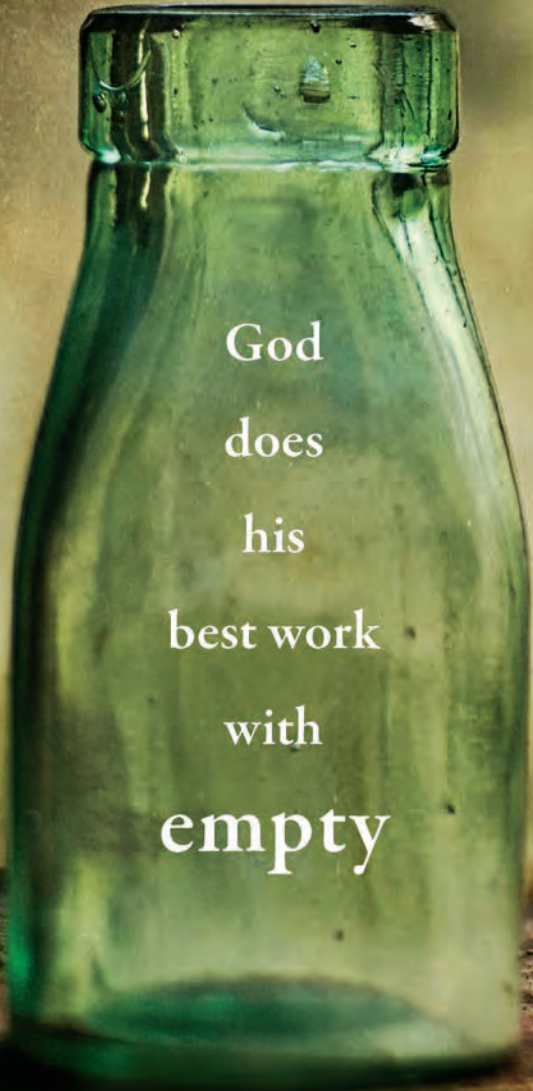


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A green glass bottle is the central focus of the image. It is empty and has a simple, rounded shape with a slightly wider base. The bottle is set against a dark, textured background that looks like a wooden surface or a wall. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong light source from the right, creating a bright highlight on the right side of the bottle and casting the left side into shadow. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

God
does
his
best work
with
empty

NANCY GUTHRIE

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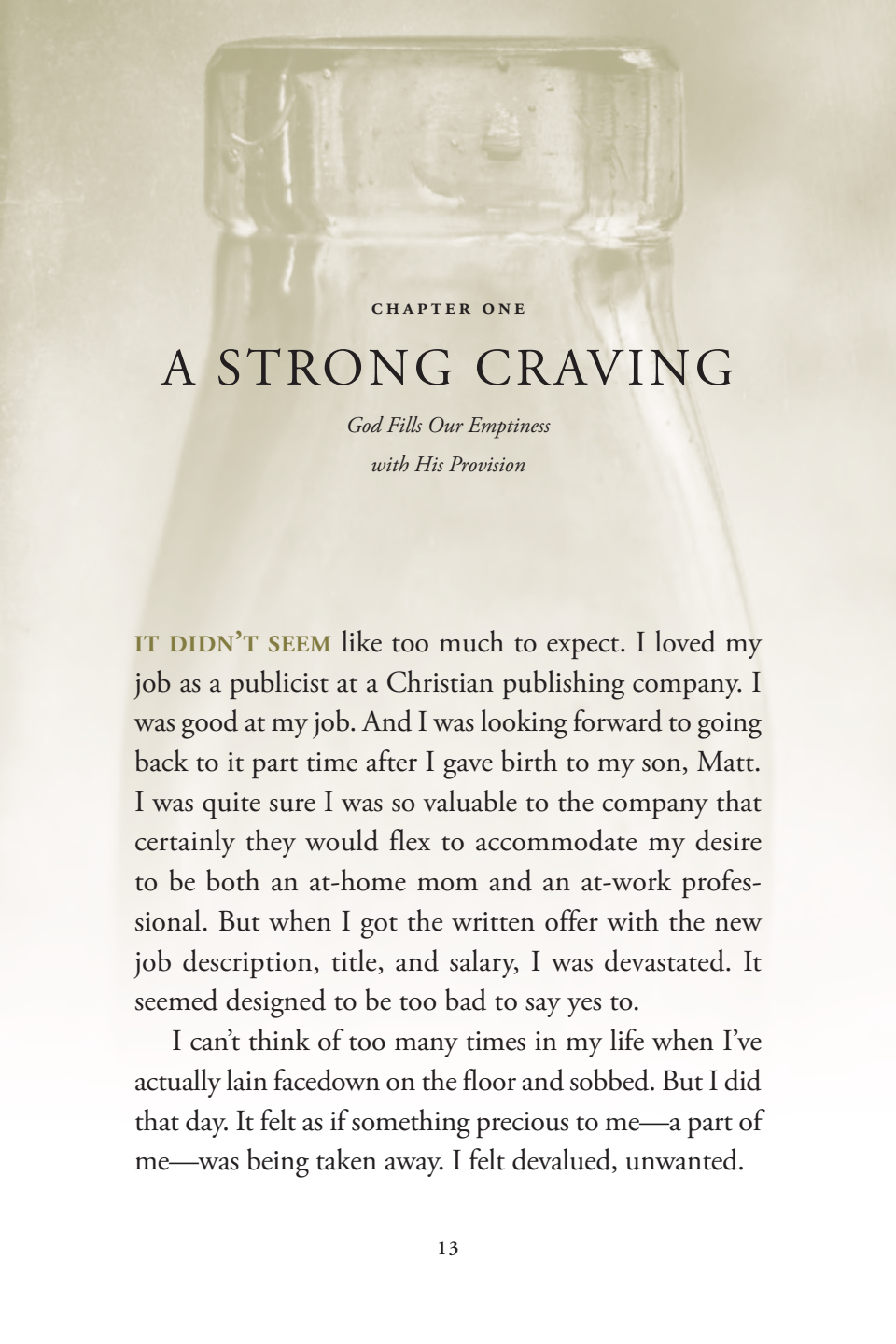
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CHAPTER ONE

A STRONG CRAVING

*God Fills Our Emptiness
with His Provision*

IT DIDN'T SEEM like too much to expect. I loved my job as a publicist at a Christian publishing company. I was good at my job. And I was looking forward to going back to it part time after I gave birth to my son, Matt. I was quite sure I was so valuable to the company that certainly they would flex to accommodate my desire to be both an at-home mom and an at-work professional. But when I got the written offer with the new job description, title, and salary, I was devastated. It seemed designed to be too bad to say yes to.

I can't think of too many times in my life when I've actually lain facedown on the floor and sobbed. But I did that day. It felt as if something precious to me—a part of me—was being taken away. I felt devalued, unwanted.

A short time later, floundering in the adjustments of new motherhood, I remember saying to my husband, David, “I want my old life back. I want my old job back. I want my old body back. I want my old relationship with you back.”

I believed what I was doing at home with Matt was important. But honestly, it just didn't *feel* important. I remember going into the office to clean out my things and finding a message on my desk that one of the publishing company's bestselling authors had called and was asking me to call him back. Now *that* made me feel important.

I had such a strong craving for something that seemed to hold the key to my happiness—being a valued part of that company, that team. And I couldn't imagine how that hunger was ever going to be satisfied by changing diapers and playing on the floor with an infant. I couldn't imagine how I was going to be happy without that work title after my name, that work paycheck being deposited to my account, and that work significance supporting my sense of self.

That craving dominated my life for quite a while, coloring my view of all of the goodness in my life. And I've had plenty of cravings since then, cravings for things that were out of reach, cravings for things I have been unable to make happen. I imagine you have too. We

are creatures of desire. We have wants. And sometimes those wants become cravings—cravings that cause us to lose perspective, cravings so strong that they become the knothole through which we see all of life.

That's how it was for the people of God who were rescued from slavery in Egypt. God rescued them so that they could live with him in his Promised Land, where he pledged to satisfy them with good things. He brought them to the edge of the land he had promised to give them, but they became afraid. They didn't trust him. So they ended up spending forty years in the wilderness. Forty years of in-between time in an inhospitable environment.

But God did not intend for their wilderness years to be wasted years. Rather, he intended to use their time in the wilderness to teach and train them. He intended for them to learn that he could be trusted to provide for his own. Forty years in the wilderness would give them time to live out that belief and depend on him day by day to meet their needs, even if he didn't assuage all of their cravings. There in the wilderness he gave them the opportunity to discover what they really needed more than what they craved.

We read their story of forty years in the wilderness in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. But we shouldn't read it merely as a story about distant,

disconnected people. What we must see is that their story is our story. If God has rescued you from slavery to sin through the blood of an innocent lamb—the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—and if by faith you have taken hold of God’s covenant promises to his people centered in the person of Jesus Christ, then the Israelites’ story is your story too.

Just as God did not intend for their years in the wilderness to be wasted, neither does God intend for the years you and I spend living in the empty wilderness of life in this world to be wasted. Just as he wanted to teach and train the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness, so he has something he wants to teach you and me, a way he wants to train us.

Hunger in the Wilderness

It was one month after the people had left Egypt, and evidently the thrill of escape was beginning to wear off.

“If only the LORD had killed us back in Egypt,” they moaned [to Moses]. “There we sat around pots filled with meat and ate all the bread we wanted. But now you have brought us into this wilderness to starve us all to death.”

EXODUS 16:3

Here's the first hint that their craving was robbing them of perspective. They were forgetting about the beatings, the backbreaking work, and the murder of their infant sons back in Egypt. And what was making them forget? Hunger. Their mouths were watering as they remembered the food they ate back in Egypt. But God, in fact, had not brought them into the wilderness to starve. He intended to provide for them.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Look, I'm going to rain down food from heaven for you. Each day the people can go out and pick up as much food as they need for that day. I will test them in this to see whether or not they will follow my instructions."

EXODUS 16:4

The Israelites were out in the desert where there was no food or water. And why were they there? Because God had led them there. It wasn't an accidental detour but rather a purposeful detour. He intended to test them. In other words, he was giving them the opportunity to live as if they had a relationship with the God of the universe, who was committed to taking care of them—a relationship expressed on their part by their willingness to trust and obey him.

When the dew evaporated, a flaky substance as fine as frost blanketed the ground. The Israelites were puzzled when they saw it. “What is it?” they asked each other. They had no idea what it was.

And Moses told them, “It is the food the LORD has given you to eat.”

EXODUS 16:14-15

The Hebrew word *man hu'*, or *manna*, means, “What is it?” That’s what the Israelites called this miraculous food that was sent to them by God every morning for forty years. “What’s for supper?” someone would ask, and the answer was always “What is it?” The manna was a daily miracle that lasted for forty years.

But it was also a daily test. The people could never store up manna for the next day. Every morning, as they gathered just enough for that day, they had the opportunity to demonstrate that they trusted God to provide for them tomorrow too. They had the opportunity to live by faith.

And really, as we find ourselves living here in the wilderness of the world, we’re put to the same test. In fact, perhaps that is why God has allowed us to experience the emptiness we feel. Perhaps we’re being put to the test. Or another way to look at it is this:

God is giving us the opportunity to live out what we say we believe.

God intends to use this time in our lives to train us to trust that he will provide what we need, when we need it. Have you said that the God of the Bible is your God? Here in the wilderness is where you have the opportunity to live that out. As you trust him to supply what you really need and refuse to grumble about his provision, you demonstrate that the faith you claim is genuine and not merely a convenient or culturally acceptable alliance.

We catch up with the Israelites in the book of Numbers. It's about a year later, and we discover that even though they had been waking up to manna delivered outside their tents every morning, they were grumbling again.

God intends to use this time in our lives to train us to trust that he will provide what we need, when we need it.

Then the foreign rabble who were traveling with the Israelites began to crave the good things of Egypt. And the people of Israel also began to complain. "Oh, for some meat!" they exclaimed. "We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the

cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic we wanted. But now our appetites are gone. All we ever see is this manna!”

NUMBERS 11:4-6

Ah, so it's not that they had *nothing* to eat. It's that they wanted something to eat other than the manna God rained down on them every day. God was leading them to a land flowing with milk and honey, and feeding them day by day with bread from heaven. (And how do you think bread that is made in heaven tastes? Heavenly, of course!) But their mouths were watering for the leeks and melons back in Egypt.

Often people say that if God would do a miracle, then they would believe in him. Perhaps you think that if God would simply supply what you are hungry for, then you would be more inclined to trust him going forward. You would love him rather than resent him. But the history of Israel is the story of people who experienced miracles on a massive scale, including the daily miracle of manna waiting for them outside their tents, yet did not trust God. They refused to love him with all of their hearts, souls, and strength. Instead of believing in him, they rebelled against him. As Dr. Tuck Bartholomew says, “They became one-dimensional people who thought about life only

through the knothole of their craving.”³ Their desire for more variety in their diet became a demand that blinded them to anything and everything else. They couldn’t see the goodness of God literally raining down on them because they were consumed by their craving.

Many of us have cravings that blind us so we can’t see all that God has done for us and all he has given to us. Yes, we appreciate salvation and all that, but what we *really* crave is to be thin, to have a nicer house in a better neighborhood, to be elevated to a position with more authority and opportunity, to have a child or to be able to change the child we’ve got.

For the Israelites, everything was about food. What is everything about for you? Are you allowing that craving to be the knothole through which you view all of life, causing you to lose sight of God’s goodness?⁴

Consider what the Israelites were craving: the culinary delights of Egypt. They were entertaining the idea of going back to Egypt, the place that had literally been killing them, all because their food cravings could be satisfied there. They were facing a clear choice: Would they follow their cravings back into the slavery of Egypt, or would they be satisfied for now, accepting and enjoying God’s provision, believing that he would supply their needs, if not all of their cravings, while they lived in this in-between time in the wilderness? Would they

demand that God give them everything they craved in the here and now, or would they allow their hunger to fuel their longing for the day when they would feast with God in the land of milk and honey?

And, of course, we face the same clear choice. God is putting us to the same test.

He is giving us the opportunity to reject what the world offers as we wait for what is to come.

The day is coming when the dissatisfaction that is inherent to life in the wilderness will be gone for good.

As we live out our days in the wilderness of the world, we have the opportunity to wean our appetites away from the things the world provides that temporarily satisfy our taste buds but actually rob us of life and freedom.

We'll make our home in God's eternal land, the new heaven and new earth, and we'll never go hungry again. But here and now, as we live out our days in the wilderness of the world, we have the opportunity to wean our appetites away from the things the world provides that temporarily satisfy our taste buds but actually rob us of life and freedom. We have the opportunity to feed on the bread that God provides so that we develop our appetites for what truly nourishes and gives life.

Developing a New Appetite

The Israelites had forty years to develop their appetites for what would really satisfy them. In fact, when the next generation was preparing to enter into the Promised Land, Moses explained to them that this was exactly why God had allowed his people to experience hunger in the wilderness in the first place.

Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

DEUTERONOMY 8:2-3

Evidently it wasn't an accident that they went some time without food and felt the discomfort of hunger before God sent the manna. What they perceived as lack or emptiness was actually a gift that would help them learn something. By depending upon God's promise to

provide manna day by day, the Israelites were to learn that “we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

What were the words that come from the mouth of the Lord that they were to live by? God’s promise to give them the land; his promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience; his assurance that the law was for their good always; his instructions for sacrifice and sanctification, feasts, and festivals; and the announcement of his intention to bless the whole world through them.

As the Word of God begins to change how we think, we discover that it is also changing how we feel. In fact, we discover that it is actually changing what we want.

Of course we have so much more revelation from God than they had. They had the words from God that Moses had delivered to them, but we have the whole of the Bible. So then, what does it mean for you and me to “live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD”? It means that we are meant to consume what God has provided to

us in his Word by reading it and hearing it preached. We have to chew on it. We have to work its nourishment into our system. We have to think! We find ourselves provided for and strengthened as we think

through Scripture's implications and applications and as we figure out what it will look like for us to begin living in light of its truth. And as the Word of God begins to change how we think, we discover that it is also changing how we feel. In fact, we discover that it is actually changing what we want.

For example, we read in the Psalms:

The LORD God is our sun and our shield.

He gives us grace and glory.

The LORD will withhold no good thing
from those who do what is right.

O LORD of Heaven's Armies,

what joy for those who trust in you.

PSALM 84:11-12

Instead of rushing through the passage or discounting it, we begin to meditate on it and tease out its implications. We think about what it means to have Jesus as the one who shines light into our lives so we can see and grow, and what it means to have him as our shield, protecting us, guarding our lives from the enemy of our souls. We begin to think through the many times we've witnessed God give grace to people who don't deserve it—both people in our lives and those we read about in Scripture—and the times in which he has extended

grace to us over the course of our lives. We consider the ways in which we can testify that it is really true that the Spirit of Christ has been at work in our lives making us more like Christ, the ways in which he is giving his own glory to us.

Further, as we read and linger on the line, “The Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right,” we remember that we read the whole of the Bible through the lens of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We’re comforted in knowing that we can expect that the Lord will withhold no good thing from us, not because we have always done what is right but because Jesus has always done what is right, and when we come to him in faith, he transfers his perfect record of obedience to us. Then we think through what the psalmist might mean by “good thing,” and we let the reality settle in our souls that God knows what is good better than we do. As we mull the words over in our minds, it becomes clearer to us that since the Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right, whatever he has withheld from us is because it would not be best for us, or because now is not the right time for us to have it. We experience joy trusting in the Lord as our provider.

In other words, rather than feeding on our disappointment and frustration, we choose to chew on nourishing truth. Instead of feeding on social media, where

we are bombarded with images of what other people have that has so far been withheld from us, we feed on God's promises of his intentions to do good to us.

So I have to ask you: How's your diet these days? What are you feeding on? Are you allowing your appetite to be developed by the Word of God, or is it mostly shaped by what Egypt has to offer and tells you you must have? God is providing you with an opportunity during these years spent living in the wilderness:

He is giving you the opportunity to discover what you really need, rather than being consumed by what you crave.

Oh, how I wish I would have grasped this in those early days of motherhood when I was so consumed by my craving for significance through my job. How I wish I would have had a heart to learn all that God intended to teach me in those wilderness years that seemed so mundane. He was giving me the opportunity to discover that my significance can never really be dependent on a title or a paycheck. It has to come from him. Jesus alone is the only thing I must have in this world to be happy. As I feed on him, I continue to find that he is what I really need.

If you and I feed only on our own thoughts and feelings, we'll grumble and grow resentful. But as we feed on the Word of God, we'll grow in gratitude for all that

God has provided, and we'll grow in anticipation for all that is yet to be provided.

Another Test of Hunger in the Wilderness

We would like to be able to look back at the family history we read about in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and discover that our spiritual ancestors learned what they were meant to learn in the wilderness, that they developed an appetite for God's Word that continued when they moved into the land God provided for them. But they didn't. Instead, when they moved into Canaan, they began to consume all of the idolatry the Canaanites served up to them.

Ultimately, the people of Israel, whom God referred to as his "firstborn son," failed the test of the wilderness. So God sent another Son. And he let this Son experience hunger in the wilderness too.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread."

But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say,

‘People do not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth
of God.’”

MATTHEW 4:1-4

God let Jesus hunger in the wilderness, not for forty years, but for forty days. But instead of grumbling, instead of accusing God of bringing him out into the wilderness to let him die, instead of taking it into his own hands to provide for himself, Jesus trusted in God’s provision. Jesus demonstrated that he had spent the previous thirty years of his life feeding on every word that comes from the mouth of God, and it strengthened him for facing hunger in the wilderness with faith that God would provide what he needed.

Hunger on the Hillside

A day came when Jesus found himself in front of a hungry crowd. It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover celebration, the time when the people feasted in celebration of the rescue God had accomplished through Moses centuries before. So Jesus used the timely opportunity to give them a sign about who he is and why he came.

Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks to God, and distributed them to the people. Afterward he did the same with the fish. And they all ate as much as they wanted.

JOHN 6:11

As the people experienced the miracle of provision, they began to think that Jesus was another Moses, that the miracle that took place in the wilderness for forty years was beginning again. So the next day, they got into boats and crossed the Sea of Galilee to get to Capernaum, hopeful that Jesus would repeat the miracle of the previous day.

“Show us a miraculous sign if you want us to believe in you. What can you do? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! The Scriptures say, ‘Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, Moses didn’t give you bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

“Sir,” they said, “give us that bread every day.”

Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again.”

JOHN 6:30-35

The people were correct to relate the miracle that happened in their day to the story of what happened in Moses’ day. But they were missing the point of the miracle. They were missing what the sign was pointing to. Jesus isn’t merely the conduit of God’s promise of bread, as Moses was. Jesus *is* the bread. And Jesus was standing there offering himself to them.

Now what would have made sense at this point was for them to come to him—in fact, run to him. But instead, they did something that sounds very familiar to us, having just read the story of their ancestors—our ancestors—in the wilderness. They grumbled.

[Jesus said,] “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is my flesh.”

Then the people began arguing with each other about what he meant. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they asked.

So Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day.”

JOHN 6:51-54

At this point, many of those who had been following Jesus turned away and deserted him. They only wanted bread from Jesus, not Jesus as bread. They were thinking that Jesus would be useful in their pursuit of the life they wanted, but they didn't really want *him*. They just wanted what they thought he could give to them.

And when we read this, we can't help but see ourselves in these people. We think life—the good life—will come when Jesus gives us what we want, what we think we need. And just as he did with these people in Capernaum, he presses the issue with us to the point of offense. Jesus stands offering himself to us, and he's asking, “Will you feed on my atoning death as your life? Will you abide in me, feed on me, commune with me? Will you love me? Will you nurture your craving for me rather than insisting on having what you crave?”

Perhaps we're not as immediately dismissive of Jesus' offer of himself as the people were that day in

Capernaum. We may be more polite, yet our attitudes and actions often say, “Jesus, thank you. I respect you and appreciate the offer. But if you really want to be helpful, you would add to my bank account, or add to my family, or add to the estimation others have of me.” And Jesus looks us in the eyes and says, “Don’t you understand? If you don’t feed on me, you will starve to death. But as you feed on me, you take my own unlimited, unstoppable, unending life into yourself.”

What a tragedy it would be for Jesus to supply everything on our wish lists yet leave our deepest need unmet, for him to shower us with what we want yet leave us empty of what we really need.

How Will You Feed Your Hunger?

My friend, I wish I could tell you that God is going to rain down whatever it is that you are so hungry for. I wish I could tell you that he is going to miraculously provide so that you will be filled. There are others who will say that. They’ll tell you that if you have enough faith and pray the right prayer and speak the right words, then you will get your miracle. But we see all over Scripture that that just isn’t true. I cannot tell you that your need is going to be met in the way and timing you are hoping and praying it will be met. No one can.

But what I can tell you is this: If you are hungry, God

is letting you hunger for a good purpose. God is giving you the opportunity to live out what you say you believe. God is strengthening you by forcing you to reckon with the inability of the things of this world to fill you up and their tendency, instead, to enslave you. God is seeking to retrain your appetite toward what you really need, what will truly satisfy and sustain you, what will infuse your life with lasting significance. God is whispering to you, or perhaps shouting to you in your emptiness, “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

Are you open to that? Or does that just sound like an empty religious answer that will leave you continuing to crave?

I can think of times when I have felt as if someone were giving me the pat answer, the spiritualized answer that I was certain I saw right through. I was quite sure that I was hearing just another worn-out version of “Get close to God by reading your Bible and praying” that simply would not work. At least I didn’t think it would work for me. And maybe you think that what I’m saying to you right now is just a pat answer that you’ve heard before and that is really no answer at all. Perhaps you think there is no way that something as spiritual-sounding as feeding on Christ day by day, hour by hour, would have any power to address your deep need.

But perhaps that’s because you’ve never really tried

it. Perhaps you've dabbled in it but never truly feasted on him. I wish I could look you in the eyes when I tell you that it is true that as we begin to chew on "every word that comes from the mouth of God"—not just by checking off a daily Bible reading, but by tearing off huge chunks of Scripture to think about, figure out, pray through, and submit to—we find that our cravings don't have as much power over us as they once did. As we make time day by day to simply savor who Jesus is and all he has done, is doing, and will do for us, rather than rushing through a fast-food meal of Netflix, Internet scrolling, and other diversions, we find ourselves tasting and seeing that the Lord is good. It's not that we're not hungry anymore; it's that our appetites are changing. We are discovering that Jesus is not someone we use to get a feast that's to our liking. Rather, Jesus is the feast.

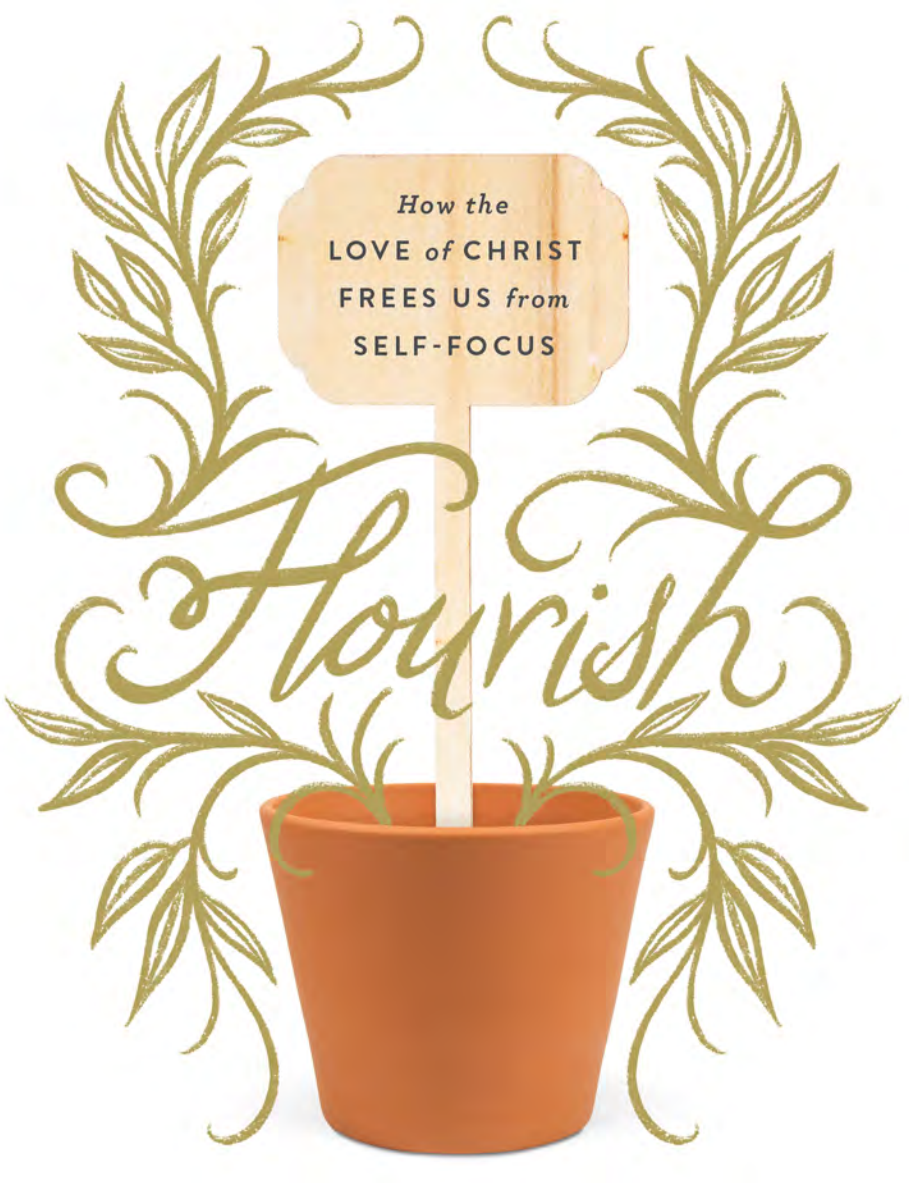
As you feed on his obedient life, you'll lose your appetite for perfection and performance. As you feed on his sacrificial death, you'll be able to enjoy drawing close to God rather than living in fear of being under the judgment of God. And as you feed on his victorious resurrection, anchoring your hopes in the resurrection body that will be given to you, the heavenly inheritance that will be granted to you, and the eternal life that will be extended to you one day, you'll find that you stop

expecting that this world could ever fill you up with its limited offerings. Every time you participate in eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord's Supper, rather than rushing through it mindlessly, you'll savor the taste on your tongue, allowing it to fill you with anticipation of the greater feast to come, when the Lord "will spread a wonderful feast for all the people of the world. It will be a delicious banquet with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat" (Isaiah 25:6).

I want and need my appetites to be retrained toward that feast more and more each day. Don't you?

You and I live in a day when high-protein or high-fat diets have made bread the enemy of our weight-management goals. So perhaps when we hear Jesus offer himself as the Bread of Life, we think we'll stick with the low-carb option. But for the Israelites in the wilderness, and for the people in Capernaum, to not have bread to eat was to starve. To say no to bread was not merely to live a diminished life; it was to have no life. The options were to eat this bread or starve to death.

And really, my friend, it is the same for us. We feed on this bread, the person and work of Jesus Christ, or we starve in the wilderness of this world. You see, it is not just that nothing else will fill up our emptiness; it's that nothing else will nourish our souls. Nothing else can provide the life we are so hungry for.



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Discern

Whatever the issue—our appearance, our family, our home, our kids—we quench the joy of our faith and mar our witness of Christ if we live self-conscious lives. It seems counterintuitive, but happiness comes not from being thought well of but by thinking less of ourselves altogether.

Body and Soul

Not all of us have children to raise or homes to furnish, but we all have bodies to present to the world on a daily basis. Living, as we do, in a society where youth and muscle tone are icons of success, the temptation to measure up can be enormous. We are well aware of the pressures put on women by society, and those of us who know God's Word seek to combat them by regularly cultivating an eternal perspective. We turn to verses such as 1 Timothy 4:8, where Paul writes, "While bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way." Even so, we may find ourselves giving too much thought and too many dollars and too much time to how we look.

I grew up on the tail end of that first skinny-obsessed generation. Twiggy came along in the 1960s, effectually abolishing the Marilyn Monroe hourglass ideal, and eventually the Twiggy trend led to full-fledged emaciated heroin chic in the 1990s. Girls in my generation got hooked by all this, and many of us have never become unhooked. Additionally, significant scientific developments during these decades opened our eyes to the health dangers of a high-fat diet, obesity, and a sedentary lifestyle. To this day we are tempted to define our well-being by our body weight. And adopting the cultural standard, we use *thin* and *toned* as synonyms for *successful* and *godly*.

Even so, worldly influence isn't our only challenge to a right understanding of biblical discipleship. Equally influential is how that

worldly influence has infiltrated our churches. Common on many a church's activities list today are exercise classes with names like "Body and Soul Fitness." These are basically the same fitness programs offered at any gym, but they are rebranded as Christian by contemporary praise music and an emphasis on good health for the glory of God. It all sounds great. Exercise is indeed valuable, as Paul said, and we do bring glory to God by taking care of our physical bodies. And how better to do so than in company with other believers all spinning and stretching to praise tunes?

But there's a bit more to consider. First is the context of Paul's words about exercise:

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. (1 Tim. 4:7-8)

What sticks in our minds is the middle of this passage—"bodily training is of some value." We see it as biblical endorsement for regular workouts. But Paul's point here is something quite different. He was trying to clear up confusion caused by false teachers about the nature of true godliness. Believers in his day were wrestling with false teaching that equated strict self-denial—also called "asceticism"—with godliness. In other words, self-denial and suppressing bodily appetites were supposedly a mark of true godliness. So Paul here is instructing Timothy to counter that lie with the truth that strict bodily discipline and godliness don't necessarily go hand in hand. Exercise is good and godliness is good, but they aren't bound up together. In fact, only one is a necessity, spiritually speaking.

The majority of these "Body and Soul" classes have no intention of promoting the heresy of Paul's day; even so, they can

create an environment that is conducive to drifting that way. Another potential danger of such classes is how they can impact our view of God's Word. Choreographing exercise classes to Scripture passages can unwittingly trivialize God's Word, and our understanding of biblical discipleship can become warped.

In a different epistle Paul *does* set forth the merits of bodily discipline (see 1 Cor. 9:27). Even so, from the number of godly saints who suffer serious illnesses—both those who exercise and those who don't—it seems that God's concern for the shape and even the health of our bodies is radically different from ours.

Certainly it is God glorifying to take care of the body God has entrusted to us, but some of these exercise classes do little more than place a spiritual veneer over our efforts to feel good about ourselves. If we participate in this sort of exercise program, let's think about how we are being affected by it. Are we fired up at the end of class, awash in the sweaty glow of an endorphin high, to run out and evangelize or race home to read Scripture and pray? Perhaps, but more likely, we simply bask in how good we feel and get on with our day. And while that good feeling is a blessing, sometimes it's there because the workout has provided us a quick fix for the next time we're assailed by the relentless question, *What will people think of me?*

Exercise classes are the drug of choice for many a self-consciousness junkie. And the remedy for many of them isn't to stop asking the question—*What will people think of me?*—but simply to shape how it's answered.

Perception Management

Another popular attempt to remedy the anxiety of self-consciousness lies in the opposite direction. Rather than winning people's approval, we try to elevate ourselves above caring

what others think of us. But contrary to popular teaching, this is no remedy; it's simply self-consciousness hiding behind a defensive shield.

Scan some popular websites, and you'll find endless how-tos for perception management, cultivating self-love, and engaging in positive self-talk, many of them directed at teens. What are we imbibing, and what message are we instilling in our daughters? And how much of either is rooted in Scripture? We cannot assume that material labeled "Christian" is actually biblical, but discerning truth from error is a challenge, especially when truth is mixed with error. A well-meaning author, seeking to encourage girls who struggle with a low self-opinion, guides her readers to think of themselves in light of who Jesus is:

This is who I am:

I am a sinner—elaborately flawed by my own self. I screw up consistently, so much so that some days I don't even realize how much I have sinned.

But I am saved and forgiven and enough. I am worthy and valuable and significant—not because of anything I did, but because Jesus has deemed me His.¹

Good stuff there, which the author draws from Genesis 1:31: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." The mistake she makes is building her advice on this alone, leaving out the Bible's overarching storyline. As a result, her encouraging words actually lead her readers away from truth, which is clear from what she writes next:

Sometimes I like to dream about what the world would look like if we all chose to believe that how God made us is entirely good enough. And then I go one step further and start to dream about what the world would look like if we not only

believed we were enough, but believed that who we are is just plain good.²

The big picture of the Bible shows us that God's good creation was marred when sin entered the world. From that point on, every person is, from birth, just like the apostle Paul, who wrote, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18). God did indeed make us "very good," but if this is all that readers are given, they won't find the help and hope they need.

I get what the author is trying to do here and that she means well, but we have to be careful of any teaching, no matter how small a portion, that runs counter to something in Scripture. The young women who read the article are left believing that salvation makes *them* good rather than that salvation is how *Christ's* goodness is given to them. Truth plus error does not equal partial truth; truth plus error equals error.

We cannot overcome self-consciousness by trying to become all we can be or by telling ourselves we are good. We overcome it by seeing the sin that underlies it, the *me* focus.

Flourish

The problem with self-consciousness isn't the emotional angst it produces or caring too much what others think of us. The problem is thinking too much about ourselves—period. Living in the freedom of self-forgetfulness begins with discernment. We begin by making a link between our self-conscious tendencies and what we are drinking in not only from our culture but also from teaching that misapplies God's Word to our day-in, day-out life. And we acknowledge that, ultimately, those influences capture us because our heart resonates with what they're pitching: personal well-being, success, and our neighbors'

admiration. Our self-consciousness is proof that we crave those things. God's Word clearly indicates that self-consciousness is bondage:

The fear of man lays a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe. (Prov. 29:25)

This proverb is addressed to people pleasers, to those who seek their well-being in the good opinion of others. But looking for well-being in people's opinions dislodges God from his rightful place in our hearts. He is the one we've been created to please.

Overcoming the Fear of Man

Ultimately, fear of man is a craving to please ourselves; we want people to admire us so we can feel valuable and important. But God is the One whose value and importance we are called to showcase. So the proverb sheds light on the people-pleasing problem. But it also shows us the path out. It is trust in the Lord that frees us from the snare of self-consciousness. If we shift our gaze away from ourselves and up to the Lord, we find that he is trustworthy and faithful to be all he has promised to be and to do all he has promised to do.

Something amazing happens as our trust grows: our thoughts are a lot less self-oriented, and there's new joy in living. We taste the freedom that comes from living under the gaze of One. He loves us, and we have nothing to prove because Christ proved everything for us.

As we trust, our focus on people changes too. We stop viewing others as a measure of ourselves but as people to love. We stop using them and begin serving them. We *are* meant to focus on others, just not with ourselves as the reference point. These are

the blessings of self-forgetfulness. A young woman named Ava modeled this for me.

I first met Ava about a decade ago at a church retreat for high school girls. She was a bit more reserved than some of her classmates but warm and friendly nevertheless. She was also one of the most naturally beautiful sixteen-year-olds I had ever seen. And she had a heart for God. That weekend began a friendship that lasted through Ava's college years. She suffered some painful circumstances during those years, but with each challenge, she sought to know the Lord better and serve him more faithfully. Ava and I lost touch after she graduated from college, but just recently she wrote me a note, and we arranged to meet at a local café. I was a bit nervous as I drove to meet her because the picture that had accompanied her note to me clearly indicated another challenge—she was completely bald. Her note had included no explanation for the baldness. Was it some new form of millennial chic, or did she have cancer?

When I arrived at the café, Ava was already there, and as she came toward me, it wasn't her bald head I noticed nearly so much as that lovely Ava smile, still the most eye-catching aspect of her person. Turns out she doesn't have cancer. Nor was she making a fashion statement. She has alopecia, a condition that brings about hair loss—in some cases, such as Ava's, total loss. "It's only hair," she said, "and the important thing is, I'm healthy." She went on to tell me how God has used this to deepen her faith and her commitment to serve him, and she talked joyfully about all the ways that's been happening. Ava's trust is deep—and she is utterly unself-conscious.

