

A DAY'S JOURNEY

STORIES OF HOPE AND DEATH-DEFYING JOY



TIM KEESEE

FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

“As Keesee has reported news of the gospel’s advance from the frontlines, in this latest missive he describes how Jesus meets us on the frontlines of our suffering. Proverbs tells us that the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel. *A Day’s Journey* chronicles the profoundly sweet way that Jesus uses friendship to bless and strengthen us in our deepest pain.”

Gloria Furman, co-editor of *Word-Filled Women’s Ministry* and author of *Labor with Hope*

“I know Tim Keesee as a storyteller—a man who has committed much of his life to seeking, finding, and telling stories about the ways God is at work in and through His people as they labor at the frontiers of world missions. But a recent diagnosis of terminal cancer has inspired him to tell new stories—stories of his own life and stories from the lives of other people who exhibit unshakeable hope and death-defying joy. Beautifully written and inspiringly grounded in the deepest truths, this is a book that will give strength and courage to all who are making their way through uncertain times and difficult days.”

Tim Challies, author of *Seasons of Sorrow*

“Cancer. My wife, myself, and now my daughter. Five years—three battles. Tim’s battling too. With his wonderfully gifted pen, he’s brought us along on the journey, filling each page with stories of fierce faith in the face of suffering. I needed this book. You do too. Take and read.”

Mitch Maher, lead pastor, Redeemer Community Church in Katy, Texas; creator, presenter, *Clarifying the Bible*

“The first time I read something from Tim Keesee, I was captivated by his writing. I still am. Tim’s worldview arrests my heart and my mind. I love his love for the Lord, and the sobriety with which he shepherds God’s people and the Father’s relentless truth. You may be tempted to sample this book as you would the cashews in a pretty dish on someone’s coffee table. Don’t

do this. Dig in. Soak in his wisdom. Be taken by truth, perhaps as never before. The time you spend here will be a worthy investment. I promise.”

Robert Wolgemuth, bestselling author

“Cancer is the reality check that no one wants. Uncertainties, fears, pain, relentless grief—Tim draws them close through life stories, then shines a searchlight on God’s steadfast love, our refuge and true reality. *A Day’s Journey* brings strange comfort to my own fearful, hopeful journey. I’m in good company.”

Karen Hubbard, friend and fellow cancer survivor

“I’ve traveled with my friend Tim to some dangerous destinations for gospel advance. Now on a different kind of journey—the terra incognita of cancer—I’ve been watching him scrutinize Scripture and lean hard into Christ. This book is a blazing torch to guide us through the shadowlands.”

Dr. David Hosaflook, missionary

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JOURNEY**

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TIM KEESEE



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To Sarah and Tim—
our arrows sent
with love

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It is [God] to whom and with whom we travel,
and while he is the End of our journey, he is also
at every stopping place.¹

—Elisabeth Elliot, *All That Was Ever Ours*

FOREWORD

Before You Begin

Quadriplegia taxes my breathing, so I was winded after giving my speech at the Ligonier Conference. But there was no time to recoup. I had to race to an interview across the massive church campus. I wheeled to an exit but saw steps on the other side. Glancing this way and that, I fumed. *There must be a door with a ramp somewhere.*

I found one and zipped outside. Halfway down a long walkway, I sensed a man running to keep up with me. When we arrived at another set of steps, my heart sank. Lost in a labyrinth of walkways and stairs, I gave the man a bewildered look. Maybe he was a groundskeeper who knew the way.

“Quick, follow me!” he said, and within minutes we reached the correct building and made a dash for the media room. My new friend wasn’t about to leave my side until I reached our destination. *Who is this amazing guy?* I wondered.

It was my first encounter with Tim Keese. Although a presenter at the conference with his own busy schedule, he had dropped everything to help a disabled woman in distress. That’s

the way Tim is wired. He gladly participates in the hardships of others.

