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Helping People experience the Heart of God

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016947145

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ISBN: 978-1-61795-799-4

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Cover Design: Melissa Reagan

Title hand lettering: jessicataylordesigns.com

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 21 lbm 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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YOUR INVITATION To Flourish



I could not have penned a more terrifying personal tale than my previous year. My battle with a life-threatening illness at times stole my will to live. A glut of surgeries altered my body forever. Drugs I can't pronounce fogged my mind and clouded cohesive thought—a serious problem for a writer.

My body ravaged.
My spirit lifeless.
My friendships atrophied.
My connection with God felt frayed.

The Margaret I once knew had slipped away.

Can you empathize? Like me, do you ache for a previous version of life? Perhaps you've been navigating a cavern of deep grief, loss, or loneliness. Years of caring for an ailing parent stripped margin from your life, or raising and releasing your children has prompted questions of purpose and meaning. Pockets of time spent in Scripture or prayer or pews—once sources of happy wonderment—now feel like a chore.

These moments make us feel like the parched soul described by the ancient prophet Jeremiah:

"That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives."

(Jeremiah 17:5–6)

Are you depressed yet?

You shouldn't be.

(Jeremiah 17:7-8)

Jeremiah refuses to end with this elegy because he knows desolation is not our destination. Instead, the prophet lifts our downcast eyes with hope of revitalization.

whose confidence is in him.

They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

"Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,

All who heard Jeremiah's words would have snapped to attention. Ancient Israel sweltered in its arid landscape. An emerald-leafed tree served as a remarkable symbol of life and vitality. The striking image drills deep, but then the prophet adds a detail that's almost absurd: This tree never fails to bear fruit.

The metaphor is the modern equivalent of a slot machine that always strikes the jackpot, a lottery ticket dispenser that produces the winning numbers every time, a bank account with unlimited funds.

Eyes open, mouths gape, waves of whispers ripple through the crowd.

Trees in the Bible often serve as metaphors referring to people, not plants.¹ By stacking these two images side-by-side, Jeremiah gives voice to one of life's most weighty decisions. Will we resign ourselves to live like a desert tumbleweed or become a lush and lavish tree? Will we live parched or be planted by a rivulet? Will we wither away or bear clusters of tangy fruit?

Jeremiah presents a choice, but really there is *no* choice.

I'll be the second tree, thank you very much.

The life Jeremiah describes can be summed up in a single word from the Bible: *flourish*.

The word "flourish" pops like corn in the Bible, appearing most often among the poets and the prophets. This agricultural term—*yapriah*, "to blossom" or *parach*, "to bud"—emerges alongside images of trees, grass, vegetation. Sacred excavation reveals layers of meaning within these metaphors.

From the opening biblical command to "be fruitful" (Genesis 1:28), we find God commending behavior that enables creation and humanity to flourish. The text portrays a partnership that leads to both personal and communal flourishing.

Proverbs 14:11 says, "the tent of the upright will flourish," which teaches that a life that flourishes nurtures the community around us. God can "make the dry tree flourish" (Ezekiel 17:24), illustrating that adversity cannot steal God's ability to make us flourish.

Throughout the Psalms, the flourishing of the righteous sings in harmony with peace, a deep sense of shalom. Other passages, such as Psalm 1, show that the virtuous, flourishing life springs from community.² This is why I recommend reading this devotional alongside friends.

What does it mean to flourish?



We flourish when we pursue the life God intends.



When our busy schedules keep us from stopping to love on a hurting friend, we falter. But when we slow to open our arms to embrace the wounded, we flourish.

When we snap back at the difficult coworker, we flop. But if we return the insensitivities with kindness, we flourish.

When our parents' inadequacies make us resentful, we flail. But when we learn to love and honor them despite their imperfections, we flourish.

From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah to Zechariah and Elizabeth, from Genesis to Revelation, flourishing lives serve as signs and symbols of the kingdom of God. God's grace and favor make flourishing possible. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ empowers us to live loved, fearless, and free.

If that isn't enough to make you salivate, here's some whipped cream and a plump, juicy cherry: Our flourishing gives God great satisfaction and joy.

After feeling wilted inside, I committed to unearth what the Bible revealed about a flourishing life. New passages budded with tender blossoms. Old ones burst forth from the winter dormancy and sprang fresh insights.

A handful of traits of the flourishing life emerged...

Planted in Love
Rooted in Trust
Grounded in Wisdom
Nourished by Community
Springing with Courage
Growing in Grace
Prepared for Drought
Protected from Floods
Budding with Hope
Blossoming in Freedom
Ripening with Resilience
Bursting with Life
Cultivated by Christ

Along the way, I harvested a bouquet of surprising scriptural beauties and stories of flourishing I couldn't keep to myself.

I hand them to you as a gift in hope we will learn to flourish together.

The lush life awaits.

We can learn to hear God's voice echoing in the everyday.

We can learn to scout for God in the nooks of life.

We can learn to live in awe of God's wonders.

We can learn to burst forth with a joy that cannot be contained.

We can begin flourishing today.

