for I cannot do it myself. Show me the boundaries that I should maintain with others, and fill me with Your Holy Spirit that I may have discernment in daily matters. Most of all, thank You for forgiving *me* from all the ways I've wronged others and sinned against You. Thank You that you are faithful to forgive me when I confess my sins.² In Jesus' name, amen.

² 1 John 1:9. Confession of sin is the way to find restoration and unbroken fellowship with God. It cleanses the conscience and removes every obstacle from communion with Christ. Confession does not gain God's acceptance, for that was won for us forever by the sacrifice of Christ. It is on the basis of being his dearly loved children that we restore intimacy with God through our tenderhearted confession before him. God will always be faithful to restore our first-love passion for him. There is no need to confess the same sins over and over, for that is ignoring the blood of Jesus that cleanses us. All of our sins were paid for on the cross and we can do nothing to remove them, but confession acknowledges God's faithfulness to restore our intimacy with him. Our Father and our forgiving Redeemer, fill the heavens with grace toward every believer, even when they sin.

DAY 31



Winter Solstice and I'm Home

By Jean T. (Singapore)

*Grandma asked if she was dreaming.
She had water in her eyes that reminded me of the water in my eyes.
Her hair had grown whiter.
There were more spots on her face.
We ate together.
She asked constantly if I had to leave again, and when I shook my head,
She clapped and hoorayed.
My heart ached at the thought of not bringing my baby into her arms.
I cried the moment I shut my door.
I felt distant from all the things that I used to hold so dear.*

For me, “home” always meant my grandma, as I grew up with her. Watching her memory fade from dementia was hard, just as it had been with my grandfather 10 years prior. But going home this time was different. After the abortion, I went home for the first time in a while. It felt like the beginning of my worst nightmare.

I did not want to have an abortion because I feared the operation itself. “The pain I’d feel afterwards will be much greater than that of raising a child alone,” I thought. My parents and brother were not supportive emotionally. My father had told me earlier that my relatives would do the same (i.e. not love the child). With no money and no shelter for my unborn son, I resigned to separate from him. I had gotten to know him so closely, but not closely enough.

I never thought healing would be possible. How can God forgive a murderer? How can I forgive myself? How can I ever reconcile with my parents? I felt betrayed. I was angry. I no longer knew how to live in a capitalistic society. Truth and morality were hardly anywhere to be seen. People had forgotten God.

I also kept struggling with pains in my body. For years I had lower abdominal pains after training, and migraine attacks every day – a physical trace of the trauma from my abortion. Accepting that my body had changed forever was excruciating. It could no longer do the things it used to do, and my self-esteem got lower and lower. “God must be punishing me,” I thought.

My father had forbidden me to speak of it to anyone, so I prayed every moment I could. God gave me a voice (I was mute for most of my early childhood), and I began to use it to sing at my workplace after everyone had left. Even as an actress, singing was new to me. I was so scared of it. But it became a prayer whereby the Holy Spirit would guide me, comfort me, and answer my questions. One day on my way to work, He showed me a poster advertising an “open stage” at a performance art festival nearby. I signed up as a singer. After the event, an audience member told me she cried during my performance and sensed a godly presence.

God made use of the festival to plant a seed of hope in me. I befriended artists with pure intentions – not for fame or commodification of art. Over time, God kept affirming me in my development as a singer, and I formed a vocal performance group with two women I later learned were sisters in Christ.

Things did not get easier, but they certainly got better with Him. One day in my quiet time with God, a simple truth hit me: Jesus came to redeem our sins. By holding on to my own guilt and shame and not forgiving myself, *I was not believing in the power of the Gospel!*

Through His grace and salvation, I eventually learned to forgive myself and everyone around me. One night, there was again a misunderstanding at home. It was unbearable. Shaking, I prayed outside my parents’ room. I asked God to give me words to say what was needed. I entered their room and He led the way. I told my parents I forgave them. I told them that I wanted our relationship to improve. I just needed time and space to heal. It was a big step in reconciling our broken relationship. God later gave me a vision of my father’s salvation and I am so thankful for that!

Eventually I moved out again, this time abroad. One day at a dance workshop there, I was surprised to meet a woman named Kuan. who had just moved to my country. Ironically, we had exchanged homes. One day, she shared the story of her failed abortion, and I shared mine in return. She had felt that she could not love her child like other mothers do. I shared how I had wanted to love mine but couldn’t. Straight away, we began working together to weave our stories into a dance theatre performance, which we later debuted at a festival in our city. Kuan was a godsend, as we healed through each other’s stories.

One night, I was woken up at 3 am with a word: “Jacob.” I read the whole story of Jacob and was struck by how he wrestled with God, and said, “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (Genesis 32:30). I felt that God was telling me to be truthful, and not deceitful, like Jacob had been. My company was sending us to a workshop in NYC where I could finally meet the source of the technique after 10 years of training; the grants were settled, and the tickets had been booked. But I felt that God was testing the purity of my heart and so the next day I “faced” my company just as Jacob did with his brother Esau and told them I was not going. Soon after, I quit. It was also very difficult for me to leave as this “Chinese-cultural-bond” is so strong.

I wanted to attend a workshop in nature instead. Then Kuan told me about a last-minute travel grant I could apply for, so I did. And I got it. Praise God! During the workshop, I found myself walking barefooted through the woods at night. Finally, my heart said “stop” in front of a certain tree. As I looked up, I saw a star right above my head in the clear night sky. I wept. I felt the presence of the Lord as He healed my body. I’ve had no pain since.

God uses the broken for His work. He directly and indirectly sent me other pregnant women, single mothers, and mothers who had lost their children, so that I might minister to them. Abortion sealed my faith in God. It taught me to run after His treasures instead of those on earth.¹

God's work is always in progress. He does not always fix everything overnight, but with persistent prayer, He makes us stronger.

I used to shiver at the slightest cold. But this winter, I'm warm because I'm "home" in the Kingdom and family of God!²



Key Verse

My fellow believers, when it seems as though you are facing nothing but difficulties see it as an invaluable opportunity to experience the greatest joy that you can! For you know that when your faith is tested it stirs up power within you to endure all things. And then as your endurance grows even stronger it will release perfection into every part of your being until there is nothing missing and nothing lacking.

James 1:2-4 TPT

Reflection

This story helps demonstrate that what we consider "unforgivable" is not beyond God's love and mercy. Have you received healing and forgiveness for your misdeeds? Jean received it through the arts. You may receive it through service, counseling, journaling, singing or something else. But it is there for you. God wants you to repent and forgive others and yourself. He wants to use your story to bring hope and healing to others. Allow Him to speak to you. Refuse to listen to any voices in your head that accuse or condemn. These are not from the Father.

As you begin to heal, write your story down so that you, too, may share it with others.

¹ Matthew 6:21 TPT, "For your heart will always pursue what you value as your treasure."

² Jean wanted to make her email available to you- jeanasherah@gmail.com.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You that there is no sin so great that You cannot forgive it and use it to bring glory to Your name! You are awesome. I turn from my sins now and repent for going my own way. Instead of focusing on my sin, I trust that You will accept me in this life and the next, in heaven. Show me if I need to reconcile with another person I've wounded or who has wounded me. I release all unforgiveness, bitterness, and especially shame to You. I rejoice with You because I no longer identify as a "sinner," but as a "new creation"³ saved by grace. In Jesus name, amen.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*

DAY 32



A Faithful Protector

By Dexter R. (Trinidad)

“Shoot me! Shoot me!” I yelled at the police officer aiming his gun at me. “Shoot me, I said!” I could feel blood slowly running down my shirt. He had just hit me with his torch. I was innocent, but very drunk and proud. I quoted the Bible, saying “Don’t you dare lay a hand on my anointed ones” (Psalm 105:15 TPT). I knew I shouldn’t have been at that bar, but temptation led me there. A fight broke out that night, and some of my friends got involved.