Just watch his DVD series, *Dispatches from the Front*. You'll find Tim laboring alongside Thai Christians risking their lives to rescue women out of slavery. He's bushwhacking his way through a jungle, helping to carry supplies to a church outpost. He's crouching with his journal by a charcoal fire alongside a handful of Africans, scribbling down their faith stories by firelight. Back in his tent, he takes out his pen and fills more pages. He is tireless. Relentless. And utterly dedicated to his quest. Tim is out to capture unheard-of examples of Spirit-inspired courage.

There's a reason for his quest.

Tim knows that with every hard effort bravely faced, with every gentle word spoken under affliction, and with every cross cheerfully shouldered, the Church is ratcheted up to a higher level. When sufferers exalt their Savior, they infuse iron into the faith of others. Their testimonies endow people with a clearer view of God. And all of it makes the body of Christ strong and purehearted. The Church—especially the Western Church—is in urgent need of such examples.

Tim Keese is not slowing down his quest. Once again, he's been hard at work cataloguing the stories of courageous Christians. But this time, his journal looks different. In *A Day's Journey*, he not only records the faith stories of others . . . he includes his own. Tim's recent battle against a fierce cancer has enlisted him among his brave examples. And we, his readers, are all the richer for it.

A Day's Journey was written for you. The stories on the following pages are compiled for the enrichment of your faith. For when it comes to hardships, we *all* need hope, help, and a little guidance. Titus 2:7 (NIV) says, "In everything set them an example by doing what is good," and with every chapter, Tim provides convincing examples of how to do what is good—that

is, how to endure the weightiest of afflictions with an eye to God's glory.

So, as a fellow sufferer, I commend this excellent volume to you. Picture yourself in its pages. Linger over each story and ask your soul questions. Inquire of your heart as to the depth of its confidence in Christ. Poke your finger into your faith to test its resilience.

Better yet, pull out a journal and do what Tim has been doing for years—take notes and learn from those who consider their afflictions as light and momentary compared to an eternal weight of glory.

Joni Eareckson Tada

Joni and Friends International Disability Center

A WORD OF THANKS

In the last chapter of Romans, Paul mentions nearly forty individuals who had an impact on his ministry—saints with whom he had shared the risks and friendships of Gospel work. I love that chapter for the *esprit de corps* it embodies among fellow soldiers of Jesus Christ. This bit of the book is my Romans 16 postscript.

Much of *A Day's Journey* was written while I was undergoing treatments related to my ongoing battle with cancer. Consequently, I want to give special thanks to my oncologist, Dr. Saeeda Chowdhury. From the time she took me as her patient, she brought her care, skill, and tenacity to this fight—day or night. I also owe deep gratitude to all the nurses and doctors at the Blood and Marrow Transplant Unit at Greenville Memorial Hospital, especially Susan Funk and Dr. Suzanne Fanning.

Other doctors' counsel was also inestimable—Dr. Rachel Hansen of Changchun, China, and Dr. Andy Sanders and Dr. Don Townsend, both of Augusta, Georgia. I often describe cancer in traveling terms—a journey or a path—but some places have been more like a labyrinth with no clear way forward. These three physicians were part of my Good Shepherd's leading at critical times.

While I was battling cancer and writing this book, there were more people than I could possibly name here who were praying, pitching in to help where they could, and sending timely letters that gave me fresh courage. So many dear friends were like Aaron and Hur for me, and while I know I will miss some, I'd like to name a few: Kevin and Leslie Cathey; Steve Leatherwood; Bert Arrowood; Allan Sherer; Roger Weil; Ben Henning; Dave Hutton; Rosaria Butterfield; Julie Zickefoose; my cousin Renee Marsh; my pastor Peter Hubbard and his wife, Karen; David Hosaflook; J.D. Crowley; Elisa Chodan; John Piper; Joni Eareckson Tada; and my young friend Zoe Farmer.