On the way home from our meeting, I wept, but not for Ava. I wept for how an hour in her company had exposed my sinful self-consciousness. I recalled how I'd panicked during a season of

middle-aged hair thinning a few years back. I'd cried. I'd prayed. I'd rushed to the dermatologist. I'd obsessed—all because my formerly thick hair had become a bit less thick. I continued to weep as I recalled the disappointment over the years on faces of friends whose homemade goodies I'd declined out of concerns rooted in vanity. I wept for the hours (days, weeks, months) lost to fixating on myself rather than on things that really matter—love for the Lord and for people. For years I'd mentored Ava, and that day she unknowingly mentored me.

Like Ava, the apostle Paul, one of most joyful people ever to walk this earth, lived free from the snare of self-consciousness. He didn't worry what people said or thought about him. Paul's focus was what people thought of Christ:

I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Jesus was Paul's whole reason for living, and because that was true, he saw his personal weaknesses as opportunities to show God's strength.

Jesus Christ was also Paul's whole *identity*, which he affirms in his letter to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

Paul defined himself by his union with Christ, not by the opinions of others or by ministry success or by personal characteristics or achievements. His Christ identity set him free from the life-leaching bondage of sinful self-consciousness and enabled him to practice what he preached: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8).

Christ is our identity too, if we’ve been united to him by faith. Sometimes we forget that. Some of us have never understood it. And it gets obscured by our naturally self-oriented hearts. Focusing upward and outward transforms us into women characterized by what Tim Keller calls “gospel-humility”:

The essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less. Gospel-humility is not needing to think about myself. . . . True gospel-humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself. In fact, I stop thinking about myself.³

Christ defines us, not other people. And what he thinks is all that really matters.

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Luke 12:4-7)

THE SOUL IN PARAPHRASE

A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems

Leland Ryken, editor

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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Caedmon's Hymn

CAEDMON (SEVENTH CENTURY)

Now we must praise the Keeper of Heaven's Kingdom,
The might of the Maker and his wisdom,
The work of the Glory-Father, when he of every
wonder,
The eternal Lord, the beginning established.

He first created for the sons of earth
Heaven as a roof, Holy Creator,
Then middle-earth the Protector of mankind,
Eternal Lord, afterwards made,
The earth for men, the Lord Almighty.



Notes on selected words. *Keeper*: guardian or ruler. *Might*: power. *The Maker*: could also be translated “the Measurer,” with architectural overtones. *Wisdom*: “mind-plans” in the original Old English, with the implication of thoughtful purpose and careful planning. *The Glory-Father*: God of glory. *Heaven* [line 6]: the sky. *Middle-earth*: standard term for earth in the Old and Middle English periods.

Commentary. This poem (originally written in Old English and here translated by Leland Ryken) is the oldest surviving poem in the English language. The story of its origin is as famous as the poem. The story was recorded by the Venerable Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the*

English People (c. 730). Caedmon was an illiterate farmhand residing at Whitby Abbey in northeast England. Whenever the harp was passed around the dining hall at feasts so residents of the abbey could take turns singing, Caedmon found an excuse to leave the meal early. On one of these occasions, Caedmon went to the barn and fell asleep. In a dream, he heard someone telling him to sing something. Caedmon replied that he did not know how to sing. "Sing about creation," the visitor replied. Thereupon Caedmon sang the song known as "Caedmon's Hymn." The new poetic gift never left Caedmon. English poetry thus began with a miracle of the word.

"Caedmon's Hymn" is an example of the artistic category that we can call "the simple as a form of beauty." Only nine lines long, the poem follows the biblical genre known as the psalm of praise. The content of the praise comes straight from the creation story in Genesis 1. It is an abbreviated account of that story, taking a wide-angle view of God's first creating the entire world and then the earth specifically as a provision for people.

The poem does three things that praise psalms typically do: (1) it begins with a formal call to praise God (the first stanza); (2) it provides a list or catalog of God's praiseworthy acts; and (3) it rounds off the praise with a note of closure in the last line. This simplicity is played off against two pleasing forms of stylistic formality and artistry. First, Caedmon loaded his poem with phrases and clauses that name the same phenomena with different words, a technique influenced by the biblical verse form of parallelism. Second, our spirit is elevated by exalted titles for God, a technique known as epithets. For example, the first epithet in the poem is *the Keeper of Heaven's Kingdom*.

Structurally the poem falls into complementary halves, as signaled by the stanzaic arrangement. The first stanza praises God's sovereignty in creating the entire cosmos, and the epithets for God accordingly stress his transcendence. The second stanza praises God's creative acts on behalf of humankind, as the cosmic imagery of the first stanza gives way to a vocabulary of earth and people.

The Dream of the Rood

ANONYMOUS (POSSIBLY EIGHTH CENTURY)

Listen, I will tell of the best of visions,
which came to me in the middle of the night. . . .
Lying there a long while,
in sorrow I beheld the Savior's tree,
until I heard it utter a sound;
the best of wood began to speak these words:

[The personified cross tells the story of the crucifixion:]

It was long ago—I still remember it—
that I was cut down from the edge of the forest,
ripped up by my roots. Strong enemies seized me there,
made me their spectacle, forced me to bear criminals. . . .
I was raised as a cross; I lifted up a mighty King,
the Lord of heaven; I did not dare to bend.
They pierced me with dark nails; I bear the scars,
the open wounds of hatred. . . .
They mocked us both together. I was drenched with blood
that flowed from that man's side after he had sent forth his
spirit. . . .

[The personified cross describes its present glory in the world:]

Now the time has come
when men will honor me far and wide
over the earth and all this glorious creation,
and pray to this beacon. On me the Son of God
suffered for a while. I am therefore glorious now,

The Dream of the Rood

and rise under the heavens, able to heal
each one of those who will reverence me. . . .

[The cross entrusts the speaker/dreamer with a task:]

Now I command you, my beloved man,
that you reveal this vision to men;
tell them in word that it is the tree of glory
on which almighty God suffered
for mankind's many sins
and Adam's ancient deeds.
Death he tasted there, yet God rose again
by his great might to help mankind.
He ascended into heaven. He will come again
to this middle-earth to seek mankind
on doomsday. . . .

[The speaker's testimony to the power of the cross:]

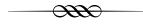
Then I prayed to the cross with a happy heart
and great zeal, where I was alone
with little company. My spirit was inspired
for the journey forward. . . .

It is now my life's hope
that I might seek the tree of victory
alone more than all men,
to honor it well. My desire for that
is much in my mind, and my hope of protection
is fixed on the cross. . . .

May the Lord be my friend,
he who here on earth suffered
on the hanging-tree for the sins of man.
He ransomed us and gave us life,
a heavenly home. . . .

The Son was victorious in that venture,
mighty and successful, when he came with a multitude,
a great host of souls, into God's kingdom,
the one Ruler almighty, to the joy of angels
and all the saints already in heaven,

dwelling in glory, when their Ruler,
almighty God, came to his rightful homeland.



Notes on selected words. *Rood*: cross. *The best of wood*: an epithet denoting the cross. *My beloved man*: the speaker in the poem; the one who received the vision that the poem records. *Adam's ancient deeds*: original sin; the disobedience in the garden and its effects in the world. *Middle-earth*: medieval designation for the earth. *Doomsday*: the judgment day, or last day.

Commentary. This poem was originally written in Old English and is here translated by Leland Ryken. The poem as printed here is excerpted from a longer poem.

The devotional potential of this poem lies in its theme, namely, the power of the cross. Everything in the poem relates to that. The poem draws upon a favorite genre of the Middle Ages known as the dream vision. This genre is prominent in the Bible and in subsequent literary history (with John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* being a famous example). In this genre, a speaker or narrator pictures himself as receiving a vision. This is only the external framework; the content of the imagined vision is what the poem is actually about. The opening lines of this poem introduce this visionary framework, as the speaker announces to us that he heard the cross of Christ speak to him in a dream.

After this opening, the poem unfolds in four movements, each one represented briefly in the excerpted version above. First the cross describes the circumstances of Christ's crucifixion; the devotional aspect is that we are led to ponder the physical suffering and torture of Christ's crucifixion. Next the cross asserts that glory has come to it because of the victory that Jesus achieved on the cross. Third, the cross charges the speaker/dreamer with the task of testifying about the cross in the world by declaring the gospel to humankind. The poem then reaches its climax in the concluding section, where the speaker testifies to what the cross means to him in his journey of life. At the very end of this section, the poem draws upon

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In the Image of God He Created Them

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26–27

“It was a dark and stormy night. Then your mother announced, ‘The baby is coming!’” And so begins my own birth story in which my parents had to drive across a bridge to reach the hospital while a snowstorm was brewing (we made it).

Your birth story is no doubt different than mine. After all, the end result of the birth story is *you*, a unique human being. There is a birth story we all share, however. It's the story of the birth of mankind. It starts like this . . .

Once upon a time, before there was time, there was God.

Independent of everything and everyone—God exists. In perfect holiness, diversity, and love, the triune God lives forever.

And then, in the beginning, God created everything you can see and everything you can't see . . . out of nothing. We read the story of creation in Genesis 1. God spoke things into existence: "Let there be . . ." He made the earth, space, time, light, land, and plants. And then he filled it all in—sun, moon, stars, sea and flying creatures, and land animals. It was all good.

Then the Creator did something different. With intimate care and attention, he "formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7). But a helper fit for the man was not found among everything God had made. "So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man" (Gen. 2:21–22). When the man awoke and saw her, the man burst into song:

This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man. (Gen. 2:23)

There they were—two complementary imagers of equal dignity and value—distinctly designed to fit together in unity with a procreative purpose (Mal. 2:15). God saw everything that he had made, and it was *very* good. From the outside in, God

created and filled the cosmos, and the epitome of his creative work was his image bearers—man and woman.

A Wonder-Full Thought

Whether you are a brand-new mother or a mother of twelve, it is astonishing that God would grow another one (or more!) of his image bearers in your womb. Though the child is made up of your DNA and bears resemblance to you, he or she is foremost an image bearer of the triune God. As are you.

Pause for a minute to notice the swirling arcs on your fingers. Be conscious of your lungs filling with air, your heart pumping blood through your blood vessels, and your brain controlling your body's functions (even as you sleep). Your life is no accident. Someone is purposefully holding you together (Col. 1:17). Both you and your unborn child belong to the Lord, you are his imagers, and you exist for his glory. As God's imagers we have the unparalleled privilege and responsibility of representing him to the watching cosmos in every capacity he has designed for us.

I know all of this can be hard to understand on a Thursday afternoon. You've got a dozen things on your mind right now, and besides, God is infinite and his ways are above our ways. How can humans think about such things? After all, we are merely physical creatures who are earthbound in our limited comprehension. *But is that all we are?*

Could it be that the Creator of all things had something wonderful in his mind when he made man and woman? Something that shows us how glorious *he* is? God could have charged the six-winged seraphim with representing him to the watching cosmos, yet he fashioned a man out of dust and a woman from the man's rib. Our mammalian lungs could have just simply filled with oxygen like those in the animal realm, yet the Lord

chose to breathe into the man his breath of life. Something profound is going on here—something beyond what we can see with the retinas and corneas in our eyes. We would do well to take more time to think about such things, following the dust in the sunbeams up to the sun.

All-You-Can-Eat Truth

Where else can we go to learn about the One for whom we were made but to God's very Word? Through God's gift of medicine, a world of knowledge about fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth is at our disposal to help us nurture both our own bodies and those blooming within our wombs. But when we are looking for spiritual nourishment, we have to dig into the Bible.

And so that's where we will continue to look. The Bible is a buffet with plenty of soul food for those who are eating for two. As the Lord wills, I will use the pages that follow to explain how the entire human experience of childbirth is a signpost for overwhelming joy and realities that will endure forever.



Be Fruitful and Multiply

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Genesis 1:28

“Wouldn’t it be so lovely having little versions of you and me running around? I’d love to have a family. *And you think you know what you’re talking about . . . you have no idea!*” British comedian Michael McIntyre chided would-be parents during a show. He then described the added complications of mundane life with kids. Through playful humor he made the point that efficiency and comfort do not accompany the task of building a family.¹

1. Michael McIntyre, Christmas Comedy Roadshow, “People with/without Kids,” 2011, <http://www.michaelmcintyre.co.uk/clips/>. (Note: Two instances of mild language used in this clip.)

Perhaps at one level he's right. When it comes to understanding the purpose of having children, we think we know what we're talking about. As confident in our understanding as we may be, we need to ask this question: Where do our ideas about having children come from? We probably would get different answers depending on cultural values, time period, or personal experience.

Little Versions of You and Me Running Around

Because I live in a diverse global city, I get to see many different people groups live out their beliefs in regard to the purpose of having children. Some people aim to have as many children as biologically possible, perhaps with an aim to birthing more boys than girls. Some people embrace the concept of transracial adoption and have grown their family in this way. Some people consciously refrain from having children at all for economic reasons. Some people have more children precisely for economic reasons. Perspectives on fertility are as diverse as the people who hold them. What is the purpose of having little versions of you and me running around? Do we have any idea?

In the Bible, children are considered a blessing because of God's command to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth"—known as the "creation mandate." Practically speaking, more kids means more image bearers of God, and more imager bearers of God means the earth will be filled with God's glory. Having children was necessary to fill the earth with little image bearers. On hearing this passage from Scripture, careful readers of the Bible will know this is the way it was in the Old Testament. Careful exegetes of modern cultures will recall scornful nomenclature that reduces women to "baby factories" and controversial practices such as surrogacy and abortion. It is true that in Old Testament times in order to expand and fill

the earth with God's glory, God's people focused on biological fertility. But what about now? We live in between the two ages—the one that is passing away and the one that is coming. How do we think about the purpose of having children *now*? Do we need to discard the Bible's teaching at this point? Of course not. Thankfully, the Bible is one book, it is utterly and internally consistent, and it is applicable for all times.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah pulls back the curtain on how God will ultimately fill the earth with his glory. Isaiah's prophecy concerned an eternal King who would bring about a new humanity through his sufferings. According to the will of God, this Servant would be cut off from this life, crushed, and put to grief, yet he would somehow not only have offspring but he would see them in his prolonged, prosperous life.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. (Isa. 53:10)

This is not humanly possible. Humanly speaking, men who die do not actively bear offspring and see their offspring, nor do they come back to life. It just doesn't happen. But Isaiah isn't describing just *any* man.

How does this Suffering Servant have offspring? And *why*?

From Creation Mandate to the New Creation

There is a man who was, by the will of God, crushed in order to atone for the sin of his offspring. This Man is Jesus, and he sees his offspring every day. He is with them, in fact, to the end of the age, at which point he will dwell with them again and they will see his face. No, Jesus did not have any biological

children, but now through his Spirit, his spiritual children are lighting up every dark corner of the globe. Remade into his glorious likeness, men, women, and children who have been given new hearts are filling the earth and making more and more and more disciples of the Servant who suffered for their sake. Let's call this "spiritual fertility"—a kind of procreation that can run circles around our expiring biological clocks.

Starting a family, building a legacy, carrying on the family name . . . do we have any idea what we're talking about? All of these very good things—families, legacies, names—are mere shadows and signposts that hint at something much greater than what we can see with our eyes and measure with a head count at the family reunion. It may be, friend, that you are among those who are not physically able to participate in biological procreation. Be encouraged, because what I am about to say is not a trifling "consolation prize" for you. God's big idea of the way his glory will fill the earth is for all of us to enjoy: "making babies who make more babies" points us to discipleship. The offspring of the Suffering Servant—little versions of Jesus running around—pass on the gospel to those who will pass on the gospel. Our biological and spiritual fertility is facilitated by God for God's glory (not ours). By the power of the Spirit, the new humanity in Christ will fill God's new creation to the praise of his glorious grace. And it will be profoundly more than lovely.

Sara Wallace hands anxious mothers a heaping helping of grace that is seasoned with practical advice and one clear message: peace. Peace to a worn-out mother's heart—the kind of peace that can come only from Jesus himself. In fact, she shows us over and over again how our reliance on Christ doesn't mean that we try harder or work better but that we rest in his power to equip us for the job of motherhood. All mothers should read Sara's excellent book. Each of us needs this kind reminder to trust the Lord in this high calling that we are utterly ill-equipped to handle without his presence and help.

—**Melissa Edgington**, Blogger, *Your Mom Has a Blog*

As moms, we all care for our children. We were created to care. But sometimes that care can turn into anxiety. In *Created to Care*, Sara shows anxious moms the great care God has for them and their children. Through personal stories, insightful reflections, and the truth of God's Word, she points readers to the truth of who God is and what he has done, helping anxious moms to find peace in their sovereign God.

—**Christina Fox**, Speaker; Author, *Sufficient Hope: Gospel Meditations and Prayers for Moms*; Content Editor, *enCourage*

I have always been so grateful to read Sara's thoughts on motherhood. The gospel is the foundation for what it means to be a mother. It is always through this lens that Sara's wisdom comes shining into our everyday lives, where joining all the dots can be tricky. I'm excited about this latest release!

—**Kristyn Getty**, Soloist; Composer; Hymnwriter; Coauthor, *Sing! How Worship Transforms Your Life, Family, and Church*

Created to Care invites moms to the “shalom” that their hearts desperately crave. Its Scripture-filled pages unfold the path that leads moms toward peace with God, peace within, and peace

with others—especially their husbands and children. This book is exceedingly practical and gospel-centered in its application.

—**Karen Hodge**, Coordinator of Women’s Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America; Coauthor, *Transformed: Life-taker to Life-giver* and *Life-giving Leadership*

Sara Wallace identifies the source of a young mom’s many anxieties, then gently points to the Creator who cares for *her*. Filled with humor, counsel, and gospel insight, *Created to Care* provides nuggets of sanity to strengthen the weary and calm the worried. Highly recommended!

—**Rondi Lauterbach**, Author, *Hungry: Learning to Feed Your Soul with Christ*

When there’s so much for us to fear—including our own shortcomings—*Created to Care* reaches out toward us fellow mom-travelers in kindness, pointing us over and over again to the all-sufficiency of the One who gently leads us.

—**Holly Mackle**, Editor, *Same Here, Sisterfriend: Mostly True Tales of Misadventures in Motherhood*

From day one of motherhood I have vacillated regularly between sinful control and crippling fear. I have long struggled to trust the Lord without feeling like I’m failing my children. In her book *Created to Care*, Sara Wallace not only shares these common mom struggles but also points us to the cure: entrusting both our mothering and our children to God’s sovereign care. Rather than telling us to do more or be better, Sara teaches us how to move from sin and fear in motherhood to trust and confidence in Christ. I can’t think of a mom who doesn’t need this book.

—**Glenna Marshall**, Author, *The Promise Is His Presence: Why God Is Always Enough*

Created to
CARE

God's Truth for
Anxious Moms



SARA WALLACE

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Peace for Mom Guilt

Last week I came into the living room and found my four-year-old lying perfectly still, flat on his face. I was startled.

“Honey, what are you doing?” I asked.

The muffled voice from the carpet said, “Playing with my toys.”

I stared at him, confused. I didn’t see any toys, and he certainly didn’t look like he was playing. “What toys?”

My son shifted his body slightly so I could see under his stomach. I saw two plastic snakes, three playing cards, and a Lego man peeking out. His current favorite toys.

“Why are you lying on them?” I asked.

He turned his head to face me. “I don’t want anything to happen to them.”

I tried to process the situation. “You’re protecting your toys so you can play with them . . . but you’re not playing with them. Are you having fun?”

“Yes,” came the automatic response. Obviously, he was not.

I didn’t understand. My son loved these toys, but he couldn’t enjoy them. He couldn’t bear the idea that something might happen to them (or that a brother might dare to touch them).

He would rather lie facedown on the carpet than play with them.

I had to laugh at the ridiculousness of it. He looked so miserable. Something that was supposed to bring him joy was paralyzing him.

I have an embarrassing confession to make: that's exactly the way I sometimes feel about motherhood. I love being a mom so much, and yet it terrifies me at the same time. I suffocate my own joy by holding on too tightly. It's as ironic as my four-year-old lying on top of his favorite toys.

Does anxiety keep you from enjoying this beautiful gift of motherhood? Perhaps you have prayed, waited, and prepared to be a mom, and now you're paralyzed by the thought that something bad could happen. Or maybe motherhood caught you by surprise, and you don't feel equipped for this unexpected blessing.

We know our sin and our weakness better than anyone else. And yet God chose to entrust us with the precious gift of children. As we bask in the glorious mercy of this thought, a nagging fear creeps in: *Can I handle this? What if I mess it up?*

Before you became a mom, perhaps the consequences of your actions didn't seem so big. They usually only affected you. But now everything you do affects your kids. *Everything*—whether it's good or bad. How do you know if you're doing the right thing at any given moment? How can you protect your kids from your own weakness, incompetence, and flat-out sin?

Accepting Our Imperfection

Recently I got a sweet message from another mom. She loves her children dearly and is constantly haunted by the idea that she will mess things up for them. "I know that God can forgive me," she wrote. "But I also know that sin has consequences.

I'm afraid of what consequences my children will have to live with because I'm a sinful person."

I can relate. I know how it feels to see the hurt in my son's eyes when I speak harshly. I know what it's like to ruin everyone's fun on a family outing because I let my own stress take over. There are nights when I fall into bed with an aching heart, wishing my kids had a perfect mommy.

But they don't. And, as much as we strive to put our sin to death, there is nothing we can do to change the facts: we are sinners, and we will remain sinners until the day we are with Jesus. We will fail our children. They will live with the consequences of our sin. And you know what? *They* will be sinful parents, too. Their kids will suffer the consequences of *their* actions.

Does that sound depressing? Maybe. But, in a way, it is also freeing. Whenever I went shopping with my mom as a kid, we would listen to Elisabeth Elliot cassette tapes in the car. One of Elisabeth's favorite quotes was "In acceptance lies peace." Peace doesn't necessarily come when our circumstances change; it comes when we accept our circumstances the way they are. Does that mean we accept our sin? Yes—we accept the *fact* that we are sinners and remember that Jesus came only to save sinners (see Mark 2:17). There is peace when we stop fighting against the fact that we are sinners and say instead, "I am the one Jesus died for. Yes, I am a sinner; but I am forgiven."

Once we accept our problem, we are free to accept the solution. We know that our kids will grow up in a sinful world with sinful parents and that they will need the same solution that we do.

Accepting Christ's Perfection

When I was fourteen, a woman from my church gave a message to all the girls in the youth group. I sat in the front row and

watched as she held up first a dirty old bathrobe and then her handmade wedding dress. Each handsewn bead sparkled. The girls were spellbound as she explained how Jesus removes our filthy rags and makes us his spotless bride. It was like taking off the old bathrobe and putting on a costly wedding gown. That was the first time I had ever heard the term “imputed righteousness.” I knew that Jesus took my sin, but I didn’t fully grasp what I got in its place: his perfect righteousness.

What does this mean for Christian mommies? It means that when God looks at us he sees his Son. Even on the bad days? On *all* the days. So often, I feel like a mess—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. I feel like the sentence “It’s been one of those days” is stamped on my forehead. But God sees something else. He sees a heart that is washed white as snow—a beautiful bride waiting for him to return.

Several years after that youth group talk, I came across the verse that gives the same illustration: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD . . . for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10).

These “garments of salvation” aren’t something we have to put on every day. We are already wearing them. We didn’t clothe ourselves; we *have been* clothed by God.

God’s Part, Our Part

How do these righteous robes affect our daily motherhood? God sees his Son in me—but how does that silence the mom guilt? When we see ourselves clothed in Christ’s righteousness, we have fresh confidence to do what God has called us to do. We

know that he is working through us for his glory and that he will forgive us when we fail.

Connecting our theology to our daily lives doesn't always come naturally. As busy moms, we often experience a disconnect between the spiritual and the physical. Our salvation is "out there"—but the screaming baby is right in front of us. It's hard for us to meditate on eternity with Jesus when we can't see past the diapers and dishes.

We know God takes care of the "big stuff," but it's our own failure that scares us the most. We think, *Whatever God is in control of I can trust him with. But if it's in my control, I know I'll mess it up.* I want to encourage you: there is no separation between God's part and our part. It's *all* God's part. He is in control of every part of our motherhood—including us.

Yesterday I was running errands with the kids, and I turned on a sermon by one of my all-time favorite preachers: my dad. I just about slammed on the brakes when he said, "Our sins do not hinder [God's] good, eternal, sovereign purposes for you; they are part of it."¹ Amen! What kind of God can use even our sin to bring about good? What kind of grace is that? It's a grace that we don't understand. But we revel in it—and we say, "Thank you, God." I am responsible for my actions—good and bad. And God has a perfect plan for my actions—good and bad. We don't have to understand it in order to accept it—and to take great comfort from it.

I was getting my two-year-old dressed last week and marveling at his big blue eyes and his tuft of blond fluff. I thanked God for giving him to me. But I rarely (or maybe never) thank God for giving *me* to my son. Just as God picked my son for me, he picked me for my son. God chose to use me in this calling for his glory. He is working through me. When my personal insecurity nags at my heart, I can remind myself, *I have been chosen*

by God for this task. He will not leave me alone. I am forgiven. I am new. God made me a mom for his own glory.

I first heard the word *deism* in a philosophy class in college. Deism teaches that God set the world in motion and then stepped back to let it run its course without him. Not only is this a depressing thought, it is also unbiblical. Our Creator is intimately acquainted with all our ways (see Ps. 139:3). He is the one who started the good work in us, and he has promised to complete it (see Phil. 1:6). He is walking with us every step of the way.

So often we live our lives as if God has said, “I saved you—now, you live out your life here the best you can and I’ll see you on the other side.” Paul calls this foolishness: “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3). God did not leave us on our own to finish what he started.

If we apply this idea to our own motherhood, it’s like telling our kids, “I gave birth to you—now, you go do your thing and I’ll do mine. Maybe I’ll see you around some day.” Don’t we long to hold our kids’ hands and see them through every twist and turn of their journey through childhood? That is how God deals with us, as well.

We need to mend this harmful disconnect—the idea that God handles the big stuff and we handle the rest. There is no better remedy for this than Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” God gives us everything we need for this life. The proof? He already gave us his son.

Do you believe that God is working through you? Or do you feel like he is too far away or you are too broken? You are not just filling marching orders each day, hoping that you’ll mess up a little less than the day before. You are an ambassador

for Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:20). God is showing your children the gospel *through* you—and your brokenness is part of it. Let’s explore how.

Not-So-Perfect Moms Share the Gospel

My kids are constantly “camping” in the house. They gather up all the lanterns and flashlights and run to the darkest place they can find (usually my closet). They head for the dark because they want their lanterns to shine brighter. In the same way, God uses our weaknesses to make his glory shine brighter. In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul says, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves” (NASB). God gets all the glory.

I can talk to my kids about God’s forgiveness all day long. But showing them his forgiveness is different. When I repent in front of my kids, I take their hands and lead them to the cross. I show them the well-worn path I have walked many times. I point out my footprints for them to put their own feet in. I say, “This is where we go. This is the only path to forgiveness.” I show them that glorious place where, in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian’s burden rolled off his back and he exclaimed, “Ah, what a place is this! . . . Blessed cross! Blessed tomb! Nay, blessed is the Lord that was put to shame for me!”² One day, when my children recognize their sin, they will know where to go. They will remember.

Can you see how our sin is part of God’s plan? God is glorified through the journey, not just at the destination. Our sin, suffering, and pain are all part of the journey. All of it points to the gospel—including our broken motherhood.

When we mess up, in both big and small ways, we can come alongside our kids and say, “We are all in this together. We are all sinners in need of a Savior.” We seek our kids’ forgiveness

and God's forgiveness. We aren't perfect, and they won't be perfect either. We have to show them how to deal with their imperfections.

Maybe you think that your sin is too big for God to handle—that he can accomplish something good only with perfect people. Paul tells us the exact opposite: “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me” (2 Cor. 12:9 NASB).

Wait. Are we supposed to actually be *happy* about our weaknesses? Look at Paul's mixed reaction when he was smacked in the face by his sin: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24–25) This same thankfulness that Paul displayed renews our own confidence for the task ahead. We have been delivered. And now we have a job to do.

Unrealistic Expectations

Speaking of jobs, have you seen the meme floating around on social media that describes a mom's job? It usually says something like “Don't tell me I don't have a job. I'm a doctor, nutritionist, chauffeur, chef, teacher, maid, accountant, counselor, project manager, and personal trainer.”

The only problem is that we are *not* all of those things. We are simply women who love our babies. *None* of us could fill that kind of a job description.

When I was in school I was terrible at science. It never clicked for me. I scraped by with a passing grade, but I have accepted the fact that I will never speak periodic table. When I became a mom, suddenly I felt like I was expected to be a scientist. I was supposed to know the thousands of ingredients that were

in each thing my child could possibly eat, how the ingredients would interact with each other, which nutritional elements my child should have at what age and in what quantities, when to choose homeopathic remedies and when to use modern medicine. I was a wreck.

But my expectations were crazy. Unrealistic expectations create a vicious cycle of anxiety. The only way to break the cycle is to apply God's truth directly to our expectations. What do we expect from ourselves as moms, and what does God expect from us? Let's compare job descriptions.

Our Expectations	God's Expectations
Feed my child perfect food. Never let my child get hurt. Give my child a perfect home environment. Never sin in front of my child. Give my child perfect friends. Answer all my child's questions accurately and patiently. Make every vacation scrapbook-worthy. Make every party Pinterest-worthy.	Train up a child in the way he should go (Prov. 22:6). Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt. 6:33). Work heartily, as for the Lord (Col. 3:23). Be faithful in the little things (see Matt. 25:21).

What differences do you notice? We get tripped up by the details, but God shows us the big picture—the end goal. To “train up a child in the way he should go” means to show our kids the gospel. Point the way to Christ over and over. We

complicate things by placing expectations on ourselves that distract us from the purpose of motherhood. When we take a step back and refocus on the big picture, the details that cause us anxiety fade into the background. Suddenly we see our kids' hearts. We're reminded of what's important.

You can see how God's expectations allow for many different personality types among moms. You don't have to be good at everything. You don't have to know everything. You can point your kids to Christ whether you're a working mom or a stay-at-home mom, whether you're a college grad or a high-school dropout, whether you were raised in a Christian home or became a Christian later in life. When you start to feel the panic of not knowing how to do everything "right" for your kids, remind yourself of your simple goal: Seek first God's kingdom. Look for ways to show your kids the gospel.

This should bring so much relief to us moms. Show my kids the gospel? Yes, I can do that. Imperfectly, of course—but as we've already seen, our imperfections are part of the gospel story. We are imperfect mommies raising imperfect kids in an imperfect world. There are so many things we *don't* know, but we can cling to what we *do* know: Jesus died for sinners. Can I give my child a perfect diet? No. Can I teach him about Jesus? Yes. Big sigh of relief.

Take one more look at the expectations chart. We could fail every single one of our own expectations on the left and still fulfill God's expectations. Yep—even when we sin. And some family vacations stink. Some birthday parties are a hot mess. It doesn't mean we are failing as moms. Everything we experience with our kids, good and bad, can be part of "training them up" in the gospel.

Past, Present, and Future Comfort

A good friend in college confided in me that she was nervous about having kids one day. “I don’t know what a good mom looks like,” she said. She didn’t come from a Christian home, and she herself didn’t become a Christian until she was an adult. She already felt guilty for letting her kids down, and she didn’t even have kids yet.

The hope for a mom from a non-Christian home is the same as for a mom from a Christian home: We are forgiven in Christ. We are a “new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). We have all been saved from the same dead state by the same perfect righteousness.

The disciple Peter had a messed-up track record. He denied Christ, gave in to peer pressure, and set his heart on earthly things. But he belonged to Christ. Before Peter’s greatest betrayal, Christ gave him a special charge that must have echoed in his heart for the rest of his life: “I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32).

Christ knows that we, like Peter, will fail. But he also knows that our faith will go on. It will experience the painful flames of refining, but, in the end, it will come forth as gold. And as failed, redeemed mamas, we are called to turn and strengthen one another. Know that every mom, no matter her past, is afraid of failing her kids. When your past threatens to steal your joy, find another mom to encourage. Tell her, “We are in this together. We were dead, and now we’re alive—and our kids are going to know it.” This is where we see the beauty of the body of Christ. Dive into your local church. Seek out moms whom you trust and admire. You are not alone.

Do you believe that God made you a mom on purpose? Do

you believe that he put your kids in your home for a reason? If you do, then you must believe that he already knew what he was working with: a flawed mommy. Not only did he know, but he has worked your sin into the equation from the beginning. God has no Plan B. He didn't say, "Well, I need a perfect mom for this job, but you'll have to do." He chose you for your kids and your kids for you—all for his glory.

Satan does not want us to be confident. He wants us to constantly wallow in our weaknesses and insecurities so we won't show our kids the glory of Christ. I love Martin Luther's response to this: "When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: 'I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? . . . For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also.'"³

We can accept all our inadequacies with confidence, because we've been forgiven. Our strength comes from Christ, not from ourselves. Give your insecurities to Christ. Fix your eyes on Christ in whatever he calls you to do today, and let your kids' eyes follow your gaze.

What Other Moms Are Saying

In our weakest moments of motherhood, we long to hear a voice say, "Me too!" There is comfort in knowing that we are not alone—that other moms understand the unique struggles of this season. I've been blessed to be surrounded by wise, godly mamas at every stage of my motherhood journey. At the end of each chapter, in this "What Other Moms Are Saying" section, we will have the privilege of hearing from many of these women. Some of these women I have known since grade school, when we would daydream about what it would be like to be

moms and what we wanted to name our kids. Others I've met in church, at college, or through my blog. Each one has poured into my motherhood in a special way. I love the variety of perspectives they offer. I hope you will, too. Let's listen in to how other moms from all walks of life find peace in the chaos.

I am most overwhelmed when my focus is on myself. I am most equipped to be the mom I want to be when my focus is on Christ. (Rebecca)

When my husband started med school and I was on my own with the kids, another mom encouraged me to start praying more. At first I rolled my eyes—but I felt convicted about it, so I took her advice. WOW! I instantly saw a difference in my personal insecurities. I can now tell when my prayer life is lacking by how strong my personal insecurities are. (Carrie)

I think what would've helped me in my first years was for someone to just remind me that Christ is the perfect parent on my behalf and that no matter how I mess up, he alone can save my kids. (Katie)

When insecurity starts to take over, I blast worship music. My kids love it, and it helps me refocus. It's hard to grumble while singing praise. (Melissa)

I try to remember that God saw fit to make me my kids' mother and that now my kids are my mission field because God has *sent* me to them. (Jori)

When I lean on my own skills and knowledge, I stumble. That's when I remember to acknowledge *him* in all my ways (see Prov. 3:6). (Christy)

It really helps me to just have honest conversations with the Lord in which I admit all the ways I'm struggling. Something like, "Lord, I am really struggling with not getting frustrated when my daughter whines. Please give me wisdom in my parenting and honor my sincere efforts to raise her in your love and truth." (Rebecca)

When I had my twins, I was completely overwhelmed by personal insecurity. That's when I fell in love with Psalm 56:9: "This I know, that God is for me." If a believer truly believes that, they can face anything. (Andrea)

Reflection

1. What are some unrealistic expectations you place on yourself that lead to insecurity?
2. What do you think Paul meant when he said, in 2 Corinthians 12:10, "When I am weak, then I am strong"? For more context, read verses 9-11 as well.
3. Look at the first part of Isaiah 50:9: "Behold, the Lord GOD helps me; who will declare me guilty?" How could this verse bring you comfort when you feel the "mom guilt" creeping in?
4. Look again at Luke 22:32: "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." Can you think of a time in your life when you were able to use your failure as an opportunity to point someone else to Christ?
5. Do you know a mom who struggles with insecurity in motherhood? How could you encourage her today?



CHRISTINA FOX

LIKE
OUR
FATHER

HOW GOD
PARENTS US
AND WHY THAT
MATTERS FOR
OUR PARENTING

In *Like Our Father*, Christina Fox equips and encourages parents in the glorious task of leading children to know and love God. Each chapter has a rhythm: biblical principles directly from Scripture, which lead to reflection on how those principles shape our practice, which leads to application of those principles to real challenges. The chapters close with questions for further discussion, and a helpful prayer in light of the character of God. Before you wade into the ocean of how-to guides, read this book that reminds you of Who is parenting with you.

STEPHEN T. ESTOCK

Coordinator, PCA Discipleship Ministries (CDM)

Christina Fox is a wise mother, a gifted counselor, and a dear friend. Every time I pick up one of her books, I know it will be filled with the kind of biblically sound teaching and practical application that has served so many of her readers through the years. If you are a parent looking to learn from our perfect, heavenly parent, Christina Fox is sure to be a trustworthy companion and helpful mentor.

MEGAN HILL

Editor for The Gospel Coalition; author, *Patience: Waiting with Hope*

Our Father, who art in heaven, help me parent these kids! Every parent knows that in order to raise healthy, loved, and spiritually mature children, we need a parenting coach. In *Like Our Father*, Christina Fox reminds us we already have one—our heavenly Father! You'll walk away from this book with a fresh awe for the way God has lovingly cared for you and deep wisdom to help you raise your children rooted in His love. This is a parenting book I will read and reread.

ERIN DAVIS

Writer, Bible study teacher, and mother of four boys

Christina Fox doesn't just offer a parenting "how to" manual, but instead paints a beautiful picture of how our heavenly Father parents us, slowly shaping us into a conduit of His love and grace as we learn to parent our own children in His strength. Lay down the heavy burden of needing to know "how" to be the parent you long to be and soak in the pages of this book, which will draw your eyes upward to know and rest in the One who has everything you need.

SARAH WALTON

Coauthor of *Hope When It Hurts* and *Together Through the Storms*

This book surpasses parenting how-to guides, giving us practical wisdom to nurture kids in gospel truth. Christina Fox faithfully points us to the perfect parent: God Himself. Get ready to see what it means to imitate our loving Father and proclaim His beloved Son to our children, fully relying on His abundant grace.