As you can tell, my story is not about being a good Christian. It is about how our Savior is merciful, kind, and delivers his people from trouble. I received Jesus in 1993 and He changed my life. In May of that year, I was baptized and received the Holy Spirit. I became full of zeal for the Lord and started sharing the Gospel. I received blessings and experienced the wonderful gift of redemption. Everything I did brought success and prosperity. Life was easy, and money was no problem. Anything I asked for, I received.

But then I started to take it for granted, and began using the money for my selfish desires. Drinking and partying became my *modus operandi*, and I moved slowly away from God. I had no more time for my Friday night “Overcomers Meeting” at church, or Sunday morning Bible study and prayer. Then things started to go really wrong. Instead of spending money on fun, I had to start spending it on medical bills and repairs to my expensive car. I kept accumulating debt.

The policeman did not shoot me, and we all dispersed peacefully. Before the year ended, that same policeman was shot in a similar situation. Everybody started calling me. They all felt my quote from Psalms had been brought to bear. I felt guilty for even being in that bar, but I knew that the power of the Almighty was with me.

This was at the height of my rebellion. I knew what was right but did everything wrong. I would pray for forgiveness, only to make the same mistakes again and again. In 2005, things came to a climax. I showered, put on my best clothes, and prepared to die. I took all the medicine tablets I could find and drank a bottle of rum. I prayed to God and said, “Father, I am weak, continually

doing wrong and committing sin. I am not worthy of your love.” I then drifted off into what I expected to be my last sleep.

The pastor of a church I visited occasionally had been praying for my deliverance together with his wife. That night they could not sleep and stayed up till morning praying for me. They did not know what I had done, but came to check on me at sunrise. I heard them calling my name from behind the gate. I immediately woke up, shocked and surprised to be alive. I came out and started to cry. Repenting, I gave thanks to Jesus for saving me from death. Indeed, in repentance there is life.

In June I decided to take a break, and travelled to London to visit my sisters. I went sightseeing and rejoiced to be alive. Walking along the Thames River, I came to the famous Maritime Greenwich. I thought, “Lovely buildings and interesting museum.” Incidentally, the University of Greenwich was having an open day. My sisters said to me, “Why don’t you check it out?” They knew I had always wanted to attend university and become an electrical engineer, but never did because of my rebelliousness. So, I entered the university building, with no specific intentions. The first person to greet me at the entrance was the Head of the Electrical Engineering Department. We were all shocked. He invited me to sit down and have an interview. By the end of it, he gave me an unconditional offer to study electrical engineering at the university.

Leaving my old job back home in Trinidad, having a place to stay and money for my degree, meeting my wife at the university, and having sunshine to warm me through the coldest winter in British history – these are only a few testimonies to God’s power in my life.

From death to life, from sin to repentance, my Redeemer and Savior is with me. My story is still unfolding, and I believe it’s important to record what God does in our lives. One of my dreams is to write the rest of my testimonies in a book called *Chronicles of a Village Boy*.



Key Verses

You can buy two sparrows for only a copper coin, yet not even one sparrow falls from its nest without the knowledge of your Father. Aren't you worth much more to God than many sparrows? So don't worry. For your Father cares deeply about even the smallest detail of your life.

Mathew 10:29-31 TPT

Reflection

Think about a time when you felt you would have died if God had not supernaturally intervened. For example, when you encountered a traffic delay, only to pass a serious accident on the road later. There must be countless other times unknown to us, but only by Him. Our lives are in His hands! Yet we are invited to partner with God in the events of this world, like when Dexter's pastors heard an SOS call from heaven to act on his behalf. Has anyone been praying for you faithfully? If so, thank them. Who is God calling you to pray for today?

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank You for being involved the smallest details of my life. I believe that You care about me and are watching over me. I invite You right now to execute Your perfect will. Open my eyes and heart so I may see from Your perspective, Lord. When my life turns upside down, help me be honest with You, and think the best of Your character. I proclaim that You are *good*, even when I don't understand what is going on and the world seems cruel. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 33



A Night of Terror

By Cindy Anne Riley (USA)

18 years ago, at 2:00 am, God suddenly woke me up and I laid down on the floor before Him in Holy reverence. He spoke to me and said, “You will no longer do drugs. I’ve set you apart for my purposes. My Holy Spirit will lead you into all truth; man will not lead you astray.” Since that day I have been drug-free and “on fire” for Christ.

Because of the power of the resurrection, I believed He would also deliver my nephew Jamie from drug addiction. I persevered in praying over him, but he only got worse. His anger was out of control. He lost his family, spent time in jail for growing marijuana, wrecked 2 cars, and almost died from a drug overdose.

God answered my prayer through an 80-year-old man – Bill – from Maine. He was told to seek out the owner of a boxing gym in North Conway, New Hampshire and befriend him in order to share the Gospel. The owner of that gym was my nephew, Jamie. Bill began teaching Jamie the Bible and showing him God’s love. After I met Bill, God reminded me of the verses I had been praying over for 11 years:

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”¹

I told Bill about the verses and we were in awe of God as we hugged each other. Two months later, my nephew was baptized in a river and dedicated his life to Christ. He joined my Bible study and I couldn’t have been happier! As far as I knew, he was drug-free. What happened next was the most terrifying night of my life. Yet God delivered me.

Fear gripped me in the middle of the night as I was awakened by the terrifying sound of Jamie, in a drunken rage, threatening the life of my niece. “I will kill you!” he yelled. Her scream was blood-curdling: “Stop! Stop! Stop! No!” He punched her head repeatedly. Then fear gripped

¹ Matthew 9:37-38 NIV

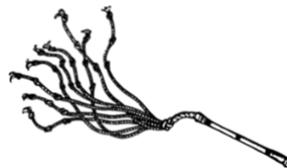
me as I heard him walk back towards where I was hiding. But he returned to attack her again in his fit of anger. Next, I heard furniture being broken and thrown off the second-story balcony.

I was so paralyzed by the fear he would find me that I couldn't even pray. I felt like I was in a horror movie. But how could I live with myself if I didn't rescue my niece? I called the police. They told me not to go downstairs and to stay on the phone under the covers, so he wouldn't hear me. After 15 minutes, the police had still not come, so I walked downstairs and came face to face with Jamie. I told him, "Run! I called the police." He replied, "I'm going to kill you!" He punched me, and I reeled back. Then he hit me in the chest.

I faced him again and saw pure evil looking back at me. He said, "You think God is stronger than me?" He gave me a devastating blow to the face, knocking me over. When I stood up, I touched my face with my hands, expecting it to be bloody and broken. At that moment I had a word of knowledge that an angel of the Lord had shielded my face and healed me. I yelled, "I am healed. There's no blood. Oh God, Jamie, run! The police are coming!" He ran out and I locked the doors. The danger of him returning terrified me. I cried out, "Help us, Jesus!" as I heard him running up the stairs outside.

He kicked in the two oak doors and broke the frame. He was facing us again! Startled by sirens approaching, he ran into the woods as the police pursued him. He was arrested and jailed for two years.

Bill continued to disciple Jamie in prison, where studied the Word of God and fully surrendered his life to Christ. He is now remarried, his children restored, and his example and testimony bring hope to others.



Key Verse

*When we live our lives within the shadow of God Most High,
our secret hiding place, we will always be shielded from harm.
How then could evil prevail against us or disease infect us?*

*God sends angels with special orders to protect you wherever you go,
defending you from all harm.*

*If you walk into a trap, they'll be there for you
and keep you from stumbling.*

*You'll even walk unharmed among the fiercest powers of darkness,
trampling every one of them beneath your feet!*

For here is what the Lord has spoken to me:

"Because you have delighted in me as my great lover,

I will greatly protect you.

I will set you in a high place, safe and secure before my face.

Psalms 91:9-14 NIV

Reflection

Read and meditate on the key verse. Which phrases stand out to you? What is our secret hiding place? Who are the angels with special orders and the fiercest powers of darkness? Ask God to speak to you about these phrases.