The Frontline Missions team—both home office and worldwide—loved us like family. I especially want to thank John Hutcheson for all the miles we've traveled together and especially all the time you spent the past two years covering speaking engagements for me; Ben Ebner for your steady and strong leadership, which kept the whole team steady and strong; and Ronny Marmol for your faithful friendship and for investing your time in helping me regain strength to travel again. I am also humbled by the love that was extended to us from Frontline's families overseas and from little house churches scattered from North Africa to northern China. What an encouragement that prayers ascended on our behalf in Arabic and Albanian, in Ukrainian, Hindi, Uzbek, Mandarin, Tagalog, and Bahasa!

On the publishing side of turning my journals into the book you hold, special thanks go to two Andrews: Andrew Wolgemuth of Wolgemuth & Associates was superb and ever ready to help, and Andy McGuire, my acquisitions editor at Bethany House Publishers, who was a delight to work with. I'm also grateful to Elisa Haugen—editor extraordinaire—for working through my journals with me.

Finally, and foremost, Debbie—I could never have made it this far without you!

READERS' GUIDE

Three miles an hour. For most of history, that walking pace has been the speed at which much of humanity moved. Sure, there were camels and horses, and Hannibal's army famously used elephants to get around. However, four legs instead of two were used mostly for battles or as beasts of burden. The average person got around the old-fashioned way, and travelers in ancient times measured their distance by how far they could go in a day at walking speed. They would simply say they went "a day's journey," which was approximately twenty-five miles. Of course, *a day's journey* wasn't a precise measure because many things affected it—such as terrain, risks encountered, weather, as well as the locations of early versions of a motel.

This book is about days. It's about how we spend them and (like those early trekkers) about the twists and turns we encounter along the way. So I took this ancient measure as my title: *A Day's Journey*. When I originally envisioned this book, it was to be similar to my previous books and films in the *Dispatches from the Front* series—travelogues written from distant outposts of Christ's Kingdom. Only *this* book would not be written from just one country but would be a global odyssey with stories of one great blood-bought family gathered from

many nations. It would be a preview of Revelation 5:9 between two covers:

And they sang a new song, saying,
“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed
people for God
from every tribe and language and people and
nation.”

I couldn't wait to get started filling my journal with stories of this every-tribe-every-tongue Gospel! But then something happened. To repurpose Emily Dickinson's lines,

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me.¹

Cancer stopped for me. People deal with their suffering in different ways. For me—I write. So, bound by weakness, chemo, and oncologist appointments, this book became a more personal dispatch written from the cancer front. Although I have been in this battle for three years now, I know that what I have experienced and suffered cannot be compared to what others suffer. Since I began this book, at least a dozen close friends have died from a variety of causes. Others suffer from severe chronic illnesses that are too heavy to bear—and yet they do. And others carry the unyielding pain of sorrow over an untimely grave or the utter helplessness of watching dementia erase a loved one's ties to the past, the present, and those who care for them the most. As I have faced cancer, many of these hurting people have reached out to assure me of their prayers and understanding. I am humbled by their stories of hope and endurance and am grateful for all the ways they have pointed me to Christ so I could look up and sing:

O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer
Strong defender of my weary heart
My sword to fight the cruel deceiver
And my shield against his hateful darts
My song when enemies surround me
My hope when tides of sorrow rise
My joy when trials are abounding
Your faithfulness, my refuge in the night.²

To aid my fellow travelers through this book, I've set up milestones along the way by dividing *A Day's Journey* into three parts:

Setting Out

Along the Way

Toward Evening

Every traveler (and reader) has to answer this big question: Where am I going? And so, in "Setting Out," I have written a few essays about time, its swiftness and surprises, about the power of memory and the value of days—including the ordinary and seemingly uninteresting ones, like you are probably having right now. On their own, such days may not be very impressive, but taken all together they are a string of pearls!

The last section, "Toward Evening," is excerpts from my journal written on my cancer journey as I have walked this tortuous path. I pray that these entries scribbled during chemo infusions and sleepless nights will strengthen the hearts of the hurting and magnify Jesus, our sure Hope.