BARBARA REAOCH

Author; former Director of the Children's Division at Bible Study Fellowship International

In a world full of prescriptive strategies that don't go the distance, *Like Our Father* offers an invitation to discover the "why" of parenting instead of the "how." Understanding the multidimensional glory of God as Father shapes both parent and child toward the ultimate aim of parenting—being more conformed to His image.

KAREN HODGE

Coordinator of Women's Ministries for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and author of *Transformed: Life-taker to Life-giver* and *Life-giving Leadership*

Simply put, *Like Our Father* is an excellent resource for parents who want to understand how our status as adopted sons of God helps us parent our own children. By inviting us to experience how God parents us, and then demonstrating how our sonship informs raising our children, Fox teaches readers how to image God's father-love in our families. Parents will fall more deeply in love with our heavenly Father and with the children He has graciously given us to raise.

ANNA MEADE HARRIS

Editor-in-Chief, *Rooted Ministry* blog, and cohost of the *Rooted Parent Podcast*

**LIKE
OUR
FATHER**

HOW GOD PARENTS US
AND WHY THAT MATTERS
FOR OUR PARENTING

CHRISTINA FOX

MOODY PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO

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CHRISTINA FOX

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GOD IS PATIENT WITH HIS CHILDREN

When you first have a child, friends and family often share stories of their own parenting experiences. They also give advice about everything from favorite gadgets and toys to the best way to get a baby to sleep through the night. One piece of advice I heard from multiple parents was, “Enjoy every moment because it goes by so fast.” Each of these friends were ahead of me in the parenting journey. They likely looked down at my son snug in his car carrier and remembered when their children were small enough to carry around—children who had since grown up and left home.

While I listened to their advice, I wasn’t so quick to follow it. I was impatient for my boys to grow. Instead of enjoying the current stage they were in, I looked forward to the next. I kept thinking, “I can’t wait until he sleeps through the night. Then we all can get some sleep too.” “I can’t wait until he can walk on his own,

so I don't have to carry him." "I can't wait until he can talk . . . is potty-trained . . . can ride a bike . . . can drive a car." Soon enough, I found myself passing on the same wisdom once shared with me, having learned the hard way that time does pass all too quickly.

But my impatience went further than just wanting to push fast-forward on the passage of time. I was also impatient with my children's unique idiosyncrasies; the way they insisted on things being a certain way; their constant energy and curiosity; their resistance to change. I was also impatient with their behavior. I grew irritated when I had to repeat the same instruction or teach the same lesson. I found myself saying, "How many times do I have to tell you to . . .?" I responded in frustration over normal childish behavior—excessive excitement, mishaps, and general forgetfulness. As a result, one of my most fervent prayers was for patience. (Incidentally, it's been a prayer I've heard my own children pray for me!) My patience has been tested more as a parent than in any other context. It truly has been a place in my life where the Lord's sanctifying work is most active.

Patience is one of those qualities we pray for; yet, when the Lord provides us opportunities to learn and practice it, we resist the opportunity. It's a bit like exercise: Wouldn't it be nice to just wake up one day all toned and strong without having to do the work to get there? We'd like to be given patience on a silver platter, not have to practice it in the face of frustrating experiences. Patience also seems elusive, just out of reach. We know what it looks like when we see it, but to grasp it seems impossible. It's like trying to catch a hummingbird midflight; it darts away as quickly as it arrived.

Our struggle with patience can look different from one person to the next. Some may struggle with the rapid-fire questions a three-year-old asks. Others are impatient with having to remind their children to do tasks they should have learned long ago.

Some simply find a child's immaturity and incessant curiosity frustrating. Still others find themselves most impatient with their child who has such a different personality than their own. When we are impatient, we might respond to our children with irritation and annoyance. We might be sarcastic and belittling. We may even respond in outright anger. Impatience creates a barrier in our relationship with our children. Even more, we know the Bible calls us to patience with one another (1 Cor. 13:4; Gal. 5:22; 1 Thess. 5:14).

Over the years of parenting, I kept coming back to my own impatience, looking at it from different angles and dissecting it. I wanted to be more patient, but it seemed so hard and I started to wonder if maybe I just wasn't capable of it. Yet, as my children grew into the preteen years, the Lord gently reminded me of my own preteen years. Like Dickens' tale, I revisited my past and saw how the Lord was patient with me throughout my life. I started to see the slow process of sanctification in my life—the starts and stops, the lessons learned and repeated, and how the Lord was long-suffering with me in that process. And the more I thought about my Father's patience with me, I found my own impatience with my children start to recede.

In this chapter, we'll look at God's patience for us and how it shapes our own patience with our children.

God Is Patient

One of God's characteristics is that He is patient. The patience God has for us is a bit different than how we usually think of patience. I often think of patience as the quality of waiting in line without getting irritated. Or overlooking the unique mannerisms of people in my life. Or even just enduring the passage of time until an event

LIKE OUR FATHER

I look forward to takes place. And certainly, patience does mean that. But in the Bible, there's an even deeper nuance to this characteristic, especially when it describes God's patience with us.

When Moses asked to see God's glory, God passed before him and described Himself as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). This description of God is repeated throughout the Old Testament. That phrase "slow to anger" is translated as *long-suffering* in the King James, another word for patience. Long-suffering means to patiently endure lasting offense for the sake of love. The prophet Jonah knew this characteristic of God and that is why he didn't want to go to Nineveh and instead attempted to run away (Jonah 4:2). Throughout the Old Testament, we read account after account of Israel's sin and God's great patience or long-suffering. He sent multiple prophets to preach repentance and warn them of the consequences of their sin. He withheld the punishment they were due and gave them opportunities to turn from their sin and back to Him. God suffered long; He was patient for the sake of love. And so He is with us.

Consider the Lord's patience toward us before we came to faith in Christ and the lives we lived. Examine the ways we lived for ourselves, worshiped false gods, and trampled on the truth. Consider also our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. God patiently endured our sin until the time when He opened our eyes to see our need for a Savior. He saved us from our sin, brought us into the family of God, and trained us in the way of righteousness. Though we are no longer slaves to sin and are freed from its power over us, its presence still remains. The Lord continues to be patient with us as we learn and relearn the way of grace. Time and again, we sin and seek forgiveness through the blood of Christ and God forgives us. He suffers long for the sake of love for us. What grace!

The apostle Paul reminds us of God's patience with us when he calls us to put on patience ourselves. "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Col. 3:12–13). We are to love others the way God loves us. We are to be patient and long-suffering. We are to forgive as we've been forgiven. The Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards describes this long-suffering love for others: "He, therefore, that exercises a Christian long-suffering toward his neighbor, will bear the injuries received from him without revenging or retaliating, either by injurious deeds or bitter words. . . . He will receive all with a calm, undisturbed countenance, and with a soul full of meekness, quietness, and goodness."¹

God Is Patient as We Grow

One of the ways God is patient with us is in our growth in faith. He is like a patient gardener, tending His garden and waiting for the harvest.

One year in homeschooling, my children and I did a study on botany. For those who are unfamiliar with homeschooling, parents often learn just as much as the children, and this was true in our study of plants. We did an experiment with seeds, wrapping them in a wet paper towel and placing them in a few different plastic bags. We then placed those bags in various places around the house to see where the seeds thrived most. No surprise, they did not do well when placed at the top of the schoolroom closet! During that year, we studied all kinds of plants, learned how they grew, and observed various plants throughout the growth process. Unfortunately, I also relearned that I did not inherit my grandfather's green thumb.

LIKE OUR FATHER

The Bible uses many agrarian and agricultural metaphors to describe spiritual concepts. In ancient history, people understood these metaphors because most people grew the food they ate. They didn't drive to their local grocery to select their melons and cucumbers from a stack in the produce section. They also knew firsthand the work involved in tending vineyards. They knew what a healthy fruit-bearing tree looked like and what it took for that tree to bear fruit. They knew too how their wheat grew, how to grind it into flour, and then how to bake it into the bread they ate.

That's why there are so many references to plants, gardens, vines, and fruit in Scripture. In John 15, Jesus describes Himself as a vine, we as the branches, and the Father as the gardener:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:1-5)

Jesus uses this imagery to compare our growth as Christians to that of a vineyard. Just as a branch receives nourishment from the vine in order to grow and thrive, we receive spiritual nourishment through our union with Christ. Just as a branch can't grow on its own apart from the vine, we can't do anything apart from Christ. Just as a gardener tends to his plants, trimming and pruning them, so too does God prune us so that we can produce more fruit. Though most of us do not grow grapes, we have a rudimentary

understanding of how things grow and can learn from this passage about our own growth in the faith.

When we consider all that takes place in the life of a plant—from the seed planted in the ground to the harvest of fruit—it is quite a process. A long process. The plant's growth does not happen overnight. There are many days of quiet underground before the first shoot makes an appearance. This infant plant must continue to grow before it is ready to bear fruit. The gardener ensures it is watered and fertilized. The sun shines down its nutrients. The plant continues to grow. It endures dark days and ferocious storms. It continues to grow. One spring day, buds appear. Then flowers. Then finally the fruit and, with it, the harvest.

Our Father is a patient gardener, tilling the soil of our heart. He plants seeds of faith in us and nourishes us with His Word. He watches over us with love and care. He doesn't rush the process, knowing that our growth takes time. He tends to our hearts, pruning and trimming away what doesn't belong. He protects us from evil pests that threaten our growth. He doesn't leave us on our own; He keeps us in the vine through all the storms of life. He finishes what He starts in us and ensures we bear the fruit of righteousness.

Imaging God in Patience

The Bible teaches us to be patient with others just as our Father is patient with us. Patience is one of God's characteristics. He is slow to anger. He is merciful and does not give us what we deserve. We've seen how He was patient with us before we came to faith. We've seen how He is long-suffering because of His great love for us. We've seen how He patiently teaches and trains and nurtures us. As God's image bearers, we are called to reflect the patience God has for us to others, including our children.

First though, it's important that we remember that patience is a fruit. It is not something we come by naturally. We can't simply muster it up by sheer will power. It grows and develops in us by the work of the Spirit. As Paul wrote in Galatians 5:22–23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” In the John 15 passage above, Jesus said that we

bear fruit out of our union with Him. As we abide in Him through the Word and prayer, as we grow in our faith, we'll see the fruit of patience develop in our lives. This is good

As God's image bearers, we are called to reflect the patience God has for us to others, including our children.

news for those of us who have tried in our own strength to be patient and have failed. This also means patience isn't as elusive as it seems. It is within reach—through the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for this fruit to develop in our lives.

What are some areas where we can practice the fruit of patience with our children, showing them the Father, our patient Gardener?

Patience in Development

Those who work with children—doctors, teachers, therapists—know that children learn certain things at certain times in their development. Children grow incrementally throughout the growing process. They are capable of certain physical tasks at certain times. They move from rolling to crawling to walking to running. They understand speech before they speak it themselves. Their thinking is concrete before it is logical. It is not a process that can be rushed. And even when they've started to learn something, it takes time

before that lesson is fully learned. A child who has started walking will not walk with certainty for some time; for a while he will stumble and fall. A child who has learned to read will continue to struggle over more complex words until they are mastered.

This means we must be patient at each stage in our child's development, not expecting more of them than they are capable and not expecting them to master something right away. Just because they are physically capable of picking up their toys, it doesn't mean they are emotionally or mentally mature enough to know the right timing in doing so or even the best organizational methods to do so. There are tasks we will need to do with them over and over before they are mastered.

It also takes time before a child can juggle multiple tasks in their mind at once. You may send your daughter to her room with the instruction to get dressed for the day, make her bed, and brush her teeth and she may return having only completed one task. You may respond in exasperation because you know she can do all three tasks on her own. She can, just not all at once. She will need to receive one instruction at a time. Your preteen son may be capable of completing the homework assignments he is given, but he may have difficulty organizing his time well in order to accomplish all those assignments before they are due. He may be overwhelmed by juggling multiple tasks and due dates and forget something important in the process. He needs help and instruction in organizing his time, prioritizing tasks, and keeping track of when his assignments are due.

A person's brain hasn't finished developing until they are in their early twenties. This means we can't expect our children to think, behave, and respond as an adult would until that time. This can be frustrating to parents, especially in the teenage years when our children appear mature on the outside. They may stand a foot

taller than we do and look like a young adult, but their brain is still growing and maturing. We can't be surprised by teens who make impulsive decisions or who lose track of time or who need to be reminded about things. They continue to need our guidance and reminders. They need patient parents who walk alongside them, teaching—then re-teaching—how to navigate the world.

We show patience to our children as we help them with tasks and don't respond with irritation when they need help or reminders. Patience is displayed when we don't expect more from them than they are capable of. Or, when we don't respond with anger or sarcasm when they stumble, make a mistake, or forget something they already know. Parents must be like gardeners who patiently wait and watch as the seed grows in the soil. Our Father, the Gardener, is patient with us as we grow. May we reflect Him as we patiently wait for our children to grow and mature.

Patience in Behavior

If you search the phrase “slow to anger” in a Bible app, you'll find numerous citations describing God as slow to anger. Impatience and anger go hand in hand. When we are impatient with our children's behavior, we may respond to them in anger or be harsh in our words and actions. We'll say unkind things and may belittle them with sarcasm. We will threaten them with extreme consequences. The Bible cautions us to not be quick to become angry (Eccl. 7:9; Eph. 4:26, 31; James 1:19–20), nor to sin in our anger. Many of us have lashed out at our children in anger. We know it is wrong, but find ourselves so exasperated and frustrated, we react to their behavior.

If we dig beneath that anger, we often find the idol of control lurking there. Impatience desires control over time, circumstances, and people. We want things to happen on our schedule and time-

table. We want life to go the way we plan. We want people to do things our way. The more we worship control, the more we find ourselves angry at the slow person in traffic or the long wait at the checkout lane. We are quickly frustrated when unexpected events cut into our carefully planned day.

When it comes to our children, we respond in anger when we cannot control their behavior. Whether they are slow getting out the door in the morning, making us late to work; their fatigued cries make it difficult for us to get any shopping done; or their repeated troubles in the classroom require yet another meeting with the teacher, we can find ourselves impatient and angry. We just want them to do what we want them to do. We just want things to go as we've planned. Often, our anger comes not because our children are violating the law of God, but because they are not keeping ours. Our wants and desires take precedence, and when they are broken, we lose our patience.

Instead, God calls us to respond with patience, with long-suffering. We do so because we know God has rescued and forgiven us for far worse than anything our children have done. We know how many times we stumble into the same sin, and yet God forgives us through the blood of Christ. We know our own wandering hearts and how easily distracted we are. We know our own immaturity and how far we've yet to go in our own growth and development. As Paul Tripp wrote, "Like our children, you and I do the same wrong things over and over again because we are not only blind, but we are blind to our blindness. We need compassionate, patient care if we are ever going to change, and so do our children."² We can't be like the unmerciful servant in the parable who was forgiven much for his debt but who then went on and imprisoned those who owed him little (Matt. 18:21–35). We must be slow to anger and quick to forgive.

Sometimes this means stepping away from our children and not interacting with them until we've calmed down. We might need to refrain from making any decisions about discipline until later. Patience might also look like not putting things off until the last minute so that we find ourselves rushing around and being frustrated with our children because they don't rush alongside us. Perhaps we need to reevaluate our expectations for our children. Do we expect something they aren't capable of doing yet? Are they too young to drag from one errand to another without a nap in between? We might also need to take an honest look at our heart for idols and ask ourselves: Are we impatient and angry because our children are violating God's Word, or because they have violated our own personal laws and expectations?

Patience also requires being proactive rather than reactionary. We are more likely to be impatient when we've not anticipated or planned for a challenge. After too many tortuously long visits to the doctor's office with my children, I learned to bring extra snacks, activity books, and small toys for my busy boys. One time when the doctor finally arrived to our exam room, he found that they turned the entire space into a racetrack for their cars! It was worth taking the extra time to prepare because rather than whine or fuss—and me respond with impatience—my children were contentedly busy as we waited for the doctor.

In whatever ways we practically live out patience in our parenting, may those ways be rooted in our Father's patience and grace toward us. May we all take time to remember His great long-suffering for us.

Patience in Waiting for God to Work

Another area that is difficult for parents to be patient in is waiting for the Lord to work in their child's heart. As believers, our

greatest desire is to see our children come to faith in Christ. We long to see them join the family of God, to trust in Jesus as their Savior, and to know we will be with them in eternity. This is a good and right longing. Yet, it is hard to wait and watch for the Lord to work in our children's hearts to bring them from death to life in Christ.

One of the inherent characteristics of patience is waiting well. When it comes to waiting for the Lord to work in our children's hearts, we need to wait with hope and confidence. The Bible tells us that it is good to wait for the Lord, "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (Lam. 3:26). That's because good things happen as we wait. Our own hearts are changed in the process as we rest in the Lord's sovereignty and trust in His faithfulness. We learn to depend on Him. We are reminded of our human limitations and of our great need for God and His grace.

Yet, as we wait on the Lord, it doesn't mean we don't do anything. It's not like sitting in the waiting room at the doctor's office, twiddling our thumbs or playing endless games of solitaire. There is such a thing as active waiting. While we wait, we cry out to the Lord in prayer (Ps. 40:1). We hope in His Word (Ps. 130:5). Our heart takes courage (Ps. 27:14). We continue to move forward in our calling as parents, teaching and training our children in God's Word. We continue to point them to the gospel. We continue to show them their Father in heaven. Like a gardener, we tend our garden, and wait for the Lord to bring in the harvest.

As we've looked at the characteristic of patience in this chapter, I hope that you've reflected on your Father's patience with you. May His patience shape your own patience with your children.

Questions for Discussion

1. How has your Father shown patience to you in your life?
2. Read Romans 8:18–25 and James 5:7–11. How is patience a characteristic of the Christian life, especially as we wait for Christ to return?
3. Read Proverbs 15:18; Ecclesiastes 7:9; Ephesians 4:2–3. How are we to respond to others?
4. Read Colossians 3:12–13. What is the source of our patience?
5. What areas of parenting do you find the most frustrating, where you struggle to be patient with your children? Why do you think that is?
6. Patience and waiting go hand in hand. What can you do while you wait for the Lord to work in the life of your children?
7. How can you image your Father's patience to your children today?

A Parent's Prayer

Father in heaven, I come before You with a heart that is quick to impatience. I've never waited well. I am frustrated by immaturity. I dislike having to remind my children about things they have learned long ago. But then I remember Your great patience with me. You planted the seed of faith in my heart and nurtured it

God Is Patient with His Children

into a young plant. You watered and fed it. You protected it from the storms of life. And You continue to patiently watch me grow and produce fruit. Help me remember Your great patience with me, and may it shape how I respond to my children as they grow.

In Jesus' name, amen.

FREEDOM *to* FLOURISH

The Rest God Offers
in the Purpose He Gives You

ELIZABETH GARN


P U B L I S H I N G
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1

THE LOVE OF GOD

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:2)

Then God said, "Let us make man." (Gen. 1:26)

"Do you know what?" I looked down at the tiny button nose and the impish grin on my daughter's sleepy face and smiled.

"What?"

"I love you!"

She sighed and flopped her arms on the fluffy comforter that was tucked up around her. "Mommy! I know that! You tell me every day!"

She was right. This was a common conversation in our house—one that was repeated over and over again in different ways and at different times but always with the same message: you are unconditionally loved. Her eyes met mine as she waited for what always came next.

"And is there anything you could ever do to make me love you any less? To lose even a single drop of my love?"

"Nope!"

“What if you said not-nice things? Or were really mean to your brother and sister? What if you smashed all my stuff and told lots of lies?”

She looked suitably horrified—these were pretty big infractions—but she laughed along with me and shook her head.

“And is there anything you could ever do to make me love you *more*?”

This one stumped her. It was a new addition to our script, an addition that I realized in that moment was just as important as everything that we had said thus far.

Her eyebrows pulled together, and she tilted her head to the side. “No . . . ?”

“What if you made your bed every day and cleaned up your room perfectly? What if you helped to set the table and colored me a picture every day? Would that make me love you more?”

“No,” she said, a bit more confidently this time.

“What if you were the nicest girl in the world and always obeyed the first time, every time, and with a happy heart? Would I love you more?”

“Nope!”

“You’re right. Why do you think that is?”

She shrugged.

“Because you have all my love right now! All of it! You can’t ever lose it, and you can’t earn any more because you already have every last bit of it!”

There were tickles and giggles and hugs at that point, and the conversation moved on. Eventually, after goodnight kisses and bedtime prayers, I slipped out of her room and closed the door softly behind me. Standing in the hall, I let the import of those words sink into my heart as well.

I’ve always known about unconditional love, especially the unconditional love of God. After all, “Jesus Loves Me” is practically required learning for kids who grow up in the church. But

while I had known that God loved me and that I couldn't lose any of that love, I had never thought about how I couldn't earn *more* of it either. And while I would love to say that fact was obvious (salvation is a free gift, after all), the truth is, I was living like it wasn't and like I could.

This idea of earning God's love goes way back for me. I was a churchgoing girl from the beginning, and I took wearing my Sunday best, putting my quarter in the offering jar, and reading my Bible a little bit every day very seriously. As a teen my attempts to earn God's love morphed into having official "quiet times," attending youth group regularly, and listening to only "Christian" music. As an adult, I tried to make myself look as godly as the women around me—leading ministries, attending conferences, posting verses on my Facebook wall. All of those are fine things—good, even—but when you do them because you're hoping to earn favor with God, they become less acts of worship and more like bargaining chips. I wasn't worried that God was going to turn his back on me, but I was worried that if I didn't do enough, I would be missing out. Missing his blessings. Missing his presence. Missing his love.

For much of my life, I have operated, sometimes without even realizing it, as if I could earn more of God's love. As if the love he loved me with at the cross was just a baseline amount and more love was available for those who worked hard enough. That if I was good enough, life would be better, or if I tried hard enough or prayed hard enough, things would go well and he would be happy with me. But the truth is, children of God can't earn more of his love any more than we can lose it, which is to say, not at all.

When we don't understand the depth of God's love for us, when we think or feel like we need to do certain things to earn more of his love or live in fear that we might lose some, we've missed the heart of both who he created us to be and how he planned for us to live that out. It's a confusing, exhausting, depressing way to

live. This misunderstanding pushes us into shame and prevents us from living in the type of community we so desperately need.

But God does not operate that way, and this is not his plan for us! And while there are many, many misunderstandings out there about what it means to be a woman of God, we can't start with them. No, the problem is bigger than that. In order to untangle the mess and get back to the heart of God's plan, we have to go back to the beginning.

Not to the beginning of our own stories. . . . No, we need to go all the way back to *the* beginning.

THE CREATOR

I have always been fascinated with opening lines. Books, movies, plays, poems, even speeches. No matter the medium, the opening line is one of massive significance. It sets the tone. It creates the mood. It tells the audience a lot about what's going to happen. In fact, I got a little book a long time ago that was simply a compilation of opening lines. I loved it! I loved it so much that, as a teenager, I forced my family to play a game in which I would read a line, and they would have to guess what it was from. They didn't like it as much as I did. In fact, I'm pretty sure they only tolerated it once. But the fact remains, I thought it was awesome! Opening lines are important, and good writers put a lot of thought into where and how to start.

The opening line of Genesis is a perfect example. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). It's so simple, so well known (it was in the book—in case you were wondering), yet these simple words convey a ton of meaning. With these words, we find out what the focus of Genesis—of the entire Bible, really—will be: God.

With these first words of Genesis, the Holy Spirit crashes onto the pages of Scripture with a triumphant declaration that this is

God's story. He is the one who creates. He is the focus, the subject, the foundation on which all else depends. He is the beginning; before anything else, he was. He is the main character—not us, not our sin, and certainly not Satan. This is not our story! What we do, what we accomplish (or don't), what man-made standard we live up to, is not the point! We are not center stage, the lights are not focused on us, and that, my friend, is a really good thing. There is so much freedom and so much hope in that truth. And, as we will see, there is so much love.

This is God's story. Every sentence, every moment, is centered on him and him alone. "In the beginning, God . . ." They are little words, but they fill every page of the whole Bible. They flow through every story, gird each chapter, and drape themselves over every second of every day of all time.

As far as opening lines go, this is the best. Not just because it is masterfully written but also because it brings the hope our hearts need and sets the stage for what's to come. It is so easy to skim past it, but it is radical, filled with thunder and power. God is God!

Were we talking about anyone else, this opening line might fill us with dread. But this is the Lord! He is not some authoritarian dictator or narcissistic ruler—this is God who, as we will see, is both loving and love itself. When he created the world, every detail flowed from his abundant love.

THE CONTEXT

Have you ever played around on Google Earth? Maybe started with a view of the earth as a whole and then scrolled in until you were looking at the satellite picture of your home? It's fun to see the big picture so quickly followed by the details.

The creation account in Genesis is written like that. It starts with the super-huge big picture and then moves closer to show us a more detailed view. Moses, under the inspiration of the Spirit

of God, does not jump around to show us different things that happened, nor does he give us a bulleted, chronological account. Rather, he zooms in a little at a time, showing us an increasingly detailed picture of the days of creation.

Genesis, which means “beginnings,” is the title of the book. It’s derived from the first words of verse 1, “In the beginning . . .,” and is a fitting title for a book that is about to tell us the beginning of all things! In fact, the verse goes on to say that exact thing: “. . . God created the heavens and the earth.” Verse 1, then, is sort of like a title and subtitle. It’s as if Genesis is called *The Book of Beginnings: Wherein God Creates Everything*. Then we get to verse 2, and the creation account kicks off: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

I don’t know about you, but Genesis 1:2 has always sort of confused me. At times it’s felt out of place or simply didn’t make sense to me. But this verse is incredibly important!

First, it focuses our attention on the place of God’s creative acts. From the whole of the universe, Genesis 1:2 zooms in on the specific location of Earth itself. “It sets the scene, making the earth our vantage point.”¹

Second, Genesis 1:2 serves as an overview of the creation event. This is not step one of creation. It’s not that when God started creating things, he took some primordial goo and began forming it. Not at all. Instead, this verse describes the process of creation. In his commentary on Genesis, John D. Currid wrote, “The universe, and particularly the earth, is now pictured as it appeared in the process of creation.”² It’s a big-picture view of the events that will unfold in greater detail in the verses that follow.

1. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 44.

2. John D. Currid, *Genesis*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1:1–25:18*, Evangelical Press Study Commentary (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2003), 60.

Third, this verse presents the themes of the creation account. It draws our attention to three things we need to understand for anything else in the creation account to make sense to us: (1) the earth was without form, (2) it was void, and (3) the Spirit of God was hovering.³

1. The word for “without form,” or formless,⁴ carries with it the idea of chaos. Of wildness. It’s the picture of a vast, untamed wilderness that God is bringing under control.
2. The word translated “void,” or empty,⁵ means completely devoid of all living things. In fact, later in the Scriptures (Isa. 34:11; Jer. 4:23), it is used to describe an utterly barren wasteland. It paints a picture of a vast, silent nothingness that God then fills.
3. The word for “hovering” is used later, in Deuteronomy 32:11, to describe a mother bird, her wings spread protectively over her young. It’s the beautiful image of the Spirit of God—active and present—stationed over his creation to love and nurture it.

Chaos to order. Empty to full. The loving, personal presence of God. Keep those things in mind as we go on.

In verse 3, Moses moves another step closer, and the details come into focus. Now we get to the actual events of creation! God, by the power of his word alone, calls all things into being. Through this concert of colors, sounds, shapes, and smells, the three key elements bind the creation account together.

With each verse, we see the three points of verse 2 unfold. Derek Kidner put it so well when he said that “God’s normal

3. Martin Kessler and Karel Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 16.

4. The Hebrew word *tôhû*.

5. The Hebrew word *bôhû*.

method is to work from the formless to the formed. The whole process is creation. . . . Indeed, the six days now to be described can be viewed as the positive counterpart of the twin negatives ‘without form and void’, matching them with form and fullness.”⁶

God deals with the chaos, the “without form,” by bringing order. He creates time, days, nights, stars for charting seasons and paths. He separates the land and the seas. He gives everything a place and a name. He brings order because our God is a God who delights in order; he cares for his creation, and every part of it has a place.

But God doesn’t just bring order to the chaos in creation; he also deals with the emptiness, the “void.” He fills the earth with every form of life. Creatures of all sizes and shapes emerge at his call. Plants grow and flourish. His creativity overflows into the brightest blues and pinks, the richest scents of flowers, the chest-rattling boom of thunder, and the soul-lifting silence that comes after a rain.

And through each moment of creation, the Spirit of God is present, active, personal, and loving. When Moses gives us the three themes of the creation account, he isn’t just helping us to see the pattern of creation (filling and ordering)—he is also showing us God’s heart toward his creation. God is a personal, loving God.

The days of creation form a grand symphony. Each moment adds new instruments as the music builds. With each beat, we see “And God said . . . ,” and something amazing appears, and “. . . it was good.” The pattern repeats over and over again but with growing complexity and beauty. The great conductor draws in each player, and the air fills with the rising sounds of nature’s worship. As the music swells, we know that the best is about to come. We sit in edge-of-our-seat expectation. And God said. And it happened. And it was good!

But—

6. Kidner, *Genesis*, 45–46.

But suddenly the conductor stops.

The interruption in Genesis 1:26 is, in itself, dramatic. The silence is deafening. “Why would you stop?” our hearts cry out. Did something go wrong? But the conductor isn’t upset. No, like a giddy new dad showing off home videos, he turns to the audience and says, “Get ready—this is the best part!”

THE TRIUNE GOD

Each member of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—has been present in creation, but here they stop, invite us in, and discuss what they will do next: “Let us make man” (Gen. 1:26).

To be honest, many of us often breeze past the fact that all three members of the Trinity speak in communion with one another. But it is so important because here, in the opening verses of Scripture, we see that God is Trinitarian, and knowing he’s Trinitarian changes the way we see what has just happened in creation, what he’s about to do, and what it means for us to live as his people in the world. We saw that he was loving in the way he created and cared for his creation, but now we see that love is a foundational aspect of who he is. Love is what prompted him to create in the first place.

To see that, however, we need to quickly clarify a few things about this idea of “Trinity.” Let’s start with the fact that the word *Trinity* isn’t even used in the Bible. It’s a word that was used years later to encapsulate the progressive revelation of the whole Bible’s teaching of who God is.⁷ But the problem is, words are seldom simple or clear, especially when they need to distill something as huge and complicated as the Trinitarian nature of God! Because of that, we need to hit on a couple of points to make sure we’re all on the same page.

7. John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 46.

First, God exists as the Trinity. He is not *like* a trinity or *in* a trinity—he *is* the Trinity.⁸ In saying that he is the Trinity, we are saying that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are one God, three persons. Not three different modes of being, or three different gods working together—not at all.⁹ The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are of one substance (or nature) while at the same time three distinct, unmingled persons.

Second, while each member of the Trinity performs different functions throughout Scripture, it is also equally true that all three members participate in every action.¹⁰ We cannot, and should not, try to sharply separate what they do. We see this more clearly when we read about the life of Christ in the New Testament: the Father sent the Son, the Son lived and died in our place, and the Spirit revealed him to us. All three persons of the Trinity worked together to accomplish redemption. And that’s the same premise at work in the early verses of Genesis. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all work together in creation. Without announcing that God is three persons, Genesis 1 shows all three present and active.

Finally, the names we have for the members of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—in no way imply, or should be taken to mean, that there is a power hierarchy between the members of the Godhead. All three persons are absolutely equal, and there is no natural subordination between them.¹¹

God is Trinitarian. The question, then—as I’m sure you’re wondering—is, why is that fact important in verse 26? Why does

8. “The Eleventh Council of Toledo on the Trinity,” in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Alister E. McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 201.

9. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, 49.

10. Leith, 50.

11. John H. Gerstner, Douglas F. Kelly, and Philip Rollinson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith Commentary* (Signal Mountain, TN: Summertown Texts, 1992), 28.

it matter that God declares himself to be Trinitarian in the same sentence that he declares he's going to make people?

THE OVERFLOWING LOVE

When God speaks in Genesis 1:26 and says, “Let us . . .,” he speaks as the Trinitarian God: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit existing in perfect relationship within himself. This means that relationship is a huge part of the nature of God; he has existed, and does exist, and always will exist in relationship. Moreover, he dwells in relationship perfectly, because he is God and he is perfect. There is perfect unity among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit: no vying for power or position, no loneliness, and no lack. That little word *us* declares that God is Trinitarian and dwells in perfect loving relationship. This brings us to the next point we need to see: God doesn't need us.¹²

Can we sit with that for a second?

We are not needed! If God the Father were without the Son or Spirit, we could say that maybe he was lonely. Maybe he created us because he needed a friend? Or perhaps he longed for creatures to worship him or stroke his ego? He is God, after all. But because God exists in perfect relationship within himself, none of that is true. God doesn't need us. In fact, because we know from elsewhere in Scripture that God is love,¹³ we know that he *must* exist as a trinity because perfect love cannot exist on its own; it must have both someone to love and someone to share that love with.¹⁴ God isn't lonely!

12. Gerstner, Kelly, and Rollinson, 27.

13. “So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16).

14. “Richard of St Victor on Love within the Trinity,” in *The Christian Theology Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Alister E. McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell

He doesn't get lonely, he doesn't need someone to hang out with, and he didn't create us to fill some lack that he had; God is perfectly satisfied within himself. So when God calls us into his presence in verse 26 and says, "Let us create man," we can know with absolute certainty that it is not *need* that prompts his actions—it is *want*.¹⁵ He creates out of his own free will, motivated by his overflowing love. He didn't need to create us, but he chose to; it wasn't lack that prompted him but abundance.

The perfect love that exists within God himself, that drives and connects him, overflowed in abundance, and he chose to create beings on which to lavish that love, because perfect love is always outward focused. That abundance—that overflowing, outward-facing love—led him to create you. He wanted you. He isn't a lonely being, longing for someone to love him back. He isn't manipulative, twisting our affections to fill some emotional void. He is the King, perfectly sufficient in himself but exceedingly generous and with love abounding.

God didn't create you because he needed you to do something for him. He doesn't have a to-do list of errands he needs someone to run or a bunch of tasks to be accomplished. He has no lack for you to fill. He doesn't need you, but he wanted you. Do you feel the love in that?

That night as I left my daughter's room and listened to the blankets rustling softly as she settled down to sleep, I was reminded of this great love. A love that is so much bigger and better than mine. I love my children, and I can sit in their rooms at night and whisper words of hope and remind them that my love is unconditional, but I also know deep in my heart that I can't fulfill that promise or keep those words—at least, not on my own. The

Publishers, 2001), 204.

15. Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 9–10.

day will come, possibly even the very next day, when my selfishness and their actions will collide. There will be times when I will allow my hurts or fears or longings to twist my reactions, and I will, I know, allow their actions to influence the way in which I love them. I will be tempted to hold their choices against them and make them earn my love back. And while I wish my love were unconditional, I know that sin prevents that. To love my kids—or anyone, for that matter—well, I must cling to the source of love, to the One who is love.

But God's love isn't like mine. His overflowing love prompted him to create humans, and, as we will see, his specific love moved heaven and earth to bring us back when everything went wrong. His love truly is abundant, full, and all-encompassing. It is not something you can earn by doing all the right things or by being the woman you think you're supposed to be. And in Christ, it's not something you can lose by failing to live up to whatever standard you think there is. It is perfect because he is perfect.

In Genesis 1:26, God declares that he's going to make people, and in saying that, he declares that he's going to make them out of his abundant love. But he doesn't stop there! In addition to both of those truths, he declares that he is going to make them for a *reason*. He is going to create image bearers. Creatures made in his image to be like him. Creatures who could exist in loving, personal relationship with him. Creatures he could pour his abundant love upon. Creatures who would image him by bringing that outward-facing love into the world and bringing flourishing in his name.

In the following chapters, we will look at what it means to be made in his image and how we are called to live out our image bearing. But as we do, hold on to this truth: you were created out of the abundance of God's perfect love. The ways in which we are invited to live that out are gifts of love from him meant to bring us flourishing. We do not live as image bearers to earn God's love, nor do we obey out of fear of losing it. In other words, his love,

not our actions, is the foundation. We are image bearers, we are children of God, and we are deeply, powerfully loved.

SCRIPTURE TO CONSIDER

Genesis 1:1–26

Deuteronomy 32:10–11

Psalm 33

Ephesians 3:14–19

FOR REFLECTION

1. Describe a time when you felt like you could earn more of God's love. What are some things that you have done or seen other people do to earn his favor?
2. Describe a time you worried that you could lose God's love. How did that affect the way you interacted with him?
3. God's presence is an aspect of creation that will grow increasingly important as we move forward. Read Deuteronomy 32:10–11. How does the picture presented here, combined with what we saw in Genesis 1:2, illustrate the presence of God? What does it tell us about his disposition toward his creation?
4. Write a list of words or ideas that come to mind when you think about the love of God.
5. God didn't need to create us, but he wanted to; he was motivated by love. How does this understanding of his love change the way we relate to him? How would your life change right now if you truly believed that you couldn't earn more or lose any of God's love?

MARCH 30

Puritan Marriage

∞ Lucy Hutchinson, 1620-1681 ∞

On her wedding day Lucy Apsley was taken ill of smallpox, and the wedding was delayed as her life hung in the balance. Lucy did survive smallpox, but her visage was marred and deformed from the disease. Colonel John Hutchinson looked beyond the wreck of Lucy's beauty to her honor and virtue, and the two were married on 3 July, 1638. Lucy later wrote of their courtship:

Never was there a passion more ardent and less idolatrous: he loved her better than his life, with inexpressible tenderness and kindness; had a most high, obliging esteem of her, yet still considered honour, religion, and duty above her; nor ever suffered the intrusion of such dotage as should blind him from marking her imperfections.²⁶

Colonel Hutchinson was a trusted officer of Oliver Cromwell and one of the commissioners of the trial of Charles I. At the Restoration he was imprisoned and Lucy worked tirelessly to secure his release and to be with him during his confinement. Though she was not allowed to stay with him, she took lodgings near him and visited him daily. During his imprisonment Colonel Hutchinson spent much of his time reading his Bible, making many notes along the way. Lucy later compiled these into a commonplace book, with Scriptures organized under different headings.

