

A painting of a lighthouse on a cliff at sunset. The lighthouse is white with a black top, and there are two small houses next to it. The cliff is green and rocky. The ocean is blue with white waves. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and purple. There are two sailboats in the distance.


infinite

HOPE

IN THE MIDST OF STRUGGLES

ARTWORK BY JONI EARECKSON TADA & JILL DE HAAN

FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

A soft, multi-colored watercolor splash in shades of green, yellow, and pink, centered behind the text.

INFINITE HOPE

in the midst of struggles



infinite
HOPE
IN THE MIDST OF STRUGGLES

Joni and Friends



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Infinite Hope . . . in the Midst of Struggles

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foreword from Jani



Before You Begin . . .

Because you are holding this book in your hands, I believe it's safe to say you are interested in *hope*—understanding it, finding it, and resting in it. Our world is in terrible turmoil: People are angry, cynicism and despair are on the rise, and the nightly news reminds us we are only one terrorist plot away from another global nightmare. We desperately need soul-settling hope, the kind of hope that's infinite—never fading and always brightening our darkest paths. We need the hope of God to fill and overflow our hearts, transforming us into people who are confident and at peace with ourselves, our God, and our circumstances.

You may not realize it—and it may seem odd—but the sufferings scratching at your door are the very windows through which God wants to shine his brightest rays of hope. I should know. Suffering has been my constant companion ever since 1967, when I broke my neck in a diving accident and became a quadriplegic.

It was a terrible shock at first. When I learned that my paralysis was permanent, I sank into a deep depression. Then, after I returned

from the hospital, my depression evolved into suicidal despair. I would often wrench my head back and forth on my pillow, hoping to break my neck at a higher vertebra, sever my spinal cord, and end my life. When that didn't work, I stayed in bed every morning for nearly two weeks, telling my sister, Kathy, to close the drapes, turn out the lights, and shut the door. Hope was nowhere to be found.

Lying there, I would brood over how much I hated being paralyzed. But I also hated the suffocation of self-pity. Slowly I realized I could not live with hopelessness. It was too claustrophobic, too confining. I finally cried out, "Oh, God, if I cannot die, then *please* show me how to live!" My prayer was short, but the God of all hope heard me.

The next morning, I woke up with a new determination to face life. I asked Kathy to get me up and into my wheelchair. Once I was in my chair, she pushed me into the living room and placed my Bible on a music stand in front of me. Clenching a mouth stick between my teeth, I began turning the pages. I knew the Bible contained answers for my plight; I just didn't know where to look.

Thankfully, God brought wise Christian friends alongside to help me discover his life-transforming precepts. I heard God whisper, *Joni, trust me . . . I have a bigger plan and more than enough power to change things. If I loved you enough to die for you, can't I be trusted with even this?* My hopelessness began to dissipate, especially when I read, "I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).

This was no ordinary hope that filled my heart. This was life-transforming hope—the kind that filled me with confidence and helped me find peace with myself, with God, and with my wheelchair. And I've never been the same since. Suffering was the wide-open window through which God shone his healing grace and infinite hope into my life. And it was my suffering that gave me a richer, deeper love for Christ, the Blessed Hope.

Perhaps you are caving in under the weight of suffering today—permanent pain from a botched surgery, an unexpected death in the family, or a divorce that totally took you by surprise. Perhaps your reputation has been unfairly stained, or your teenager has chosen a rebellious path toward drugs, or you are keeping vigil at the bedside of your little one who is struggling against cancer. It could simply be a long season of unexplained depression, the kind that lingers on and on like a low-grade fever. Do you wonder if you will ever smile again?

It is my prayer that the stories we share on the following pages, as well as the insights about suffering and the goodness of God, will fill your heart with this life-giving hope. May you gain a fresh perspective on your hardships and heartaches. I ask only that you read with prayerful expectancy of the hope and help God desires to shine upon you this day.