We need not fear the powers of darkness when we are "in Christ."² On the contrary, we are called to be victorious over evil forces through faith in the power of Jesus, who lives in us.³ Imagine a huge, strong figure (God), and yourself hidden inside. Allow God to speak to you about your place in Him. This not a place of fear, but of peace. Use this place to rally your courage and strength so that you can go forth into victory.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I worship You because You are such a strong and mighty God. You have authority over all spiritual forces. I thank You that I am hidden in You, Lord. When I am afraid, I will focus on who You are and not my own weaknesses or the powers of darkness. You have already defeated Satan. Thank You for being with me every day. Protect me and my family, and lead us all into salvation through Your Son. In Jesus' name, amen.

² See Appendix "WHO AM I?"

³ For further study, read the book *Steps to Freedom in Christ* by Neil T. Anderson.

DAY 34



God Can Save

By Kristine Rand (USA)

It was New Year's Eve and I remember thinking that it was good to be alive. My busy year would be full of celebration! I was looking forward to the birth of my first grandchild and the wedding of my oldest daughter.

The year had barely begun when I got the diagnosis that would change my life. The following week was a blur of events as I underwent chemotherapy education, a PET scan, an infusion, surgery to insert a chemotherapy port, and the first of eight chemotherapy treatments. As I sat down with the doctor at the end of the week, I learned that I had an inoperable stage 4b carcinosarcoma. My doctor, a pragmatist, told me that my prognosis was very poor. He was unsure whether I would be alive for my daughter's wedding in just 8 months. My daughter tearfully told me that if I would not be alive very long, she wanted to have a more intimate wedding in the coming weeks. We waited to make a decision until we had a more complete picture.

That harrowing week was not without its blessings, for my beautiful, healthy granddaughter was born on the day of my first chemotherapy treatment. Additionally, I felt surrounded by love as my family, church, and friends around the world began to intercede and plead with God for a miracle.

I regularly met with members of my prayer team for healing prayer sessions and begged the Lord to allow me to live until my daughter's wedding. Miraculously, after the second chemotherapy treatment, it appeared that the cancer was shrinking! Around that time, two friends in the Czech Republic independently heard God say, "She will live and not die." I received these prophetic words, even though I did not know how to interpret them. After the fourth chemotherapy treatment, the scan revealed the cancer had shrunk to just one location, making me a candidate for surgery. We were ecstatic that I could soon be cancer-free! I told myself that God had heard our prayers and healed me. My oldest daughter came home and we celebrated as we designed her wedding invitations.

Yet just six weeks after the operation, my oncologist found that the cancer had returned. I faded into a deep depression. I completed the remaining two treatments, although we were not hopeful for remission. I continued to meet with my friends for healing prayer sessions. When friends asked how I was doing, I would speak honestly. I did not know what the Lord had planned for me, but I used those opportunities to point to scripture, such as Psalm 118:17 (TPT): "You will not let them kill me, but I will live to tell the world what the Lord has done for me."

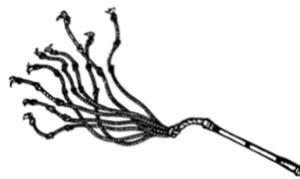
Many arduous weeks later, after my last chemotherapy session, the scan revealed that the cancer had spread to my pancreas, so I was no longer a candidate for radiation. Despite finding a "hospice care"

brochure that my husband had secretly collected, I still felt that the Lord was not finished using me. Three weeks later, we learned that the cancer contained genetic markers which might make it responsive to an immunotherapy called Keytruda. I immediately began the infusions every three weeks.

When my daughter's wedding day arrived, I was surrounded by family and friends who shared in my excitement of being alive and healthy. I felt that the Lord had honored our steadfastness in prayer by allowing me to attend the wedding. The day after the wedding, my waking thought was, "every breath is a gift from God. We don't choose whether we take a billion breaths or no breaths."

Since this revelation, I have been intentional in making each breath count for building the Kingdom. What a joy it was last year to be alive not only for my daughter's wedding, but for a subsequent return to Europe on another mission to teach the Bible, counsel, and pray for many!

I have been in the struggle for a year and am still not cancer-free. We continue to pray that the Lord will heal me. I believe that the God I serve is able to deliver me from cancer, just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego believed that God would keep them alive when thrown into the blazing furnace. But even if he does not, I want you to know that I will continue to worship Him with each breath.



Key Verse

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

Daniel 3:16-18 NIV

Reflection

Life has a way of surprising us. Sit quietly and take some deep breaths. Thank God for each one, and for the gift of life in general. Allow gratitude to fill your heart. In this place of thankfulness, resolve

to worship God in every circumstance, no matter what. Even when life seems cruel, worship Him for his goodness! When we determine in advance that we will trust God in circumstances beyond our control, we realize that we are never really “out of control.” We are under His control.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the furnace for not bowing down to the king. Later, they were seen walking through the flames with a fourth man. Whether it was an angel or Jesus himself, this illustrates how God can supernaturally intervene when things seem impossible.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, I invite You to intervene in my life supernaturally. Even if You don't answer my prayers as I expect, I will praise You and do Your will. Jesus himself wrestled in prayer the night before his crucifixion, and then resolved in His heart to yield to You – “But no matter what, Your will must be mine” (Luke 22:42 TPT). You know best. I give You my life and trust that You will somehow work everything out for my good. Heal Kristine so that she may glorify and serve You for the rest of her life. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 35



Learning the Hard Way

By Matt (USA)

It was the week of the Major League Baseball All-Star Game in 2004. I remember it distinctly because it was playing on the television in the jail cell where I was being held. I found myself with about fifty others, most of whom were waiting on deportation or had been arrested on some minor drug charges. It wasn't a very violent group. In fact, some people were actually reading Bibles quietly to themselves. I was reading some books about Christian adult education and Sunday school curricula for the children in one of my seminary classes. Yes, that's right – I went to jail for a night as a student at a theological college.

To understand why I was in this situation, we must rewind about seven years. I was in my sophomore year at one of the most difficult schools in the U.S. The stress of my classes was starting to pile up, and the ability to maintain any kind of social life was quickly fading away. But one of the mottos at my school was “we work hard, and we play hard.” So, in order to maintain my sanity, I started going to more and more parties and social events on weekends.

I was part of a fraternity (or college social club) for Christians. We had people from a very wide range of Christian backgrounds: liberal Catholics, fundamentalist Protestants, and everything in between, like me. As I began to experiment with these new social activities, I encountered very strong opposition from some of the “strict” members of our group.

There were a handful of members we referred to as the “Charismatic Caravan,” i.e. a “holy huddle” of very fundamental believers. Their judgmental attitudes about the actions of other believers with a looser approach to Christian liberties like alcohol were quite obvious. Their disapproval would have made the Pharisees¹ proud.

As you may have figured out by now, this did not sit well with me. In fact, I came to the conclusion that if I were going to be judged for what I did anyway, then I might as well do it right in front of them, and enjoy making them upset because it would be more fun. And it was

¹ Members of an ancient Jewish sect, distinguished by strict observance of the traditional and written law. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees in many New Testament passages; for example, Matthew 23. The term can also refer to a self-righteous or hypocritical person.

fun, at least at first. That's the thing about sin, it seems fun at the time, but it eventually catches up with you.

I look back on this time of my life as my “angry young man” phase. It lasted for about seven years. Seven years of my life I spent serving myself and running away from God's call for me and my close relationship with Him.

And then it finally happened, I got tired of running away from God. I surrendered to His call for me and applied to seminary to get my master's degree. I knew God had some ministry for me to do in the future, I just didn't know what it would be.

During the time I was running from God, I still had a relationship with Him. I was like the prodigal son² in many respects. But the He never gave up on me. Some people, when they start to follow God or come back to Him, turn away from their old lifestyle on a dime. For me it, was more like turning around a battleship. It took some time to get things right again.