In spite of Lucy's care Colonel Hutchinson fell ill from the damp, miserable conditions of his cell and died 11 September, 1664. The Hutchinsons had eight children, and Lucy wrote *The Life of Colonel Hutchinson* for them to learn to emulate their father's virtues and character. In her introduction she wrote that their father's

example was more instructive than the best rules of the moralists; for his practice was of a more divine extraction, drawn from the Word of God, and wrought up by the assistance of His Spirit. He had a noble method of government, whether in civil, military, or domestic administration, which forced love and reverence even from unwilling subjects, and greatly endeared him to the souls of those who rejoiced to be governed by him. He had a native majesty that struck awe into the hearts of men, and a sweet greatness that commanded love.²⁷

Lucy lovingly described their marriage relationship:

His affection for his wife was such, that whoever would form rules of kindness, honour, and religion, to be practiced in that state, need no more but exactly draw out his example. Man never had a greater passion or a more honourable esteem for woman ... but he managed the reigns of government with such prudence and affection, that she who would not delight in such honourable and advantageous subjection must have wanted a reasonable soul. He governed by persuasion, which he never employed but in things profitable to herself. He loved her soul better than her countenance; yet even for her person he had a constant affection. ... When she ceased to be young and lovely, he showed her the most tenderness. He loved her at such a kind and generous rate ... yet even this, which was the highest love any man could have, was bounded by a superior feeling; he regarded her, not as his idol, but as his fellow-creature in the Lord, and proved that such a feeling exceeds all the irregularities in the world.²⁸

*Let marriage be held in honor among all,
and let the marriage bed be undefiled ...*

~ HEBREWS 13:4 ~

26. Sarah Josepha Hale, *Lessons from Women's Lives* (London: William P. Nimmo, 1877), p. 46.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

MARCH 31

Looking to Heaven

☞ Mary Love, d. 1660 ☞

When Mary Stone's father, a wealthy London merchant, died Mary became the ward of John Warner, the Sheriff of London. Warner invited Christopher Love, a Welsh non-conformist preacher, to be his chaplain. Over the next six years, a bond of Christian affection developed between Mary and Christopher. Christopher taught and catechized the children and servants of the household and was instrumental in the conversion of several family members. He also served as an army chaplain with the Parliamentary forces from 1642-1645. After completing his army service Christopher Love and Mary Stone were married 9 April, 1645, at St Giles of the Field Church in London. An ordained Presbyterian minister, Christopher became a lecturer at St Ann's Aldersgate and then pastor at St Lawrence Jewry. The Loves had four children, though two died as infants. Mary was pregnant with their fifth child in 1651, when Christopher was arrested for treason and condemned to death. Like many Presbyterians, Christopher had become disillusioned with Parliament and had corresponded with Charles II's forces about overthrowing Cromwell and restoring the monarchy. Though the six other ministers involved in the plot were released after a brief imprisonment, Christopher remained in the Tower of London under sentence of death. Mary and others petitioned Parliament for leniency, but a reprieve of only a few weeks was granted.

The letters Christopher and Mary wrote to each other during his imprisonment reveal a passionate, Christian love with roots in and eyes on eternity. In her last letter, written the day before Christopher was executed, Mary wrote:

God hath put heaven into thee before He hath taken thee to heaven. Thou now beholdest God, Christ and glory as in a glass; but tomorrow, heaven's gates will be opened and thou shalt be in the full enjoyment of all those glories which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither can the heart of man understand. God hath now swallowed up thy heart in the thoughts of heaven, but ere long thou shalt be swallowed up in the enjoyment of heaven. And no marvel there should be such quietness and calmness in thy spirit while thou art sailing in this tempestuous sea, because thou perceivest by the eye of faith a haven of rest where thou shalt be richly laden with all the glories of heaven. O lift up thy heart with joy when thou layest thou dear head on the block in the thought of this: that thou are laying thou head to rest in thy Father's bosom which, when thou dost awake, shall be crowned not with an earthly fading crown but with a heavenly eternal crown of glory. ...

O let not one troubled thought for thy wife and babes arise within thee. Thy God will be our God and our portion. He will be a husband to thy widow and a father to thy children: the grace of thy God will be sufficient for us.

Now my dear, I desire willingly and cheerfully to resign my right in thee to thy Father and my Father, who hath the greatest interest in thee. And confident I am, though men have separated us for a time yet our God will ere long bring us together again where we shall eternally enjoy one another, never to part more. ...²⁹

*What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined ...
God has prepared for those who love him ...*

~ I CORINTHIANS 2:9 ~

29. Don Kistler, *A Spectacle unto God: The Life and Death of Christopher Love (1618-1651)*, (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1998), pp. 84-85.

A P R I L 1

Abounding in the Work of the Lord

∞ Mary Tracy Vere, 1581-1671 ∞

Born 18 May, 1581, Mary Tracy was the youngest of fifteen children. Her mother died three days after she was born, and her father died when she was eight. As an orphan, Mary found comfort and care in her heavenly Father, adopting for her motto, 'God will provide'. As her life unfolded she always looked to her God for sustenance.

When she was nineteen Mary married William Hobby, son of Henry VIII's Privy Counsellor. The couple had two sons before Henry died. Mary then married Sir Horatio Vere, a devout Christian gentleman and military leader aiding Holland in its war with Spain. Mary and Horatio were supremely happy in their marriage and had five daughters. Mary lived several years in Holland with Horatio during the Spanish war. Here she worshiped with the English Puritan church pastored by William Ames.

Mary's two sons died young. When her oldest son, a promising student at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, died at the age of twenty-two, a friend wrote Mary a letter filled with Christian solace:

God hath taken away your well-beloved and only son, I confess this is such a cross as must needs affect the heart of a loving mother. But remember that he hath given you his own and only Son, to be your wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption. He hath adopted you to be his daughter and heir, and fellow-heir with Jesus Christ. He hath given you his word, his Holy Spirit, and hope and assurance of eternal life. Besides these unspeakable mercies, the Lord hath blessed you with a gracious and worthy husband, with many hopeful children God is the father of your child; he gave him his life, and breath, and being; you were appointed to be his nursing mother, and that for a few days; which now being ended, he hath taken him into his own kingdom; and therefore you should not be so much grieved that you part with him now, as thankful that you enjoyed him so long, and that he now enjoyeth everlasting life in the heavens, whither yourself also shall come within a while.³⁰

Mary used her position and wealth to help others materially and to secure appointments of faithful ministers to important positions. Her influence helped secure James Ussher's position as Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland. William Gurnall, the esteemed Puritan who delivered the sermon at Mary's funeral, stated that 'she had silver for the penniless, food for the sick, salves for the wounded'. Her well-ordered house reflected her Christian heart. Twice daily the family, including the servants, met together for worship – reading the Word, praying and singing psalms. Mary's life was a quiet life, but one lived in the light of God, throughout her ninety years.

*Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, unmovable,
always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that
in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*

~ I CORINTHIANS 15:58 ~

30. W. H. Davenport Adams, *Stories of the Lives of Noble Women* (London: T. Nelson & Sons, 1891), pp. 51-52.

A P R I L 2

Making a Home in the Wilderness

∞ Ann Mountfort Eliot, 1604-1687 ∞

When Archbishop William Laud began restricting the biblical preaching and lectures of Puritans in England, many found a refuge in America. Among these was John Eliot, who immigrated to Massachusetts in 1631. Eliot left behind his fiancée, Ann Mountfort; the two had been introduced by Rev. Thomas Hooker, who also would find his way to America and become a founder of Connecticut. Eliot settled in Roxbury, near Boston. The following year Ann followed him to America. The two were married shortly after her arrival; their marriage in October 1632 was the first recorded in the town of Roxbury.

John and Ann's love was rooted in the Savior, and their fifty-five years of marriage became a model for all. One daughter and five sons were born to the Eliots, and their home became a miniature church. Daily prayers and Scripture reading were held in the family. After the Bible reading, each child was encouraged to note what it learned from the Scripture that day. Ann was skilled in providing clothing and food for her family, and she also became skilled in medicine and surgery. Often she and John found themselves together at the bedside of an ill patient, he laboring for the health of the soul while she provided for the health of the body.

John Eliot not only pastored the church at Roxbury but also brought the gospel to the native Algonquians. He learned the Algonquian language and translated the Scriptures into their language, making the Algonquian Bible the first Bible printed in America. Eliot's missionary work became a pattern for William Carey in India. Ann cared for the children and home while John was on his missionary travels and provided an atmosphere that allowed John to work on his translation. Cotton Mather wrote of John Eliot's love for Ann: "The wife of his bosom he loved, prized and cherished with a kindness that strikingly represented the compassion which he thereby taught others to expect from the Lord Jesus Christ."³¹

As the couple aged together, neighbors called them Zacharias and Elizabeth. When Ann died in 1687 John wept uncontrollably, saying over her grave, "Here lies my dear, faithful, pious, prudent, prayerful wife. I shall go to her; but she shall not return to me."³² John did follow Ann three years later.

*I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.*

~ JEREMIAH 2:2 ~

31. Rev. Thomas Timpson, *Memoirs of British Female Missionaries* (London: William Smith, 1841), p. 4.

32. Lydia Howard Sigourney, *Examples of Life and Death* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1852), pp. 178-179.

A P R I L 3

Jesus, My Redeemer Lives!

☞ Louisa Henrietta of Brandenburg, 1627-1667 ☞

Louisa Henrietta was born in the early years of the Thirty Years War, that conflict which raged across Central Europe between 1618 and 1648, and her life would be lived in the thick of that political and religious conflict. Born in The Hague, Louisa's grandfather was William I, Prince of Orange, who had led the revolt bringing independence from Spain to the Dutch Republic. On her mother's side she was descended from Admiral Coligny, a leader of the French Protestants. With her noble heritage, Louisa's marriage became a matter of diplomatic negotiations. When an engagement with Charles II of England came to nothing, Louisa was married to Frederick William, Elector of Brandenburg. Frederick's early years had been spent in Holland, and he had known Louisa as a girl and knew of her devotion to the Bible and the Reformed faith. The two were married in The Hague on 7 December, 1646.

Louisa and Frederick lived at Cleves in western Germany for a couple of years, where a son was born and soon died, to their parents' great sorrow. In 1848, with the end of the Thirty Years War, the couple journeyed to Frederick's capital of Berlin, a journey taking six months. Adding to their personal sorrow, they were surrounded by the devastation of war on every side. People were poor and starving; fields were desolate. In her deep sadness Louisa drew closer to her Savior, and during this time wrote a hymn weaving together themes from Psalm 46, Job 19:25, 27, and 1 Corinthians 15, which has become a favorite German hymn, 'Jesus, my Redeemer, lives':

Jesus, my Redeemer, lives,
Christ, my trust, is dead no more!
In the strength this knowledge gives,
Shall not all my fears be o'er;
Calm, though earth's long night be fraught
Still with many an anxious thought? ...

Close to Him my soul is bound,
In the bonds of hope enclasp'd;
Faith's strong hand this hold hath found,
And the Rock hath firmly grasped.
Death shall ne'er my soul remove
From her refuge in Thy love. ...

Ye who suffer, sigh and moan,
Fresh and glorious there shall reign;
Earthly here the seed is sown,
Heavenly it shall rise again;
Natural here the death we die,
Spiritual our life on high. ...

Only see ye that your heart
Rise betimes from earthly lust;
Would ye there with Him have part,
Here obey your Lord and trust.
Fix your hearts above the skies,
Whither ye yourselves would rise.³³

*For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I
shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.*

~ JOB 19:25-27 ~

33. James I. Good, *Famous Women of the Reformed Church* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007, reprint of 1901 edition by The Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States), pp. 224-226.

A P R I L 4

Persecuted for Christ

☞ Margaret Wemyss, Lady Colvill, 17th century ☞

The 1680s in Scotland has been called 'The Killing Time'; it was a time when the government forces of Kings Charles II and James VII sought to impose their will on church government and practices. Church ministers had to either accept the royal authority and bishops over the church or leave their parishes. About one third of the ministers refused to conform, believing Jesus Christ was the head of the church, not the king or any bishop. These ministers, intent on teaching the Scriptures, met in private homes or in fields and woods with the people faithful to the Scottish Covenant of 1638. These meetings were outlawed, and those participating were often persecuted with fines, imprisonments, and even death.

Margaret Wemyss, widow of Robert, Lord Colvill, was faithful in attendance at the preaching of the gospel at these field conventicles, as well as providing hospitality for the ministers in her home. In 1674, soldiers broke up a meeting in the Lomonds of Fife and later falsely claimed the people had violently resisted the authorities. The king issued an order to punish the ringleaders. Lady Colvill was among those listed to appear before the privy council and was fined. Yet Lady Colvill continued to attend preaching meetings and entertain ministers in her home. When the persecutions intensified she and other Covenanters hid themselves in the mountains, greatly injuring her health.

When the privy council resolved to take her son away from her, since they considered her a fanatic for diligently teaching him the Word of God and instructing him in the truth of Christ, she sent him away to safety before he could be taken by the authorities. This irritated the government more, and they fined her heavily. When she didn't pay she was imprisoned in the tollbooth of Edinburgh. There she was in a dark, damp room which required a candle to see even in the daytime. After some weeks she petitioned for a better room, and her room was changed. After three months in prison, her health was so broken she was in danger of death. She was temporarily released, but required to return to prison in a few weeks.

In spite of her imprisonment and enduring hardship, Lady Colvill never wavered in her faithfulness to Christ and His Word. She was honored to be able to suffer for Christ.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

~ I PETER 4:12-13 ~

A P R I L 5

Looking to the Lord in All of Life

☞ Anne Bradstreet, house burned 10 July, 1666 ☞

Anne Bradstreet was eighteen when she came to America with her husband Simon and her parents, Thomas and Dorothy Dudley, in 1630, on board the *Arbella* as part of the Puritan migration led by John Winthrop. Throughout her life Anne wrote poetry, writing biblical reflections to life's ordinary events – the birth of a child, marriage, or the care of children. On 10 July, 1666, when her house burned, Anne again put her thoughts in poetry:

In silent night when rest I took,
For sorrow ne'er I did not look,
I waken'd was with thundering noise
And Pietous shrieks of dreadful voice.
That fearfull sound of 'fire' and 'fire'
And to my God my heart did cry
To strengthen me in my Distresse
And not to leave me succourlesse.

Then coming out beheld a space,
The flame consume my dwelling place.
And when I could no longer look,
I blest his Name that gave and took,
That layd my goods now in the dust;
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was his own; it was not mine;
Far be it that I should repine

Anne described how when looking at the ruins of her house she recalled where she had sat, where the trunk or table had been – all now ashes. There shall be no more guests under the roof or sitting at the table, or a bridegroom's voice heard within the walls:

In silence ever shalt thou lye;
Adieu, Adieu, All's vanity.

Then she began to rebuke herself, for certainly her wealth was not on earth and moldering dust. She needed to raise her thoughts 'above the skye':

Thou hast an house on high erect
Fram'd by that mighty Architect,
With glory richly furnished,
Stands permanent tho' this bee fled.
It's purchased, and paid for too
By him who hath enough to doe.

A Price so vast as is unknown,
Yet, by his Gift, is made thine own.
Ther's wealth enough, I need no more;
Farewell my Pelf, farewell my Store.
The world no longer let me Love,
My hope and Treasure lyes Above.³⁴

Anne had learned to seek the Lord and His ways, whatever came her way – the burning of her house led her to reflect more on the heavenly home and treasure stored above.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

~ MATTHEW 6:19-21 ~

34. *The Poems of Mrs Anne Bradstreet* (The Duodecimos, 1897), pp. 343-345.

A P R I L 6

Puritan Wife, Mother and Poet

☞ Anne Bradstreet, 1612-1672 ☞

Anne Bradstreet was among the leaders of society in early colonial Massachusetts. Both her father and husband served as governors of the colony at different times. Her husband Simon was gone frequently on government business, and on one occasion, Anne wrote a poem 'To My Dear and Loving Husband':

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold

Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay,
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.

Simon and Anne had eight children, all of whom survived to adulthood – a very rare occurrence in a day when most families lost several children to disease. Though Anne's children did become seriously ill they recovered, as Anne wrote in 'Upon my Daughter Hannah and Her Recovering from a Dangerous Fever':

Bles't be Thy Name who did'st restore to
Health my Daughter dear
When Death did seem ev'n to approach
And life was ended near.

Grant she remember what thou'st done
And celebrate thy praise
And let her conversation say
She loves Thee all her days.

Having eight children, Anne was wise enough to recognize that each child was different and required different parenting:

Diverse children have their different natures; some are like flesh [or meat] which nothing but salt will keep from putrefaction; some again like tender fruit that are best preserved with sugar; those parents are wise that can fit their nurture according to their Nature.³⁵

In the epitaph Anne wrote for her mother, Dorothy Dudley, she pictured the Puritan ideal of woman:

A worthy matron of unspotted life,
A loving mother and obedient wife,
A friendly neighbour, pitiful to poor,
Whom oft she fed, and clothed with her store;

To servants wisely awful, but yet kind,
And as they did, so reward did find.
A true instructor of her family,
The which she ordered with dexterity.³⁶

Though Anne gained some fame for her poems, and was America's first published poet, when she wrote her autobiography for her children she didn't even mention her poetry. Her life before God was primarily as a wife and mother. Shortly before her death she wrote in her journal:

Upon the Rock Christ Jesus will I build by faith, and if I perish, I perish. But I know all the powers of Hell shall never prevail against it. I know whom I have trusted, and whom I believe, and that he is able to keep what I have committed to his charge.³⁷

*But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced
that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.*

~ 2 TIMOTHY 1:12 ~

35. Helen Campbell, *Anne Bradstreet and her Time* (Boston: D. Lathrop Company, 1891), p. 355.

36. John Harvard Ellis, ed. *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse* (Charlestown: Abram E. Cutter, 1867), pp. 394, 28, liii.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

A P R I L 7

Sovereignty and Goodness of God

∞ Mary Rowlandson, 1637-1711 ∞

When King Philip, leader of the Wampanoag Confederacy, attacked isolated homesteads in Massachusetts throughout the summer of 1675, Rev. Joseph Rowlandson went to Boston and urged the government to provide protection for Lancaster and other frontier communities. While he was away, on the morning of 10 February, 1676, warriors attacked Lancaster. The Rowlandson house was one of the five or six garrison houses into which the fifty families of the town crowded. When fire was set to the house Mary Rowlandson and her sister took their four children to leave the house, but when they opened the door, the bullets were coming fiercely. Mary saw her brother-in-law fall dead, her nephew killed, and her sister shot. Mary herself was shot through the side; the little six-year-old Sarah she carried in her arms was hit by the same bullet. That morning thirteen were killed and twenty-four became captives and servants of the Indians. In the trek north Mary and Sarah were separated from her other two children, Joseph and Mary. After a week, little Sarah died from her wounds.

After a raid on another settlement one of the Indians brought Mary a Bible rescued from one of the burning houses and asked if she would like it. Mary recognized this as a 'a wonderful mercy of God to me in those afflictions, in sending me a Bible'. After eleven weeks of travelling with the Indians Mary was ransomed for £30. She was reunited with her husband in Boston, and her children were released soon after. They relocated to Wethersfield, Connecticut, where Rev. Rowlandson became pastor.

Mary wrote an account of her captivity, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed*, which was published in 1682. The narrative describes in vivid detail the horrors of Mary's captivity, but throughout is a trust and recognition in God's sovereign working. The first day after the raid and her capture, she wrote,

God was with me, in a wonderful manner, carrying me along, and bearing up my spirit that it did not quite fail. ... The Lord renewed my strength still, and carried me along, that I might see more of his power; yea, so much that I could never have thought of, had I not experienced it.³⁸

Fifty-nine Scriptural quotations are scattered throughout. Many of them were promises from the Psalms Mary trusted in during her captivity, and expressed her piteous state: 'My wounds stink and are corrupt ... I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long' (Ps. 38:5-6, KJV). Others were promises that she would survive the ordeal: 'I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD' (Ps. 118:17). Mary concluded her narrative:

When God calls a Person to any thing, and through never so many difficulties, yet he is fully able to carry them through and make them see, and say they have been gainers thereby. And I hope I can say in some measure, As *David* did, *It is good for me that I have been afflicted*. ... I have learned to look beyond present and smaller troubles, and to be quieted under them, as *Moses* said, *Exodus* 13.13. *Stand still and see the Salvation of the Lord*.³⁹

*Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!*

~ PSALM 27:14 ~

38. Mary Rowlandson (Neal Salisbury ed.), *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), pp. 72-73.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

A P R I L 8

Penn's Farewell Letter to His Wife

∞ Gulielma Springett Penn, 1644-1694 ∞

In 1681, the Quaker William Penn received a large grant of land in America with a right of sovereign, sole proprietorship, except the power to declare war. Penn saw this land, which the king named Pennsylvania, as a refuge for Quakers, who were under persecution in England. Penn spent the next year drawing up the Frame of Government and drafting a charter of liberties for the colony. On this first voyage to America he would have to leave his wife Gulielma and children behind in England. Before setting sail, not knowing whether he would ever see them again, Penn wrote a farewell letter on 4 August, 1682 to 'My dear Wife and Children'.⁴⁰ Penn reminded Gulielma,

remember thou was the love of my youth, and much the joy of my life, the most beloved, as well as most worthy, of all my earthly comforts. And the reason of that love was more thy inward than thy outward excellences (which yet were many). ... I can say it was a match of providence's making, and God's image in us both was the first thing and the most amiable and engaging ornament in our eyes. Now I am to leave thee, and that without knowing whether I shall ever see thee more in this world. Take my counsel into thy bosom and let it dwell with thee in my stead while thou lives.

Penn's first counsel was, 'Let the fear of the Lord, and a Zeal and love to His glory, dwell richly in thy heart.' He encouraged Gulielma to be diligent in worship meetings and also that once a day the family should meet and 'wait upon the Lord, who has given us much time for ourselves'. By keeping a regular schedule, household affairs should be easier:

Consider what income you have and what your daily requirements are, and live within that: I need not bid thee be humble, for thou are so; nor meek and patient, for it is much of thy natural disposition. But I pray thee, be often in retirement with the Lord and guard against encroaching friendships ... that which might seem engaging in the beginning, may prove a yoke and a burden too hard and heavy in the end.

Penn had specific counsel for the care of the children:

Above all things, endeavour to breed them up in the love of virtue and that holy plain way of it which we have lived in, that the world, in no part of it, get into my family. I had rather they were homely than finely bred, as to outward behaviour. ... Next, breed them up in a love one of another. Tell them, it is the charge I left behind me, and that it is the way to have the love and blessing of God upon them ... tell them it was my counsel, they should be tender and affectionate one to another.

No expense should be spared on their learning. Someone should teach them at home rather than them going to school, where 'too many evil impressions' can be received. Penn also wrote out lengthy words of counsel for the children, especially to be obedient to their mother, 'for she has been exceeded by none in her time for her plainness, integrity, industry, humanity, virtue, and good understanding, qualities not usual among women of her worldly condition and quality'.

So William Penn wrote farewell to his 'dearly beloved wife and children', signing off with 'Yours, as God pleases, in that which no waters can quench, no time forget nor distance wear away, but remains forever.' Penn was in America two years, returning to England in 1684 and reuniting with Gulielma and the children. Gulielma, who was always frail in health, died in 1694. Penn returned to his colony in 1702.

*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God,
and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*

~ 1 JOHN 4:7 ~

40. Maria Webb, *The Penns and Penningtons of the Seventeenth Century* (London: F. Bowyer Kitto, 1867), pp. 340-343.

A P R I L 9

Heart for God

∞ Madame Jeanne Guyon, 1648-1717 ∞

A French aristocrat who moved in the highest court circles, Jeanne Guyon maintained a heart for God under much opposition and the temptations of the world. Educated in a French convent, Jeanne came upon a Bible there when she was about ten years old. She began reading the convent Bible and memorized large portions of Scripture. When she was fifteen Jeanne's father arranged her marriage to M. Jacques Guyon, a man of great wealth.

Jeanne's mother-in-law ruled their home like a tyrant and constantly criticized Jeanne to her husband. Jeanne realized that God could use this adversity for good in her own soul, as he had used Joseph's slavery in Egypt, and God used her acerbic mother-in-law to develop Jeanne's humble spirit. She turned to God in prayer and read devotional books which turned her mind to Christ. The deaths of two of her children caused her to trust God's hand in her life even more.

Jeanne's husband died when she was twenty-eight, leaving her with three children – one just months old. Her husband also left her with a wealthy estate, and Jeanne started to use her fortune to help others, providing food and nursing, and establishing hospitals. She began traveling in Europe speaking to people about the importance of seeking Christ by faith, not by outward ceremonies. She wrote forty books about the importance of the Christ-transformed life, an inward holiness, and a total surrender to God. She wrote:

There are but two principles of moral life in the universe, one which makes ourselves, or the most limited private good, the center; the other, which makes God, who may be called the universal good, the center. When self dies in the soul, God lives; when self is annihilated, God is enthroned.⁴¹

As Madame Guyon's writings increased in popularity, the church authorities became alarmed and accused her of heresy. She was imprisoned for seven years, including two years in solitary confinement in the Bastille. She was broken in health when released, though her spirit remained resilient. In her last will she wrote:

It is to Thee, O Lord God, that I owe all things; and it is to thee, that I now surrender up all that I am. Do with me, O my God, whatsoever Thou pleases. To Thee, in an act of irrevocable donation, I give up both my body and my soul, to be disposed of according to thy will. Thou seest my nakedness and misery without Thee. Thou knowest that there is nothing in heaven, or in earth, that I desire but Thee alone. Within Thy hands, O God, I leave my soul, not relying for my salvation on any good that is in me, but solely on Thy mercies, and the merits and sufferings of my Lord Jesus Christ.⁴²

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

~ I THESSALONIANS 5:16-18 ~

41. Quoted in Edith Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Books, 1959), p. 136.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

A P R I L 1 0

He Does All Things Well

∞ Marion Fairlie Veitch, 1638-1722 ∞

Marion Fairlie endured many hardships during the religious and political turmoil in Scotland during the seventeenth century. Her diary reveals the Scriptures which sustained her throughout these troubles. From a godly family, Marion was thankful for the blessing of early being brought to faith:

It pleased God, of his great goodness, early to incline my heart to seek him, and bless him that I was born in a land where the gospel was at that time purely and powerfully preached as also, that I was born of godly parents, and well educated. But above all things, I bless him that he made me see, that nothing but the righteousness of Christ could save me from the wrath of God.⁴³

On 23 November, 1664, Marion married William Veitch, a nonconforming minister. Some of Marion's friends discouraged the marriage, saying the times were such that she would be reduced to severe straits by persecution and hardship. Marion, however, decided to trust God for all her temporal provisions as well as her spiritual blessings. Towards the end of her life she could testify that God not only 'provided well for me and mine, but made me in the places where my lot was cast useful to others, and made that word good, "as having nothing, and yet possessing all things" (2 Cor. 6:10).'

When married just two years, persecution fell upon Marion and her husband. As a participant in the Covenanters' resistance to the king's forces at Pentland Hills, William was declared guilty of treason and worthy of death. He found safety for some years in England, where Marion and her two sons were able to follow four years later. They had lost their land in Scotland, and Marion prayed that the Lord would sustain them, giving them food to eat, and clothes to put on, and He did indeed. On 19 January, 1679, however, a party of dragoons came to the house at night, broke in the windows, came into the house and captured William, eventually taking him to Edinburgh on charges of high treason. During the break-in Marion remained calm, persuaded that the men could not do anything that God did not permit. The Scripture from Mark 7:37, 'He has done all all things well,' came to mind. Remembering Psalm 56:11 – to trust in the Lord and fear not what man can do – brought her perfect peace.

In the months ahead, whenever she began to fear, Marion returned to the Scriptures for comfort. Job 23:14 (KJV) encouraged her that 'he performeth the thing that is appointed for me'. Whenever doubt assailed her, she again found comfort in God's Word, recalling Psalm 43:5.

The King released William after several months in prison. He then spent some years in exile in Holland, before the Glorious Revolution of 1688, after which he returned to Scotland and became minister of Dumfries. Marion's prayers of William returning to Scotland and preaching freely there had been answered. Marion died the day before William in 1722. Their fifty-eight years of marriage had seen many difficulties and afflictions, but always God's promises provided strength in times of trial.

*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.*

~ PSALM 43:5 ~

43. *Memoirs of Mrs William Veitch* (Edinburgh: General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1846), p. 1.

A P R I L 1 1

United in Soul and Spirit

☞ Margaret Baxter, 1631-1681 ☞

Margaret first met the Rev. Richard Baxter when she was eighteen or nineteen and Richard was pastor of the church in Kidderminster. Margaret had been staying in Oxford with her sister but in 1652 moved to Kidderminster to be with her mother. After her social life in Oxford, Margaret found Kidderminster not to her liking. Spending all her thoughts on fancy apparel and reading romances, Kidderminster seemed boring. But under Rev. Baxter's preaching Margaret realized that she was not converted. She began to read serious books and cast aside her romances. Then Margaret became very ill with consumption and lay dying. Baxter called for the people to set aside 30 December, 1659 as a day to fast and pray for Margaret's recovery. God heard their prayers, and Margaret amazingly recovered. She recognized that God had delivered her and that he had a special claim on her life.

Margaret and her mother came to so depend on Baxter's preaching for their spiritual food that when Baxter moved to a church in London they followed him there. Margaret's mother died in 1661, and Margaret became very melancholy. Baxter counseled her with the Scriptures. When the 1662 Act of Uniformity forced two thousand Puritan ministers from their pulpits in the Church of England for refusing to conform to the *Book of Common Prayer*, Baxter was among them. Without a congregation to oversee, perhaps Baxter felt free to marry as he had not previously. Margaret and Richard Baxter were married 24 September, 1662.

Margaret's melancholy left her as she found perfect contentment with her husband and managing the affairs of his household. Margaret's well-ordered home provided Richard with the calm needed for his extensive writing. Every morning as they rose and every evening as they went to bed they sang a psalm of praise together. Richard valued Margaret's kind temper and unselfishness. She cared not only for the physical needs of the poor, but instructed them in Christian truth and distributed religious books among them. She established a school for the poor in London, one of the first free public schools in the city. Richard also valued Margaret's discerning and quick insight to problems. When Richard was imprisoned for holding an illegal religious meeting, Margaret persuaded the jailer to let her stay with him in jail, and her happiness brought light to the prison.

When Margaret died in 1681 Baxter was consumed with grief. Within a month of her death he wrote a memorial of her life in which he noted, 'we lived in inviolated love and mutual complacency, sensible of the benefits of mutual help. These near nineteen years I know not that ever we had any breach in point of love, or point of interest. ...'⁴⁴ Historian Frederick Powicke found 'the simple truth was that they loved each other – with a love of that high spiritual character which unites soul to soul, and transfigures life, and is immortal.'⁴⁵

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

~ EPHESIANS 5:22-23 ~

44. Richard Baxter, *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Baxter* (London: Richard Edwards, 1826), p. 52.

45. Frederick Powicke, 'A Puritan Idyll, or the Rev. Richard Baxter's Love Story' (*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. 4, 1918), p. 444.

A P R I L 1 2

Remembering those in Prison

∞ Helen Johnston, Lady Graden, d. 1707 ∞

Helen Johnston's father, Sir Archibald Johnston, was a man of prayer who regularly led his family in prayer and devotions to Christ. Active in support of the Scottish National Covenant of 1638, he was a strong opponent of the attempts by the Stuart kings to bring control of the Church under the Crown. A member of the House of Lords under Cromwell, he was a prominent leader in the struggle for religious and civil liberty. After the monarchy was restored to Charles II, Johnston privately admonished the new king about his moral conduct. The king took great offence, and charges of treason were made against Johnston. Though he fled to the continent he was found, arrested, and brought back to Scotland, where he was executed in 1663.

Four years before her father's death in 1659, Helen was married to George Hume, who also was a Covenanter, a supporter of the Scottish National Covenant. The Stuart monarchs placed stiff penalties on those who failed to attend the parish church, attended 'conventicles' or unauthorized religious meetings, or housed and protected unconfirming ministers. In 1678, George Hume was imprisoned for supporting nonconformity; he died the following year. In 1684, Helen was fined over £26,000 for her support of unauthorized preachers and meetings, much more than any others were fined for similar 'offences', probably because of the hatred the king still harbored against her father.

In 1683, Helen's cousin and brother-in-law, Robert Baillie, a godly man with strong Christian faith, had been arrested for participation in the Rye House Plot, an attempt to assassinate King Charles II and his brother James. Examined by Charles himself, Baillie denied any knowledge or participation in the plot, and there was no evidence of his participation. Nevertheless, he was fined £6,000 and imprisoned. During his imprisonment Baillie's health worsened, and he was dying. Helen petitioned the courts to allow her to go to the prison and care for him. The courts only allowed this if she remained imprisoned with him, so for two months Helen remained imprisoned, caring for her ailing cousin. She read the Scriptures to him and comforted him with the promises and hopes of the gospel. Baillie endured his sufferings with patience and even joy, as he anticipated the glories of his eternal home.

In the final hours before his execution for treason on 24 December, 1684, Baillie was filled with joy and the peace of Christ. Helen thought his face seemed to shine, and in his prayers he sounded like one already in heaven. She saw in him God's strength made perfect in weakness. As she had been with Baillie in prison on 24 December, 1684, Helen provided Christian companionship, accompanying him to his execution in Edinburgh.

'I was naked, and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ... And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'

~ MATTHEW 25:36,40 ~

A P R I L 1 3

Wigtown Martyrs

☞ Margaret Wilson and Margaret MacLauchlan, d. 1685 ☞

When Charles II restored the Stuart monarchy to the throne of Scotland in 1660 he quickly moved to replace the presbyteries and synods of the Church of Scotland with an episcopal church government. All were required to take an oath of allegiance recognizing Charles as head of the Church of Scotland. Any who refused were culpable of death. The numerous executions of those refusing to swear the required loyalty oath to the king has been called 'the Killing Time' in Scotland's history, lasting from 1660 to 1688.

Among those executed were eighteen-year-old Margaret Wilson and sixty-three-year-old Margaret MacLauchlan, both of Wigtown. Margaret's parents had a prosperous farm and took the oath recognizing the king's headship of the church, but their teenage children would not conform. They contended that Jesus Christ, not the king, was head of the Church. Since parents were considered responsible for their children, they were heavily fined and given strict orders not to allow the children in the house. Margaret, her sixteen-year-old brother Thomas, and her thirteen-year-old sister Agnes went to live secretly in the mountains, meeting as they could in open air conventicles with other Christians.

In February 1685, Margaret and Agnes went secretly to Wigtown to visit some friends, were discovered, arrested and placed in prison. When they were brought before the magistrates they were sentenced to be tied to posts in the Solway where they would be drowned when the tide came in. The girls' father was able to pay £100 and have Agnes freed, because of her age. But no effort of his could change the verdict against Margaret.

On 11 May, 1685, Margaret was tied to the post in the Solway. Sixty-three-year-old Margaret MacLauchlan, who also refused to recognize the king's headship of the Church, was tied nearby. As the waters approached, Margaret Wilson sang from Psalm 25:

Let not the errors of my youth,
Nor sins remembered be:
In mercy for thy goodness' sake,
O Lord, remember me.
The Lord is good and gracious,
He upright is also:
He therefore sinners will instruct
In ways that they should go.

Before the waters engulfed her, she recited the words of Romans 8 (κγν), concluding with, 'For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long: we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.'

~ ROMANS 8:35-36 ~

A P R I L 1 4

Importunate' Wife

☞ Elizabeth Bunyan, ? – 1692 ☞

Elizabeth married John Bunyan in 1659, when she was seventeen or eighteen and he was thirty-one. Bunyan's first wife had died the previous year, leaving him with four young children, the oldest being Mary – a little girl of five who was born blind. Elizabeth loved and cared for the children as for her own. Barely a year after their marriage, John was in the Bedford jail, arrested for preaching without a licence. At the time of Bunyan's arrest, Elizabeth herself was pregnant. The trauma of the arrest caused Elizabeth to go into labor; the child was born premature and died within days.

Elizabeth shared Bunyan's commitment to Christ and was a great encouragement during his imprisonment. Bunyan had been arrested briefly before in 1658, but had been released. With the accession of Charles II in 1660, the requirements to worship according to the Church of England were strictly enforced. Bunyan had been able to preach freely under the Commonwealth, and he would not desist preaching.

Once Elizabeth recovered from the trauma of her husband's imprisonment and the loss of her child she began to look for ways to help her husband and obtain his release. Bunyan later wrote that Elizabeth's persistence was like the importunate widow in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:1-8). Though a country girl, she traveled to London and presented a request for his release at the House of Lords. The Lords would not act, telling Elizabeth she needed to present her case to the local judiciary. In August 1661, Elizabeth presented her case before Judge Matthew Hale and three other judges in Bedford. Hale told her he would look into the matter, but didn't think there was anything he could do. Elizabeth was determined to have the case considered; the next day she took the bold move of throwing her petition into the window of the judges' coach as it passed by! On the third day of the assizes, Elizabeth again came before the judges and begged for her husband's release. She pled, 'My Lord, I have four small children that cannot help themselves of which one of them is blind, and have nothing to live upon but the charity of good people.' Judge Hale was sympathetic, especially when he heard that Elizabeth had just lost a child. The other judges, however, were adamant, one even saying that Bunyan's preaching was the doctrine of the devil. Elizabeth replied, 'My lord, when the righteous judge shall appear, it will be known that his doctrine is not the doctrine of the devil.'