Infinite hope *is* possible. It's a little like the line from *The Shawshank Redemption* where Andy writes to his paroled friend, "Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. And no good thing ever dies."

I pray that with this special book as your guide, you will get busy living. And you can start right now by turning the page to find your much-needed inspiration and hope. Remember, hope is the *best* of things.



Joni Eareckson Tada



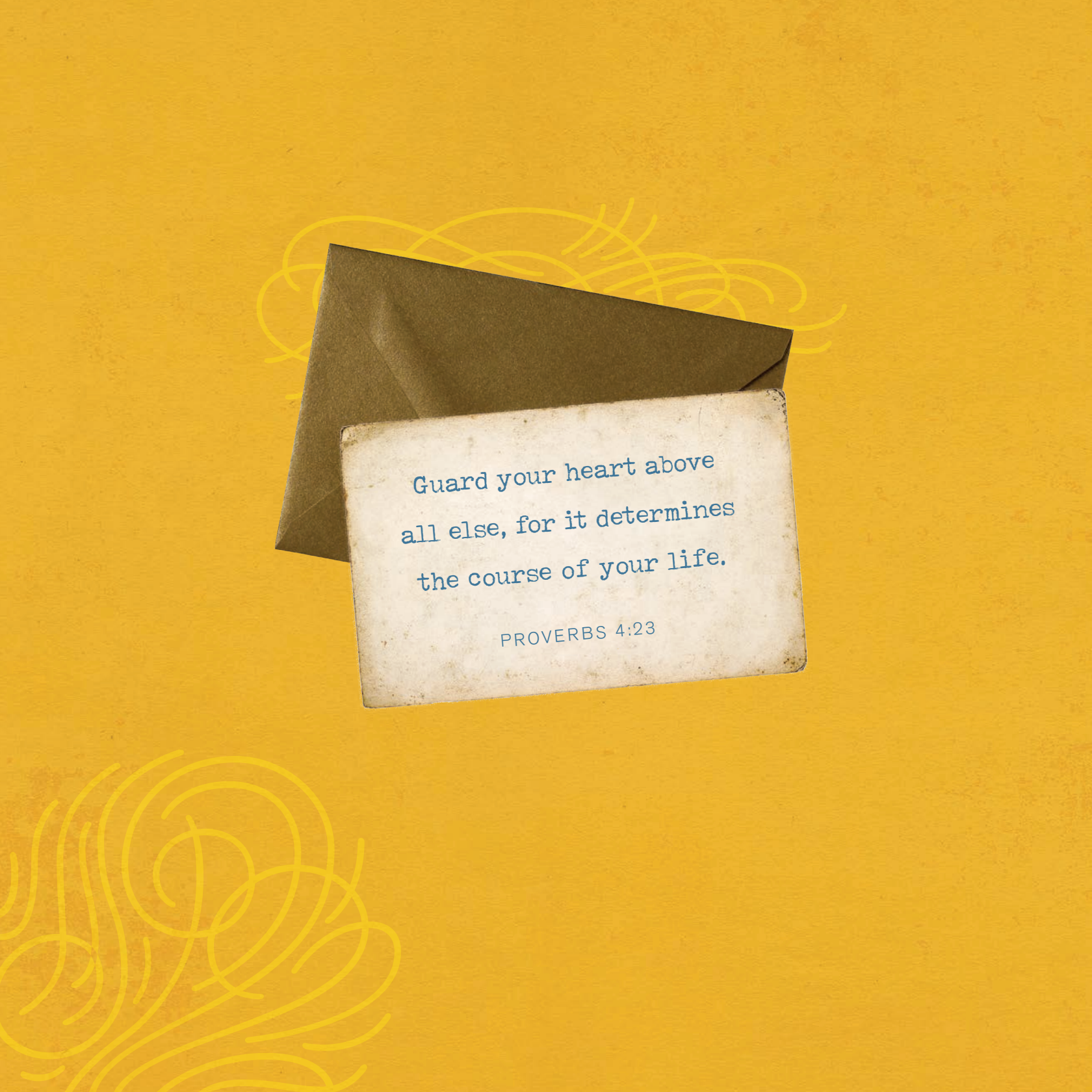
PART 1

infinite
ASSURANCE




*Why am I discouraged?
Why is my heart so sad?
I will put my hope in God!
I will praise him again—
my Savior and my God!*

PSALM 42:11



Guard your heart above
all else, for it determines
the course of your life.