For a while, I was living “with one foot on each side of the fence”; trying to get my life right, but still being lured by the ways of the world. Then one night in 2003, I was at a party with a bunch of musicians who were drinking and smoking marijuana. I joined them in both, which wasn't a first for me. After a while, I decided that it would be a good idea to drive home – you know, so I could get up and go to church the next morning. Well, that never happened. On the way home, I fell asleep at the wheel and woke up to blue lights in my mirrors.

I was arrested for driving under the influence (DUI, or drunk driving) while in seminary. I don't think there are many people who can say the same thing. I was living a worldly lifestyle and following Christ at the same time. But that clearly doesn't work too well. Getting arrested and having to spend a couple nights in jail was not something I ever thought would ever happen, but it taught me many lessons about grace. The most immediate was that I could have easily killed someone, including myself. I firmly believe God sent that officer to save my life, in more ways than one.

I didn't drink for a season after that, and I don't smoke anymore; not because these are “rules” I need to obey to earn favor with God, but because He wants what is best for me. And destructive habits like those are not God's best for me. (Of course, stubborn me had to experience that firsthand rather than just believing and accepting it.)

Now fast-forward to my present-day life. I've reconciled my relationship with those whom I felt were judging me. I now understand that there is nothing I can or cannot do to make God love me any more or less than He already does. So, needless to say, my relationship with God is stronger than ever. Living my life by walking with Him daily is a great adventure. He's opened doors and led me to things I could have never imagined.

² The story of the Prodigal Son can be found in Luke 15:11-32. The photo featured in this chapter is Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal*.



Key Verse

So the young son set off for home. From a long distance away, his father saw him coming, dressed as a beggar and great compassion swelled up in his heart for his son who was returning home. So the father raced out to meet him. He swept him up in his arms, hugged him dearly, and kissed him over and over with tender love.

Luke 15:20 TPT

Reflection

Is your heart wholly devoted to God? Or do you feel pulled in two directions? What is holding you back from total surrender? Perhaps it is the fear that life will be dutiful and boring? The lure of the world is strong, and many of us have learned the hard way. Ask God to show you the things you're learning the hard way. Listen and obey His voice.

Thankfully, no matter how far we wander, the Father is always there for us. Just like the father in Jesus' parable in Luke 15, our Heavenly Father longs to sweep us up in His arms, to hug and kiss us with tender love when we return to Him. If you have wandered away, turn around and go back home to your Daddy. Can you imagine Him running to meet you now?

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, show me the areas in my heart where I am prone to wander away from You. I repent of my rebellion and stubbornness. I turn to You now, trusting that Your love and mercy are greater than anger or judgement. I accept Jesus' sacrifice for my sins, including rebellion. You are the potter, I am the clay. Mold me into Your image. Help me to understand Your intense longing to be in fellowship with me. I want Your love. I say "yes" to Your love. In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 36



Watch the Birds

By Ilona & Tad (Poland/USA)

I was on my way to work, driving through morning traffic. I could hear one of my favorite songs playing through the speakers, but I was not paying much attention. My thoughts were going much faster than the speed of the car, and my head was spinning. The lease for our apartment was expiring soon. That meant that we would either have to move out and find another place to live, or accept a rent increase at the total discretion of the landlord. But what kind of increase? Will we be able to afford it? Our family budget was already stretched thin. At the least, the initial discount we received when first signing the lease would be revoked. I could not seem to find any solution that would work well for us. Moving out did not seem like a very compelling option. Where would we go? Maybe we should move to the southern part of the city? I had heard you could find better deals there, but it was far away from everyone and everything we knew. I really felt lost and defeated.

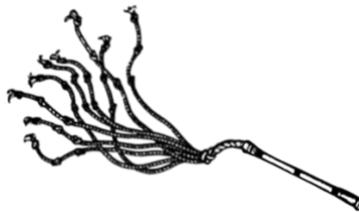
Later that day, we received a text message from Lula, a lady we had met once almost a year earlier. We were taking a stroll through the neighborhood when she sprang out of her house nearly crying. The first thing she asked was whether we loved Jesus. She later said that she felt the Lord wanted her to speak with us. She invited us over, and to my surprise, we said “sure.” Where we are from in Poland, and across Europe in general, you don’t usually talk to strangers and invite them into your home. But here in Georgia, USA, things are different.

During our unexpected meeting, my wife and I mentioned that we were looking for a place to move, and Lulu suggested that we move to the *northern* part of the city. After we left, she texted us again, inviting us to check out her new blog. When we got home, we did. Her first post began with Matthew 6:25-34 (below) – the exact same scripture that was read during our wedding ceremony! We did not even pick it ourselves; we simply asked our pastor to read the scripture assigned to that day of the year. And here it was again! God was speaking. In her post, Lulu went on to observe that the first thing birds do when they wake up in the morning is *not* worry, but sing praise and worship.

A few days after that, we received a written notice from the landlord. We were totally surprised. It said that in return for renewal of the contract, we would have the exact same price that we had before (including all discounts). A rent increase is to be expected when you renew a rental contract, and as far as we knew, that's how things worked at our apartment complex. But our God is a God of impossible things, and He is called Jehovah-Jireh,¹ meaning "the Lord will provide." This is another thing Lula told us.

It always amazes us that our God, the God of the entire universe, cares about each one of us to the point that we have nothing left to worry about. You see, I have a natural inclination to worry, especially about the future. I respond by devising elaborate plans and strategies, and then I worry if they will actually work. But this is *not* the way our Father is calling us to live.

As we write this story, we are approaching the expiration of our current lease. We trust that the Lord already has it worked out for His glory. We know for certain that He, our all-powerful God, has a plan for our lives. This brings to mind a prophetic word we received recently: "I am convinced that my God will fully satisfy every need you have, for I have seen the abundant riches of glory revealed to me through the Anointed One, Jesus Christ!" (Philippians 4:19 TPT).



Key Verses

This is why I tell you to never be worried about your life, for all that you need will be provided, such as food, water, clothing—everything your body needs. Isn't there more to your life than a meal? Isn't your body more than clothing? Look at all the birds—do you think they worry about their existence? They don't plant or reap or store up food, yet your heavenly Father provides them each with food. Aren't you much more valuable to your Father than they? So, which one of you by worrying could add anything to your life. And why would you worry about your clothing? Look at all the beautiful flowers of the field. They don't work or toil, and yet not even Solomon in all his splendor was robed in beauty more than one of these! So if God has clothed

¹More appropriately transliterated as Yahweh-Yireh in Hebrew, used in Genesis 22:14 in naming the mountain (Mount Moriah, also the biblical Temple Mount in Jerusalem where the Dome of the Rock now stands) where Abraham almost sacrificed his son, Isaac. God provided another offering. "Yahweh" is actually the modern pronunciation of the tetragrammaton of YHWH. These four letters are the personal name of God, which is usually translated as "Lord."

the meadow with hay, which is here for such a short time and then dried up and burned, won't he provide for you the clothes you need—even though you live with such little faith? So then, forsake your worries! Why would you say, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For that is what the unbelievers chase after. Doesn't your heavenly Father already know the things your bodies require? So above all, constantly chase after the realm of God's kingdom and the righteousness that proceeds from him. Then all these less important things will be given to you abundantly. Refuse to worry about tomorrow, but deal with each challenge that comes your way, one day at a time. Tomorrow will take care of itself.

Matthew 6:25-34 TPT

Reflection

Our God cares just as much about helping us with trivial worries as He does about helping us with huge crises. A good daily motto is: *turn your worries into prayers!* Know that worrying is a total waste of time, because He provides exactly what is needed, exactly when it is needed. If you put Him first in your life, there is no reason for fear. Ask Him how you can worry less and trust Him more.