When Elizabeth left the assizes in tears she said it was 'not too much because they were so hard-hearted against me and my husband, but to think what a sad account such poor creatures will have to give at the coming of the Lord, when they shall there answer for all things whatsoever they have done, whether it be good or bad.'⁴⁶ Bunyan remained in prison ten more years. Elizabeth was allowed to visit him and bring the children. Little blind Mary even learned to find the way to the prison alone, often bringing soup to her father. Bunyan wrote numerous Christian books while in prison, and Elizabeth helped to find publishers for them. His most famous work – *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

... they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

~ LUKE 18:1 ~

46. As quoted in Edith Deen, *Great Women of the Christian Faith* (Uhrichville, OH: Barbour Books, 1959).

A P R I L 1 5

Loyal Wife and Queen

☽ Queen Mary II, 1662-1694 ☽

On November 4, 1677, Mary, eldest daughter of King James II of England, was married to her cousin Prince William of Orange when she was sixteen. It was a political marriage cementing an alliance between England and the Netherlands. Some reports indicate Mary cried throughout the wedding as she was so distressed at marrying William, who was eleven years her senior, rather austere and, to be blunt, not particularly handsome. However, Mary came to love her husband and became noted for her loyalty and submission to him. She saw her marriage to William as important in supporting the Protestant faith in both her native England and the wider Europe.

The first twelve years of her marriage was lived in the Netherlands, where the Dutch people loved Princess Mary for her piety and virtue. Mary had two miscarriages early in her marriage which made her infertile, a source of sadness the remainder of her life.

After the death of her uncle, King Charles II, Mary's father came to the throne in 1685, as King James II of England and Ireland, and VII of Scotland. King Charles had converted to Roman Catholicism on his deathbed, and James brought more Catholic sympathizers into government. James wrote his daughter Mary a lengthy letter encouraging her to convert to Roman Catholicism. Though very respectful to her father, Mary replied at length, answering point by point James' arguments. She ably refuted the absolute authority and infallibility of the Roman Church and wrote of the importance of the Scriptures. Her faith was firm, and she was confident, as the Savior said, the gates of hell would not prevail against his true church.

With James wanting to establish not only Roman Catholicism but also an absolute monarchy within the kingdom, Parliament encouraged Prince William to invade England and depose James, claiming the throne for himself. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 did bring about the change in government; King William and Queen Mary were crowned in 1689.

The English came to love Mary as had the Dutch. Desiring the glory of God and the welfare of her people, Mary used her position to strengthen the Reformation in England. She secured appointments of bishops in the Church of England faithful to the Scriptures. Mary endowed the College of William and Mary in Virginia, hoping it would graduate students who would preach the gospel to the American natives. She also strongly supported Thomas Bray and the SPCK (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge). On a lighter note, Queen Mary is known for encouraging the style of blue and white porcelain in England and the keeping of goldfish as pets.

Mary contracted smallpox and died in 1694, at the age of thirty-two. At her death, Mary was greatly mourned by the English people, and the poet John Milton wrote:

When faith and love, which parted from her never,
Had ripen'd her just soul to dwell with God,
Meekly she did resign this earthly load
Of death call'd life, which us from life doth sever.⁴⁷

*'I will build my church,
and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'*

~ MATTHEW 16:18 ~

47. James A. Huie, *Records of Female Piety: Comprising sketches of the lives and extracts from the writings of women eminent for religious excellence* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1841), p. 101.

A P R I L 1 6

Encouraging the' Body of Christ

☞ Anne Dutton, 1692-1765 ☞

When Anne Williams was growing up in Northampton, England her parents instructed her in 'the Doctrines and Worship of the Gospel'. As she grew she wrestled with the fear and guilt of her sinful nature and enjoyed the joy and peace from the grace and forgiveness she found in Christ. Pastor John Skepp especially edified Anne. She carefully wrote down notes from the sermons and her thoughts as she grew in the knowledge of Christ. She came to see writing as a gift God had given her to encourage others in their faith.

Anne married Thomas Cattell in 1715, and the couple moved to London. Four years later, Cattell died suddenly of a stroke. The next year Anne married Benjamin Dutton of Bedfordshire. In 1732, Benjamin became pastor of the Baptist church in Great Gransden, Huntingdonshire, and the church expanded greatly. Anne began writing letters of counsel and encouragement to numerous correspondents, as well as theological tracts, poems and hymns. All of her writings dealt with the journey which was the Christian life and reflected the biblically-rooted spirituality of the Puritans.

Benjamin Dutton went to America to raise funds for a new church building in Gransden and to find a publisher for Anne's *Letters on Spiritual Subjects*. After successfully raising the needed funds, Benjamin sailed for home; but his vessel was shipwrecked on the homeward voyage, and he drowned. Anne surrendered herself to 'Mercy's Ocean', and knew God would use each crisis to conform her more to Christ.

Anne corresponded with leaders of the evangelical revival such as Howell Harris, John Wesley, and George Whitefield as well as ordinary Christians in need of spiritual encouragement and comfort. She comforted them in their faith and strengthened them in their struggle with sin. She wrote that meditation on God's Word, prayer, and watchfulness were important spiritual practices for every Christian. By watchfulness, she meant to watch the first stirrings of sin and 'kill 'em in the *Bud*'. Temptations were not to be dallied with. The Christian must not have a place for sin in the heart, enlarging the room in the soul for God:

When we would be *something* in ourselves, *separate* from God, we become *nothing* that's *Good*, nothing but *Evil*. When we are willing to be *nothing* in ourselves and *all* in God, we possess *Being*, enjoy the great I AM, and in Him possess our *own Souls*. And the *lower* we sink to nothing in *ourselves*, the *lighter* we rise to Being in God, and the *more* our Holiness and Happiness increases.⁴⁸

Many of Anne's letters and essays were published, and today she is recognized as probably the most influential woman of her day. She used the gift of writing and her knowledge of God's Word to build up and encourage the Body of Christ.

Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

~ 1 THESSALONIANS 5:11 ~

48. Anne Dutton, 'Some Thoughts about Sin and Holiness', in *Meditations and Observations upon the Eleventh and Twelfth Verses of the Sixth Chapter of Solomon's Song* (1743), pp. 61-62, as quoted by Michael Sciretti's 'Anne Dutton as Spiritual Director', The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2009.

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Great Men and Their Godly Moms

Tim Challies

God blessed me with a mother who
loved me, taught me, shaped me,
and prayed for me. It is to her that I
dedicate this book.

– Tim Challies

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ONE

The Hidden Strength of a Weak Mother

John Newton

You may have heard the phrase before: Behind every great man there's a great woman. Like most maxims, it is generally true, even if not universally true. But here's the surprise: Sometimes that great woman is not *behind* the man, but *before* him. Sometimes that great woman is not his wife, but his mother. In this book we are looking at noteworthy Christian leaders whose most formative spiritual influence was a godly mother.

We begin with a man whose mother proves that spiritual strength can abide even where there is physical frailty. She was his first and dearest teacher, the one who first taught him truth and the one who first modeled it in her life. Though his gentle early

years would soon give way to the deepest depths of depravity, he would eventually be rescued by God's amazing grace. Later he would say, "My dear mother, besides the pains she took with me, often commended me with many prayers and tears to God; and I doubt not but I reap the fruits of these prayers to this hour." John Newton would wander, he would run, he would pursue every manner of sin, but he could never escape the great strength of that weak mother.

A Pious Woman

John Newton was born on August 4, 1725, in London, the only son of Elizabeth and John. History has not recorded how his parents met and married, but it does tell of the impact they made on their son's life—John Sr. as a stern and often absent father, and Elizabeth as a gentle, caring mother whose life was tragically short-lived.

Elizabeth Scatliff was born around 1705 in Middlesex, England, the lone daughter of Simon Scatliff who worked and lived in East London as a maker of mathematical instruments. Little is known of her early days except that she received a fine education and was raised a Nonconformist, a Protestant who chose not to associate with the established Anglican Church. John Sr. was a sea captain who regularly sailed the Mediterranean Sea, taking him away from home for months at a time. He was also a strict disciplinar-

ian who insisted on maritime conventions even in his home.

By the time of John's birth, Elizabeth and her husband were members of the Old Gravel Lane Independent Meeting House, a Dissenting congregation pastored by Dr. David Jennings. While Elizabeth's faith was genuine, her husband's appeared to have been merely formal. John would later say that though his father was a moral man, he had not come under the true "impressions of religion."

Because of his mother's warm faith and his father's long absences, John grew to be very close to Elizabeth, whom he later described as a "Dissenter, a pious woman" who was "of a weak, consumptive habit, and loved retirement." As did so many in that time, Elizabeth suffered from tuberculosis, the disease that would eventually claim her life. Among the many symptoms of her tuberculosis was chronic fatigue, which often confined her to bed.

Though Elizabeth was unable to function as she might have wished, she did not squander her days. Knowing that time with her son might be short, she determined to make the most of what remained. She took on the role of teacher and spent hours with John each day. She was a good instructor, and he was an eager, bookish student. He progressed quickly. "When I was four years old, I could read (hard names excepted), as well as I can now: and could likewise

repeat the answers to the questions in the Assembly's Shorter Catechism, with the proofs; and all Dr. Watt's smaller Catechisms, and his Children's Hymns." From this list of material we know that Elizabeth consistently trained her son in Reformed theology. John later wrote, "As I was her only child, she made it the chief business and pleasure of her life to instruct me, and bring me up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

Based on her son's quick mind and easy grasp of theology, Elizabeth prayed and hoped God would call him to ministry. "My mother observed my early progress with peculiar pleasure, and intended from the first to bring me up with a view to the ministry, if the Lord should so incline my heart." She may have gone so far as to devote him to the ministry through prayer and to form plans to enroll him in the Calvinistic school of divinity at St. Andrew's in Scotland.

Sadly, Elizabeth would not live to see such a day. By early 1732, her disease had advanced and her symptoms had become grave. She traveled to the coast, hoping the sea air would provide respite or cure. But it was to no avail, and she succumbed to tuberculosis on July 11 at the age of 27. John was thought to be too young to witness his mother's final days, so he remained with family friends and learned the terrible news just two weeks short of his seventh birthday.

John Sr. returned from his voyage in 1733 and,

learning of his wife's death, wasted no time in remar-
rying. John's stepmother was at first attentive, but she
soon bore children of her own and lost interest in John,
excluding him from family life. He became distant
and rebellious. When John was just 11, after he had
attended boarding school for a year or two, his father
decided it was high time for the boy to head to sea.

And the rest, as they say, is history. He would
rebel against God and commit horrifying atrocities.
But later, he would experience God's amazing grace
and become a preacher, hymn writer, and abolition-
ist. He would tell his own story and the story of every
Christian in his most famous song: "Amazing grace!
how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me! / I
once was lost but now am found / Was blind but now I
see."

A Weak Body, a Strong Faith

When John Newton looked back on his life, he was
quick to give credit to his mother. He knew his
eventual salvation was inseparable from the early
training he had received on her knee and from the
many prayers she had prayed on his behalf. He wrote,

Though in process of time I sinned away all the
advantages of these early impressions, yet they
were for a great while a restraint upon me; they
returned again and again, and it was very long

before I could wholly shake them off; and when the Lord at length opened my eyes, I found a great benefit from the recollection of them.

Elizabeth, he said, had “stored my memory, which was then very retentive, with many valuable pieces, chapters and portions of scripture, catechisms, hymns, and poems.”

Though Elizabeth was gravely ill for all of her son’s early life, she did not allow her condition to keep her from fulfilling her God-given duty. To the contrary, her illness made her urgent to lay an early foundation of Christian doctrine and practice.

She used what strength she had to express the deepest kind of love for her son. She taught him to know God’s existence, God’s holiness, and God’s demands on his life. She taught him songs that would remain in his mind and heart until his dying day. She taught him to honor the Bible and to turn to it for spiritual knowledge and strength. She taught him the good news of the gospel, that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. She displayed a sweet submission to God’s will and a deep piety, treasuring and obeying God’s every word.

As biographer Jonathan Aitken says, “The spiritual lessons the boy had learned at his mother’s knee were never forgotten. They become the foundation for Newton’s eventual conversion and Christian

commitment.” We cannot understand this great man apart from his godly mother.

You, too, may be weak. You, too, may battle frailness and illness. Or perhaps you have some other besetting weakness. Learn from Elizabeth that a mother of feeble physique can still be formidable in faith. See how God delights to use even the weakest people to preach the greatest news. Like Elizabeth, make the most of every day and every opportunity, for you do not know how many years you will have to love, teach, and train your son. Know that those early lessons are not easily forgotten, that this early foundation is not soon destroyed, that your labor in motherhood is not in vain.

* * *

A Mother's Reflection

For those of us who don't have those types of challenges to contend with, here's what I find encouraging and challenging about Newton's story: every bit of the instruction he received from his mother happened before he even turned seven years old. This means that while he was still a preschooler he got a Christian foundation from his mother.

It's encouraging because when we're in the throes of raising small children, we sometimes think that the things we do don't matter all that much. We try to

teach them but wonder if it makes any difference at all, in between the never-ending laundry and the evidence that (oh yes!) these kids really are sinners at every turn.

But this story shows us that even the small things we do as we point them to Christ really matter, that they are taking in so much more than we know, that we have no way of knowing how the Holy Spirit is working through the words of the Bible as we speak them over our kids.

It's also encouraging if we have a child who is wandering or wayward. Even though it isn't promised that a child will return to "the way he should go," this story is definitely a great example of seeing that general truth become a reality. Maybe it was the prayers of his dear mother being answered long after she was around to offer any more up for him.

It's challenging because Newton's mother gave him much more credit than most of us give to our own kids. She taught him things he probably shouldn't have been able to learn, but because she took the time to do it, he did, and those things came back to him in later years at a crucial time. That said, we have to be careful not to inadvertently hold our children back, spiritually speaking, by assuming they're too little. And it should be a huge wake-up call for those mothers who believe that it really doesn't matter if kids are in church when they're little or not, as if they have plenty of time to get that biblical foundation.

I've read that spiritual foundations are pretty well formed by the age of nine. If that is true, many of us are doing too little, too late with our own kids, and John Newton and his mother are a good reminder that the time to start is now. Jesus works in the youngest lives, too, even when we don't expect it.

Reflection Questions

- *Can you think of a time when your child surprised you with spiritual insight that you didn't realize he/she had?*
- *Have you ever wondered if what you're teaching your kids really matters, especially at a young age? How does John Newton's story change your thinking?*
- *What are some ways that you can begin now, wherever your kids are spiritually, to teach them to follow Christ?*
- *Do you regularly ask God to give you the ability to teach his truths to your children? Do you ask him to store these truths in their memory and use them as a foundation for their commitment to Christ?*
- *Whether you are new at motherhood or have never taken the time to teach biblical truths to your children, it may feel overwhelming to begin this process of teaching. Don't know where to begin?*

There are many solid biblical resources available for you to use. Here are a few that my family has especially enjoyed: Training Hearts, Teaching Minds and Comforting Hearts, Teaching Minds by Starr Meade; Big Beliefs! by David Helm; Long Story Short, Old Story New, and The Ology by Marty Machowski.

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Wonder and Worship

Psalm 92:1–4

SUSAN

Our granddaughter Suzie was about four when she slid down the stairs on her pillow just as her mother rounded the corner and saw her. Thus began the following conversation:

“Suzie! Don’t ever do that again!”

“Did you do this when you were a little girl?”

“No, my mother wouldn’t let me.”

“Who is your mother?”

Surprised she did not know this, her mom answered, “*Memommie* is my mother.”

Without flinching Suzie replied, “No, she’s not. She’s an old lady.”

Suzie is now twenty-four, which makes me a very old lady. But here's the thing: I have been happily married for fifty-six years, have three children, twelve grandchildren, and one granddaughter-in-love. You *have* to be an old lady to have these amazing blessings.

The world tells us aging is our enemy, and we should fight it; the Bible says it's our friend: "Wisdom is with the aged, / and understanding in length of days" (Job 12:12).

Let's be real—aging doesn't feel very friendly. Change is disorienting, because we settle into our roles and responsibilities and they become our identity and purpose. And now we face almost daily changes of diminishing physical abilities and energy. We need something bigger and better to make sense of it all. We need an identity and purpose that transcends it all, which is exactly what God provides in the gospel.

The gospel is big enough, good enough, and powerful enough to make every moment of every season of life significant and glorious. The one who created us promises we can flourish and bear fruit, we can be full of sap and green, even in old age (Ps. 92:12-14). These lively words indicate growth and vitality. They seem to contradict my reality as an eighty-year-old who suffers with inflammation of the connective tissue in my body that causes pain and weakness in my muscles. But this promise of growth does not mock my physical reality; it transcends it.

The gospel imperative to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18) does

not have an age limit. The same grace that gives us new life in Christ empowers that life to develop, mature, and flourish. We never finish growing. There is always more grace to experience and more to know of Christ's love. This growth is gradual. We don't produce it, but as we trust and obey God's word, we can anticipate it.

We had almost finished writing this book when I fell, damaging muscles in my neck and jaw that caused severe headaches. My kind doctor told me. "*At your age* this will take a couple of months to heal." I spent many days lying in a dark room, sometimes wondering what it would mean to age with grace if I never got better. I prayed, "Lord, what does it mean to flourish and be fruitful right now when I do not feel like doing anything?" I reflected on Psalm 92, and prayed that he would make me glad (92:4). Some days I fought fears and fatigue, but I began to realize I was not afraid. I was content, and I knew Jesus was with me. I thought, "This is not wasted time. It is growing time, because my physical weakness and pain push me to trust Jesus more. My heart is full of an ineffable gladness." Honestly, I'm shocked by that statement. The only explanation I can give is the one Jesus gives to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

So let's walk the timeless and timely path of Psalm 92 with expectant hearts, eager to know how to flourish and be fruitful as long as we live in these earthly bodies.

Psalm 92:1-4**A Song for the Sabbath**

¹ It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
² to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
³ to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
⁴ For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your
work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

The title of Psalm 92, “A Song for the Sabbath,” indicates this is a communal song that was used in the context of worship. Notice how Sinclair Ferguson connects flourishing to worship:

It is at the end of life, not only at the beginning, that Christians are most different from the rest of the world. Then the true beauty of a woman, the true character of a man, is seen for what it really is. That is why there sometimes seems to be a touch of glory and light about the lives of elderly Christians. They have remained “fresh and green” as Psalm 92 suggests, because their hearts have been given to the Lord in worship. . . . True worship puts character into our lives, humility into our bearing, strength and confidence into our witnessing. . . . Let us learn to worship God, with the faithfulness and joy of the author of Psalm 92.¹

1 Sinclair Ferguson, *A Heart for God* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 116–17.

The psalmist's unbridled joy in God is contagious. His God-centeredness is compelling.

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about God? Our answer is one of the most important things about us because it reveals the arc of our life. It determines the choices we make and shows whether we understand that our identity is not based on what we do but on who we are in Christ. The psalmist leaves no doubt that his knowledge of God is not a product of his imagination or his circumstances; it is the product of God's revelation of himself in his word.

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF THROUGH HIS NAMES

Note the two names the psalmist uses in Psalm 92:1.

LORD is the English translation of the Hebrew word *Yahweh*. This is God's personal, covenant name whereby he reveals himself to us as the covenant-making, covenant-keeping God who enters into a personal, forever-relationship of love with his people. His covenant is his marriage bond with his chosen ones. The very mention of *Yahweh* immediately reminded the elderly Israelites that the Lord never stopped loving or pursuing them, even when they sinned. For us, on this side of the cross, this name brings an even fuller understanding of never-ending covenant blessings, which include:

- God's covenant plan that began in eternity past when the Father chose us in Christ and predestined us for adoption through Christ to the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:4–6);

- His covenant promise in Genesis 3:15 that he will rescue us from Satan's bondage by providing an offspring of the woman who will crush Satan's head;
- His repetition of this promise throughout Scripture: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will live among you" (see Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; Deut. 29:10-13; Jer. 24:7; Zech. 8:8; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev.21:3);
- The fulfillment of the promise when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14);
- The victory of the promise when the crucified Christ rose triumphantly from the grave, conquering sin and death. "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57);
- The provision of the promise when the resurrected Jesus said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20);
- The expectation of the promise when "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11).

"O Most High" is the English translation of the Hebrew word *Elyon*, another name for God, which describes the sovereignty, majesty, and transcendent glory of our Creator and sustainer.

These two names show that the psalmist knew the familial nearness of God as his Father and the stunning transcendence of God as his King. These names bring together the themes

of covenant, creation, fall, redemption, restoration, and consummation. This is the big story that holds every moment of our story together.

We are all products of our theology. What we believe, or don't believe, about God shows up every day. Sound theology produces sound thinking and living. As we face the sorrows and physical suffering of aging, thinking biblically about who God is and who we are in Christ comforts and carries us. God's word accomplishes his purpose in us (Isa. 55:10–11).

Growing in Grace

God reveals himself to us in his word. Our flourishing happens in proportion to time spent getting to know him through his word. An ever-growing knowledge of God produces a more mature, God-centered perspective on our identity and purpose, which are the same in every season of life.

IT IS GOOD

These first three words of Psalm 92 echo God's declaration at the close of each creation day (Gen. 1), reminding us of the rhythm of work and worship established by our Creator when he "blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:3). God's people now gather on the first day of the week to celebrate Jesus's resurrection—his triumphant victory

over sin and death—and to anticipate the everlasting Sabbath rest “for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9).

The psalmist tells us, “It is good to give thanks” (Ps. 92:1). The apostle Paul also exhorts those who are in Christ to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:16–18).

We don’t necessarily give thanks *for* all things but rather *in* all things—in every situation and relationship—we can “give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, / for his steadfast love endures forever!” (Ps. 106:1).

Growing in Grace

As we move through the various seasons of life, the steady rhythm of weekly corporate worship is one way we regularly stop and unite our voices with others to give thanks to the Lord for his amazing grace. This helps to develop the grace of gratitude, which is a means and evidence of flourishing.

MORNING AND EVENING DECLARATION

In Psalm 92:2, the psalmist tells us it is good to begin and end each day by declaring God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. “Steadfast love” (from the Hebrew word *hesed*, sometimes translated “lovingkindness”) is a rich, multifaceted concept. Sinclair Ferguson writes:

Hesed [is] one of the “big” words in the Old Testament Scriptures. It appears around 250 times, and dominantly with reference to God himself. He is a God of loving-kindness. . . . When God revealed himself to Moses, he said that he was a God full of *hesed* (Exodus 34:6)—not simply love or kindness in an ordinary sense. It means God’s deep goodness expressed in his covenant commitment, his absolute loyalty, his obligating of himself to bring to fruition the blessings that he has promised, whatever it may cost him personally to do that.²

It cost God his Son. It cost the Son his life. Jesus embodied *hesed*.

We see the triune God’s unrelenting faithfulness to his covenant of redemption when the first man and woman committed cosmic treason against him. He could have ended it all, but because he had chosen a people in Christ before he created the world, he pursued the man and woman. They were hiding, but he was seeking; and he still is: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He promises, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; / therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (Jer. 31:3). Our sin can never out-distance God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. But the question is, How do we continue in faithfulness? Jesus tells us, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. . . .

2 Sinclair Ferguson, *Faithful God: An Exposition of the Book of Ruth* (Bryntirion, UK: Bryntirion Press, 2007). 64.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4–5).

The repetition of declaring the gospel to ourselves gradually becomes the melody of our soul. Faithfully declaring God’s *hesed* in word and deed develops a pattern of remaining constant even in changing circumstances. It is what Jesus called abiding—remaining, continuing, staying, enduring, submitting.

Growing in Grace

Our bodies change as we age; so do our spirits. We must guard against our hearts becoming brittle and bitter by praying for grace to abide in Christ and bear the fruit of steadfast love and faithfulness to others, even when it is costly.

GLADNESS

This exuberant statement is extraordinary: “You, O LORD, have made me glad” (Ps. 92:4). We look for gladness in people, things, and circumstances, and we are always disappointed. Even if gladness comes, it is temporary. We don’t usually connect gladness and worship. Sometimes people say, “I don’t like the worship at that church.” What does that even mean? Worship is not something we observe and critique; it is something we *do*. In fact, *it is what we were created to do*. And in doing it, the psalmist found great joy. The answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism captures this understanding of life.

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

When Moses was in the desert with a stiff-necked congregation (God's description, not mine, Ex. 33:3), he prayed. Two of his petitions were "Show me now your ways, that I may know you" and "Show me your glory" (33:13; 18). The only thing that could make sense of Moses's situation was knowing God and seeing his glory. God replied: "I will make all my goodness pass before you" (33:19). Then God hid him in the cleft of a rock and passed by, proclaiming the goodness of his own glorious character: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." And Moses's response? He "quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped" (Ex. 34:6–9). The result? "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Ex. 34:29).

Moses's circumstances did not change, but Moses changed. He grew in his knowledge of God's character, he worshiped, and he reflected God's glory to stiff-necked people. When I was recovering from my fall, Gene's care of me continually reflected the goodness of God to me. Shortly after I recovered, Gene was hospitalized. Yes, we felt we were getting a crash course in aging. As Gene needed constant care, not knowing whether his circumstances would change, his reflection of

God's character became brighter. Even talking was exhausting, but he never failed to show kindness to our children and me, to the doctors and nurses, and to all who cared for him. He thanked us for what we did, and he always spoke of God's goodness. Whether he was giving or receiving care, his worship and reflection of his Savior never wavered. It grew. One especially difficult day our son was caring for his dad. When I thanked him for his tenderness, he responded, "It stretched me, but I kept thinking of all Dad has done for me through the years." Ah—isn't that the way it works? As we think of the Lord's goodness to us, we become good, and we become glad.

Will we be stiff-necked or shining old ladies? As we spend time listening and talking to God, we slowly know him better, we know our identity as his children, and we gradually become like our Father. "Those who look to him are radiant, / and their faces shall never be ashamed" (Ps. 34:5).

Proverbs 16:31 tells us, "Gray hair is a crown of glory; / it is gained in a righteous life." Gray hair is a sign of age. The crown is the reward for righteous living. I am not one of those women with beautiful gray hair that does indeed look like a crown, but this is not about hair color, is it? It refers to the reflected glory of the one who lives face-to-face with Jesus, seeking to know him better each day. One of my spiritual daughters calls it *the gospel glow*.

Our primary calling is to glorify God. All other callings are extensions of that. Our calling to be a daughter, employer, employee, wife, mother, single mom, widow, or old lady, our

calling to serve others or to suffer, is a calling to glorify God in that relationship or situation. The venue changes, but the calling remains the same. Often when a woman retires from her vocation or after her children leave the home, she feels useless because her purpose was centered on what she was doing rather than what she was becoming. The calling to glorify God transcends place, time, circumstance, and age.

Growing in Grace

There are many things we can no longer do as we age, but age does not keep us from fulfilling our purpose to glorify and enjoy God. An ever-growing knowledge of God's undeserved love—his grace—changes our motivation: "The love of Christ controls us" (2 Cor. 5:14). When our prayer is that his love for us will increasingly compel us to stop living for ourselves and to live for his glory, we will age with grace.

WORSHIP

Notice the psalmist's involvement in worship in Psalm 92. He gathers with God's people to hear the preaching of God's word, gives thanks, sings praises, and declares God's love and faithfulness. And God makes him glad. God is glorified when we are grateful and glad, because he is the source of these graces.

Charles Bridges, a nineteenth-century pastor in the Church of England, wrote, "Again and again must we be reminded that every motion must begin with God. . . . The

secret of Christian energy and success is a heart enlarged in the love of God.”³ So we pray:

Love divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heav’n, to earth
 come down:
 fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown;
 Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love
 thou art;
 visit us with thy salvation, enter ev’ry trembling heart.
 Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be:
 Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee;
 changed from glory into glory, till in heav’n we take our
 place,
 till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love,
 and praise.⁴

Growing in Grace

The more we know the triune God, the more we rejoice in our identity as his child and our purpose to glorify him. This knowledge results in worship that is transformative. God makes us glad. God fills us with joy. And this gladness and joy, this wonder and praise, do not diminish with age; they increase until we take our place in heaven.

I was in my late forties when my husband went on staff of a church with many righteous, radiant older women. Several

3 Charles Bridges, *Psalm 119: An Exposition* (1827; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 78.

4 Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” 1747.

of them had attended and faithfully served that church all their lives. These women had watched their farmlands become neighborhoods and their rural church fill up with new people. They never resented these changes, and they lovingly welcomed the strangers among them. They flourished as they made us feel like family, and so did we. One of these women was Evelyn, who was in her eighties.

One day I visited Evelyn and poured out my heart to her. I was overwhelmed with life. I whined and grumbled. She listened and never interrupted me or rolled her eyes at my self-centered immaturity. Finally I asked, “What do you think I should do?” She was quiet for a few moments and then lovingly spoke life-giving words that soothed my soul. “As you talked, I kept thinking of one thing—Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Evelyn did not criticize me. She did not give me solutions. Her life and lips declared the steadfast love and faithfulness of Jesus based on the authority of his word. She did not minimize my story by telling me her story, but I knew her story and it gave tremendous weight to her words. Her mother died when she was four years old. Her daddy moved in with his mother, who cared for Evelyn and her three siblings, including her brother Ralph, who was mentally challenged. Before the grandmother died, she told Evelyn, “Take care of Ralph.” Evelyn’s husband died when she was sixty-three. She never had children, but she took care of Ralph, and she had a host of spiritual children.

Until she was bedridden in an assisted-living home, Evelyn was in Sunday school and church every Sunday always looking fresh and beautiful. Her gray hair was a crown of glory that was gained in a righteous life (Prov. 16:31). She lived to be a hundred. She disciplined me until she died, not by her words, because the time came when she could not speak, but by her grateful submission to God's word and his plan for her life.

How do we age with grace? Psalm 92:1-4, along with Evelyn's life and words, shows me that a worshiping, grateful heart becomes a glad heart that glorifies and enjoys God. The opposite is also true. A grumbling heart becomes a sad heart.

Lynda's Story

Lynda Tedeschi is a retired registered nurse and interior decorator. She has three children and seven grandchildren. She has taught women's Bible studies and lives in Newark, Delaware.

I was thirty-nine when my husband died of a rare lung cancer. It had been a difficult marriage because he had years of undiagnosed endogenous depression, but before his death God healed our relationship. I'm grateful for our last year together and that he is with his Savior.

Today I am almost seventy-five and married to a godly man, but soon I will be alone again. Andy has mesothelioma and is in hospice care. When I heard his diagnosis, I cried,

“Again, Lord?” My stepdaughter gently responded, “God prepared you to take care of my dad.” And she was right.

Since the death of my first husband, Jesus has shown me through his word the depth of my need for him and the sufficiency of his grace. Before I only understood saving grace; now Jesus has made living by grace a reality.

I survived my first marriage and the death of my husband by my own strength, repeatedly telling myself, “You can do this!” My heart was full of self-righteousness, pride, and a determination to survive on my own. Now, as I watch Andy die, I admit I am incapable of doing this alone; I need Jesus.

How does one flourish when the love of her life is dying? When Andy heard there was no treatment left to fight his disease, he exuded peace, knowing he would soon be with Jesus. As I slid into the abyss of disappointment and grief, terrified by the idea of life without my dear husband, I also felt the strong arms of Jesus holding me tightly. I soon realized flourishing in this place requires me to daily die to self. Every morning I wake up, not knowing if this will be my last day with Andy, and sorrow floods my soul. Then I fall at the feet of Jesus, knowing I cannot do this apart from his grace. Because I know him better, I rest in him, and the peace that passes all understanding washes away my fear. Jesus began a work in me many years ago, and in this season of life I am being completed in my suffering so I can minister to others who may be suffering. For now, God has called me to love and

care for my husband. Because of Jesus, I will not just survive this; I will flourish as I walk with Andy to the edge of heaven.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you learn about abiding in Christ from the following?

John 15:1-11

John 8:31-32

1 John 2:3-6, 28

1 John 4:13-16

2. Read Exodus 33-34.

a. In 33:18-19, when Moses asked to see God's glory, what did God say he would show him?

b. Make a list of the words God uses in 34:6-7 to describe his goodness. Ask the Holy Spirit to transform your character so you reflect these characteristics to others.

3. Which *Growing in Grace* principle is especially helpful to you at this point in your life and why?

A decorative border of colorful circles surrounds the text. The circles are arranged in a grid-like pattern, with some overlapping. The colors include shades of green, brown, pink, orange, dark green, grey, yellow, purple, blue, red, black, teal, light blue, dark blue, dark red, gold, light purple, dark purple, blue, orange, brown, pink, light blue, dark blue, dark green, light pink, green, and magenta.

JEN WILKIN, JACKIE HILL PERRY,
DANNAH GRESH, JENNY YANG,
COURTNEY REISSIG, AND MORE

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10. WHAT WE SAY ABOUT BEAUTY

JEN WILKIN

I recently came across an article showing ads from the 1930s and '40s selling products to help people gain weight. The ads made claims that sound completely comical to our ears:

“Add 5lb of solid flesh in a week!”

“Since I gained 10lb I have all the dates I want!”

I showed the ads to my daughters, whose response was “Mom, those must be made up.”

But they're real all right, despite how preposterous they seem. For much of human history, the curvy beauty has prevailed. Statues of women from ancient Greece and Rome celebrate a body type we would call “plus-size” today, as does Renaissance art. Historically, padded women were considered beautiful because only the rich and idle could achieve such a figure, and because curviness indicated fertility. For women of past generations, curviness was extremely hard to achieve unless you had the money to eat well and work little. Thanks to trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup, this is no longer the case. To many, slimness is the new ideal: the rich and idle

of today strive to look undernourished and overworked, and the rest of us rush to follow suit.

So, would it have been better to have lived during a time when well-fed women were hailed as beauties? I doubt it—because the issue is not “fat versus thin”; it is “perfect versus imperfect.” Even when we are encouraged to stop thinking about weight and seek strength over skinniness, the underlying message is the same: there is an ideal body, and you don’t have it.

There has never been a time when women have not defined themselves by some ideal of physical beauty. There has never been a time when women have not believed that this ideal exists and should be pursued at all costs. Though its definition may change across the centuries, one element remains constant: it is always just beyond our reach. We want what we cannot have. If curvy is hard to achieve, we want curvy. If thin is hard to achieve, we want thin. We long to be beautiful—whatever our culture tells us “beautiful” means—and we spend a great deal of time trying to achieve it.

In our culture, physical “perfection” is the legacy of womanhood, handed down with meticulous care from mother to daughter, with faithful instruction in word and deed. It is the constant subject of conversation between girlfriends. It is the center of our worries. It is the focus of our compliments, so that even when we are trying to encourage and uplift one another, we often unintentionally reinforce the idea that pursuing physical perfection is a good goal.

Surely we can find a better approach. Surely we can find a better way of talking about beauty.

THE TRUTH ABOUT OUR BODIES

Our culture tells us a series of lies about how we should perceive our bodies. But we can look to Scripture to examine these lies and help ourselves to shift our perspective.

The first lie we are told is about ownership. To whom does your body belong? Western culture says your body belongs to you. You are its owner. You may neglect it, obsess over it, indulge it, punish it, pamper it, or alter it as you wish. The choice is yours, and the consequences will be yours alone to savor or suffer.

But the Bible says that your body is not yours.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

(1 Corinthians 6 v 19-20)

You are the steward of your body, not the owner. Because you were bought with a price, all decisions about and behaviors toward your body must be run through the filter of the question “Does this glorify God in my body?” In other words, does the way I treat my body help me to love God and others or hinder me from doing that? Decisions about our bodies never impact us alone.

The second lie we are told is about purpose. What is your body for? We are told by our culture that our bodies are decorative: useful for attracting the attention of men and the envy of women. The body can and should be trained, toned, and preserved from all signs of aging. What matters most is how it looks, because its level of attractiveness—or, as we’ve been told in more recent years, its strength—can and should be leveraged to give you dominance over and independence from others.

But Scripture says that what matters most about the body is not how it looks but what it does. The body is useful, created to do good works which serve God.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2 v 10)

And instead of telling us to focus on preserving our strength and youth, the Bible points out that our bodies are fragile and fleeting (Isaiah 40 v 6-8, 23-24, 30; Romans 8 v 20-23). Our bodies bear the impact of the fall. People who face challenges such as disability, disfigurement, infertility, chronic illness, terminal illness and advanced age think of their bodies differently than people who don't. They tend to enjoy a heightened ability to value wellness over attractiveness. They readily understand that a beautiful body is a body that simply functions as it should.

The third lie we are told is about alterations. How might we improve on what we've got? We are told by Western culture that our appearance is flawed but fixable. You are not the right size, shape, or color, but you can and should go to enormous effort and expense to change that. Our culture tells us that what we should be hoping for is a better body, and eventually a perfect body. By making these physical changes, you can change the condition of your heart. Once you look right, you will have more self-confidence, better self-esteem, and greater happiness.

But the truth is that your body's appearance was planned by God. You were purposefully knitted together by him in your mother's womb (Psalm 139 v 13). Because God is a God of infinite creativity, people come in many different sizes, shapes and colors. While our bodies are not "perfect" in the sense that our culture demands, they are designed by a perfect God.

Not only this, but our bodies have a glorious future. There is a type of physical perfection that we can achieve. It will be reached in heaven.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

(1 Corinthians 15 v 42-44)

This is true hope and good news for the believer: one day we will be free of our self-loathing and will live in harmony with our physical appearance. We will be given new, incorruptible bodies—bodies that are no longer on a collision course with the grave.

We dare not reduce this future hope to that of an eternity with thinner thighs or a smaller nose. We must celebrate it as the day when vanity itself is dealt a fatal and final blow.

IN THE MEANTIME

We can lay claim now to this future hope. Every time we look in the mirror and are tempted to complain, we could say instead, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6 v 10)—accepting that our bodies are imperfect and fragile, acknowledging that they are designed, created, and owned by God, and looking forward to the day when they will be made perfect with him in glory.

And then we can strive to live in the light of these truths. We can labor to live in right relation to our bodies now instead of only at the resurrection.

By all means, seek to steward the gift of your physical body. We should present our bodies as living sacrifices, ready to work in accordance with God’s will. That means caring for our bodies—but for the sake of wellness, not beauty. Two women can step onto two treadmills with identical fitness goals and widely different motives. Only they will know the real reason why they are there.

1 Peter 3 v 3-4 is often quoted to encourage women not to focus too much on their appearance.

Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.