PROVERBS 4:23



Lord, show me your purpose.

LIFE'S STRUGGLES always prompt heart-wrenching questions:

If God is good, why would he allow heartache and
pain in my life?

Is God truly concerned about life-altering accidents,
natural disasters, and family crises, or does the
devil set the world's agenda?

What is the purpose of this sadness in my life?

The psalmist David lamented,

My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Why are you so far away when I groan for help?

Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.

Every night I lift my voice, but I find no relief.

PSALM 22:1-2

Does this sound familiar? Maybe you're walking a path of sorrows because of a job loss, a health issue, conflict with a loved one, a disability, or depression. Or perhaps you recall that David's first question was also spoken from the lips of a totally innocent man while he was hanging on a cruel cross (see Matthew 27:46). Jesus' expression of his profound sense of abandonment shows that he understands the spoken (and unspoken) questions in your life.

Jesus also put his humanity on full display in Gethsemane, telling his disciples, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death." Slipping further away, Jesus cries out, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me." Then he models humanity attuned to divinity: "Yet I want your will to be done, not mine" (Mark 14:34-36).

It was excruciating for Jesus to place such suffering in God's hands, but he did. This Suffering Servant was described as "despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Isaiah's prophecy foretold the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, who would bear our weaknesses and carry our sorrows. He would be pierced for our sins and rebellion, whipped and beaten for our healing. Our sins would be laid on him. His death would be undeserved—like a lamb being led to slaughter without resistance. His body would be buried in a rich man's grave. His death would (miraculously) produce a host of descendants, and he would be satisfied by the accomplishments of his anguish.

Jesus Christ shows us in a personal way what God looks like. Those who have become God's children by faith in Christ are daily being made more like him. The presence of personal crises, diseases, and struggles do nothing to negate this reality because all human beings bear the image of God and are capable of entering into a relationship with him (see Colossians 1:15, 2 Corinthians 3:18, and Genesis 1:26-27).

If your desire is to grapple with the meaning of adversity and learn to manage it, you must spend time in God's Word. Since Eden, people acquainted with suffering have looked to the character of God for justice, fresh purpose, and *infinite assurance* to carry on.

When Hopelessness Crushes Your Spirit

At the age of twenty, Mike King had it all. He was a man's man: strong, athletic, and handsome. And then one day a car pulled out in front of the motorcycle Mike was riding, and *CRASH!*—his life was changed forever. Mike was left paralyzed, broken, and angry. He'd always been active in all kinds of sports and enjoyed meeting challenges head-on. But paralysis was a different story. Unable to walk, Mike struggled to find life's purpose.

When our hearts are sad and our spirits broken, we lose the strength to endure. Extended times of suffering take a toll that is magnified if we are not intentionally seeking God in their midst. Solomon cautions us, "Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life" (Proverbs 4:23). If we do not take precautions to protect and care for our hearts, it is to our own detriment.



SEARCH
FOR THE
LORD AND FOR HIS
STRENGTH,
CONTINUALLY
SEEK HIM

1 CHRONICLES 16:11

How should we respond when we realize that we've forsaken our faith and left our hearts vulnerable to Satan's attack? The psalmist cried out,

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

Renew a loyal spirit within me. . . .

The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit.

You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.

PSALM 51:10, 17

During our darkest hours, when all comfort fails to touch the depth of our pain, Jesus stands with open arms as the ultimate expression of empathy and love—our model for suffering (see Isaiah 53:3-4). Like the psalmist, we can ask for God's merciful touch and rest assured that he will answer our prayers.