It is quite obvious from today's Key Verses that Jesus does *not* want us to worry. Instead, He wants us to look to Him. Take a moment to read the verses again, this time slowly. Now, ask God to show you what you worry too much about. If worry is second nature to you, you might be surprised by the answer. Then bring your worries to Him in prayer (not just now, but throughout the day!). If you are a worrier, this will grow your prayer life very quickly! It may take some discipline, but you can do it. Remember – every time you worry, give it up to your Abba.²

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, You are my good Abba (Daddy). Make me like a child right now. I throw my hands up and yield to You. I ask You to listen to me, take care of me, and let me sit in Your lap so that You can reassure me. You are good, and I trust You. Forgive me for all the time I've wasted worrying. I praise You because I know that when I need You, You are here to provide. I put my worries to rest right now. In Jesus' name, amen.

² One Hebrew (*Ab*) name for God as father of His people, or Aramaic (*Abba*) for "Daddy," which gradually came to mean "dear father." The use of *Abba* can be seen in Mark 14:36, Galatians 4:1-7, and Romans 8:15.

DAY 37



No Accident

By Bridget C. (Czech Republic)

Most children have pleasant memories of their parents throwing birthday parties for them. When I was growing up, our household was quite different. For my 12th birthday, I went behind my father's back and planned my own little celebration at home with a few friends and some snacks (no birthday cake, as usual). I had to plan carefully so that my friends would be gone by the time he came home from the pub. Drunk and aggressive.

But he came home half an hour early. He shouted at my friends to leave. Then he smacked me across the face in front of them, giving me a bloody nose. That night solidified my anger, rebellion, and fierce need for love.

I'm from a small town in Moravia, where my alcoholic father repeated the behaviors of his own father. He pushed my siblings and me to work hard on our farm, yet we could never do enough to please him. We were regularly beaten. Additionally, he refused to join the Communist Party, so our educational opportunities were limited.

My sister and I were sent to a "special" school. It was a well-known fact that the children of communist loyalists were sent to the best trade schools and universities. Other children like us were often marginalized and sent to the worst schools, and later to work in factories. No one cared about these "special" schools or what went on there. Amazingly though, this lack of attention is precisely what opened to the door for me to find God during a very dark and hopeless time. I was only 15.

Up until then, my life had been filled with abuse and rejection. My parents made sure I knew they had been expecting a boy, not a girl. I was sure that if I looked and behaved like a boy, I would be accepted, but it never happened. I even considered a sex change.

I ran in many different directions looking for love and attention. I tried drugs, alcohol, smoking, and even Satanism. Nothing brought relief from the emotional and physical pain (I suffered a fractured skull 5 times in 5 years due to various accidents and angry outbursts). After one terrible beating of my mother by my father, I decided to commit suicide by overdosing on pills. I woke up the next morning in my mother's arms, surprised to be alive and with a terrible headache (again).

A lady used to come to my school once a week and teach the Bible. This would have never been allowed at other schools in communist times; but as I mentioned earlier, she could do it in my school because no one knew or cared what was happening there. This lady was a Christian and she prayed with me one day that Jesus would enter my heart. Then something miraculous happened: I immediately lost the desire for cigarettes, drugs, and alcohol. But calming my anger and finding love would be a longer journey. I began to learn what it means to follow Christ, but still had many struggles ahead.

I even enrolled in Bible school. My family rejected me, and my father's words were especially biting: "You know, you were an accident. We were expecting a boy. What are you even doing here?!" Had it not been for my relationship with God and the strength He gave me, I would have killed myself that day. Still, I had the feeling that something was missing and that I was running away from God in some area of my life.

Six years ago, a breakthrough came. I had a friend from Slovakia visiting and she encouraged me to pray and forgive my father. She prayed for me. The next night the Holy Spirit would not let me sleep. Finally, I began desperately shouting into my pillow. I cried out to God and forgave my father from deep within. A wave of peace and love washed over me. I finally knew what peace felt like. I still have a relationship with my earthly father and I pray he will someday believe in God and accept Jesus as his savior.

But my peace was from my Heavenly Father. I am still learning who I am in Christ through prayer, Bible study, and worship. I encourage you to trust that life with God is beautiful. People may disappoint you or leave, but God is always there.

I finally know that I was no accident to my Heavenly Father. In fact, He loves me so much that His only Son (Jesus) died in my place!



Key Verse

For this is how much God loved the world—he gave his one and only, unique Son as a gift.¹ So now everyone who believes in him² will never perish but experience everlasting life. “God did not send his Son into the world to judge and condemn the world, but to be its Savior and rescue it!”³

John 3:16,17 TPT

Reflection

Do you feel like God made a mistake when He created you? Have hurtful words taken root in your heart? Take a few moments and ask God to show you the answer.

Now, visualize you are of great worth to the Father, your Creator. Will you accept your worth in His eyes by accepting His gift, Jesus the Christ? You are no mistake. He loves you and created you with a perfect plan in mind. We will not fully understand it until we get to heaven. Trust him and accept God’s plan for your life, including how he made you.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

I rejoice in how You have created me. I am excited to see how Your plan for my life will unfold as I give You my life each day. Forgive me for the times I have believed lies about myself, both from individuals and society in general. I choose to believe what You say about me.⁴ Thank You for Your love. I love You, too. In Jesus’ name, amen.

¹ Or “God proved he loved the world by giving his Son.”

² Or “believe into him.” Salvation and regeneration must be by faith. True faith (Gr. *pistis*) has a number of components: acceptance, embracing something (someone) as truth, union with God and his Word, and an inner confidence that God alone is enough.

³ The Aramaic reads, “so that they shall live by his hand” (of power)

⁴ See appendix for more information on “Who I am in Christ.”

DAY 38



Carry the Cross

By Garth W. (USA/Czech Republic)

In September of 2009 I got a gig doing marketing and leadership training in Dagestan, on the shores of the Caspian Sea. If you don't know where that is, join the club. Politically a part of Russia, the capital city of Dagestan – and my destination was Makhachkala (*ma-khach-ka-la*).

It was a total surprise to me when I met my translator on Wednesday night at the Makhachkala Airport, as he was a committed, college-age evangelical Christian. In the taxi on the way to the hotel, he asked me if I would like to speak in his church the next night. I could share my testimony. Great!

The next evening, we arrived at a round, white, unusual looking building – the home of Hosannah Christian Church. He took me through and proudly showed me the snack bar and Sunday school classes and explained that the church had a Bible training institute and did food distribution to the poor. Founded in 1994 as a prayer group, it now had over 1,000 members, almost all converted from Islam. It was now the largest evangelical church in Dagestan.

My translator introduced me to a young couple with kids and told me the wife would translate for me as her English was superb and I asked her what her husband did for work, assuming she was a professional translator. She said she and her husband were preparing to move into a little village in the mountains above the city and start a church.

Recently, in the village they were moving to, the local Muslim leaders had commanded all the residents to come to the central square. Then two women, the only two Christians in the village, were dragged to the square, tied up, and everyone was forced to watch as they were burned alive for converting from Islam to Christianity.

My translator said she and her husband believed the martyrdom of these two women could not be forgotten, and that their deaths would be the seed of a church that she and her husband would start. I had to ask, “But aren't you risking the same thing happening to you and your family?” And she replied, “How can we be so selfish as to worry about saving our lives when Jesus paid for us with His terrible death on the cross?”

Then it was time. She led me into their smaller sanctuary that held about 200 people, and I was told that the members had brought some of their non-Christian friends. They used the Thursday evening service as another means of evangelism. That audience gave me their total attention as I shared my testimony of the poverty, addictions, and abuse in my life, and read from 2 Corinthians 5:17: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*

When I finished, Pastor Artur Suleimanov laid hands on me and prayed a blessing, asking the Lord to use me mightily in ministry for Jesus. That pastor had such a big smile and such joy that he gave me a bear hug!

Each day I receive an automatic email with information on Christians suffering from persecution and in need of prayer. That's how I learned that, less than a year after my trip to Makhachkala, on the evening of Thursday, July 15th, 2010, Pastor Suleimanov, the same pastor that prayed for me, had left his church alone after the service. He was surrounded by a group of militant Muslims who filled his car with bullets. A Muslim terrorist group immediately contacted the media and took responsibility for the murder.