"Setting Out" is the early morning hours of the journey with the sun at your back, while the final section, "Toward Evening," is when the day is drawing down and golden light breaks between the lengthening shadows.

At the heart of this book is "Along the Way." This section is filled with stories of people who have taught me so much

about courage, hope, joy, wonder, compassion, and a deeper understanding of the Gospel. I spent a day with each of them and wrote their stories. The writer of Hebrews had such saints in mind when he wrote that we are to be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:12). I’ve seen the ways they work and worship, the ways they pray and sing, the ways they love their neighbors and the ways they love their enemies—even when beaten black and blue for the sake of Christ. In seeing how they number *their* days, I’ve learned better how to spend *mine*.

All of these days are written in the moment, capturing as much life as possible in the beautiful ordinary of a day. The historian David McCullough tells a wonderful story about the painter John Singer Sargent, who was the foremost portraitist of his time. In 1903, Sargent was commissioned to paint the official portrait of President Theodore Roosevelt. Sargent spent several days at the White House sizing up the setting and, above all, trying to get a word in with the energetic young president as to when they could do the portrait session. McCullough relates what happened next:

One morning the two met unexpectedly as Roosevelt was descending the stairway.

When might there be a convenient time for the president to pose for him, Sargent asked.

“Now!” said the president.

So there he is in the painting, standing at the foot of the stairs, his hand on the newel post. It is a great portrait, capturing more of the subtleties of the Roosevelt personality than any ever done of him.

And it’s a good story. Moments come and go, the president was telling the painter. Here is the time, seize it, do your best.³

I am deeply grateful to those who opened their doors to me to let me meet them at the foot of their staircase, so to speak, and paint a portrait of their day. These days are not filtered,

photoshopped images of their lives but instead ones that show life with all its pressing demands and unanswered questions, so that the silver thread of God's grace might be seen all the more as it runs through the routines of their days.

Some of the people whose days unfold here are well-known. Others you haven't heard of before but, like I am, you will be glad you met them. All of them have things to teach us about how we will spend the precious bits of our vapor life—the endurance we need, the joy we have, the Gospel we love, the Cross we bear, and the hope we embrace until faith becomes sight.

As I set out to write this book, capturing in my journal the struggles with living and dying, I have feared at times that I would not finish this book. I've known in full measure the admixtures of sorrow and pain that come from spotted scans, unrelenting nausea, and days of bone-burrowing fatigue. So my fear was not unfounded, and I understand novelist Ann Patchett's response to a brush with death when she wrote, "Were I to die, I'd be taking the entire world of my novel with me—no significant loss to literature, sure, but the thought of losing all the souls inside me was unbearable. Those people were my responsibility."⁴ She would have lost her fictional characters, but I would lose the stories of friends—family stories of brothers and sisters who are the pride and joy of their Father.

This narrowing path I walk has more readily reminded me that I "have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" and that "this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:7, 17). I really am discovering more of His strength in my weakness. Still, though, I know my discoveries are only like wading into the surf of a boundless ocean. By grace, these are the dispatches I've been able to scribble out as I've walked these days. Here toward the evening of my journey, the light has not faded, and I welcome your company.

SETTING OUT

Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

—Psalm 90:14

DEAR DIARY

To-day is always commonplace; it is yesterday that is beautiful, and to-morrow that is full of possibilities. . . . We admit the meaning of life taken altogether, but it is very hard to break up that recognition into fragments, and to feel the worth of these fleeting moments which, just because they are here, seem to be of small account.¹

—Alexander Maclaren, from the sermon
“Redeeming the Time”

Kmart was the shopping mecca of my small town, although it was a rarity for me to step inside this discount world of wonders. Likely I was there that day to buy shoes for the new school year, as the necessity of my physical presence was the only reason Mama would bring an eleven-year-old along with her to shop. As I walked through the store, suddenly there it was on the clearance table: my beginnings as a writer. It was a five-year diary with a leatherette cover embossed with a lion—the kind of lion a knight would be proud to have emblazoned on his shield. The diary also had an intricate brass latch with a key hanging by a thread. This real brass lock would secure my future secrets from the prying eyes and fingers of my big

brother and baby sisters. And all for a mere twenty-five cents. Even on a grass cutter's income, I could swing this!