A few years after Mike King's accident, he heard about two wheelchair athletes who had traversed the continental United States in their chairs. The idea aroused his competitive nature and compelled him to do something even more daring—he set a wild goal to push his wheelchair from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Washington, DC.

Mike started out with his eye on the prize, but the long hours of wear on his hands and arms quickly brought discouragement. When some high school students heard about his goal, they showed support by surrounding him on their bikes. Others joined in along the way, and Mike completed the 5,605-mile trip, which changed his self-image and views on life.

The physical and spiritual discipline from Mike's earlier years helped transform him into a stalwart follower of Jesus Christ. Mike discovered new possibilities. Some years later, he founded an organization, Powered to Move, to promote physical fitness among persons with disabilities and to increase their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Today, he and

his wife, Sharyn, travel around the world sharing the hope of Jesus Christ with hurting people.

People ask Mike what keeps him connected to God in the daily grind of a disability. With a winning smile, he says, “It is the hope Christ provides. God has a plan for each of us. It’s not a plan B—it’s a plan A, and it doesn’t change. He has shown me this throughout my experiences and led me right to where I am today.”

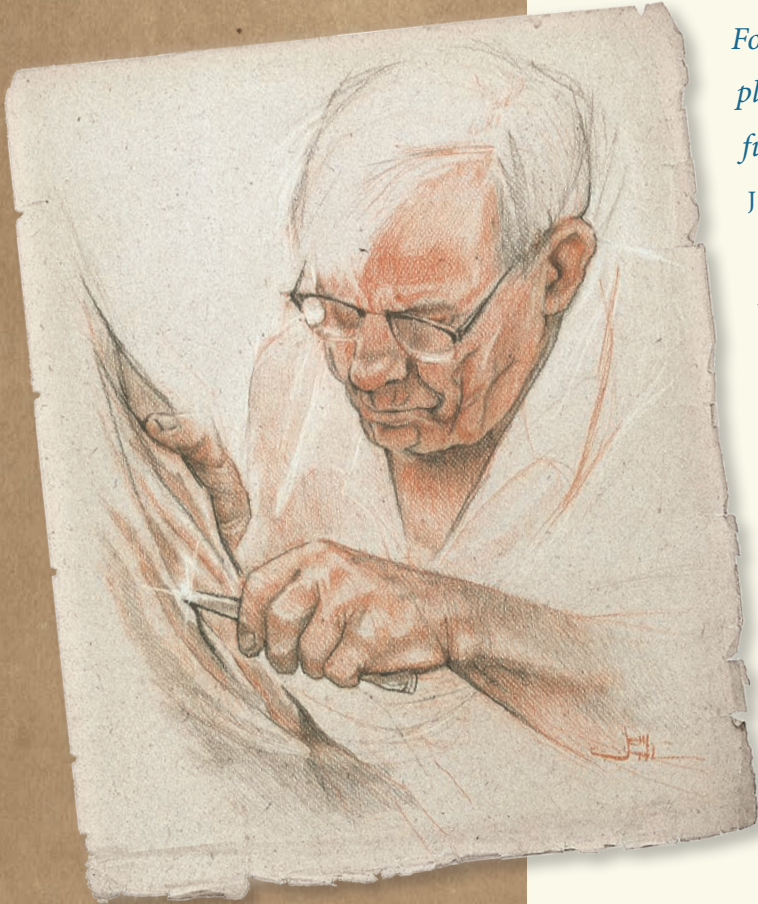
No matter what we are facing, the Lord assures us that he is aware of our circumstances and present with us:

For I know the plans I have for you. . . . They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.

JEREMIAH 29:11

My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts. . . . And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine.

ISAIAH 55:8



a word from Joni



I Need God in My Suffering

When we wonder why we must suffer, we're actually asking a question of someone. That someone is God. But why he allowed suffering doesn't really matter. The only thing that matters is how we respond. When we can't find the answer we're looking for, we can find peace in the only true answer: We need God!