But is Peter’s purpose to tell us that we should never do anything to make ourselves look nice? No. In this passage he is speaking to wives with unbelieving husbands, regarding how they might seek to win them for Christ. He contrasts the influence of their outward beauty with the influence of their inward beauty. He’s saying, *Are you relying on something that is perishable when you have something imperishable to rely on?* Rather than a warning against adornments, this is an instruction about the power of inward beauty to draw others to Christ.¹

There is nothing wrong with wanting to look our best, insofar as doing so does not begin to absorb excessive time, thought, effort, or expense. But what our culture calls physical “perfection” is not within our grasp—nor should it be what we are aiming for. The common marketing pitch that transforming the outside will fix the way we feel on the inside is a lie. It is an inversion (and a perversion) of the good news, which promises transformation in an opposite direction. The believer’s hope is that transformation on the inside enables us to make peace with the outside.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by

testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12 v 1-2)

A mind being progressively transformed by the gospel rejects the worship of self and the futile pursuit of happiness. By pursuing holiness instead, our attitudes toward our bodies will change as we learn to love them as instruments, as good gifts from God. We can have healthy confidence because we have confidence in God, and because we are laying up treasure in heaven, which can never be destroyed.

What if we began to build a legacy of womanhood that celebrates character over carb-avoidance and godliness over glamor? What if we simply didn't talk so much about calories, workouts and weight loss? What if we didn't talk about body sizes at all? What if we made it a point not to mention our own calorie sins or victories in front of our girlfriends and daughters?

Sure—hit the gym, eat the Paleo diet, run six miles a day, wear Spanx from neck to knee; but just stop talking about it. Stop telling your friend she looks slim; instead tell her you love her sweet spirit. Choose compliments that spur her to pursue that which lasts instead of that which certainly does not. If someone comments on your own shape, say thanks and change the subject. Banish body-talk to the same list of off-limits topics as salaries, name-dropping, and colonoscopies. Apply the discipline you use to work out to controlling your tongue.

But whatever you do, don't avoid bestowing the compliment of "beautiful".

A BETTER "BEAUTIFUL"

I grew up with a dad who told me I was beautiful—a lot. I would roll my eyes as he'd say it, reaching out to hug me, and I would think to myself, "He just thinks that because he's my dad." My subscription to *Seventeen* magazine reminded

me faithfully every month that I was not, in fact, beautiful at all. My hair was stick-straight (a debilitating handicap for '80s hair). I had a bad complexion. I had the shoulder span of a linebacker in an era when giant shoulder pads were routinely added to women's shirts, seemingly for the sole purpose of enhancing my freakishness. I was no curvier than the 13-year-old boys I desperately hoped would ask me to dance, even as I loomed over them with my gargantuan height. Clearly, my dad was delusional.

But he was the best kind of delusional. He was the kind of delusional every daughter needs. He saw something in me that the mirror didn't, and he routinely and faithfully pronounced me beautiful regardless of all external measures.

We become more beautiful in the knowing. Which of us has not met someone whom we at first thought to be plain, but whom upon longer acquaintance we grew to find beautiful? When we tell someone she is beautiful, what we mean is that she is beautiful to us. It is a way of telling someone that it is a sheer joy to know them.

This particularly applies to parents. In our image-driven culture, young girls already perceive their physical "flaws" to the point that the face value of the words "You're beautiful" will ring untrue. But, God willing, they will learn the deeper significance of these words because of who speaks them. Because we know our daughters better than any other human does, our opinion counts more than anyone else's. Our daughters will see how our belief in their beauty intertwines with our love for their person, and realize that they are valued just as they are. When every billboard and magazine cover and internet ad is telling your daughter that she is not beautiful, the knowledge that you absolutely, irrationally, vehemently disagree may just be the thing that keeps her heart whole.

But the benefits of saying "You're beautiful" extend beyond the parent-child relationship. When we tell our

daughters—and our mothers, sisters, grandmothers and friends—that they are beautiful, we are modeling the love of a heavenly Father who “sees not as man sees” (1 Samuel 16 v 7). When we simply tell them they are beautiful—avoiding the poisonous language of complexion or color, of size or shape, of failure or perfection—we give them permission and power to measure beauty differently. We show them that it is possible to focus not merely on the outward appearance but on the heart.

LOOKING UP

Would it help us grow in godliness to readjust our language as we speak to one another about beauty? Yes. Would it help us grow in godliness to change our inward motivations and mantras and say no to the cultural lies that surround us every day? Yes. But the greatest help to having a healthy, godly, biblical view of our bodies is to think about something else altogether.

We so easily measure ourselves by a human standard instead of a divine one, succumbing to and revering human opinion as truth. But the ultimate antidote to the fear of people is the fear of God. We need to offer our reverence and awe to its true object: God himself.

You can tell me that I’m beautiful, truthfully and fervently. You can tell me that I am God’s masterpiece, that I am sung over and delighted in, that I am beautiful in his eyes, that I am set apart for a sacred purpose. You can tell me these things, and you should. But I beg you, first tell me to gaze in awe at God. Though all of these statements are precious truths, their preciousness cannot be properly perceived until framed in the brilliance of his utter holiness.

In my book *None Like Him* (Crossway, 2016) I wrote about awe and what it means to fear the Lord:

“Research shows that when humans experience awe—wonderment at redwoods or rainbows, Rembrandt or Rachmaninoff—we become less individualistic, less self-focused, less materialistic, more connected to those around us. In marveling at something greater than ourselves, we become more able to reach out to others ... Awe helps us worry less about self-worth by turning our eyes first toward God, then toward others. It also helps establish our self-worth in the best possible way: we understand both our insignificance within creation and our significance to our Creator.” (pages 154-155)

When we consider the God who created the world and who embodies perfection, when we truly “worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness” (Psalm 96 v 9), when we glimpse something of what he is really like, we tremble and stammer, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful woman.” On such holy ground, self-conscious thoughts of body image have no place. They are rightfully replaced with awe at the miracle of our acceptance through Christ.

To lift our eyes to the transcendent God is to reorient ourselves to true beauty, eternal beauty, unchanging beauty. The prophet Isaiah tells us that our beauty is as fragile as grass—and then suggests that that should lead us to submit to and depend on the strong and eternal God.

*All flesh is grass,
and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the LORD blows on it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.
(Isaiah 40 v 6b-8)*

In Acts chapter 1, as the apostles watch Jesus ascend into the clouds and disappear from sight, two angelic messengers assure them:

Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. (v 11)

This Jesus. This Jesus, in his resurrected body: “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15 v 20). At this very moment, Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father in a body of flesh. His resurrected body is a promise that our withering, fading flesh will one day, too, be raised incorruptible.

This is the reason to pursue the truth of Scripture instead of accepting the lies of our culture. This is the reason to look forward to that day, and to live in the light of that sure expectation. This is the reason to discipline our tongues and create a culture in which physical appearance has nothing to do with how much we value ourselves and one another.

We must fix our eyes upon Jesus, the One whose beauty will never, ever fade. In this captivating vision is found healthy self-forgetfulness, help for the weak, and hope eternal.



A LITURGY FOR
Changing Diapers I

Heavenly Father,
in such menial moments as this—the changing of a diaper—
I would remember this truth:

My unseen labors are not lost, for it is these
repeated acts of small sacrifice that—
like bright, ragged patches—
are slowly being sewn into a quilt of
lovingkindness that swaddles this child.

I am not just changing a diaper.
By love and service I am tending a budding heart that,
rooted early in such grace-filled devotion,
might one day be more readily-inclined to bow
to your compassionate conviction—knowing itself then
as both a receptacle and a reservoir of heavenly grace.

So this little act of diapering—
though in form sometimes felt as base drudgery—
might be better described as one of ten thousand acts
by which I am actively creating a culture
of compassionate service and selfless love to shape
the life of this family and this beloved child.

So take this unremarkable act of necessary service, O Christ, and in your economy let it be multiplied into that greater outworking of worship and of faith, a true investment in the incremental advance of your kingdom across generations.

Open my eyes that I might see this act for what it is from the fixed vantage of eternity, O Lord—
how the changing of a diaper might sit upstream
of the changing of a heart;
how the changing of a heart might sit upstream
of the changing of the world.

Amen.

A LITURGY FOR

Changing Diapers II

FOR THERE ARE MANY DIAPERS THAT MUST BE CHANGED. . .

Ah Lord, what a mess we sometimes make of our lives!
What a tragic comedy is even our most sincere attempt
to merit righteousness on our own.

We are no more able to render ourselves holy
than is this infant to keep itself unsoiled.

I am as dependent upon your grace
and your own righteousness, O Christ,
to justify and make me clean,
as this little one is dependent upon me to wash
the residue of filth from its skin, wrapping it
again in soft and freshly-laundered garments.

Let me not be frustrated
by the constant repetition
of this necessary act
on behalf of a child.

Rather, let the daily doing of this
be a reminder to me,
of the constant cleansing and covering
of my own sin, that I—helpless as this babe
and more often in need—
enjoy in the active mercies of Christ.

Amen.



KELLY M.
KAPIC

you're
only |
human

How Your Limits
Reflect God's Design
*and Why That's
Good News*

you're only human

How Your Limits Reflect God's Design
and Why That's Good News

KELLY M. KAPIC



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have i done enough?

facing our finitude

The result of busyness is that an individual is very seldom permitted to form a heart.

Søren Kierkegaard, journal entry

Many of us fail to understand that our limitations are a gift from God, and therefore good. This produces in us the burden of trying to be something we are not and cannot be.

Not in Control

Creaturely finitude is less an idea we discover than a reality we run into.

Todd and Liz had been married and childless for many years, so Liz's sudden pregnancy filled them with joy and expectation. They were going to have a baby but hadn't found out yet if it was a boy or girl, let alone picked the baby's name. Without warning, however, events spiraled out of control. The baby was born prematurely, at just twenty-five weeks, three days after Christmas. Their joy had turned to alarm. Unsure of how long he would live, they immediately named him Findley Fuller after their mothers' maiden names; Liz and Todd told me that in the uncertainty of whether he would

live or die they chose a name for their son that reflected his place in a larger family and a larger story. He was not alone; to the God of the living they entrusted their son and his story.

In previous centuries, or even previous decades, medical practice would not have been able to save Finn's life. He needed twenty-four-hour care, and even with medical advances the prognosis didn't look great. Would he make

Finitude, *n.* The condition or state of being finite; the condition of being subject to limitations; = FINITENESS *n.*

Finiteness, *n.* The quality or condition of being finite; the condition of being limited in space, time, capacity, etc.

Oxford English Dictionary

it through the night, through the week? His system was very fragile: he struggled with everything from breathing to seizures, from infections to dangers to his young eyes. Each day brought not only fresh hope but also new obstacles. Finn was a strong little guy and a fighter, but the odds didn't look good.

A few weeks into his son's fight for life, despite his exhaustion, Todd found the strength to send out a CarePage update on their son's condition, commenting, "All of this brings loads of new fears and anxieties to Liz and me. But we trust in God's faithfulness, mercy, and love. And we have confidence in the NICU medical staff. We acknowledge fear, but we cling to hope." Todd then reminded us that he was writing on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and quoted from this American minister and civil rights advocate, who once said, "We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope."¹ And then Todd signed off, "God is able." He didn't mention our limits as an excuse for the doctors to give up but rather as the context for their best efforts. Only God was and is infinite.

The vulnerability of their son's life reminded Todd and Liz of their own tiny and comparatively weak place in an incomprehensibly huge and threatening cosmos. Standing in the hospital beside Findley, they were freshly aware that, from the odd asteroid to everyday germs, the parts of the world that can hurt us often operate beyond our control or even prediction. They had given their newborn son into the care of doctors, but even more so into the care of God. Still, even with this, how does one "accept finite disappointment" while maintaining "infinite hope"? Excellent nurses and doctors were working as hard as they could to preserve little Finn's life, and Todd and Liz knew that the infinite God of grace and love cares more about them and their child than they ever could, so they took some comfort there. But

when the brokenness of the world hits our human limitations, it strains our emotions, will, and understanding past their abilities.

All of us bounce between the illusion that we are in control and the world's demonstration that we are not. Thank God Finn has both survived and flourished as the months and now years have passed: as you can imagine, his baptism and first birthday were great celebrations! But the memories of this frightening and humbling season of life remind Todd and Liz and their friends that the boundaries of our abilities to handle life are closer than we would like.

Whether through tragedy or simply as the result of aging, we all are repeatedly reminded that we are fragile and dependent creatures.² But it is not just our bodies that face us with these upsetting limits—we also see them in a coworker with greater intellectual gifts than ours, or a fellow athlete who is so much faster, or an aging parent whose waning emotional and psychological stability has threatened the health of our relationship with them. We have far less control of the world and even of ourselves than we would like to imagine. Some people respond by living as passive victims, while others aggressively seize as much control as possible.

We know our actions matter, and matter a lot. A doctor who studied hard is usually better than one who simply wanted to pass exams. Parents who want to be thoughtful about rearing their children, seeking to avoid mistakes they inherited from their own parents, are better than negligent guardians. Unfortunately, patients still die in surgery under the care of excellent physicians, and earnest parents mistakenly assume they can get it perfectly “right,” ignorant of their own blind spots, larger cultural factors, and personality differences. What we *do* matters. We can and do change things. But when we suppose that we can control all our circumstances, we soon find that we can't. We don't say the words, but we live as though the weight of the world were on our own shoulders. And it exhausts us. Behind the patient grin on our faces we hide a lingering rage about the endless demands that must be met, unrealized dreams, and relational disappointments.

The odd thing is that, even when we run into our inevitable limits, we often hang on to the delusion that if we just work harder, if we simply squeeze tighter, if we become more efficient, we can eventually regain control. We imagine we can keep our children safe, our incomes secure, and our bodies whole. When I complain about getting older, my wife sometimes laughs and says to me, “You have two options: either you are getting older

or you are dead.” Denying our finitude cripples us in ways we don’t realize. It also distorts our view of God and what Christian spirituality should look like.



Finitude is an unavoidable aspect of our creaturely existence. We run into it constantly and in different ways. If we are paying attention, we can see it. It doesn’t take a car accident or an unexpected hospital visit for us to discover our limits and dependency. But are we listening? Do we recognize the signs? They’re all around us. Far too often our lives testify to the fact that we believe we really can and should do everything. Thomas Merton, drawing on an observation by Douglas Steere, once observed,

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.³

Merton wrote this over fifty years ago, but his concern is even more relevant now than it was then.

The Crushing Weight of Expectation

Are you exhausted? Do you experience a consistent background feeling of guilt about how little you accomplish each day? Are you weighed down by a sense of how much there is to do and how little progress you are making? How are your plans, hopes, and dreams doing?

One of the areas I had not planned to investigate while doing research for this book, but which proved truly significant, was the American educational system. I paid most attention to high schools and colleges. What I noticed was how the educational patterns we learned there often foster unhealthy expectations of how much one should “get done” in a day. Now, before I say

more on this, let me clarify that this appears to affect middle- and upper-income public and private schools more than it does schools in low-income areas. That said, here is an average day for many high school students:

- Leave home for school around 7:30 a.m. or earlier.
- Attend classes until 3:30 p.m.
- Immediately go to extracurricular activity (sport, theater, etc.) until 6:00–7:00 p.m.
- Rush home; quick dinner and shower.
- Then, for the rest of the evening, work almost nonstop on homework, only finishing and heading to bed at 10:30 p.m. or later.

This basic schedule sounds painfully familiar to my own students, but they are hesitant to admit the toll it has taken on them. They have absorbed the view that this pattern is morally “right” and “expected”: pack your day from morning to bedtime with as many things as possible. Consequently, many students who have been rushing around like this and can’t keep up have come to believe they are disappointments, weak, or worse. They can’t keep up and they equate this inability with a moral shortcoming on their part. Add to that the challenges of getting into college, and they reach the unquestioned view that getting certain grades is not just valuable; it defines your worth. It’s easy for adults to say “Grades aren’t everything,” but all our other actions and words teach the students not to believe the intended comfort. So getting a B–, let alone a C, isn’t just taken to reflect one’s struggles in a class; it is often subconsciously used as a moral assessment of them.

I am a college professor who regularly deals with students. Anyone willing to listen will discover that they often live with at least a low-level sense of guilt over how much they are not getting done. So many pages they didn’t read, endless assignments they rushed, activities they missed, and friendships they have neglected or never formed. Sure, it is easy to say they are not using their time well, that they fool around too much (which is sometimes true!), but that line usually functions as an easy excuse to avoid honestly considering whether there are any problems with how we have set things up in formal education. Funnily enough, some students also tell me they don’t feel so guilty about not getting all the assigned work done because they believe their professors (including me) have such unrealistic expectations—they

believe there is no way they could possibly do all of what is expected in any given week. In other words, not only students but professors, too, struggle to have realistic expectations or understand how much time and work assignments really take. So some students detach while others frantically try to keep up even as they feel like they are slowly drowning. However, this is not just a challenge for students and faculty.

At my work there are always people and projects that need more attention than I can give them. Others face similar frustrations: the warehouse operator could always become more efficient at dealing with inventory; the realtor has never sold enough houses; the stay-at-home parent never seems to get to that neglected mess in the corner of the house. Counselors might have asked better questions; teachers could be better prepared each day for classes; and students wish they could focus their attention longer. Receptionists could be more organized and efficient, while managers dream of being proactive rather than reactive. We all constantly collide with our limits. Your work circumstances probably differ from mine, but we both

How I spend this ordinary day in Christ is how I will spend my Christian life.

Tish Harrison Warren,
Liturgy of the Ordinary

wonder if we have done “enough.” Maybe we are being driven by the wrong impulses and have the wrong goals in mind?

What about church and missional concerns? We should offer prayers, write encouraging notes, and provide meals to those in need. Countless excellent organizations desperately require time and resources so someone can care for the poor, adopt the orphan, and come alongside the prisoner; yet how rarely do I participate? And when I do, it almost always feels like a tiny drop in a massive, empty bucket of need. Shouldn't I do more? Then, when I sense my limits, I am tempted to pretend that these problems are not that bad or that Jesus didn't really say that they require his people's attention. Maybe helping the poor and orphan is optional rather than essential. Maybe prayer is a great idea, but not genuinely needed. But such denial isn't healthy either, since it distorts our view of Jesus and warps our understanding of God himself. What should we do, then? How should we respond to these gospel needs and our own limited ability to answer them?

Then there is my body. With every passing year the metabolism slows down, the aches increase, and there is the undeniable sense that it needs greater attention, from the food I eat to the exercise that I need to counter

my sedentary work patterns. To neglect caring for our bodies has greater consequences than we want to admit: the problems are not just related to our waistlines, but to our relationships and countless other areas of life. Proverbs long ago warned us how misusing our bodies or never restricting our appetites can produce negative consequences (e.g., Prov. 20:1; 23:1–3, 20–21; 25:16, 27).

What about my mind? I'm an academic, paid to spend my hours studying, teaching, and writing. Guess what: I simply can't keep up—not even close! Please don't tell anyone. Fresh books and articles appear every week. Not only that, I meet more people every year, including fresh crops of students and new people at church—it is painful how many names I forget. Or, more accurately, it is painful how few names I remember. My mind simply cannot keep up with the endless demands . . . and I feel guilty about it. When Paul calls us to the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2), what does that require of us? And why do we always approach these questions by assuming that an idealized genius is the goal or model, rather than looking to people with severely limited IQs who yet profoundly love God and neighbor? Maybe we have inappropriately valued our brains in a way that distorts our view of *being* human.⁴

What about family? I'm a parent of two amazing children—this should be easy since I know folks with four or more kids. Yet I could always spend more time with my two—more time playing cards, laughing, talking, and just hanging out. Similarly, I'm married, and any self-reflective spouse easily recognizes his or her shortcomings. I want to be more thoughtful, more attentive; there is always more that can be given. We could all do more to encourage, empower, and care for our spouses. And how well am I keeping up relationships with extended family who live all around the country? Shouldn't I check in more? Wouldn't it be good to gather together more often?

The list could go on to touch other spheres of life, from home maintenance to education, from community involvement to recreation. In area after area we sense our shortcomings, our longings to be more, to do more, and yet we run smack dab into our limits. So how should we respond to this guilt and the endless needs and demands?

A Time-Management Problem?

Here we face a crucial question: Does this dissatisfaction always mean that we have sinned, or is something else going on? Are we *required* to overcome

these perceived shortcomings? Some treat these limitations as indicating a moral deficiency or as an obstacle in a competition that can and should be conquered.

One common response in the West is to seek self-improvement through greater organization in our lives. We skim the internet for short articles on time management, since we long ago gave up on reading whole books. Sometimes we decide to get up earlier or stay up later, hoping to add another hour or two of productivity to our lives. Since we can't put more hours into the day, we try to change ourselves. We try to do more, be more.

Normally at this point in the story we draw attention to how much TV the average American watches, how much time is lost consuming mindless digital content and games. But what if our problem is not time management? *What if rather than serving as the cause of our problems, the draw of mind-numbing screen time was a sign of a deeper malady?* Maybe such escapism reveals a sickness in our souls that we have been neglecting. And rather than just being a problem for the “world” out there, these are signs to which Christians should also pay attention.

I think we have a massive problem, but it is not a time-management issue. It is a *theological* and *pastoral* problem.



A few years ago I had a podcast interview with a woman who had read my book *A Little Book for New Theologians* and wanted to talk about it.⁵ Part of what made this interview stimulating was that most of her audience were mothers who primarily spent their time caring for their young children. She wanted her listeners to discover how relevant theology was to their lives.

Near the end of the interview she asked, “Any other big theological concepts that we moms should major in?” She apparently thought I would use the softball question to talk about divine sovereignty or some other high-octane doctrine, but instead my answer was, “Human finitude.” She was fairly surprised. My response grew out of my concern that many of us North American Christians have a very weak and underdeveloped doctrine of creation. This problem is something I can only hint at here, though in a later chapter I will revisit this point.

What I mean is that we must rediscover that being *dependent* creatures is a constructive gift, not a deficiency. Clever readers might even notice that using “dependent” as an adjective for “creature” is basically redundant—there

are no creatures who are not, by their very nature, dependent beings. Our dependency does not merely point to abstract ideas of divine providence, but takes concrete form when we rely on others, on the earth, on institutions and traditions. We must learn the value and truthfulness of our finitude, eventually getting to the point where *we might even praise God for our limits*. I didn't say praise him for *evil*: we need to see the difference between the gift of finitude (i.e., human limits) and the lamentable reality of sin and misery.⁶

Returning to the interview, the connection between finitude and child-rearing was not difficult to make. Our kids don't need to be good at everything. In fact, they are *not* supposed to be good at everything! And once we finally believe and

embrace this, it liberates our children (and us!). We can now start delighting in other people rather than viewing them as challengers to be overcome.

Almost immediately the host responded in a most delightful way. Although she said this “came out of left field,” she started making all kinds of wonderful connections, from parents' inclination to overschedule their children's lives, to how they imagine their kids should be stars in everything. Such homes are consumed with activity and have little space for rest and reflection. Relationships remain superficial when everyone—from the children to the parents—is constantly trying to be the best, to win. That distorting expectation—whether or not one realizes it—necessarily makes all of us come out as losers rather than winners. Thus, we sign up the kids for more activities, hoping they will eventually succeed. And until they do succeed, we lie to them and tell them they are amazing at everything, hoping one day it will be true. Kids start to believe the problem lies not with their own shortcomings, but with the judges, with the teachers, with their peers—with anyone and everyone but themselves. Although meant to encourage self-esteem and success, this strategy eventually undermines our children's long-term self-esteem and view of self because the myth of their “excellence” at everything cannot be sustained.

At some point the course of life will expose what we then receive as painful truths: we are not the best, the brightest, the most able. There are always stronger, more beautiful, more brilliant people. At some point the illusion comes crashing down, and when it does, it can have devastating

As deficient beings, humans are in danger of working themselves up into a frenzy of activity and thus destroying themselves.

Ingolf U. Dalferth,
Creatures of Possibility

consequences. As a college professor, I frequently see young adults coming to terms with these very difficult facts that had been, in various ways, hidden from them. But no “helicopter” or even “bulldozing” parents can protect the child forever. Each of us must face our limits and weaknesses at some point, whether we want to or not.

Finitude Is *Not* Sin

We live in a fallen world. Sin has affected everything from our heads to our hearts, from our body chemistry to sociopolitical dynamics. Because of this we sometimes wrongly attribute all our problems to sin, when in fact they are often a matter of running up against the limits inherent in being finite creatures instead of being God.

We are, by God’s good design, finite. For the purposes of this book, when I say “finite,” I will normally be focusing on *good, created human limits*: all creatures are limited by space, time, and power, and our knowledge, energy, and perspective also have always been limited. In other words, please do not necessarily read “death” into the word “finitude” as used here, since that raises a whole set of different questions and is not, for the most part, what I am focused on in these pages. This book focuses on the limits that are part of God’s original act of making us, which he called “good.”

Often when we rush to meet all the expectations that surround us and look at our bottomless to-do lists, we desire to become infinite in capacity. We think, “If only I had more time, energy, and ability, then I could get everything done, which would make me and everyone else happy.” But meeting endless expectations would require that we possess God’s infinite attributes and prerogatives as our own. Sometimes lurking under our desires to expand our abilities is the unspoken temptation: “If only I were the infinite Creator, not a finite creature . . .”

Indeed, this impulse to reject our creaturely limits is as old as sin itself. Genesis shows us that God made all that is not God, and everything he made was “good” (Gen. 1). But we quickly meet a serpent who seems to appear out of nowhere and raises an unsettling question: “Did God actually say . . . ?” (3:1). Using his words to warp his hearer’s imagination, the snake declares, “God knows that when you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (3:5). Subtly insinuating doubt and uncertainty, the serpent introduces distrust into the divine-human relationship.

With these indirect tactics the serpent encourages his hearers to imagine they can and should *know more*. They should *be more*. He implies that divinely given limits are a fault to be overcome rather than a beneficial gift to be honored. This knowledge is not just about information, nor merely about morality, but as Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad observes, it is about “mastery” of “all things.” Von Rad further explains, “By endeavouring to enlarge his being on the godward side, seeking a godlike intensification of his life beyond his creaturely limitations, that is, by wanting to be like God, man stepped out from the simplicity of obedience to God.”⁷ The man and woman disdained their creaturely limits as faults instead of gifts, barriers that kept them from obtaining divine qualities. Taking a bite of the fruit was only the outward sign of the terrible lie the serpent got them to believe.

Though they were the pinnacle of God’s creation in the Genesis narrative, they became dissatisfied, rejecting love to gain power. Being finite creatures, even made in the divine image, was simply not enough. God had given Adam

The human being’s limit is at the center of human existence, not on the margin. . . . There where the boundary—the tree of knowledge—stands, there stands also the tree of life, that is, the very God who gives life. God is at once the boundary and the center of our existence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*

and Eve the fullness of the garden and many other rich gifts; accordingly, the original sin has the shape of *taking the one thing that was not given to them*.⁸ Rather than perceiving this limitation also as a good gift, they viewed it naively and greedily as an opportunity, like children doubting their parents when they tell them not to stick their finger into an electrical outlet. Parents do not set such limits because they disrespect or hate their children, but because they so love them and recognize the danger of ignoring their natural limits. The shock could kill them!

Thus from chapter 3 onward, Genesis tells of our discomfort with any divine restrictions, moving from obedience to disobedience. As von Rad claims, “A movement began in which man pictures himself as growing more and more powerful, more and more titanic.”⁹ In fact, the Genesis narrative appears to represent a turning from the original good ordering of creation to a disordering: shalom is disrupted. And now we all live in this disordered relationship to our limits.



So what does it mean that we are creatures and not God? What does it mean that we have *these* talents and resources and not *all* talents and resources? What does it mean that we are finite, particular, and rooted, and not infinite, universal, or standing above all local circumstances? Answering these questions honestly will change how we imagine the world, ourselves, and our relationship to God and others.

Recognizing and rejoicing in our particular kind of finitude is a massive challenge, especially in the affluent, driven West. This shows up not just in our unrealistic expectations about how much we can accomplish in a day but also in our failure to value rest and slow-growing relationships. This problem takes many forms, from inappropriate expectations placed on our children to dehumanizing practices in the workforce. Christians often burn out from overcommitment to church activities or ministries; or they go to the opposite extreme, never volunteering for anything because they fear the unending demands that will come once they have committed. Too often the options are either try to do everything or simply to do nothing.

So how can we proceed? I want us to take time to carefully think about our creatureliness. This will reveal limits, dependence, love, reliance on the grace of God, and worship. We will examine the joy of being a creature and the freedom of resting on the promises of the Creator. We will question harmful and unrealistic ideals and begin to appreciate the messiness of our complex lives.

As we do this, the following central concepts will guide my reflections:

1. We are not under any requirement to be infinite—infinity is reserved for God alone. Rather, *in and through* our creaturely limits we are called to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In other words, loving both God and neighbor falls completely within the range of creaturely finitude. This takes us to my second guiding observation.

2. We need to stop asking (or feeling that we should ask) for God's forgiveness when we can't do everything, and we need to ask forgiveness for ever imagining we could!

These and other reflections throughout the book are built on some basic theological assertions:

- God is the good Creator who designed us as good creatures.
- Part of the good of being a creature is having limits.
- The incarnation is God's great yes to his creation, including human limits.
- God designed the person for the community and the community for the person.
- The Creator is also the Sustainer and Redeemer.
- We are never asked to relate to God in any way other than as human creatures.
- God's goal for humanity is for us to become lovers of God, neighbor, and the rest of creation.

Once we see ourselves within this framework, where our creaturely finitude plays a good and essential part, the pressures to fulfill endless expectations take on a different appearance. We begin to relate to God and others in a more fruitful way: no longer do we aspire to have infinite capacity—that is God's job! We worship him as he made us: dignified, purposeful, vulnerable, finite creatures. We do not apologize for our creaturely needs and dependence on others, for we discover this is how God made us, and it is good.



This book aims to help us discover the theological and pastoral significance of embracing the gift of being limited: it is just part of being human. Each chapter will explore a different question that allows us to look at our creaturely limits from a slightly different perspective. We have already observed that we often feel we have not done enough, which raises a nagging concern: *Am I enough?* If we are ever to answer that well, we must ask the central question (which we will look at in chap. 2): *What does God think of me?* Not generic humanity, but me, in my singularity, my particularity, my smallness? How do I relate to Christ without ceasing to be me? We then consider the particular humanity of Mary's son, including his physicality: this gives us a deeper and more realistic appreciation of our own humanity (chap. 3). From there we explore why our bodies are necessarily tied to our self-perception, relationships, and even worship: one aspect of our original makeup is that we worship in and through our bodies, so ignoring or abusing a person's body has significant consequences (chap. 4). God made each

of us with distinct particularity, with different bodies and personalities, but not to be isolated individuals who generate our identities on our own: our identity is necessarily linked to our families, cultures, and historical contexts (chap. 5). Since sin has also affected every aspect of our lives, including our limited self-understanding, we must carefully navigate the daily challenge of being a saint who sins.

Having laid the groundwork for the value of our particularity and limits, we spend the rest of the book exploring what healthy interdependence looks like. We examine humility: concerned about the problematic results

We have no other experience of God but human experience. When I experience God, what sustains me is, at least first of all, God made human.

Emmanuel Falque,
The Metamorphosis of Finitude

that come from too often grounding it in sin, we show humility's true basis in the good of our creaturely limits (chap. 6). Next we explore some of the problematic ways we relate to time. Cultivating awareness of God's presence can liberate us from the despo-

atism of the clock and recenter us in truly human pursuits (chap. 7). On a related theme, our sense that we lack time often leads us to want immediate and radical improvement in ourselves. We discover, to the contrary, that God has purposes in taking his time and that, since process itself is also a good aspect of the created world, we should learn to honor rather than belittle it (chap. 8). We also look at the apparently endless legitimate demands we face in the church, from proclaiming the gospel to caring for the materially poor. Our finitude drives us back together, to depend on each other in the church and on our God. What is impossible for the particular Christian becomes possible for the church as Christ's body (chap. 9). Finally, I offer practical reflections on four patterns of life that can help us have a healthier experience of our human limits: rhythm, vulnerability, gratitude, and rest (chap. 10).

Examining some of our false assumptions (outside and inside the church) will show us why we struggle with our human limits and how to celebrate the goodness of being a creature of the God who loves what he made. God delights in our finitude: he is not embarrassed or shocked by our creatureliness. Since he is not apologetic about it, we should stop apologizing for it ourselves. But if we are ever going to appreciate how this is good, we need to start by asking: How does God view me?

does God love . . . me?

crucified . . . but i still live

The indwelling Christ enables each person to be more himself than he was ever able to be before.

Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Praying the Jesus Prayer*

God loves his children; therefore, by his Son and Spirit he is liberating us from the entanglements of sin that distort our true selves, which were made for communion with the Creator and our fellow creatures.

A FAIR PLACE TO BEGIN thinking about the good of human finitude is by understanding the importance of our particularity. We are often far more uncomfortable with who we are than we might at first realize. Understanding what God thinks of you is, therefore, a great place to start.

What Does God Think of *You*?

If you ask most Christians if God loves them, they don't normally hesitate to answer yes, maybe even enthusiastically. Having listened to plenty of young people and adults, not to mention my own heart, I have come to

suspect that we are not as sure of this as we seem. Are we simply repeating an automatic “right answer” that doesn’t truly reflect our internal world? Often lurking under such quick responses are deep and abiding insecurities about God’s attitude toward us. Consequently, asking a different question has often yielded a more revealing answer that can open up a more compelling conversation. So now I ask you . . .

Does God *like* you?¹

Alicia Zanoni wrote a children’s book titled *I Like You, Samantha Sarah Marie*, based on the experience of her family when her adopted sister joined them.² Samantha Sarah Marie was “as little as a fiddle” when she came to live in the “Zs” house. Everything was new: new adults, new kids, new place. As she entered this new home, she wondered if she would like them, but, more significant, she wondered if they would like her. Zanoni describes the mishaps and misdeeds in the family, from wild dances that resulted in broken vases, to endless loud singing in the car, to coloring on the walls with crayons. In each case Mrs. Z responded with care and grace, never a pushover, but also very warm and never flinching from fundamental acceptance and embrace. Cuddling one evening on the rocking chair, Mrs. Z told Samantha Sarah Marie just how grateful she was to have her in the family. Based on previous experience, the boundary-bursting spunky girl wondered aloud if that was true even when she got in trouble. “Well,” sighed Mrs. Z, “I don’t like it when you break my things or color on my walls. And it makes me very sad when you disobey and yell and I have to discipline you. But that doesn’t change the fact that you are so very special to our family. There is no other girl like you who has your spunk, or your smile, or your imagination, or your laugh.”³ Part of what is so insightful about Zanoni’s book is that she pushes us to think afresh about belonging. She invites us to admit our own lingering fears about being liked, especially when our foibles and failures are exposed. We wonder this not just about parents and classmates, but even about our heavenly Father.

Distinguishing *Love* and *Like*

Love is a beautiful word. Said in the right context and by the right person, it can still bring goosebumps to the most hardened person, enliven the saddest soul, and calm the angriest heart. Love draws together, unites, and heals. God’s love animates the entire gospel story, making it good news for

us sinners. Love, true and real love, is cool water for a parched soul, food for the hungry, and welcome for the stranger. God's love makes the world go 'round and sustains it despite human sin and cosmic brokenness.⁴ However, we have so often heard of God's love that the word often bounces off us like a marshmallow being thrown around in a game of tag. When it hits us, it feels so light we are not sure if it actually touched us or not. "Sure, I'm it," we confess, but not really convinced we were tagged in the first place. We know we are supposed to believe and affirm that God loves us, but if you probe deep enough, you see that the doubts persist.

What about the word *like*? I like cheesecake. I like a cool spring morning. I like leaning back at the table after a meal with my wife and kids, listening to their adventures as well as their painfully accurate teasing of me. I like sitting around a campfire with Jay and Jeffrey, eating, drinking, and filling the evening with ridiculous laughter, philosophical reflections, and tear-inducing stories. I like my coffee black and my office desk clean. *Like* often carries with it a sense of preference, inclination, and delight, as when a woodworker looks at the gorgeous table they built and says, "Oh, I like that, that is really good. I want that in my house."

Have you ever felt that your parents, or spouse, or your God loved you, and yet wondered if they actually *liked* you? *Love* is so loaded with obligations and duty that it often loses all emotive force, all sense of pleasure and satisfaction. *Like* can remind us of an aspect of God's love that we far too easily forget. Forgetting God's delight and joy in us stunts our ability to enjoy God's love. Forgiveness—as beautiful and crucial as it is—is not enough. Unless it is understood to come from love and to lead back to love, unless we understand the gospel in terms of God's fierce delight in us and not merely a wiping away of prior offenses, unless we understand God's battle for us as a dramatic personal rescue and not merely a cold forensic process, we have ignored most of the Scriptures as well as the needs of the human condition.

The story of Samantha Sarah Marie describes a little girl who surely was told her new parents loved her. Of course they did. She knew they "had to" since she was now their daughter. Whether adopted or natural-born, most of us know our parents have to "love" us. But life is more complicated than that, isn't it? In our struggle to make everyday life function, kids inevitably get inundated with corrections, advice, and demands; they also pile up sins and shortcomings. The conflict involved here can create subtle instability

and foster insecurities. Further, parents easily project onto their children what they want to see rather than what stands right there in front of them. Some long for football players while others for math geniuses; some want their children to be popular while others push them to be radically independent because the parents are too busy to be present. All the while, the kids wonder to themselves, “Does my dad actually like me, even when I am not good?”