I rediscovered my first diary in a box rescued from the attic of my parents' house when the place was sold. The old journal was mixed in with plastic army men, faded ribbons from track events, and some superhero bubble gum cards. As I reread the entries, I certainly did not see the glints of a child prodigy—it was about what you would expect from a kid's diary—but the best part was that I kept writing in it. And for over fifty years now, I've continued to keep journals. I now have a shelf full of them—and more stuffed in boxes. Their ink and coffee-stained pages sketch miniatures of people—many long since gone—whose laughter, wisdom, and affection filled my life, and the overflow inked the pages of my journals. Some of my journals capture crossroad decisions, while other journals record distant journeys. It's a happy convergence that *journey* and *journal* have the same French root: *jour*, which means “day.” So, a journey is the measure of a day, and a journal is a daily record of life and our encounters with people and places.

To me, the journals by which all other travel journals are inevitably—and often unfavorably—compared are *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*. I share historian Stephen Ambrose's enthusiasm:

Lewis and Clark's exploration of the western two thirds of the continent was our epic voyage, their account of it is our epic poem. Sitting before the nightly campfire, using a quill pen that had to be dipped into the inkwell every other word, balancing their leather-covered journals on their knees, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark described the day's events, as well as the land and its people and its flora and fauna, in a prose remarkable for its verve, sharp imagery, tension, and immediacy.

Reading the journals puts you in the canoe with them. . . . You and the captains are in a constant state of surprise, because

as you read, and as they write, you never know what's around the bend of the river, or what will happen next.²

Lewis and Clark's journals *made* history, but for us lesser mortals, our journals will not be studied or celebrated centuries from now. Yet, our daily writings still do something important: They capture the beautiful rhythms of ordinary life. And most days of our rather obscure lives *are* ordinary, and that's what I appreciate about the journals of Charles Loeber. His diaries are not housed in the Library of Congress—instead, they are in a cigar box on my bookshelf.

Many years ago, three of Loeber's pocket diaries came to me in a box of his papers that no one else at the auction wanted. His little journals were from the years 1900, 1901, and 1902. I don't know anything about him beyond what was in the box, but at the turn of the century, he was a draftsman in an entry-level engineering job. He was a conscientious, church-going young man, who kept a few close friends and was careful with his money. Even his small handwriting seemed to be an act of economy. Among his resolutions for the new year 1901 was "Save \$100."

Loeber's weeks had a quiet rhythm to them. He noted the books he read and the friends he visited. He occasionally wrote "Rain" at the top of the page. He saw a lunar eclipse once, and he recorded the news of President McKinley's assassination. On Sundays, Loeber captured the highlights of the sermon in his diary, and after church he usually walked a young lady, named Minnie Mae, home.

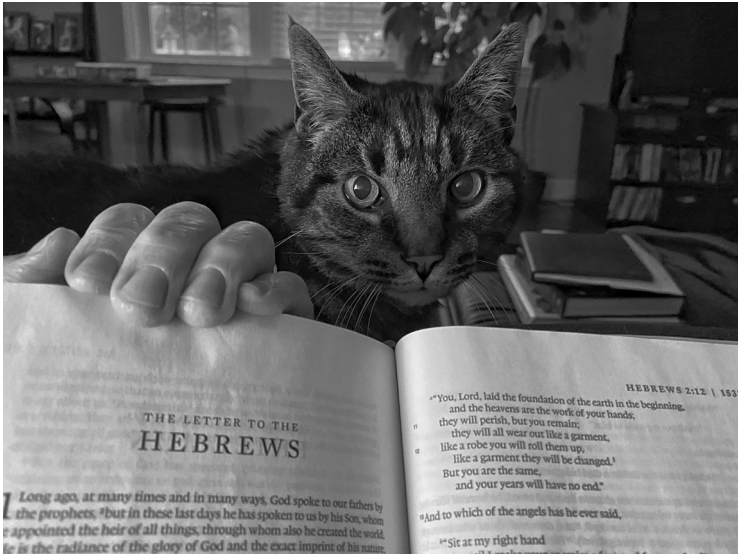
My favorite part of Charles Loeber's journal, though, is how hundreds of times he summarized his day with "Business as usual." Day after day, week after week, "Business as usual" crowned most entries. Loeber would go on to become a successful engineer—building schools, hospitals, and churches in China, Korea, and America. Despite his achievements, if later