Affliction is the lowest common denominator for all of us. Philippians 1:29 tells us to expect suffering: "For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him." But no matter how strong our faith is, it's natural to ask why.

After many years of suffering, I've concluded that God allows one form of evil—suffering—to expose another form of evil—sin. It is as if God were turning suffering on its head to help us feel the sting of sin, which reminds us of how poisonous sin really is. Suffering is like a sandblaster that strips away our fears, anxieties, self-centeredness,

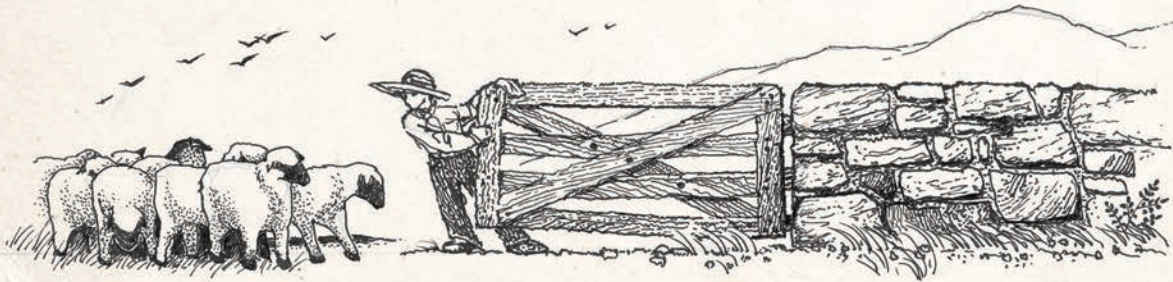
complaining, and apathy toward others who hurt. God allows affliction to rip it all away so that we can see the world through the eyes of Christ.

God hates evil and suffering. He promises us in his Word that he will relieve suffering, and he relieves it every day. We can be sure that if our hearts hurt for someone, God felt our pain first. Our souls are strengthened through suffering. To know God better, we must know our suffering better. And as we do, we become less self-focused and more God-focused.

John



Lord, you're the Creator of the universe and everything in it—
nothing is hidden from you. You see doubts and hurts; you're
acquainted with my grief. But none of it makes any sense to me.
I need to understand your infinite purpose for these things . . .





You Are God's Masterpiece

We are made in God's own image—something unique to humanity (see Genesis 1:26-27). While our capacity to reflect the divine image is impacted by sin, the image itself remains intact. Thus all human beings, whatever their abilities or struggles, are “image bearers” and capable of having a relationship with God. We share the common dignity and equal value that being made in God's image confers.

This is true whether we “feel” like it or not. Yet at some point, we all try to hide from ourselves and from others, pulling the covers over our heads so God doesn't even have to look at us. These emotions can be the result of sin in our lives, but often they come from the constant trouble and stress that weigh us down. Life on this earth is incomplete and even contradictory at times. We rarely have all the explanations we desire for the conflicting circumstances of life, especially when we feel painfully alone.

Even John the Baptist, who had a pretty clear idea about who Jesus was and about his own purpose in life, experienced serious doubts when he found himself in prison. He sent some of his followers to ask Jesus, “Are you the Messiah we've been expecting, or should we keep looking for someone else?” (Matthew 11:3). Somehow, suffering in prison didn't align with John's expectations if Jesus was in fact the Messiah John thought he was.

We, too, can begin to doubt God when our lives don't make sense or our expectations are not met. We wonder whether God is who we thought he was when we first met him. But God's plans are not subject to our desires or dreams. His purposes for us often involve suffering and pain in this present world.

Jesus' reply to John's disciples was gentle and understanding—yet also challenging: “Go back to John and tell him what you have heard and seen” (Matthew 11:4). And Jesus added, “God blesses those who do not fall away because of me” (verse 6).

FOR WE ARE
GOD'S
MASTERPIECE.
HE HAS CREATED
US ANEW IN
CHRIST JESUS.

EPHESIANS 2:10