A long-experienced youth minister recently told me that the current pressure on high school kids is intense, but especially for young women. He explained that the “guys need to at least be excellent at one thing, whether that be baseball, chemistry, or computers. As long as you are really good at one thing you can be okay, but you better be really good at something.” Then he went on: “The young women, they are expected to be great at *everything*. They should get straight As, look gorgeous, be athletic, funny, and socially plugged in.” Plus, they should be able to do all of this without appearing flustered or out of control. Having to be great at just one thing is a high enough standard to make most guys insecure and always on edge; having to be perfect at everything is enough to make the young women feel that they can barely breathe. It’s no wonder that self-harm is a growing phenomenon among our young people.⁵ Reading Shauna Niequist’s *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Present over Perfect* has recently shown me that this is not simply a challenge for high school women.⁶ I believe it is a challenge for most of us, although women seem targeted even more than men. Impulses toward contemporary forms of “perfectionism” are not a joke, but have proven to be mentally, physically, and relationally crippling.⁷

Our culture in the West, even as it glorifies radical individualism, fosters far more of a herd mentality than most realize.⁸ What an irony that our modern age on the one hand exhausts us by its calls for complete self-expression and, on the other hand, suffocates us by its pressures to conform. We must constantly adopt ever-changing fashions, humor, and music, and yet keep up the appearance that we are independently minded. This tension fuels our economy—and our insecurities!⁹

With pressures from home, the classroom, and peers, young people often feel isolated and unsure if anyone likes them. Even with friends, many people sense that these are more like tribal packs that hold together only to the extent that each member keeps up their contribution. Failure to do so produces

a fear of rejection. Your hobbies, your fashion, your athletic abilities all need to be in line with your group; the threat of exile consistently hovers over youth. That can sound silly to us adults, but it is the common experience of many kids and teenagers.¹⁰ If we were more self-aware, we would likely see how common it is among adults as well. We walk on the knife's edge between the demand to "be yourself" and the unspoken requirement to conform to current social trends that often masquerade as self-expression. School and social pressures are not new, since they go back millennia, but social media and other cultural changes have clearly intensified them.¹¹

Even when these young people have been told, just like Samantha Sarah Marie, that they are loved, they still wonder whether anyone actually likes them. Do their parents like them? Similar questions worry them as they consider their teachers and school friends. There is a reason so many kids (not to mention adults) find animals such a relief. When my kids burst through the door at home, Ruby can barely contain herself, wagging her tail so hard it seems her body is being bent in half. Cotton the cat jumps onto the lonely lap, waiting to exchange comforting purrs for kind caresses. No judgment arises from these furry friends, just acceptance and affection. Welcoming Suzie or Sam, the pet enjoys this time with the young person, with its mutual acceptance and kindness. As gratifying and therapeutic as an animal's presence can be, it doesn't resolve the questions about our other relationships. And behind them all is the lingering concern about what *God* thinks of you.

Whoever has any knowledge of people will certainly admit that just as he has often wished to be able to move them to relinquish self-love, he has also had to wish that it were possible to teach them to love themselves.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*



So I ask again, does God *like* you?

I have addressed that question not just to teenagers, but to adults of all ages. When I ask it, I try to keep eye contact, but it is amazing how quickly people drop their eyes to the ground. It is painfully clear this is an uncomfortable question. Rather than interrupting the uneasy silence that often follows such a question, I sometimes notice eyes starting to moisten. Why? What is behind this visceral reaction to a simple question? Let's step back and consider potential roots to this problem.

Does God See *Me*?

Have you ever heard a gospel presentation that starts out something like the following?

- God is holy and loving.
- You are a sinner.
- God hates sin and can't be in sin's presence.
- Don't worry. The cross brings good news because now the Father no longer sees you but instead looks at Christ and his cross.

How many believers have heard some version of this proclaimed by well-meaning ministers and Christian counselors? Sitting there in the unforgiving wooden pews or across the room in a tired leather chair is a tender conscience feeling the weight of sin and failure. The speaker intends to proclaim the good news of Christ's death and to comfort the believer with this presentation. Yes, one's first response to this message can be a sense of promise and profound relief (after all, it is pointing us to Christ and him crucified!). Hearers may be grateful to discover the good news of Christ's death for us and God's complete forgiveness, deeply moved to hear of God's love. But for all that is good and right in this outline, it contains threads of misunderstanding that consequently can distort the hearers' views of God, themselves, and the Christian life.

Some traditions, like my own, place so much emphasis on our identity as "sinners" that we leave no room for our deeper identity as the ones whom God designed in his own image to experience life in fellowship, or to experience his original delight in us ourselves, with our particular spunk, our personality, our difference. Since a presentation like the previous one often works solely in terms of obligations and our failure to meet them, we absorb the idea that God thinks and acts only in terms of obligations too. Thus, we can misperceive God's love, as we misperceive that of our parents, as consisting largely of self-imposed obligations. Things like joy or delight or approval are just too good to be true. God, like our parents, *has* to love us (or so we have been told). That's just part of the deal. He is God after all, and there's no way we can ever meet his standards. We are repeatedly told so. Why should we think that God likes us? Nothing in the sermon outlined above indicates that there is anything especially likable about us—far from

it! We are told that there is nothing good in us, aren't we?¹² Maybe the best we can hope for is that God will put up with us if we keep our heads down and hang around with Jesus. We imagine God's acceptance of us like we're attending a party with our older brother, Jesus. Our presence is tolerable to the host because we tagged along with someone that he actually likes, Jesus. In truth, that is how many of us experience "God's love": mere divine toleration toward us. Some versions attempt to offer comfort to the believer by telling them that since they are covered in Christ's blood, God "doesn't see" them (since they are sinners) but only sees Christ (since he alone is free from sin).¹³ In this version, God really doesn't want to look at you. Or maybe he just can't.

It's entirely understandable (and a symptom of growth) if the listener who has heard versions of this message for years—maybe even decades—at some point gets the courage to ask, "If God only sees me in Christ, does he even see *me*? Does he know *me*? How can you say God loves me? Maybe he just loves his Son?"

Sometimes it is the non-Christian who is first to raise these awkward questions.

Looking at the Christian faith, they ask, "Do I have to stop being *me* in order to become a Christian?" Answering this question may be trickier than most people realize. Dismissing such questions as self-absorbed or individualistic is often just a way of avoiding them. Rugged individualism may be the particular temptation of Western culture, but that isn't the same as asking what place particular persons have in the kingdom of God. Jesus, after all, spent quite a lot of time doing just this.

The unholy is the absurd affair in which the creature seeks to be creature in a way other than that which is purposed by God.

John Webster, *Holiness*

What Does the Father Think of Me?

Difficult questions like these, honestly asked, are immensely helpful. They can slow us down enough to see if we have wandered away from the biblical presentation of the good news. That wandering takes the forms both of misstating God's role as Redeemer and forgetting his role as Creator: the two should not be separated.

Too often in some offerings of the gospel, for example, we are presented with a wrathful Father and a loving Christ. In this way, the Father appears as an easily offended, furious perfectionist, who is only persuaded to forgive

us by a more compassionate Son. The Father is now willing to put up with us, but only because Jesus loves us. The obvious tension between the Father and the Son in such a story clearly violates the oneness of God and the many passages in the Bible that highlight God's love for us flowing out of the Father himself (e.g., John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 2:4; 1 John 4:8). When we get this wrong regarding the triune God, we feel that God is like a father who is irritated by his kid's friends but nevertheless lets them play at his house because their presence makes his kid happy. Oh how I wish such a rendering were a figment of my imagination, but I have dealt with far too many people from across the country and beyond who have received such an impression: crudely put, the Father is associated with anger (or irritable toleration) and the Son with love. This is deeply antithetical to the gospel. Try this test: Do you tend to avoid prayer because you feel like a stranger in the Father's presence rather than a safe and welcomed daughter or son?

While I understand where they come from, claims that God can't stand to be in the presence of sin are fundamentally opposed to the gospel and the nature of God. This claim and its many variants are backward: it's sin that can't stand the presence of God. To say that God can't stand the presence of sin makes him out to be like the person I heard of who couldn't stand the presence of a spider and would demand that someone else deal with it. It gives sin leverage over God. It makes God out to be either finicky and weak or a kind of irritable, narcissistic fussy spot who is more concerned that things go smoothly than that his beloved is safe and whole. It makes God out to be the kind of being who doesn't have a beloved at all, except perhaps himself. It undercuts and denies the divinity of Christ, who, as God incarnate, was present with and to sinners his whole life. It misunderstands the Holy Spirit, who comes to dwell *in* sinners in order that they might be saints.¹⁴ It can develop from the kind of theology that sees justice only in terms of retribution with little concern for restoration.

When our pulpits and our psychologies link the Father with wrath and the Son with love, we end up with a deeply distorted conception of the triune God. John Owen (1616–83) dealt with a similar misconception among seventeenth-century Christians, recognizing that worship, delight, rest, and love all shrivel up rather than grow when this view takes root.¹⁵ To combat these views, he preached the New Testament, emphatically proclaiming, "God [the Father] so loved the world that he sent his only Son" (John 3:16). Divine persons are not pitted against one another; there is no friction or

tension between the Father, Son, and Spirit, for God is One. There is no friction or tension between his holiness and his love, for God is One. Furthermore, the Son is not passive, but, as Morna D. Hooker observes, he freely and actively “gives himself up” for us, not reluctantly, but for the joy set before him.¹⁶ And the Spirit freely unites us to the Son so that he might liberally distribute God’s gifts as he draws us into the life and love of God. United to the Son by the Spirit, our hearts cry out “Abba, Father.” God is holy. God is love. And this holy God genuinely loves you and does what is necessary to reconcile you to himself.

The gifts of the Son and Spirit are not what secure the Father’s love for us but are the fruit of his love for us. Rather than solving an abstract accounting problem, God’s *love* for his world, his people, and you shapes the meaning of the cross for us. God does not hate you; rather, he manifests his love in his delight to be about the work of redemption. Believers are those who have experienced the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). Redemption is not just for some generic humanity but for particular people: the Shepherd knows his sheep, he lays down his life for them, and he calls them by name (John 10:3, 11, 14). As we will see later, we need to emphasize community far more strongly than is common in the Western church today, but that should not undercut the complementary biblical truth that God calls not just generic humanity or the world, but particular people (cf. Exod. 33:12, 17; Isa. 40:6; John 6:37; 10:3). He knows your name. He sees you. He loves *you*.

If we interpret redemption as merely a form of problem solving, where we are the problem, then we are also apt to forget that the good Creator created us good. We forget God’s delight, pleasure, and satisfaction. God likes what he made, and he apparently really likes human creatures. After all, he made us in his own image and likeness—not just generic humanity, but particular people, young and old, male and female, quick-witted and slow, you and me. This does not mean God is blind to our rebellion and sin, just as Samantha Sarah Marie’s mother did not ignore her child’s occasional ill behavior. God doesn’t like hard hearts, greedy hands, and violent responses. God is not and cannot be indifferent to sin *precisely because it perverts his good creation*. In the end God will deal with it by straightening it out and making it right. But whenever fallen humanity’s sinfulness becomes not just *a* theme but the *chief* theme in our assessment of humanity, then it prevents us from appreciating the particularity of God’s work in individual humans.

We begin to interpret healthy aspects of creaturely life as expressions of sin. Because bad preaching and bad theology also typically present the preacher's specific view of how to live as the only right pattern (e.g., Christians should be highly educated, or work for particular causes), listeners are left to believe that every deviation from this particular pattern is sin.

To disconnect redemption from creation encourages a form of self-loathing and shame among God's people. As we will explore more fully in chapters five and six, right repentance and humility are never about self-hatred, but

You would not see yourself so clearly if you did not already know the love of the Savior.

Fleming Rutledge,
The Undoing of Death

a recognition that we are not living as God created us; our sin damages and distorts us, it warps our understanding, and it hurts the way we relate to our God and his world.

Repentance is always unto life, not death.¹⁷

It is a turning around (Greek: *metanoia*), away from self-harm and toward our heal-

ing God. That is why it is linked to resurrection, which, according to Paul, points to the dawning of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). But we will need to ask, "What does *new* mean here?" As a redeemed and forgiven people—as *new* creatures—we can and need to respond in gratitude, grounded in the dignity that we have in Christ: the triune Creator is making all things new through "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (13:14), and we praise him for his work of renewal.

To start affirming our creaturely finitude as a good quality rather than an evil to be overcome, we must confess that God loves me and not just Christ instead of me. His love is not driven by ignorance (e.g., "He doesn't see you"), but by delight and purpose (seeing you as his own lost sheep in need of a Shepherd): he likes how he made you, and his overflowing love now pours out toward you, his particular creature; he is about rescuing and renewing *you*.

Holding together creation and redemption allows you to make sense of this dynamic, a dynamic employed by the apostle Paul.

Revisiting Galatians 2:20

Near the beginning of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, he repeats the account of his calling from God (Gal. 1:12–17), mentioning his retreat into Arabia

and return to Syria and Cilicia, where he “preached the faith he once tried to destroy” (1:23). Next we hear of his trip to Jerusalem with Barnabas some fourteen years later (2:1). Paul then recounts the painful story of confronting Peter, who started to distance himself from the gentiles, not eating with them, and holding aloof from them as if they were *unclean* rather than *cleansed* by Christ (2:11–14). Paul would have none of this, for such an attitude betrays the gospel. God shows no partiality (1:6). No one stands justified before God or others because of birth or based on “the works of the law” (2:16); no, our righteousness and our life come through Christ, who lives in us (2:20). And he comes to each where we are, calling us as individuals and communities to believe. Christ alone is the Savior of the world, and so we must view our salvation, our life, our death, and everything else in terms of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. This takes us to Paul’s paradigm-shifting claim:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

While this is one of the most memorized New Testament texts, it is still possible to misunderstand and misapply it. Have we only listened to part of the verse? What is Paul arguing here, and what is he not advocating? I want to highlight three aspects of this text: union with Christ, “I live,” and the call to believe. These three points help us hold together redemption and creation, and in so doing, they can help us avoid confusing creaturely finitude with sinfulness. They are not the same thing!

To Be United . . .

Has it ever occurred to you how strange it can sound to people when Christians talk about Jesus? We don’t merely talk about him as a great teacher of wisdom, or simply as an edgy sage or prophet, but as the very Son of God who became man, becoming like us in all ways, except that he never sinned (John 1:1, 14; Heb. 4:15). It is one thing to talk about Jesus as a historical figure, as someone who started movements, offered insightful counsel, and was courageous enough to stand up to the power structures of his day. While he did all of that, those actions are not primarily why he has followers to this day. Christian worship around the globe centers on

understanding him as the Messiah, and we make claims far more world-shaking than that he was merely a teacher of wisdom or powerful prophet. Believers claim that we somehow personally (and corporately) continue to have fellowship with this man and benefit from his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession in heaven. What does all of that mean?

Central to our Christian identity is the union of believers with Christ by the Spirit. Paul refers to this in Galatians 2:20 when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ. . . . Christ . . . lives in me.” Wait, Paul wasn’t crucified, was he? What is going on here? This is going to take a bit of work, so be patient, but what we learn here will have crucial implications for our lives.

Although you don’t find the phrase “union with Christ” in the New Testament, this idea is essential to Paul’s view of Christian existence. Woven throughout Paul’s letters are phrases that denote such union: saints are “in Christ” (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; etc.), and Christ is “in” those who believe (e.g., Rom. 8:10; Col. 1:27; etc.). Believers are members of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12–27; Eph. 4:11–13; 5:30). The church is the bride of Christ, united to her groom (1 Cor. 6:15–17; 2 Cor. 11:2–3; Eph. 5:25–32), and thus we are united to one another (Rom. 7:4). We are those who “put on” or are clothed in Christ (Rom. 13:12–14; 1 Cor. 15:53–54; 2 Cor. 5:3; Gal. 3:26–27). Whereas we were once linked simply to the first Adam, now we are to find our identity in the final Adam (Greek: *eschatos Adam*) (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45). Believers are those who are now “in the Lord” and found “in him” (e.g., Rom. 16:2, 8, 11, 13; Eph. 1:4; 2:21; 5:8; Phil. 3:8–9).

Constantine R. Campbell nicely surveys the variety of Paul’s imagery and his interpretation of what we call union with Christ: “A believer is united to Christ at the moment of coming to faith; their union is established by the indwelling of the Spirit. The person united to Christ therefore entered into participation with Christ in his death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification. As a participant in Christ’s death and resurrection, the believer dies to the world and is identified with the realm of Christ. As a member of the realm of Christ, the believer is incorporated into his body, since union with Christ entails union with his members.”¹⁸ These comments reflect the various ways Paul brings together themes of identification, participation, and incorporation within the larger idea of union with Christ.

Similar imagery and assumptions are found throughout the New Testament, not just in Paul.¹⁹ For example, believers are the Israel of God,

adopted into his family, so that those connected to Christ—who “is the new covenant”—live “in the covenant through his representative headship.”²⁰ Because the Suffering Servant (whom Isaiah portrays both as singular and corporate)²¹ entered into solidarity with us, we are able to participate in the benefits of his suffering—specifically, to be healed.²² He has absorbed and dealt with our sin because it has been laid on him (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Matt. 8:14–17); thus, we who had been contaminated with sin have become clean in our union with Israel’s Suffering Servant—we have been crucified with Christ.

John’s writings likewise capture this idea, using such agricultural imagery as the vine and the branches (e.g., John 15:4–20; 1 John 2:24–27). How do we benefit from what Christ has done for us? Like branches on a vine, we are united to the Son of God and draw all our life from him. How? John answers this explicitly: “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit” (1 John 4:13). His Spirit brings together what was apart. Again, the triune God acts on our behalf—there is no division within God.

The sacraments similarly highlight the beauty and centrality of this union with Christ and serve as an instrument of it. Baptized into the name of Christ, we are declared united with him (Rom. 6). Having these sacred waters fall over our body links us to his death, and in this we experience newness of life (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:11; Gal. 3:27–28). Gathered around the Lord’s Table we give thanks as we drink the wine and eat the bread. Here we encounter the Christ who is present with us, and here we praise him for rescuing us by his death and resurrection and for dwelling in and among us by his life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 10:16–17). By our participation in baptism and the Eucharist, we are likewise united to fellow believers, whether to celebrate or to bear one another’s burdens (12:13, 26). Union with Christ does not dissolve our particularity, but rather establishes it. In Christ we are reborn into a new family, a new life, a new world. Sharing in this feast reconnects us with God’s original desires for human creatures.

United to the Son by the Spirit, our hearts cry out “Abba, Father.” As sons and daughters (via that union), we now moan from a position of hope and trust, rather than despair and apathy.²³ John Calvin understood this when he claimed, “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”²⁴ In Christ we are renewed or

“new” creatures, freed to worship and enjoy our Lord. When Paul says that we have been crucified with Christ, he reminds us that all of our sin and shame were also crucified. In light of the cross we happily see that Christ, not our sin, defines us! Paul’s declaration in Galatians 2:20 means that he “sees his own life as now constituted by the presence of Christ within him.”²⁵ Similarly, in Colossians 3:3 he declares: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” The result of this union and burial with Christ is that your “life”—your value, dignity, and future—are secure in Christ. They do not depend on your performance or your perceived acceptability before others and God. Instead, they depend on the steadfastness of the risen Christ. This equips us with the confidence to encounter our limits without fear.

This Christ to whom we are united is risen! Therefore, the last word is not death; it is not sin; it is not terror or fear. No, the last words are the first words: “He has risen.” And so we rise. We worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, because in the dawning of a new creation he has come as the King bringing us into his kingdom—yes, us. We who believe are in Christ, and Christ is in us. This union is our comfort, hope, and life. There is no salvation apart from this union to Christ. The Creator acts also as the Redeemer.

I Live

We are not accustomed (at least, outside the church) to concepts like being executed with someone else (Gal. 2:20) or being buried with someone else (Col. 2:11–12) or having died with someone else (2:20), especially when those events happened about two thousand years before we were born. Consequently, we find them awkward to handle. How literally should we take them? If they are metaphors, what are they pointing to?

If you look at what Paul is talking about here and in similar passages (see also 2 Cor. 5:14–17; Col. 3:1–5; 2 Tim. 2:11), Paul seems to affirm two realities we must keep in mind: he tells us how to approach our day-to-day existence (as in Rom. 12:1–2), and yet he also says that our lives—the center of our being—are already elsewhere, “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). Something is *already* true even as we are also in *process*.

If we only look at Galatians 2:20, it’s easy to get the impression that we have been removed and only Christ is left. “I no longer live.” Asking, “Where

is the ‘me’ in all this?” is a fair question. The more we look at the related passages, however, the more it becomes clear that Paul is not saying you no longer have existence or meaning or value. As Susan Eastman notes, despite being crucified with Christ, “Paul certainly has a strong sense of himself as a thinking, intending, emoting, and acting self with a distinctive history and vocation.”²⁶ Paul is showing us where and what the real “me” is so that we might see ourselves more clearly. He shows us that all of God’s action in creation and redemption embraces me, the real me that is free from the distortion of sin. Recognizing that me amid the ongoing struggles with sin can be a real challenge. But the “I,” the “ego,” does still matter to the Creator.

On November 17, 1867, Charles Spurgeon preached a sermon entitled “Christus et Ego,” based on Galatians 2:20. Right at the beginning Spurgeon observes that the first-person singular pronouns (“I” and “me”) are “swarming” everywhere in this passage, whereas the plural is absent. Elsewhere—and even normally—the apostle Paul will stress the communal, the plural, the whole, but here he speaks in terms of the singular individual. The Creator Lord does not merely love his creation as a system, or some generic humanity; rather, he “loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.” Doesn’t it sound a bit selfish or self-absorbed of the apostle Paul to speak this way? Spurgeon doesn’t think so, because he sees it as a mark of true Christian religion. Again, while the biblical faith commonly will press us to elevate the whole over the part, the community over the solitary figure, it never loses sight of the importance of the single, the particular. God’s love through Christ by his Spirit moves all the way to the individual.

According to Spurgeon’s reading, one “distinguishing mark of the Christian religion” is that, rather than treating humans as cookie-cutter creatures, it brings out a person’s individuality. He clarifies, “It does not make us selfish. On the contrary it cures us of that evil, but it still does manifest in us a selfhood by which we become conscious of our personal individuality in an eminent degree.”²⁷ He then provides a helpful analogy: “In the nocturnal heavens there had long been observed bright masses of light—the astronomers called them ‘nebulae’—they supposed them to be stores of shapeless chaotic matter until the telescope of Herschell resolved them into distinct stars. What the telescope did for stars the religion of Christ, when received into the heart, does for men!”²⁸

Let’s look again at Galatians 2:20. Paul’s statement that we have been crucified with Christ provokes a question: “*What* or *who* was crucified?”

I am still here, standing before you. My biology hasn't changed. My personal upbringing and history did not evaporate. The fact that I prefer coffee over tea didn't change. So, what died?

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, observed that “Christ abiding in me drives out every evil. This union with Christ . . . separates me from my sinful self.”²⁹ *Sin* functioned to separate rebellious creatures from the Creator, but Christ has overcome it, bringing the human creature back into fellowship with the Maker of Heaven and Earth. The distorted sinful self, according to Luther, stands under the law and judgment. That is any “I” apart from Christ. We were originally made as worshiping creatures who are appropriately dependent on their Creator and freely responsive to him. Sin disrupted our relationship to the rest of creation and its Creator; but we have been rescued by Christ and given life by his Spirit, so that the true ego—rather than the sinful self—may live. In redemption, “I” will always and only be free through union with Christ. Again, Luther: “Christ clings and dwells in us as closely and intimately as light or whiteness clings to a wall. . . . Christ himself is the life that I now live.”³⁰ The apostle says not only that we were crucified with Christ but also that “Christ lives in me. And the life *I* now live in the flesh *I* live . . .”

The warnings in the earlier parts of Galatians (especially 1:6–9) are not merely about heretics but also about a far more common problem that we might call “projection.” We tend to portray the Christian life in ways that reflect our own personalities and proclivities. Passionate Christian leaders and spiritual gurus commonly fall into this error. While we do not have space to fully deal with personality differences here, an example may prove helpful.

It has been argued that large swaths of the American church have received a spirituality framed in strongly extroverted terms.³¹ Serious Christians, says this view, need to love being with a lot of people, doing very expressive things, while constantly sharing their feelings and failures with everyone. But what if you are more introverted? Do you have to become extroverted to show signs of sanctification?

Is one personality godlier than another? When Paul tells us that we have been crucified with Christ and “it is no longer I who live,” he doesn't mean you actually need to cease being you. Each of us is different. Some are more extroverted, some more introverted. Some of us are publicly animated, others more reserved. Some seek adventure, others enjoy quiet. Some prefer action, others prefer reflection. Some find energy from being with a crowd,

others from being alone. Some deal with stress through humor, others through increased focus. Each can express a faithful identity in Christ.

Does the call to be a faithful Christian mean that “you” actually have to stop being you? Listen to me carefully. You cannot escape you! Stop running from yourself. The you that Christ lives in is still *you*. He does not obliterate, deform, or deaden you. Who made you? When God made you, did he make a mistake? The Father of life created each of us in our particularity, and he delights in his creation.

When unpacking the doctrine of union with Christ, John Owen anticipated various misunderstandings, including the temptation to think our individuality is absorbed and lost. When the Son of God comes to inhabit a person, Owen reminds us, “he doth not assume our [individual] nature, and so prevent our personality, which would make us one person with him.” No, instead, by the Spirit he “dwells in our persons, keeping his own and leaving us our personality infinitely distinct.”³² From time to time through the history of the church, some have pretended that our union with Christ “destroyed the person of believers, affirming that in their union with Christ they lose their own personality,—that is, cease to be men, or at least these or those individual men.”³³ That misunderstands the whole point of our union altogether and distorts our view of God and ourselves. What secures this union is not the loss of personality or particularity, but rather that “the one and self-same Spirit dwells in him and us.”³⁴ We have received his Spirit, and so his Spirit now produces fruit in us (Gal. 5:22–23; see also John 10). Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are all the Spirit’s fruit, but they often look and taste a bit different among the variety of particular trees that inhabit the Lord’s land. Each tree produces fruit, nourishes others, and grows strong; but that is far from saying each tree is the same as the next. We see evidence of such misunderstandings when Christian artists don’t feel welcomed in the church, when evangelism is always required to have a particular style to it, and when spirituality is always presented in either introverted or extroverted terms (depending on the leader). Sameness is not the goal. The life and fruit of the Spirit are. Similarly, when two people are united in marriage, they do not cease to be a distinctive woman and man, but in their differences they nevertheless become one. When the church is the one body of Christ, this

For where not I, there
more happily I.
Augustine, *On Contenance*

does not eliminate our differences of personality, backgrounds, hobbies, or delights, but it does show our shared union with Christ amid our diversity.

We are not trying to run from ourselves; rather, Christ has freed us from the entanglements of sin, which deface and deform his image in us. The Redeemer has freed us in order that we may be our true selves. Run from your sin? Yes! But don't imagine that to be a serious Christian you need to have a different temperament or personality. God's goal is not for all of us to end up looking, sounding, and being the same. That confuses sameness with godliness. Not everyone needs to wear khakis, nor do they all need tattoos. But everyone needs to be united to the Son by the Spirit that they might fully enjoy the love of the Father: because of this union we actively participate in communion with the triune God.

To Believe

Why is "living by faith" so hard? We are called to live by faith, a faith that we are found in Christ and that his life, death, and resurrection are now determinative for our lives. His story must be believed above our own story. Let me explain.

Union with Christ is not, at least biblically speaking, a universal or generic phenomenon. As Grant Macaskill's Oxford University Press volume on this theme makes clear, even among New Testament authors who "offer the strongest statements of God's universal love, such as John, union with Christ is limited to those who are acting subjects of faith."³⁵ This is because *faith* is the biblical term for the sinner's renewed relation with God; it is a term that includes personal trust, eyes that have been opened to reality, a life enabled by God himself, and a delight in him. The reason it is impossible to please God apart from faith (Heb. 11:6) is that being apart from faith means standing essentially in opposition to God. Faith is the relational dynamic in which we see God and our neighbor as who they really are, and then respond accordingly.

I think the difficulties of living by faith in the Son are related to two specific things Paul calls us to believe in Galatians 2:20. First, that Jesus "loved me," and second, that he "gave himself for me." Yes, this includes each "me" along with our particularities, our differences (Jew, gentile, male, female, young, old), our creatureliness, even our sin.

Many of us don't have a hard time with the idea that there is a God and he loves the world. But even mature Christians, who have spent their whole

life in the church, get very uncomfortable when told individually, “Christ came for you. He gave himself for *you*.” Years ago I had a pleasant and engaging conversation with someone after church. But as I later walked to the car, my then nine-year-old son Jonathan said to me, “That man must have never learned to look at people in the eye, or he was really nervous.” Jonathan had picked up on the situation. Here was a grown man who had done nothing wrong, and yet it was almost impossible for him to look me in the eye as we talked. If we struggle to look one another in the eye (which we do!), how can we ever imagine being secure in the Father’s presence? I think that we all struggle to believe God likes us. So our problem becomes learning how, given our sin, struggles, and inadequacies, we can really receive words of personal grace in a way that reaches the depths of our hearts as well as our rational understanding.

We might believe Christ could die for someone awesome like Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, or an abandoned orphan. But what about me? No one even knows my name. What if I don’t like to lead Bible studies, or I don’t go on mission trips, or I have hardly any money to give to the poor? Your Christian identity needs to be shaped by the fact that God in Christ loved “you,” and gave himself for you—*you!*

The sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism beautifully captures the message that the gospel applies to each of us in particular. It proclaims not just that God is good, or that God is love, but that he has been good to me, that he loves me, that he has provided for me. Consequently, when it describes the “holy supper” that God’s people eat, it tells the reader just how personal this sacrifice, this meal, this good news is when the feast is eaten: “As surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken *for me* and the cup shared with *me*, so surely his body was offered and broken *for me* and his blood poured out *for me* on the cross.”³⁶ Similarly, that same catechism tells us that true faith is not mere knowledge, not a general acceptance of God’s kindness, but that what “God has freely granted” is “not only to others but to me also.”³⁷ God doesn’t just forgive generic sins: he forgives *my* sin. He doesn’t just save the cosmos; he saves *me*. Why? Because he loves you and me as particular people.

Who are you?

As a believer, you are in Christ, and Christ is in you. You are secure by the power of the Spirit, who applies the finished work of Christ to your

The presence of evil separates us not only from God, but also from our true selves.

John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*

life. He enables you to grow and blossom as the real you, which involves communion with God and with your neighbor. If you were no more than a copy of a single pattern, just like everyone else, we would not have a communion but an echo chamber. You are connected but distinctive, adding your unique voice and actions to the universe. God delights in you as you use the particular gifts he has given. You are a child of the King. You are an irreplaceable member of the body of Christ. God wants you to flourish as the particular *you* that you are, to enjoy his creation and to enjoy him. That is your calling and privilege as a particular human creature he made and delights in. This is crucial for recapturing a healthy embrace of our creaturely limits. He doesn't just love a generic world or amorphous humanity; he loves you, and he even likes you.

Fundamental to what God loves and likes about you is your body, which he joyfully created. Too often we treat our bodies as insignificant or even bad, but when we do that we risk undervaluing what is central to the good news: in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). Part of being human is being limited by having a body. The incarnation—the Son of God taking on human flesh—is God’s great yes to his creation in general, and to finite human creatures in particular. Only when we fully appreciate this reality can we learn to live more comfortably in our own skin. To this story we now turn.

PIERCING
HEAVEN

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PRAYERS
of the
PURITANS




PIERCING
HEAVEN

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PRAYERS
of the
PURITANS

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COMPILED AND EDITED
BY ROBERT ELMER

ADDITIONAL EDITING
BY MARK WARD AND TOM PARR





HELP ME ASK FOR HELP!



A CRY FOR RENEWING GRACE

We cry to you, God, for renewing grace. We lie at your footstool and cry, “Help, Lord, or else I perish!”

Create in me a new heart, and renew a right spirit within me.

Renew me in the spirit of my mind, and renew me in my inner soul.

Take away this old mind that is so blind, so vain, so carnal.

Take away this old will that is so obstinate, so perverse, so rebellious.

Take away this old conscience that is so partial, so seared, so senseless.

Take away this old heart that will never delight in, comply with, or submit to you.

Let old things pass away, let all things become new. You who brought this world out of nothing with a word, can with a word work in me this new creation.

Do not let me perish. Say the word, and it will be done. Just say the word, and this soul—now a dark, woeful chaos and a lump of corruption and confusion—will become a new creature.

Lord, give me this new heart, put this new spirit into me. You have the key of David. You close, and no one opens. You open, and no one can shut. Lord, open this heart that has been too long closed against you. Break down these strongholds that keep you from me.

Cast out sin and cast out the world that kept you out of possession for so long. Bind the strong man and cast him out.

Other lords have had dominion over me, they have made me miserable by keeping my Lord, my happiness, from me. Cast out these intruders, take possession of me, and be mine forever.

You call for my heart, Lord; it is yours. Though I have dealt treacherously with you, and given my heart to other things, it is yours. It cost you dearly. So enter, take possession of it.

You knock at the door to this wretched heart. Why stay so long outside? Come in and bless me with your presence. Break it open with almighty power, and let it no longer shut you out. Amen.

— *David Clarkson*

I THIRST FOR GRACE IN CHRIST

Merciful Lord God, you are Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. You say “It is done” of things that are yet to come, so faithful and true are your promises.

You have promised by your own word, out of your own mouth, that to anyone who is thirsty you will give the fountain of the water of life freely.

O Lord, I thirst. I long for one drop of mercy. As the deer pants for the water, so my soul pants for you, O God, and for your compassion.

If I had the glory, the wealth, and the pleasure of the whole world—if I had ten thousand lives, joyfully I would lay them

down, just to have this poor trembling soul received into the bleeding arms of my blessed Redeemer.

O Lord, my spirit within me is melted into tears of blood. My heart is splintered in pieces. Out of the place of dragons and of the shadow of death, I lift up my thoughts, heavy and sad, before you.

The memory of my former vanities and sins is poison to my soul. The very flames of Hell, Lord, the fury of your just wrath, the scorplings of my own conscience, have so wasted and parched my heart that my thirst cannot be quenched.

My desire is for the pardon and grace of Jesus Christ. And Lord, in your blessed book you cry, “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” In that great day of the feast, you stood and cried, “If anyone thirst, come to me and drink.”

And these are your own words: “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled.”

I challenge you, Lord, in my extreme thirst for you, and for spiritual life in you, by that word, and by that promise which you made—make it good to me. I grovel in the dust and tremble at your feet.

Open now that promised well of life. For I must drink or else I die. Amen.

—*Isaac Ambrose*

Andrew Wilson is one of my favorite writers. And this book reminds me why. He displays a gift for weaving biblical theology with everyday illustrations that leads me to worship God. In this book, you'll get to know God's Word more deeply. And you'll never look at the world the same way.

—COLLIN HANSEN, editorial director, The Gospel Coalition; host, *Gospelbound* podcast

Reading each chapter, I marveled anew at the kindness of God to instruct his children with such gentle care.

—JEN WILKIN, author, *None Like Him*

Creation was always meant to point beyond itself, and Andrew Wilson shows us the myriad and wonderful ways in which it does. This book is packed with insight and nourishment on every page. I found myself pointed to Christ in so many surprising and fresh ways, and provoked to worship a God of such grace and beauty.

—SAM ALLBERRY, pastor and author

A treasure of a book from Andrew, and one that I didn't want to finish. Seeing God through everything he has made is sheer delight.

—TERRY VIRGO, founder, *Newfrontiers*

What a wonderful book! *God of All Things* caught my attention from the start, reminding me that all God's works—and I do mean all—proclaim his glory. From rainbows to donkeys to everyday tools, the things of this life really do reveal the God of life. This book is a delightful primer in learning how to truly see things for what they are.

—HANNAH ANDERSON, author, *Turning of Days: Lessons from Nature, Season, and Spirit*



REDISCOVERING THE SACRED IN AN
EVERYDAY WORLD



ANDREW WILSON

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REFLECTIVE

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God of All Things

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DUST



THE IMAGE OF GOD

Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

—GENESIS 2:7

Dust goes unnoticed, for the most part. It surrounds us all the time, but unless we work in construction, we hardly ever see it. When we do, it is usually because we are trying to get rid of it: hoovering, dusting, sweeping, cleaning behind the fridge, or whatever. I notice it when we first turn the heating on each winter, because everyone starts sneezing. I notice it when the children touch the television screen, leaving a small handprint

PART 1: OLD TESTAMENT

of black in a sea of a gray powder. I notice it when I go into a shed, lift up a sheet or tarpaulin, and watch the shafts of sunlight illuminate a cloud of fine particles which rise, billow, dance, and eventually settle. Otherwise, although I am continually touching and breathing a cocktail of hairs, pollens, fibers, soil, mites, and skin cells, I try not to think about it.

Dust speaks to us of decay. It comes about through the decomposition of other things, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral. Dust in a home tells us that our cells have died recently. On a building site, it tells us that something has been knocked down or destroyed. When it dominates the landscape, it tells us that plants cannot grow here because the soil is too shallow or the rain too infrequent. Ghost towns and postapocalyptic movies are covered in it, highlighting the loss not just of creatures or structures but of civilization itself. When the greens and browns of life have been and gone, we get the beige of death.

And God says to us, you are made of that.

It doesn't sound very encouraging. Dust evokes decay, decomposition, and death, in Scripture as much as for us, which means that at least part of what it is to be dust people is that we will one day be dead people. When humanity falls, choosing the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ahead of the tree of life, the curse upon us—"for you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19)—is clearly a reference to mortality. In a world where people pursue the elixir of life as enthusiastically as ever, whether in the form of cryogenics, transhumanism, genome editing, or any other death-denying fad, the Bible makes the certainty of dying as clear as it can be: "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). We came from the soil, and one day we will again be part of it.

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People sometimes talk as if Christians believe in immortality and secular materialists don't. The reality is almost the opposite. The certainty of death is integral to Christianity—our future revolves around not immortality but resurrection—while those most eager to postpone or even escape death are usually those with no resurrection hope whatsoever. Early churches met in catacombs, surrounded by corpses. To this day, churches have graveyards and are filled with memorials and crypts for the faithful dead. Our message centers on the one who died and was raised, not someone who carried on living indefinitely in suspended animation. Our sacraments are graphically morbid: we bury people in water, eat a broken body, and drink blood. So as the rich world spends good money trying to avoid (or at least to avoid thinking about) death, part of the mission of the church is to remind them of the obvious. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Surprisingly, though, the first time we are described as being created from dust, it has nothing to do with death. It has to do with life. “Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). Humans have not sinned at this point. The tree of life is still available to us. Yet the writer insists that we are created from the dust of the ground. What does this mean?