in life he kept a diary, I somehow expect he still wrote “Business as usual” above most days.

Loeber’s habitual headline is a reminder that most days *are* ordinary. Ordinary days change with the seasons of life and, of course, from person to person. But for all of us, our routine ruts, our business-as-usual days are the stuff of life.

My day usually slow-starts after sunrise. I’ve always thought getting up before the sun does is rushing things—and rushing is not something I do first thing in the morning. A simple breakfast and coffee get me started. Coffee in hand, I settle in with my Bible for my morning reading and prayer. Murphy the Cat slips onto my lap and makes for a warm, furry prop for my Bible. Occasionally his big green eyes peer into mine before he settles in again.

The rest of the morning is spent at the mission office—in meetings, answering correspondence, etc. My wife, Debbie, has been my assistant and chief organizing officer for years. She



Morning with Murphy

juggles a lot as she fields questions on the phone and in the inbox—and always makes me look better than I deserve. We head home for a quick lunch. Then Debbie may start some laundry before heading back to the office, while I settle in on the back porch with coffee and cat for an afternoon of writing—maybe an article or, in this case, this chapter.

Ink on paper is how I compose—and I'm very particular about the ink, the pen that houses it, and the paper that it's spread on. For years, I've carried a Parker rollerball in my pocket. My sturdy Parker is always at the ready, except when I'm in high deserts, where the ink gets dry and scratchy and I resort to a pencil. I know I'm an anachronism, but I know I'm not alone, as novelist Mark Helprin concurs:

There is magic in writing by hand: the pauses; sometimes the racing; the scratching out; the closeness of the eyes to the page. . . . A pen (somehow) helps you think and feel. And although once you find a pen you like you'll probably stick with it the way an addict sticks with heroin, it can be anything from a Mont Blanc to a Bic. The same for paper. There are beautiful, smooth, heavy papers, but great works have been written on ration cards, legal pads and the kind of cheap paper they sell in developing countries—grayish white, almost furry, with flecks of brown and black that probably came from lizards and bats that jumped in the paper makers' vats.³

Speaking of furry, Murphy scrunches up closer to the porch screen for a better view of the bird feeder. Today the feeder and the trees resemble the airspace over O'Hare, aswirl with cardinals and blue jays, towhees and titmice, chickadees and nuthatches, thrashers and doves. Occasionally a swarm of grackles will swoop in and scatter them all. I really like these bad boys of the backyard as they strut around like pirates. They're as black and glistening as an oil slick and have lemon-yellow eyes that don't miss a thing. Grackles have a coarse squawk that sounds

like they burn through a pack a day. They squawk at the other birds, at each other, and sometimes at me. They are delightfully cranky. When they tire of their little game—a bird version of king of the hill—they are off in a flash of feathers and catcalls.

Murphy is unmoved by all of this—probably because he’s now asleep. The late afternoon sun is warming me to the idea of a nap as well. If I nap now, perhaps I’ll be sharp enough to read and write late into the evening as I used to do. It’s only a short debate with myself before I slip into a deep sleep, while sitting up amid a scattering of books and papers with pen in hand, because profound fatigue weighs on me every waking moment. I’m thankful to still have enough strength to push through my day until I hit the inevitable wall—but the wall seems to be moving closer.