Pastor Artur died at age 49 and left behind his wife, Zina, and five children. Why did they kill him? The Islamist group responsible said it was because he was a Muslim before he converted and was responsible for converting a thousand more. I believe he was killed for loving people around him enough to fearlessly share the Good News of Jesus Christ and give them a chance to have eternity in heaven and not hell. I spoke with my translator on Skype, who said that the church members were mostly afraid to go to the church building and were now meeting secretly in homes.

Being a Christian means being a witness of His life-saving story to the people around me. It means living the "cross life" – a counter-culture life with Kingdom values that may include sacrifice, rejection, suffering, and even death. As I write this, I daily examine my life and ask many questions. Am I wholly committed to Jesus? Am I holding something back? Do I really, and I mean *really* pray for the persecuted church? I believe if I carry the name of Jesus, I must, in my own way, carry His cross.



Key Verses

Jesus said to all of his followers, “If you truly desire to be my disciple, you must disown your life completely, embrace my ‘cross’¹ as your own, and surrender to my ways. For if you choose self-sacrifice, giving up your lives for my glory, you will embark on a discovery of more and more of true life. But if you choose to keep your lives for yourselves, you will lose what you try to keep. Even if you gained all the wealth and power of this world, everything it could offer you, yet lost your soul in the process, what good is that? So why then are you ashamed of being my disciple? Are you ashamed of the revelation-truth I give to you? I, the Son of Man, will one day return in my radiant brightness, with the holy angels and in the splendor and majesty of my Father, and I will be ashamed of all who are ashamed of me.”

Luke 9:23-26 TPT

Reflection

Many of us have no idea what it means to truly suffer or be persecuted for our faith. Yet a large portion of the Church of Jesus Christ does. According to the Key Verses, what kind of journey will you embark on if you give up your life for Christ? The answer is counter-intuitive for us! In what ways are you clinging to your life?

Will you pray for your persecuted brothers and sisters around the world?² Remember that God acts in supernatural ways, and our prayers always ascend to heaven!

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

I choose to remember my brothers and sisters who are being persecuted today and stand with them in prayer. Lord, dispatch Your angels to strengthen them. You know who needs them the most. I also intercede for their persecutors, that they would be arrested by the Holy Spirit as Saul was on the road to Damascus. You are stronger than any chains of evil, Lord! We cry out on behalf of those who are too weak to cry out on their own behalf. I give my life to You. I will not cling to my own rights and comforts. I trust You as I now embark on a journey of increasing faith in my new life! In Jesus’ name, amen.

¹ This could also mean being willing to suffer and die for Christ.

² For more information on persecuted Christians, see opendoorsusa.org and persecution.com.

DAY 39



Beauty for Ashes

By Carolyn Maiden (USA)

I was working at home late one night when my phone rang. I wondered who could be calling me so late. I answered the phone and it was the call no parent wants to receive. It was from the hospital; the nurse said my son had arrived by ambulance and that I should come right away. Bill, my only son, was just 34 years old. Overcome with gut-wrenching fear and sick to my stomach, I cried out, “Oh my God!” I asked repeatedly, “What happened?” The nurse would not answer. She only said, “Come now. You have to speak with the doctor. I can’t give any information over the phone.”

Overcome with grief, my husband and I raced through the black night to the hospital. It was the longest 15-minute ride of my life. We were bracing ourselves for what we might find. Inside I was screaming, “Jesus help! Don’t let my son die.” My mind was racing and my body was shaking as I prayed for the strength I felt I did not have. How would I get through this? I asked God for the courage to face what awaited.

Upon our arrival to the emergency room, we were ushered into a small conference area to meet with the doctor on call, a young intern about my son’s age. He said, “I’ve never done this before and I don’t know how to tell you.” I prepared for the impact. He said our son was on life support and would not survive. I replied, “I will pray for a miracle.” The doctor said, “I haven’t made myself clear. Your son is brain dead.” I asked, “How will I care for him when I get him home?” I was in shock and just wanted him home with me. I couldn’t believe the doctor’s report. He said, “I don’t know how to say this: *he is not going to recover*. He has had a massive brain stem stroke as the result of a heroin overdose.”

That was the longest night of my life. At 6:15 am, I was alone with my son when the doctors came in and declared him dead. They left us in peace. How could I say goodbye to my boy, my only son? As I held him in my arms, I said, “It was you and me when you came into this world

and it's you and me as you leave this world." Broken, I held his lifeless body and just wanted to die myself.

I couldn't believe it, and wasn't able to say goodbye or accept that he was really gone. Would I believe it tomorrow or the next day? Against the hospital rules, I took his photo. I was numb and couldn't process my feelings. Children are not supposed to die before their parents!

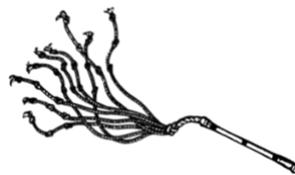
For a long time after, I did not find comfort in this world. I wanted to go to heaven to stay there with him. The pain of losing him brought such deep, dark despair that for 3 years I begged God to take me home.

I could never blame God for my son's sudden death. We choose our own destiny by free will. My prayers throughout Bill's life were answered – not in the way I wanted, but in a way that saved him from the continued agony of drug addiction. He chose his own way out of his chaotic world.

Motherhood is such an honor and awesome responsibility. It is full of overwhelming love, hope, joy, and unknown destiny. I was able to overcome my despair and pain only through the grace of God. In our hurt we are called into a profound dependence on God that creates a deeper relationship with Him. He promises beauty from ashes, and gives us hope for a future in Him. His love and grace flow endlessly.

It is only through suffering and hardship that we can stand strong in this world, and He will bring us through every pain. As we acknowledge that we can do nothing apart from Christ, we will grow closer to Him. He is our Rock. He is our Chief Cornerstone. He heals and makes us brave again.

At 68 years old, I laid down my life completely to Him. At 71, He surprised me by sending me into the mission field in the Czech Republic. It is amazing how He works with all we have been through in life. He continues to mold me into a new vessel for His purposes. We are never too old to become new in Christ.



Key Verse

*...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.*

*They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.*

Isaiah 61:2 NIV

Reflection

There are four visual elements in the above verse: a crown, oil, a garment, and oak trees. Meditate on this beautiful imagery and the biblical promise it represents. How can it apply to your own pain? If you are not sure, ask God to show you. Put your hope in Him, refusing to let despair and hopelessness deny His Word. If you are artistic, create something to demonstrate what God is doing in your life.

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for this promise. I trust that You are building something great in me through my trials and despair. I do not understand the miracle of this verse, but I know that all things are possible with You. I believe You will make me brave again. I ask You, Lord, to do great things in my life, even in my latter years. I will obey You! In Jesus' name, amen.

DAY 40



Little Did They Know

Retold¹ by Kelsie Mullen (USA/Czech Republic)

I was almost blind with pain. I had been stripped and tied to a marble pillar, then flogged 39 times. Each lash was indescribable. Unspeakable.

The soldiers, for their own wicked pleasure, had not only carried out their mandated orders of physical punishment, but heaped on emotional abuse as well.

I watched as they wove thorny branches into a bogus crown. They fastened it to my head, pushing down until the thorns pierced my flesh to bone. The lashes made my back and sides bleed. By now, my face was almost unrecognizable from scarlet torrents covering my face and even dripping from my hair.

They clothed me in a purple robe, which immediately began to absorb the blood and attach to my open flesh. I was given a reed to hold as a phony scepter. Then, the mocking began.

“Hail your majesty, King of the Jews!”²

The demonically-charged atmosphere escalated from jeers and laughter to slapping, spitting, and lashes to my head with the reed. They blindfolded me to exaggerate my feelings of powerlessness. When you can see a fist coming, brace yourself. Now their punches sent me to the ground.