Partly, it is a way of saying that we are part of the physical creation: we are made of matter, of stuff. We are created to bear the image of God, who is spiritual and invisible, so it is important that we have tangible bodies that occupy space. We are not angels or disembodied spirits; we are built from atoms and molecules, carbon and oxygen.

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But it is also a way of highlighting our supernatural, God-breathed origins. In some of the Egyptian and Akkadian creation stories, humans are described as made out of clay, which you can kind of imagine: most of us, with a bit of practice, could form clay into something that looks pretty much like a person. But you could never do that with dust. The most complex shape I could make out of dust would be a pile, and even then it would be instantly scattered by a gust of wind. What causes a bunch of particles to come together into a human being is not any property inherent in the bunch of particles; it is nothing less than the breath of the Lord, which animates the dust and causes it to become a living soul. Without the breath of God, we are nothing more than a pile on the floor. With it, we are bearers of the divine image.

That very realistic description of a human—the dust of the ground plus the breath of the Lord, physical and spiritual, body and soul—is actually a source of great comfort in Scripture. For good theological reasons, a Christian understanding of humanity places a strong emphasis on the image of God, and the essential dignity and grandeur that it confers to all people. We are kings, priests, ambassadors, rulers, made for a little while lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honor (Ps. 8:5), and that has crucial implications for the way we treat one another.

But alongside that (vital) emphasis on dignity, there is also an appropriate humility that comes from remembering that “I . . . am but dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27) and that “he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:14). Knowing that we come from the ground keeps us grounded; the Latin word *humus*, which means “soil” or “earth,” gives us the words humility and human.⁴ And there is such reassurance in knowing

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that God, in his compassion and fatherly kindness, sees us not only as princes, expected to rule the world, but also as dust and ashes, expected to fail sometimes and cry out for rescue. As Hannah sang so beautifully, one of his favorite hobbies is lifting people from the dust and ashes—marginal, broken, poor, and needy people like her, and indeed like me—and seating us with the princes (1 Sam. 2:8).

We are dust, and to dust we shall return. We may find it liberating, unsettling, or terrifying, but it is true nonetheless: one day the cells that compose us will be swirling in the autumn leaves, wedged between sofa cushions, and hidden behind radiators. The same is true of all the world's most powerful and influential people. As with Ozymandias in Shelley's famous poem, their apparently invincible empires will finally turn to dust. So will we.

But only for a while. Ultimately, as Daniel saw, "those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). Dry bones in a death valley will be filled with divine breath and raised to life (Ezek. 37:1–12). In Adam we are all dust people, and we decompose accordingly, but in Christ we then rise to become heavenly people for whom dust and decay, mortality and corruptibility, are things of the past. Paul, describing the resurrection to people who couldn't quite believe it, explains that "just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49). Our future, Paul says, will be modeled not on the man who came out of the soil but on the man who came out of the tomb.

So get all your hoovering done now. The new creation will be dust free.



CHAPTER
2

EARTHQUAKES

THE GLORY OF GOD

Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

—EXODUS 19:18

Appearances of God are often accompanied by earthquakes. Mountains tremble. The rocks split. People quiver in fear, building foundations rattle, and the land rumbles. When the earth is visited by its King, it shakes. Why?

The most frightening example is probably the first one, when God descends on Mount Sinai in fire. Moses has done

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his best to prepare the Israelites, but they are nonetheless terrified when, on the morning of the third day, the apparently ordinary mountain beside which they are camping appears to be on fire, shrouded in smoke, covered in a thick cloud out of which thunder and lightning are issuing forth and, with a deafening trumpet blast, getting louder and louder. “The whole mountain trembled greatly” (Ex. 19:18). So did the Israelites (v. 16); they were so frightened that despite having just been promised that they were God’s treasured possession and were destined to be kings and priests on earth, they stood far away in terror, refused to approach God, and insisted that Moses speak to him instead (20:18–19). The writer wants us to see the connection, so he uses the same word (*charad*) for the quaking of the earth and the quivering of the people. As the psalmist would write many centuries later, the glory of the Lord makes the people tremble and the earth quake (Ps. 99:1). Earthquakes are associated with the fear of God.

The exodus generation, however, is notoriously forgetful. A while later, a group of the people who were at Sinai that day decide that Moses is too big for his boots and challenge his leadership. “Why . . . do you exalt [yourself] above the assembly of the LORD?” (Num. 16:3). Moses responds with a simple test: if you guys all die a natural death, then that will prove that I haven’t been sent by God, but if the earth suddenly splits open and swallows you up, then it will show that you have despised the Lord (vv. 28–30). We know this is not going to end well. Sure enough, “as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up” (vv. 31–32). This is not just an Old Testament thing; there is a very similar sequence in the last

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book of Scripture, where a massive earthquake splits the world, and the rulers of the earth ask the mountains and rocks to fall on them and hide them from the wrath of the Lamb (Rev. 6:12–17). Earthquakes are associated with the judgment of God.

In several passages, they also represent divine speech. As Ezekiel is commissioned for his prophetic ministry to Judah, he hears “the voice of a great earthquake: ‘Blessed be the glory of the LORD from its place!’” (Ezek. 3:12). Psalm 29, perhaps the richest meditation on the voice of God in the entire Bible, describes it as thunderous, powerful, majestic, and glorious and then compares it to an earthquake: “The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh” (Ps. 29:8). If we were describing it today, we might compare God’s voice to the noise of an airplane breaking the sound barrier, or a rocket launch: a thunderous, booming, awe-inspiring roar which drowns out all other noise with its voluminous authority. When God speaks in Scripture, he sounds like thunder, like an earthquake, like a rushing wind or a mighty waterfall, which is why it is so surprising when Elijah hears God speak not in a hurricane or an earthquake or a fire but in a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11–13). Earthquakes are associated with the voice of God.

So far, so obvious. You can see why the shaking of the earth would make people scared and make them think of divine judgment, and why it would be used to illustrate the power of God’s word. But I think earthquakes represent something deeper than that, something which stands behind the fear, the judgment, and the mighty voice. Earthquakes are associated with the glory of God.

You can see the link in a number of texts. When the seraphim make their magnificent proclamation of divine glory—“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his

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glory!” (Isa. 6:3)—the temple shakes to its very foundations. When Haggai describes the filling of the temple with glory, it is accompanied by an international earthquake (Hag. 2:7). The psalms connect the glory of God and the shaking of the earth (Ps. 97:4–6; 104:31–32). Again, it is worth asking: why?

To answer, we need to know what the Hebrews meant by “glory.” If you hear the word glory in English, the chances are that you think of triumph, beauty, and splendor, which is what the Romans meant by *gloria*. But the Hebrew word for glory, *chabod*, was slightly different. It derived from the word for heavy or weighty, a connection which Paul makes when he talks about the “eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). Glory, in a sense, is heaviness. *Gravitas*. So when the ark of God was captured by the Philistines, this was described as the “glory” (*chabod*) departing from Israel, and then immediately afterward we hear that the hand of God was “heavy” (*chabed*) upon the Philistines, afflicting them with tumors and breaking their gods in pieces. To speak of God’s glory, in biblical terms, is not just to speak of his splendor and beauty (though that too) but also to speak of how weighty, heavy, and substantial he is.

Now consider: what happens when something glorious, heavy, and weighty descends upon something lighter, flimsier, and less substantial? Displacement. The heavy thing shunts the lighter thing to one side, and the lighter thing has to move—or quake or even tremble—to make space for the heavy thing, whether it wants to or not. If I jump into a pool, I cause a small waterquake. If I drop a giant block of gold onto a frozen pond, I cause an icequake. The weighty substance displaces the flimsy one, and the flimsy one shakes, gives way, and is forced to reorient itself around the weight of glory.

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So what happens when the glory of God, the divine *chabod*, descends upon Mount Sinai or the Jerusalem temple or anywhere on earth? An earthquake. God displaces that which is trivial and ephemeral, and forces the earth to reorient itself around him. The earth trembles and quivers in response to the arrival of a far more glorious and substantial reality. The Lord reigns! Let the peoples tremble! Let the earth quake!

The same thing happens when God descends upon people. It is not just that Mount Sinai trembles, as we have seen; the people of Israel do as well. It is not just the temple that shakes in Isaiah's vision; Isaiah himself is undone by the *chabod* and cries out, "Woe is me! For I am lost" (Isa. 6:5). When people encounter the true God, they experience a selfquake. That's one way you can tell if you've met Israel's God or simply a figment of your imagination. A made-up God will leave your world undisturbed, conveniently aligning with your priorities without displacing anything, because ultimately you are more glorious than it is. The real God, however, will land in the middle of your life like an elephant crashing through the ceiling, displacing your sin, changing all your priorities, and forcing you to reorient yourself around the weight of glory.

Yet earthquakes are also associated with the gospel of God. The two most important and hope-filled events in the history of the world, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, were both accompanied by earthquakes. When the King of the earth died, the earth shook and the rocks split (Matt. 27:51). When he rose on the morning of the third day, the same thing happened again (28:2). Both earthquakes prompted fear in those who were there, and in different ways manifested the judgment, the voice, and the glory of God. But they showed more than that. They showed

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that the Lord was not just greater and weightier and more glorious than the earth, or than the self, but more substantial than the two mightiest and fiercest enemies we have: sin and death. The Prince of Glory died and caused a sinquake. The King of Glory rose and caused a deathquake. The heavy depths of the unshakable Savior crashed into the lightweight shallows of the enemy and displaced him forever, along with all of his minions.

When the King of the earth descends, everything on earth—the people, the mountains, the temple, the principalities and powers, even death itself—is shaken. “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28).



CHAPTER
3
PIGS
THE WELCOME OF GOD

“The pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.”

—LEVITICUS 11:7–8 NIV

I like to call it the pig paradox. On the one hand, no animal is dirtier, smellier, or uglier than a pig. The unfortunate combination of snouts and snorts makes them deeply unattractive. They roll around in mud and eat their own feces. They have become a byword for mess (“her room is a pigsty”), infidelity (“he is such a pig”), ignorance (“pearls before swine”), disaster (“a pig’s ear of

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it”), overeating (“greedy as a pig”), and unappealing facial features (“pig-nosed,” “piggy-eyed”). When they are clustered together, you can smell them from miles away; I once had a night’s sleep in Yorkshire ruined by the stench from a nearby hog farm. More than a billion people avoid eating or touching them, on religious grounds, considering them filthy and untouchable. You can see why.

On the other hand, they taste sensational. Pork belly, pancetta, honey-glazed gammon, prosciutto, nduja sausage, crackling, ham, barbecued ribs, salami, trotters, hog roast: it is hard to believe that such a wide range of cuts and flavors could come from the same animal. And that is before mentioning the smell of sizzling bacon, which is surely the most delicious aroma there is (with apologies to coffee, fresh bread, and baked cookies). Bizarrely, if you were to create a smell spectrum, from the vilest stench to the most enticing aroma, pigs would find themselves at both ends of it, depending on whether it was before or after they died. How can something that smells so bad when it is alive smell so great when it isn’t? How can death transform something from filthy and untouchable to aromatic and delightful? Hold that thought for a moment.

Pigs, under the law of Moses, were off-limits to Israel. Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy command that they are not to be eaten or touched, and although various reasons have been suggested for this (their smell, their habits, the danger of eating them uncooked), the reason given in the law is simply that they have divided hoofs, have cloven feet, and do not chew the cud. It can look a bit arbitrary to us, but God simply declares that some animals are clean and some animals aren’t: cows, sheep, pigeons, goats, and scaly fish are fine, but camels, shellfish, snakes, birds

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of prey, and animals with paws are not.⁵ And the most detestable of unclean animals—the ones Isaiah mentions to show just how depraved people can be, even to the point of eating swine flesh (Isa. 65:4; 66:17)—are pigs. As gentiles, by nature unclean and separated from Israel ourselves, we can feel a certain sympathy for them.

That is not where the similarity between pigs and gentiles stops. The first person who ever preached the gospel to gentiles was the apostle Peter, and he did so only because he saw a vision of a sheet full of unclean animals (Acts 10:9–16)—a vision in which, we may assume, pigs played a starring role—and heard a voice telling him to eat them, since “what God has made clean, do not call common” (v. 15). Non-Jewish people like me got baptized only because Peter saw a bunch of pigs and other unclean animals, and then saw a bunch of gentiles, and then saw the resemblance. “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation,” he explained to the gentiles who had invited him over for a visit, “but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (v. 28). That’s a nice way of putting it. Even Peter, not always the most diplomatic of the apostles, had the good manners not to mention that his hosts were the equivalent of a sheet full of pigs, scallops, and snakes.

The result of that vision was extraordinary. By the end of Acts 10, the first ever handful of gentiles had been baptized in water and filled with the Spirit and were speaking in tongues and praising God (vv. 44–48). Now there are upward of two billion of us: formerly unclean, cloven-footed, cud-chewing gentiles who have been washed from our dirt and purified from our sins and now offer ourselves as fragrant offerings to the God who makes

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common things clean. It is the pig paradox again. Death—in our case, the death of Christ—has taken that which was filthy and untouchable, and made us aromatic and delightful by the grace of God.

The most famous pig-related incident in Scripture is the moment when Jesus delivers a demon-oppressed man, only to send the demons into a herd of two thousand pigs, who all promptly charge down a cliff and drown in the sea. You can read it in Mark 5:1–20, and it's just as bizarre as it sounds. Generations of interpreters, seeking to make sense of a baffling story, have found all kinds of tenuous principles in the passage, such as one person is worth more than two thousand pigs, you should always ask a demon's name before casting it out, and so on.

But when we bear in mind what pigs and gentiles have in common in Jewish thought, we start to see ourselves in this poor, broken, demonized man. He is unclean, impure, an outsider, surrounded by pigs, and unable to access the presence or the people of God. As gentiles, so were we. He lives among the tombs, with death all around him, naked and ashamed, without hope and without God. So did we. He is oppressed by the powers of darkness, crying out in pain and harming himself, beyond the reach of any human power. So were we.

Then he meets Jesus. The Savior not only sets him free from the devil's tyranny but humiliates his enemies (and ours) by driving them, and all the uncleanness and impurity they represent, down the cliff and into the sea. The man is restored to his right mind and clothed in new garments. He is visibly transformed by the encounter, such that those who have known him before come to fear the power of Jesus. He is desperate to follow his new Master and Savior. As the story closes, he is given a new mission:

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to return to his community and “tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). The pigs have died, but in their death the man has found new life and has been thoroughly delivered from the powers that oppressed him and the uncleanness that tainted him. So have we. Like the prodigal son, we stumble toward our father, desperate for more than pig pods and reeking of swine, and we are as surprised as anyone when he hugs us, kisses us, and dresses us in a fresh set of clothes before inviting us in to a feast.

In Christ, pigs become bacon. It’s the welcome of God. Those whom you wouldn’t have wanted in the garden, for all their stinking and snorting and snuffling, experience death and find themselves welcomed into the kitchen for everybody to savor. Stench dies, impurity is washed away, and we who were once unclean become a pleasing, crispy, tasty, aromatic offering to God. Therefore “what God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15).

Foreword by Joni Eareckson Tada
VANEETHA RENDALL RISNER

*the Scars
that have
Shaped Me*

HOW GOD
MEETS US
IN SUFFERING



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*the Scars
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HOW GOD
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IN SUFFERING

The Scars That Have Shaped Me: How God Meets Us in Suffering

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BURYING A SON

Burying my baby was devastating. I had no idea how to cope with his sudden, unexpected death. True, Paul had been born with a heart problem, but he had survived the critical surgery at birth and was thriving. He'd come home from the hospital at three weeks old and, after a slow start, began gaining weight.

We had prayed so long and so hard for this precious child, I felt certain Paul's life would be used to glorify God. I couldn't wait to see how.

With his winsome smile, easy disposition, and mop of curly dark hair, he delighted us all. He was healthy and beautiful. Even the physician filling in for Paul's regular cardiologist was so impressed with Paul's progress that he decided to eliminate all of our son's heart medications. Paul didn't need them anymore. He was fine. At first, I was encouraged by the good news. But two days later, Paul was dead. He was only two months old.

I struggled to accept what had happened: that a doctor's foolish decision took our baby's life. As I watched them lower Paul's tiny casket, I buried my dreams for him. How could his life glorify God? I felt that nothing good could come from his pointless death.

I grieved. I journaled. I planted flowers that bloomed in the month of his birth and flowers that bloomed in the month of his death. Slowly, God healed me with his com-

forting presence, but still I wondered how God could be glorified through such a sudden and senseless death.

Held

Months later, I shared the story of Paul's life and death with a new friend, Christa Wells. Christa is a recording artist who subsequently wrote the song "Held," which begins with the story of Paul. The opening lyrics are raw:

Two months is too little,
They let him go
They had no sudden healing
To think that Providence
Would take a child from his mother
While she prays, is appalling

The chorus provides the response,

This is what it means to be held
How it feels when the sacred is torn from
your life
And you survive
This is what it is to be loved and to know
That the promise was when everything fell
We'd be held.⁵

The words of the chorus echo my experience. God loves us. He holds us in our pain. And because of his love and compassion, we can go through anything knowing he'll never leave us.

“Held” was recorded by Natalie Grant in 2005 and won numerous awards and touched countless lives. As I read messages from people who felt God’s comfort in their pain because of the song, I saw how Paul’s short life had brought God glory. But none of the letters impacted me as much as seeing how it changed someone firsthand.

Touched

It had been a miserable, rainy day and I was feeling sorry for myself, running behind on errands because of the stormy weather. Partially drenched, I ducked into a bagel shop to grab a quick lunch. It wasn’t busy, but the guy making my sandwich seemed interminably slow.

Couldn’t he go a little faster? I wondered, as I sighed impatiently. He was almost finished, just tearing the final leaf of lettuce, when “Held” came on the radio. As I heard the familiar chords, I felt my tension and irritation roll away. Thankful for the delay, I smiled and leaned against the counter to enjoy the moment, unhurried. Something healing had come out of my brokenness, and it was still healing me.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn’t notice that the young man making my sandwich had stopped. When I looked up, he was crying. Our eyes met and he apologetically mumbled, “I’m sorry. Are you in a hurry? Do you mind if I stop for a minute and listen to this song? You see, my mom died a few months ago, and this song is the only thing that got me through. It has meant so much to my whole family.”

I cringed at my prior impatience. Pulling myself together, I nodded and whispered, “Please do. Take as much time as you want. I love this song, too.”

Time stopped as this stranger and I shared a sacred moment together. I stood in silence as he took in the song, mouthing the familiar words as I recited them in my head. When the song was over, tears were streaming down my face as well. Tears of hope. And redemption.

Purpose in My Suffering

I knew the song had touched thousands of people, but I'd never seen evidence of that firsthand. I had never witnessed its healing impact on broken people. I had never fully understood the way God was using it to comfort others. I'll never forget that day. Seeing purpose in my suffering was more redemptive than I had ever imagined. While it didn't take away the pain, it did take away its sharp sting. Knowing that God was using my loss made it easier to endure. It helped me see how God uses all of our suffering for our joy and his glory.

None of my other trials have been memorialized with a song, but God has brought meaning to them all. With each loss, he has pulled me closer to himself and shown me the depth of his comfort. The deeper the sorrow, the more profoundly he draws near.

God has also met me as I talk to others who have experienced their own suffering. I'm often tempted to shy away from sharing because I don't want to relive the agony. It's often less painful to stay on the surface with struggling people. It's easier to remain detached. But inevitably when I do that, I leave emptier and more burdened.

I know how much it meant to me to talk to others who had walked similar paths. They were able to offer advice and insight; they understood the unique sorrows of

my particular trial and they provided evidence that healing was indeed possible. In the pit, sometimes I doubted that. I wondered if I'd ever make it through. I questioned if the aching would ever stop. I wasn't sure if I would ever laugh again. Just talking to fellow sufferers gave me hope for the future.

God uses us to comfort one another with the comfort that we ourselves have received from God. It is both a privilege and a responsibility. And as we tell others of God's faithfulness in the midst of trial, it reminds us afresh that God will never forsake us. Though we may walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will never walk alone.

MY FAILING BODY

I have always wanted to be self-sufficient. And I worked hard at it. I contracted polio as an infant in India and was left a quadriplegic after my fever subsided. But after several surgeries I was able to walk and, after additional operations, became fairly independent. By high school, I had learned to organize my life around my limitations.

Going away to college was another major hurdle, and I wondered how I would survive. To everyone's surprise, I learned to adapt, and by the time I graduated, I had figured out how to manage on my own. After a few years of work and then grad school, I got married and had children, grateful that the hardest part of my disability seemed behind me.

I was a typical stay-at-home mom, busy caring for my children. I also enjoyed painting, scrapbooking, and making jewelry—basically anything I could create with my hands. I started selling my jewelry at a local store, but soon afterward I developed an agonizing pain in my right arm. I went to the doctor, and after several months was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome. My arms would never recover. The doctors said I needed to reduce the strain on them. Immediately. Radically. Permanently.

I was told post-polio was a degenerative condition that results in escalating weakness and pain. My energy was like a fixed sum of money in a bank—I could make

withdrawals but not deposits. So every time I used that arm, I was losing future strength. From now on, my energy could not be spent on short-term hobbies: I needed to focus on being able to feed myself long-term. Now my arms could only be used for absolute essentials.

This diagnosis blindsided me, turning my comfortable life upside down. I was a thirty-seven-year-old wife and mother with two young children to raise. It was unthinkable I could one day—maybe soon—be in a wheelchair full-time, unable to care for myself. *How could God do this to me?* I wept. How could I handle these new obstacles?

Devastating Losses

I stopped scrapbooking and boxed up my roomful of supplies. I gave up painting and making jewelry and canceled my subscriptions to cooking magazines. I made simple meals and entertained less. While all of these losses were difficult, losing my independence was the most excruciating. I constantly had to ask for help doing everyday tasks—things I longed to do for myself.

For me, the loss of self-sufficiency was humiliating. I hated being dependent on other people. But I had no choice. I started to need help driving long distances, making dinner, and occasionally even getting dressed. I had long defined myself as a helper, and I struggled with this role-reversal. I didn't want to have needs; I wanted to be needed. I didn't want to be a burden; I wanted to lift others' burdens. I didn't want to be dependent; I wanted to be self-sufficient. Every day I fought against asking for help. I desperately wanted to do things for myself. And I cried

constantly. It seemed unfair that ordinarily easy, everyday tasks were now exhausting for me.

At first I was angry. Then I grew depressed. I didn't know if I could accept this new life. I pulled away from God. I questioned his goodness and his love for me and figured he wasn't going to answer my prayers, anyway. But eventually I realized I could not face this trial without God. I finally poured out my heart to him and asked him to help me handle my losses well. To show me how joyful my dependence could look. To give me grace to deal with whatever I was given.

And God changed everything. Not by changing my circumstances but by lighting a path through the darkness. He taught me how to pray, how to ask, and how to receive. He gave me glimpses of his glory. He showed me how he is using my circumstances to change me.

The Daily Battle

It was a constant struggle. And if I'm completely honest, it is *still* a struggle. I think it always will be. Part of me will always long for my independence. But in that longing, I have learned to lean on God in prayer. I have learned how to offer God my honest lament—my anger and grief poured out unedited. I have learned to tell God what's hard and admit that I dread asking for help. I have learned that prayer changes my perspective on my life. Through prayer, I am reminded that heaven is real and one day I will have a new body.

Until then, I need the humility to ask for help. Asking for help is always hard because I'm proud and I'd rather not need anyone. But most people are more than willing to

help—they are just waiting to be asked. Sometimes people can't help, and in those situations I must graciously accept that without getting discouraged and without giving up. The first person I ask is not always the person God has chosen to help.

Glimpses of Glory

The entire process is humbling, but this dependence on God and on others has grown my faith in incalculable ways. Second Corinthians 4:16–17 says, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” Though my strength is declining, my faith is growing stronger, and one day I will see what he has done with my suffering.

I can show the surpassing worth of Christ when I suffer well—when I joyfully accept circumstances that are less than perfect, when I give up my need to control. Willingly relinquishing my need to have things exactly as I want is an act of worship.

My faith and my character are not all that has grown through my losses. My friendships and sense of community have deepened tremendously as well. I have been humbled and amazed at the willingness of others to help, even at great cost to themselves. I see the love of Christ in how he cares for me through the body of Christ. As my physical body is deteriorating, his body has taken over for mine, showering me with love and unexpected kindness. Kindness I would have never known if I hadn't needed it.

Love I would never have experienced if I had refused to ask for help.

As I depend on Jesus more and more, he is gradually transforming me into his likeness. There's no one I'd rather depend on; there's no one I'd rather look like.⁶

WHEN THE DETOUR BECOMES THE NEW ROAD

This isn't the ticket I bought. That's what I thought when my health took a detour and I found myself on a road I hadn't anticipated. A road I wasn't prepared for. A road I didn't want to travel.

Laura Story understands how that feels. Everything radically changed after her husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Watching him struggle to breathe and cope with significant memory loss, Laura begged God to heal her husband and restore their lives to the way they had been. Life hadn't been perfect, but it had been good. Laura told her sister of her desire to return to the normal, trial-free life she had enjoyed before. And her sister insightfully responded, "You know, Laura, I think the detour you are on is actually the road."¹¹

The detour you are on is actually the road. What a horrifying thought.

Aching for Normalcy

When my plans go awry, I always want to believe that I have taken a temporary detour. Maybe it's a long one, but I hope that the real road, the road where I can return to

being happy and fulfilled, is just ahead. Maybe it's only around the corner, if I can simply hang on.

I was talking to a friend recently about that desire to return to normalcy. She doesn't know how to handle her newly developed health problems. Should she pray for healing and expect God to answer? Or should she come to terms with chronic pain and disability?

I understand her questions. I have asked them myself. Should I earnestly ask God to change my circumstances? Should I draw near to him in prayer, write down my requests, and regularly seek him for the things in my life that I want to see changed? Godly things. Restoration. Healing. Return to active ministry. Or do I recognize that I am on a different road? One that may not bring the healing and restoration that I would like, but rather a closeness to Jesus that I could not get any other way. Do I hold loosely to the expectation of changed circumstances and cling tighter to the hope that will never disappoint—the hope that is rooted in Jesus?

Yes.

God invites me to ask him to change the things that I long to be different. He invites me to persevere. To trust that my prayers make a difference. But at the same time, God bids me to accept where I am. To let him meet me in the darkness. To find comfort in his presence. To see him as more important than any change in my circumstances. God calls me to do both. Every day. On every road.

Adjusting to a New Normal

The old road often seems like it was more relaxing and easy to drive. The new road can be bumpy and twisty, nar-

row with sharp curves. And I find myself longing for the ease of what I used to have. But the new road has benefits too, perhaps not in ease but in seeing life differently. More reflectively. Really noticing reality rather than rushing forward, oblivious to my surroundings.

But regardless of what I gain, it's a challenge to accept that the detour is now the new road. I struggle with that reality daily as I experience new weakness and pain with post-polio. Sometimes it's temporary, but often it's permanent. The loss becomes the new normal. And I must adjust.

Last month, I was going into a familiar building when I realized I couldn't climb the curb without assistance. Without other options, I reluctantly asked a passerby for help. She was warm and gracious as she helped me and we had an encouraging conversation walking in together. Since then I have been unable to get up sidewalks without assistance. This limitation will change where I am able to go by myself, requiring me to plan ahead. To be honest, I don't want to plan ahead. I don't like limitations. And yet, like my sweet conversation with a stranger, I'm sure the Lord has unexpected blessings along this path.

I realize that I cannot cling to the past. I cannot get back on the old road and put everything back the way it was. Some things will get better over time. Some prayers will be miraculously answered. Some dreams will come true. But the old road is gone. And in my mind, it will often be remembered as better than it actually was. The Israelites did that when they complained after they were delivered from slavery saying, "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to

look at” (Num. 11:5–6). The Israelites neglected to mention that even though they had food, they were slaves. Their lives in Egypt were not perfect. They had continually cried out to God to deliver them from slavery.

Not Looking Back

So don't look back on the past and assume it was perfect. It wasn't. Mine wasn't perfect, either. This new road that I am on, bumpy and twisty as it may be, is the path God has chosen for me. It is the best road. The only one worth taking. If I keep looking back on the old way longingly, focusing on what I've lost rather than on what I have, I will miss the rewards of the new path. I need to open my eyes. Notice what's around me. Remember that God goes before me. I need not fear for he knows what is up ahead.

As he has promised, “I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them” (Isa. 42:16). God is guiding me on this new path.

I am on the right road. And so are you.

SUSTAINING GRACE

I walk into Bible study hesitantly. This week we are talking about prayer. I'm not sure how honest I should be. While I see tremendous value in prayer, I've had my own struggles with it. Especially when people talk about their miraculous answers. The ones that happen immediately after they've prayed about something for the first time—when I've prayed about things for years and nothing has changed.

“Some of my prayers have remained unanswered for decades,” I offer tentatively. It sounds odd to say this aloud. My evident disappointment seems so unspiritual, so faithless, so shallow.

Scornful of Grace

But then Florence says something that refocuses my attention. Immediately, I know that her words are for me. “You never hear anyone in the Bible complaining about the parting of the Red Sea,” she says. “Everyone loves the grace that delivers us. But the Israelites, like us, were dissatisfied with daily manna. We all complain about the grace that merely sustains us.”

We all complain about sustaining grace. The truth of it hits me hard. I can scarcely pay attention to the rest of the discussion as I ponder. Were my prayers for *deliverance* answered with the gift of *sustenance*? Do I not see that this

was an answer, too? And often just as miraculous? Why am I not grateful for manna? The everyday, sustaining grace of God.

When I later tell Florence how her words are staying with me, how they are changing everything for me, she writes this to me: “I remember being stunned by the realization of how much I love deliverance and how little I appreciate sustenance. Essentially, I was saying ‘Where is the victory in sustenance—it sounds like just getting by.’ Wasn’t I being scornful of grace?”

Scornful of grace. Exactly. I’ve often been guilty of that.

In waiting for the huge, monumental deliverance—the kind where I can put my issue to bed and never have to pray about it again—I’ve overlooked the grace that keeps drawing me to him. The prayers that may appear unanswered, but actually are fulfilled in ways that keep me dependent, tethered, needy.

The Gift of Dependence

The children of Israel were familiar with the gift of dependence. Manna dropped from heaven so they wouldn’t starve as they wandered in the wilderness (Ex. 16). But they needed God to provide it daily; they weren’t able to hoard it. And thus they couldn’t avoid total dependence on God.

The Israelites were given bread so that they would rely on God and live by his word. But like me, they often disdained it (Num. 11). Manna was bland, unexciting, monotonous. It wasn’t what they asked for. It wasn’t extraordinary or gloriously victorious like the parting of the Red Sea

(Ex. 14) or some of the miracles yet to come, like the fall of Jericho (Josh. 6) or the healing of Naaman (2 Kings 5). It didn't impress people. Manna simply provided for their needs when they were in the desert. It became expected. And taken for granted.

I know how they felt. I often feel that way as well. I don't appreciate God's unfailing presence throughout the day. I don't acknowledge that he strengthens me when I am weak. I overlook the life-giving power of God's word. I want miraculous deliverance. Not ordinary sustenance.

But as I look back over my life, I see God has delivered me and answered some prayers with a resounding yes in jaw-dropping, inexplicable ways. I remember those answers with gratitude and awe. But the answers of "wait" or "no" have done a far deeper work in my soul. They have kept me connected to the giver and not his gifts. They have forced me to seek him. And in seeking him, I have found a supernatural joy beyond all comparison. A joy not based on my circumstances. Not based on my deliverance. Simply based on his tender presence.

Delivering grace or sustaining grace. Which is more precious?

We Need Both

In delivering grace, we see God's glory. Everyone can see the miracle he has wrought *for us*. And usually our lives are easier as a result. We have what we asked for. And we thank God for it. But after a while, we go back to the business of living. New difficulties come up. And we may even forget about what he's done because we aren't continuously going back to him.

Sustaining grace also showcases God's glory. But with sustaining grace, people can see the miracle he has wrought *in us*. Our lives are easier because our perspective is different. With sustaining grace, we must continually go back to God. This grace is not a one-time thing, just as manna was not a one-time event. We need it every day. And it keeps us dependent on God. With sustaining grace, we get more of Jesus. His comfort, his nearness, his very presence.

Both delivering grace and sustaining grace are essential in the Christian life. They are interconnected. Delivering grace is vital. We need to pray for it. It's biblical. Life can be relentlessly hard, and we need to know that deliverance is possible. That our prayers are effective. That our situation can change. Without the possibility of deliverance, we'd lose hope. We might stop praying. We could succumb to total despair.

But it is in the asking, even begging, for deliverance, and in the subsequent waiting for it, that we get sustaining grace, the grace to press on in the blazing heat. And this grace is accompanied by the intimate presence of the living God. So when I am sustained but not delivered, God is inviting me to see the miracle I have received. It is a more precious answer to prayer than I ever realized.

Manna, my daily bread, the Bread of Life himself. He alone sustains me in the desert.

THE STAGGERING PROMISE OF HEAVEN

I'm listening to a speaker, and she's talking about a difficult period in her life. Years when her prayers seemed unanswered and God felt distant and uncaring. Years when she gave up and even stopped praying. Years when nothing seemed to change.

I am immediately drawn into her story because I understand how that feels. I remember feeling as if I were drowning, wondering if I would ever come up for air. Gasping for breath, hanging on, surviving—but just barely. It was almost a decade before I could breathe deeply again.

I am thankful that I was finally able to catch my breath. But not everyone can. There are people who live in anguish day after day, month after month, year after year. And nothing changes. Ever. For them, life on this earth is just one endless struggle after another.

Not in This Life

On a smaller scale, many of us deal with some specific personal struggle that will never go away. The death of a loved one tears a gaping hole in our heart. An irreversible, debilitating disease reminds us daily of our mortality. Chronic depression ambushes us when we least expect, bringing

with it desperation and inertia. Rebellious children, difficult marriages, divorce, financial ruin, loneliness, regret. Some of this pain will never get better. Not in this life.

It all sounds so hopeless, and I'm feeling despair for the millions of people whose lives are marked by pain. I realize my hope often rests in the assumption that things will eventually get better. And I wonder: *If they never do get better, could it all be worth it?*

As I'm pondering that idea, my attention is drawn back to the speaker, and then she says it. The words that change everything. "One day, in heaven, all our longings will be met or will fade away."

Of course. That's it. That's what we need to hold onto. That is the truth worth suffering for, worth living for, and worth dying for.

The Day Everything Changes

Heaven will change everything. Things may or may not get better for us in this life, but one day, one glorious day, everything will be made new. One day, in the blink of an eye, it will all be changed.

Why don't I write more about heaven? I keep asking myself that question. Much as I have been blessed by knowing God on this earth and his comfort and incredible love in the midst of great sorrow, it should pale in comparison to the joys of heaven.

The Bible constantly reminds us that our present sufferings must be viewed in light of eternity. Romans 8:18 says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Paul knew that this life alone would never be able to balance the scales of suffering. But it was never meant to. We were made for heaven, for eternal life. Looking at this life in the context of heaven is the only way to make sense of suffering. Let alone make up for it.

Randy Alcorn asserts:

Second Corinthians 4:17 . . . says that eternal glory far outweighs our worst suffering. It's not that temporary suffering is so small; it's that eternal glory is so huge. Your suffering may be a boulder the size of the Rock of Gibraltar. But suppose you put that rock on one side of the scales, then on the other side you put the planet Jupiter. In and of themselves our sufferings may be weighty, but compare them to eternal glory, everlasting happiness, endless beauty, and unbroken relationships. The relative weights change our perspective, don't they?³²

Reading this comparison, I was convicted about my short-sightedness. I need to remind myself why I am here. I was created to glorify God and enjoy him forever—with the overwhelming majority of “forever” not spent on earth. Because of Jesus's death on the cross, I get to spend all of eternity with God in heaven.

Happily Ever After

What a breathtaking truth. I will spend eternity with God in heaven. But often the vastness of that truth escapes me because my picture of heaven is too vague and undefined. I

know it will be glorious because God says it will be, but I have not imagined what it will be like. My ideas of heaven are abstract, which makes them less appealing, and sometimes I feel cheated about the joys on earth I may never experience.

That perspective is exactly what Satan wants me to believe. Satan wants us to think that this life holds pleasures that we cannot experience in heaven. That in heaven we will sit on clouds, playing harps, with no physical bodies and no real “fun.” That the excitement of this life is better than what heaven offers.

Those are patent lies. The Bible says we will have resurrected bodies. Physical bodies. We will not be spirits or disembodied ghosts. There will be a new, physical heaven; a new, physical earth. God created pleasure and he will maximize it in heaven. Heaven will be incredible because God is incredible.

Alcorn observes:

He made our taste buds, adrenaline, and the nerve endings that convey pleasure to our brains. Likewise, our imaginations and capacity for joy were made by . . . God. . . Are we so arrogant as to imagine that human beings came up with the idea of having fun?

When Christians understand heaven is an exciting physical place on a redeemed world with redeemed people in redeemed relationships without sin and death, where there is music, art, science, sports, literature, and culture, it's a great source of encouragement and motivation.³³

This life-giving perspective encourages me to anticipate heaven. Everything I love and long for on earth will be there, only better. And it will more than make up for any suffering I've experienced on earth. Life on this earth can be relentlessly hard, and we may live with unending pain. But because of the gospel, God has all of eternity to lavish his love on us. In heaven there will be no more tears or crying or pain.

As Alcorn says, "‘They all lived happily ever after’ is not merely a fairy tale. It’s the blood-bought promise of God for all who trust in the gospel."³⁴

God’s blood-bought promise for those who trust in the gospel is that we will live happily ever after in heaven. What a staggering assurance. And a glorious future.