I’m writing of my typical day, but the reality is cancer has forever altered my days. The strength and expanse of a normal day for me just a year or two back are out of reach now. My smaller days are wedged into a calendar filled with doctor appointments, infusions, blood draws, scans, and biopsies.

Value the ordinary days because they can suddenly change. Living for the weekend, waiting for that next breakthrough that will finally bring happiness, or wanting to speed up the clock are all sure ways of trampling precious bits of life in the rush to be somewhere else. Sometimes we are forced to look back and see what we’ve missed. That’s the point Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn makes in his semi-biographical novel *Cancer Ward*, which is based on his experiences as a cancer patient in a Soviet hospital. His stories draw on the diverse lives of patients who are suddenly brought together in one confining place because of one life-altering disease.

Dr. Dontsova, the lead doctor in Solzhenitsyn’s story, is a compassionate physician toughened by thirty years of dealing with death. Dontsova viewed all her patients and their

pathologies in cold textbook terms. But in a terrible role reversal, she discovers she has a malignant tumor. Solzhenitsyn writes:

Then suddenly, within a few days, her own body had fallen out of this great, orderly system. It had struck the hard earth and was now like a helpless sack crammed with organs—organs which might at any moment be seized with pain and cry out. . . .

Her world had capsized, the entire arrangement of her existence was disrupted. She was not yet dead, and yet she had had to give up her husband, her son, her daughter, her grandson, and her medical work as well, even though it was her own work, medicine, that would now be rolling over her and through her like a noisy train. In a single day she had to give up everything and suffer, a pale-green shadow, not knowing for a long time whether she was to die irrevocably or return to life.

It had once occurred to her that there was a lack of color, joy, festivity in her life—it was all work and worry, work and worry. But how wonderful the old life seemed now! Parting with it was so unthinkable it made her scream.⁴

How do we find value in our own days of “work and worry, work and worry”? It’s easy to equate ordinary days as unimportant and boring—the same routine, the same commute, the same traffic, the same work, the same problems, the same exhaustion, the same old everything. However, thinking of our everyday world as dull or insignificant is to walk through life with blinders on. The Lord Jesus commanded us to “look up” as a habit of life—to open our eyes, to be alert—and not just to His creation that surrounds us, but also to Himself and His work in us and for us. To help us look and learn, Jesus pointed out common things for our common days in the Sermon on the Mount. I imagine that from the hillside, He could literally point to these things and say, “Look at the flowers! Look at the birds!”

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Matthew 6:28–29

Consider the lilies—and when you do, don’t think of the extra-large Easter lilies from the florist. Instead think wildflowers. Think trillium that paints the forest floor in the springtime. Or think rhododendron that bedecks a high mountain stream with pink and purple and sparks of orange, and when the wind stirs, the branches cast their crowns into the bright waters. Consider the flowers that God planted.

The flowers remind us of their Creator—and ours. They remind us that the Great Gardener purposed to give life, color, fragrance, and beauty even to wildflowers that may never be seen in their brief existence. If our God does that for flowers, He will surely be with His people, giving them His life and filling their days with the fragrance and beauty of His presence.

And just as we are to look at the flowers to grow our gratitude for God’s attentive care in the day-to-day, Jesus also told us to look to the birds:

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Matthew 6:26

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Matthew 10:29–31

I love the story that Georgi Vins tells of when he kept company with the sparrows. Vins was a courageous Russian pastor

during the Soviet era, and spent eight years in the gulags because of his Gospel work. When I met Vins late in his life, it would be the first and last time, but it was an enormously influential meeting. I was at a crossroads in my life, and Vins opened a way for me to serve Christ in Russia, Ukraine, and central Asia. It was a small opening at the time, but God would prosper it to this day.

Vins wrote of his experiences during his years in prison, and on one occasion, he wrote about what the sparrows had taught him.