They finally tore off the blindfold and paraded me through the Roman Praetorium to Pilate, the regional governor. Surely, he would be pleased with their effigy of the Jewish King. For they hated the Jews, and the Jews hated them.

But when Pilate saw me, his face betrayed a sense of horror, and I heard gasps throughout the crowd. The soldiers stood at his attention as he announced,

¹ From the Gospels (Matthew 27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, and John 13-19)

² Mark 15:18 TPT

“Look at him. Here is your man!”³

I lifted my head and squinted through the blood and tears at the crowd, searching for those whom I loved, those I had walked with throughout my ministry. I had never felt so alone. Pain and rejection pierced my heart in waves. The angry, shouting mob was a stark contrast to the warm faces in Jerusalem at the table the night before.



The usual, magical atmosphere of the Jewish Pesach meal shared with my dearest followers had been tainted by the knowledge of my looming execution. As the sun was setting, I knew I would only be “free” for a few more hours. We sat and ate, and I instructed them on many important matters. Then, I knew it was time to end life as we had all known it for the last 3 years. Those had been years of travel and adventure. Years of teaching men and women to abide in the Father. Years of the miraculous and mundane, the angelic and demonic. I looked around the table at each one of my Apostles with the deepest and most profound love. I did not see them as they were at that moment, but as they would be, both on earth and in my eternal Kingdom.

I said, “One of you is about to betray me. One who has shared meals with me as an intimate.”⁴

This resulted in deep turmoil, both in my heart and those of my followers. Little did they know that a few hours from now, I would be arrested in my favorite prayer garden and that they would all scatter in terror.

Little did they know that Jerusalem was about to erupt into chaos, and that Judas would end up dead. All as a result of me. Little did they know that the thick, heavy veil separating the Holy of Holies would be ripped in two, from top to bottom!

As I stood before Pilate and watched him wash his hands (his wife behind him⁵, heavy with the warning dreams she’d had about Jesus), I knew the worst was yet to come.

You see, in times alone with my Father, He had spoken to me about these days. He had been preparing me for years. I’d wrestled with Him the night before in the garden and pleaded for my life.

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup of agony away from me.”⁶

Instead of relief, I was given glimpses of agonizing hell which caused such distress that great drops of blood fell to the ground with my sweat. I then given the most glorious vision of my beautiful bride in the age to come – the Bride of Christ! She drank from our shared cup of

³ John 19:5 TPT. See Zech. 6:12.

⁴ Matthew 26:21,23. Or “he who has dipped his hand with me in the dish.” This is a figure of speech from an intimate friend of Jesus. Breaking bread together was a sign of friendship throughout the Middle East.

⁵ Horrified not just by Jesus’ appearance, but by the dreams she’d been given a few hours earlier. Matthew 27:19

⁶ Luke 22:42a. Jesus asked the Father to be spared from death in the garden so that he could go all the way to the cross. His prayer was answered. The blood that dripped in the garden was not redemptive. Jesus had to carry the cross and fulfill all that was written of him. See Hebrews 5:7.

proposal, thus sealing our marriage.⁷ Still prostrate in the garden, my face in the dirt, I received the Father's grace and strength to yield to a higher plan that would change history forever. An angel sent from the Throne of God in heaven ministered to me and strengthened me for the coming hours, just as it had in the desert after 40 days of fasting.

"But no matter what, your will must be mine."⁸



I could barely stand, but I was still straining to search the crowd, who were shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Was that the face of my friend, Peter, hiding from my gaze? Yes, I saw the face of Peter. Suddenly I remembered how our eyes locked for a few moments immediately following the rooster's loud crow early this morning. I had read on his face the remembrance of last night's conversation when Peter boasted, "Even if all the rest lose their faith and fall away, I will still be beside you, Jesus!"

"Are you sure, Peter?" I had replied. "Before the rooster crows a few hours from now, you will have denied me 3 times."

"I will never deny you, even if I must die with you!"⁹ he had said. But he did.

When our eyes locked through the crowd, he fled from my presence in shame, weeping bitterly. Poor man. I knew the pain he would endure over the coming weeks until we would reconcile over breakfast on the beach. He would have to suffer in order to forgive himself and become a leader of my Church and a world-changer.

Little did they know that all this must happen (this mess, betrayal, suffering and atonement) to bring a new, better covenant between God and fallen mankind.

Little had my disciples known that I would be brutally nailed and hung on a tree, that my body would die, and I would descend into hell to do my work as mankind's sinless sacrifice. They didn't know that the earth would quake, graves would open, and the whole world would be filled with sadness, darkness, and even horror, or that I would be buried in Joseph's family tomb.

Little did they know that all the prophecies about the Messiah would be fulfilled through Me¹⁰ when I was gloriously resurrected¹¹ on the 3rd day, signaling victory over death and the Devil.

Little did they know then that what I did, I did willingly.

I can see it all, and it is good.

Little did they know this. But now they do.

⁷ For more information on Jewish wedding practices of Jesus' day, read the booklet *The Christian Love Story* by Zola Levitt.

⁸ Luke 22:42b.

⁹ Matthew 26:33-34.

¹⁰ For further study, see *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell and *the Case for Christ* by Lee Stoebe, also a motion picture.

¹¹ Matthew 28, Mark 15:46-47, Luke 24:2-3, Acts 3:15, 4:3.

And many, many more like you will know that what I suffered, I endured willingly.



Key Verses

The Father has an intense love for me because I freely give my own life – to raise it up again. I surrender my own life, and no one has the power to take my life from me. I have the authority to lay it down and the power to take it back again. This is the destiny my Father has set before me.

John 10:17-18 TPT

Reflection

Meditate on the reality of Jesus' story and His great love. Let even the painful and bloody parts of the story sink in. See His eyes of love for you as he suffers.

Now turn your thoughts toward the resurrection. Bring your doubts to the Father and let Him talk to you. He loves to reveal Himself to us, just as He did to His disciples from behind locked doors 2,000 years ago.¹²

Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, my heart is filled with gratitude for the pain and humiliation You suffered on behalf of mankind. Oh, how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ!¹³ Thank You for paving the way for me to spend eternity with You in heaven. May Your story become my story. In Jesus' name, amen.

Photo credit- Lisa Thornberg, Getty Images

¹² John 20:19

¹³ Ephesians 3:18-19.

Addendum

Appendix A - How to Have a Personal Relationship with God

Appendix B - Who I Am in Christ?

Appendix C - How to Set Yourself Up for Victory

Appendix D - What's Your Story?

Appendix A

How to Have a Personal Relationship with God

Have you been reading these stories and wondering, *how could I have a close and personal relationship with the God of the universe like those people?* Or maybe you're still not 100% sure that God really exists.

Most of us spend our days forced to make decisions about trivial matters such as, *which hair style will be next? What will we have for dinner tonight? What shall I name my dog?* Other questions are more important, like what to study at university. Then there's the huge decision about who to marry.

These questions all matter. But in the daily grind of life it is easy to neglect the most important questions of all time. We spend countless hours researching topics to satisfy our curiosity. Yet we often fail to give due diligence in finding out the truth of our Creator. These are the most important questions because they have eternal consequences.

*What do I believe about God, and will I put my trust in Him?
If God is real, and He made me, then why?
What is the purpose of life?*

If you are still not sure if God exists, why not ask Him to prove Himself to you. You can pray with a hungry, humble heart and say something like this;

Dear God, if You are real, please show Yourself to me. I've always doubted but something tells me I need to find out the truth about whether You exist, or not. Please! Show Yourself to me. Show me this Jesus, the Son of God. Help me to realize it's You. If You are real, then I'll give my life to You! Amen.

Now get ready because when you least expect it, God will speak and reveal Himself to you. Get a Bible in a modern translation and then ask God to speak to you through His Word. He speaks to each person differently. The Bible says in Jeremiah 29:11-14 (NIV), "*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the LORD.*"

You're not alone. People all over the world are seeking these answers. The Alpha course is a wonderful way to investigate questions such as *Who is Jesus?* And, *How can I have faith?* And, *How does God guide us?* To find about more about Alpha, go to alpha.org. These gatherings are a safe place to investigate the questions that really matter in life. And you'll make some new friends along the way!