My hope and prayer is that we will learn to thrive alongside our loved ones and sip the sweet nectar of life-giving bonds. To push our roots into the depths of not only the richest, but also the rockiest soil. To tap into the underground river of Living Water.

Blessings,

Margaret

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL



- Fifty-two entries allow you to enjoy this devotional at your own pace. Read one entry per week throughout the year. Or read one each day for eight weeks, then repeat. Do what works best for you. Remember, all is grace.
- For your ease, a box sits next to each entry in the table of contents. Check off the ones you've completed as you read so you don't get lost along the way.
- Each entry concludes with an activity or reflection question and prayer. Take a few moments to dig deeper into what you just read. Even the smallest moments of prayer and silence can be transformative.
- After each month's reading (every four devotions), you'll find a lush coloring page. Grab crayons or colored pencils. Allow your inner creative spirit to flourish. Speak the Scripture aloud. Journal what you discover as you interact with the text.
- Since life is best lived alongside others, *Flourish* is designed to be enjoyed among friends. Invite someone near or far to join you in each of the readings, talk openly about what you're discovering, and pray for each other.

Share your artwork, your activities, your reflections, your discoveries, your questions through social media. Use hashtag #flourishdevo so we can find each other online and learn to live loved, live fearless, and live free together.

Planted Live



Week 1

THREE WORDS YOU NEED TO HEAR



Three words exist that you must hear from God today. No matter what your circumstance, this trio of syllables breathes life, imbues hope, infuses joy:

Love.			
You.			

Lucky for you and me, these three little words emerge again and again throughout Scripture. Each page reveals the bigheartedness of God and his endless reservoirs of love.

"I paid a huge price for you... That's how much you mean to me! That's how much I love you! I'd sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you" (Isaiah 43:4 MSG).

That's just one seedling from the Old Testament.

I.

In the New Testament, Jesus talks about love, teaches about love, models love. He even sacrifices his body because he loves you so much.

Why does God use the entire Bible and thousands of years of history to talk about love?

PLANTED IN LOVE

Because he wants us to flourish and knows that can only happen when we hear and believe those three words.

Maybe like me, you are all too aware of your faults and failures, your shortcoming and slipups. While we may never ask someone, "Am I loveable?" we spend oodles of time wondering.

I confess that sometimes I modify my behavior to satisfy their silent cravings. I orchestrate an adorable outfit so I can receive more compliments. Or I try to win someone's affection by purchasing them an outrageously generous gift. If the person responds with affirmation or accolade, I pretend it's nothing at all. Yet deep down, I wish they'd say more. Perhaps their words would dull the ache that accompanies my suspicion that I'm not lovable.

Perhaps you do that, too.

Yet God alone provides satisfying responses to our deepest doubts, our most mangled fears. Through the spyglass of Scripture, we see the abundant love of God isn't just some abstract theological idea, but a gift that is real and that we can experience every day.



Jesus empowers us to move from recognizing God's love to receiving God's love.



Recently, I confessed to God that I felt unlovable. As I aired my feelings, I reflected on his expressions of love in the Scripture. When I arrived at Psalm 33:5: "The earth is full of his unfailing love," my eyes grew damp. The response swelled like sea surf before crashing over my soul.

God's fierce love is abounding, bounteous, crammed, bursting, jammed full, running over, teeming, overflowing, never in short supply. Divine affection orbits and permeates and saturates. God's love never ends. Tears plopped on the page.

The emotional reaction left me puzzled. I'm not a teary person and go to great lengths to avoid becoming misty—including avoiding all Nicholas Sparks movies.

By then I was weeping.

When I regained my composure, I realized Scripture exposed my hidden questions, doubts, and angst regarding God's love. I believe in my cranium he loves me but strain to receive his affection in the fibers of my being.

On far too many days, God's love doesn't feel palpable or perceptible. Though I proclaim God's love to others, such divine affection often feels like it's for someone else, anyone else, just not me. Yet the passages reveal God's love as closer, more faithful, more bountiful than I comprehend in the nooks and crannies of every day.

Life's difficulties, disappointments, and flat out disasters often twist our perspectives of our core identities. They convince us we do not belong, we do not matter, that our lives are inconsequential. The coarseness of life can close us off from absorbing and receiving God's good gifts.

Like a plant seeks water, punching through packed soil, splitting solid rock, in some cases moving mountains to drink from an underground

PLANTED IN LOVE

spring, we are created to thirst and discover the fullness of life found in God and his love.

After I finished reflecting on Scripture and dried my eyes, a prayer emanated from my lips:

God, open me to the fullness of your love. Awaken me to your divine affection.

I wondered why I hadn't done this sooner. Love is the foundation for faith and knowing God, yet I'd never set apart specific time to marinate in the truth of God's fierce love. I ended my time hopeful—and yes, even happier.

FLOURISH TODAY: Turn to page 27 and color Jeremiah 31:3, inserting your name into the promise: "I have loved you, ______, with an everlasting love." Snap a photo and share with your friends online using #flourishdevo

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THIS WEEK'S PRAYER: Father, Open me to the fullness of your love. Awaken me to your divine affection. Amen.