Few creatures can endure the harsh climate of Siberia's far north, where the winter temperature often drops as low as -74°F. By then, the birds have long since flown south to their winter feeding grounds in the Philippines and Japan. Only the hardy ravens and magpies remain behind. And the ever-present sparrows.

During the coldest times the sparrows would cling to the sides of the barracks with their tiny claws, pressing their little bodies against the walls. There they stayed for hours. If I was very quiet, I could get close enough to see that their little eyes were closed as they rested. It was so pleasant for them. How fragile they seemed, how incongruous with the severity of our surroundings.

One day I took them some breadcrumbs. Carefully I shook the crumbs out of my pockets onto the snowy ground. Before long I was surrounded by a whole flock of sparrows and the crumbs disappeared in moments. The little birds eyed me expectantly, waiting for more. I showed them my empty hands: "I have nothing else. Tomorrow I'll try to bring you more."

After a while, the sparrows recognized me. Every time I went outside, they'd leave their precarious shelters and gather around me, waiting for their bread. There were more than I could count.

Gazing at the tiny birds, joy filled my heart as I remembered the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all

numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29–31).

Dear little birds, if you haven’t been forgotten by God, then neither have I! And so it was during my years in bonds that I saw most clearly God’s protection and His faithfulness to me and to His Word. What a privilege it is to belong to Him!⁵

Similarly, when David was on the run for his life, he wrote, “The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry” (Psalm 34:15). Our God hears the cries of His people. Whether in the weary, dangerous years David spent waiting for God’s promises to be fulfilled or in the utter obscurity of an unjust imprisonment of a pastor in Siberia, our God hears the cries of His sons and daughters. The same is true in our routine rhythms and sorrows. Our days may be too hard and our nights too long to face alone, but because of the abounding grace of Jesus, we are stronger than we know and part of something bigger than we can see.

I was reminded of this recently by a friend who shared with me an entry from her journal. Simona is a young wife and mother who wrote from inside the walls of her everyday world, where she and her husband are growing in grace and endurance and finding new boundaries of Christ’s Kingdom.

Maybe we’re actually doing something remarkable. Something big. Maybe what’s seemed so ordinary, so slight and sometimes defeating a thing, has actually been monumental. We’ve made a person, kept her alive somehow, remained committed to one another and to our church through thick and much thin this year. We’ve talked for hours about things we wished we’d never have to think about. We’ve made decisions we’d never dreamed would ever exist. We’ve set our alarms after late nights of work and dragged ourselves out of bed to read our Bibles and pray while the dark remained and the rain came down outside for endless hours. We’ve had date nights in and cleaned the floors

too infrequently and done five times as much laundry as we ever did before the small child.

We've stayed awake to the battle.

Each day begins where the last left off, but also seems somehow like Groundhog Day. Like we're right back where we started and the perseverance of yesterday and the day before and the day before that were all for nothing and the battle lines will remain the same for every new day.

Perhaps there is something true in that—perhaps holding the line is where the heat of the battle is at. There are times to advance and move forward, but all that means nothing if the line does not hold.

So, as we wake up each day and meet with the King and hear His words and plod through our days seeking to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God, our homes look more and more like outposts of that King, evidences that justice will be done, the wicked will be judged, and the righteous will be vindicated one day. Wrong will not win out in the end, but every day we have to cling to the truth anew. As we become wearied in trying to understand everything swirling around us, we must walk into the sanctuary of God to discern the end of it all. The end that makes sense of it all (Psalm 73).

And our hunger for great patience, greater peace, and more presence of God in our days as we clock into work and roll up our sleeves for another sink full of dishes, send an encouraging text to a struggling friend, and speak gently to a headstrong child—this is where the Kingdom comes. If not here, then nowhere.⁶

When the praises of God's people rise from our small but significant lives, then every day is the Lord's day. So, just as Simona is declaring from her Kingdom outpost, we pray, too,

Lord, on this day

In this appointed place

Let Your Kingdom come

Let Your will be done.