I'm Ready to Find Peace with God

So you're ready to say "yes!" to God (the Father, the Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit). You will find a peace that you've never experienced before. Your life will take new and unexpected turns. It may be scary and hard at times, but you'll have a new foundation which you will be able to withstand every storm. It is a huge comfort that we are not left alone in this world. When Jesus was leaving this world in Matthew 28:20 TPT, He said, "*And never forget that I am with you every day, even to the completion of this age.*"

If you are ready to take this next step, please go to PeaceWithGod.net of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Your life will never be the same.

Please read on to discover and affirm what God says in the Bible about who you are.

Appendix B

WHO AM I?

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Matt. 5:13 | I am the salt of the earth. |
| Matt. 5:14 | I am the light of the world. |
| John 1:12 | I am a child of God (part of His family). (see Romans 8:16) |
| John 15:1,5 | I am part of the true vine, a channel (branch) of His (Christ's) life. |
| John 15:15 | I am Christ's friend. |
| John 15:16 | I am chosen and appointed by Christ to bear His fruit. |
| Acts 1:8 | I am a personal witness of Christ for Christ. |
| Rom. 6:18 | I am a slave of righteousness. |
| Rom. 6:22 | I am enslaved to God. |
| Rom. 8:14,15 | I am a son of God (God is my 'daddy' so to speak). (see Galatians 3:26; 4:6) |
| Rom.8:17 | I am a joint-heir with Christ sharing His inheritance with Him. |
| I Cor. 3:16; 6:19 | I am a temple (home) of God. His Spirit (His life) dwells in me. |
| I Cor. 6:17 | I anointed (united) to the Lord and am one spirit with Him. |
| I Cor. 12:27 | I am a member (part) of Christ's body. (see Ephesians 5:30) |
| II Cor. 5:17 | I am a new creation (new person). |
| II Cor. 5:18,19 | I am reconciled to God and am a minister of reconciliation. |
| Gal. 3:26,28 | I am a son of God and one in Christ. |
| Gal. 4:6,7 | I am an heir of God since I am a son of God. |
| Eph. 1:1 | I am a saint. (see I Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1; Col.1:2) |
| Eph. 2:10 | I am God's workmanship (handiwork) created (born anew) in Christ to do His work that He planned beforehand that I should do. |
| Eph. 2:19 | I am a fellow citizen with the rest of God's people in His family. |
| Eph. 3:1/4:1 | I am a prisoner of Christ. |
| Eph. 4:24 | I am righteous and holy. |
| Phil. 3:20 | I am a citizen of heaven and seated in heaven right now (see Ephesians 2:6). |
| Col. 3:3 | I am hidden with Christ in God. |
| Col. 3:4 | I am an expression of the life of Christ because He is my life. |
| Col.3:12 | I am chosen of God, holy, and dearly loved. |
| I Thes. 1:4 | I am chosen and dearly loved by God. |
| I Thes. 5:5 | I am a son of light and not of darkness. |
| Heb. 3:1 | I am a holy brother/sister, partaker of a heavenly calling. |
| Heb. 3:14 | I am a partaker of Christ... I share in His life. |
| I Pet. 2:5 | I am one of God's living stones and am being built-up (in Christ) as a spiritual house. |
| I Pet. 2:9,10 | I am a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession to proclaim the excellences of Him. |
| I Pet. 2:11 | I am an alien and stranger to this world I temporarily live in. |
| I Pet. 5:8 | I am an enemy of the devil. |
| I John 3:1.2 | I am now a child of God. I will resemble Christ when He returns. |
| I John 5:18 | I am born of God, and the evil one (the devil) can't touch me. |
| Psalms 23&100 | I am a sheep of His pasture. Therefore, I have everything I need. |

How to Set Yourself Up for Victory

The following is an article by Billy Graham entitled [10 Guidelines for Christian Living](#) taken from the Billy Graham Library.

Whether we are playing a game, driving a car, or baking a cake, there are certain rules that must be followed for our safety as well as our success.

The Bible teaches that the Christian life is one of constant growth. When you were born again, you were born into God's family. It is God's purpose and will that you grow into full stature and become mature in Christ. It would be against the law of God and nature if you were to remain a baby and thus become a spiritual dwarf. In 2 Peter 3:18, the Bible says that we are to grow. It implies steady development, constant enlargement and increasing wisdom.

For one to grow properly certain rules must be observed for good spiritual health.

1. *Read your Bible daily.* Do not be content to skim through a chapter merely to satisfy your conscience. Hide the Word of God in your heart. It comforts, guides, corrects, encourages – all we need is there.
2. *Learn the secret of prayer.* Prayer is communicating. Every prayer that you pray will be answered. Sometimes that answer may be “Yes” and sometimes “No,” and sometimes it is “Wait,” but nevertheless it will be answered.
3. *Rely constantly on the Holy Spirit.* We know that the Holy Spirit prays for us (Romans 8), and what a comfort that should be to the weakest of us. Stand aside and let Him take over all the choices and decisions of your life.
4. *Attend church regularly.* The visible church is Christ's organization upon earth. Christians need one another, we need to gather together to worship God and nothing can take the place of church attendance.
5. *Be a witnessing Christian.* We witness in two ways: by life and by word – and the two, where possible, should go hand in hand.
6. *Let love be the ruling principle of your life.* Jesus said to those who followed Him, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). The greatest demonstration of the fact that we are Christians is that we love one another.
7. *Be an obedient Christian.* Let Christ have first place in all the choices of your life.
8. *Learn how to meet temptation.* Temptation is not sin. It is *yielding* that is sin. Let Christ through the Holy Spirit do the fighting for you.
9. *Be a wholesome Christian.* Our lives and appearance should commend the Gospel and make it attractive to others.
10. *Live above your circumstances.* Don't let your circumstances get you down. Learn to live graciously within them, realizing the Lord Himself is with you.

Guidelines for Christian Living is excerpted from [“Peace with God”](#) by Billy Graham, published in 1953, revised and expanded in 1984.

What's Your Story?

Learn to Share Your Own Story

I trust you have been inspired by the stories in this book. I hope you now have a desire to share your own personal narrative. Perhaps you don't know where to begin.

I want to give you tips and support for building and communicating your story to the world, whether you want to share it with one person, or on social media. Please visit my website for tips and support as well as more of my stories - kelsiemullen.com.

We Want to Hear from You!

Have you been touched by this book? Please share your testimony on 39-Stories.com. Forward this book to friends and family. Look for us on Facebook and Instagram.

You Can Join the *39 Stories* Community!

Are you a leader reading this book and thinking, "I want my church or organization to do something like this!?" I believe storytelling is a key tool which God is using in the Great Commission of these last days. Antagonistic folk can argue with theology and morality, but it is very difficult to argue with someone's personal experience. My prayer is that your church or organization will get a vision to spread the Gospel boldly through the stories of your community. *Make sure they are recorded for the generations to come!*

This project has stretched us and taught us more than we ever imagined. It pushed us out of our comfort zone and disciplined us in communication, grace, patience and prayer. It may appear on first glance that this project was easy and simple. Let me just say, it wasn't and there were many times when I wanted to scream, "*What was I thinking?!*" Then God would send an encouraging word from someone, confirmation that we should keep going, or the strong sense that someone would read it and their lives would be changed forever. We had to push back the evil whispers saying, "You're wasting your time."

I want to help you. I have put together a leadership package for you called *The 39 Stories Challenge*. It contains all the tools we used in compiling this book including a step-by-step guide for building the vision, team of editors, the group of writers, the tasks for each, common pitfalls, and a tool kit for project management (story construction, editing photos and even counseling).

Download your copy today at 39-Stories.com.

