

REACHING THE
**HURTING
AND LOST**

DAILY DEVOTIONAL



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One of the constant temptations in the Christian life—and in the life of the church—is to drift. Not usually a dramatic drift, but a subtle drift. We stay busy, we do good things, we serve faithfully, yet somewhere along the way, Jesus can move from the center to the margins. This devotional was born out of a simple but weighty conviction: **everything healthy in our lives and our church flows from keeping Jesus at the center.**

Over the next nine weeks, you'll walk through themes of fruitfulness, renewal, compassion, influence, repentance, mission, and resurrection. On the surface, these may seem like separate ideas, but they all share the same source. Jesus Himself said that apart from Him, we can do nothing. Real transformation—personal or communal—doesn't come from effort alone. It comes from abiding. From staying close. From returning again and again to Christ as our life, our hope, and our power.

My prayer is that these devotionals help you slow down and recenter your heart. Not just to learn more, but to listen more closely. To notice where God may be inviting you to deeper trust, greater humility, or renewed joy. And as individuals are renewed, I believe our church will be too—bearing fruit that blesses others and reflects the heart of Jesus to the world around us.

So come honestly. Come expectantly. Bring your questions, your weariness, and your hope. Let's keep Jesus where He belongs—at the center—and trust Him to do what only He can do.



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DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

"... Our Father in heaven..."

Matthew 6:9b (NLT)

- **What do You want to say to me today as my Father?**

"... may your name be kept holy."

Matthew 6:9c (NLT)

- **What do You want to reveal to me about Your power today?**

"May your Kingdom come soon."

Matthew 6:10a (NLT)

- **Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.**

"Give us today the food we need,"

Matthew 6:11 (NLT)

- **Is there anything specific You want me to do with my time or the people I'm around today?**

"and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us"

Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

- **Reveal to me anyone I need to forgive or ask for forgiveness.**

"And don't let us yield to temptation..."

Matthew 6:13a (NLT)

- **Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?**

THE POWER SOURCE OF A FRUITFUL LIFE

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

John 15:5-6 (NIV)

On a cold, dreary Saturday morning just a few weeks ago, I decided to settle in at home for the day and unwind with a movie or two. I nestled into my favorite spot on the couch, wrapped up in a cozy blanket and reached for the remote. I pressed the power button once, then twice, and finally a third time before I realized the batteries were dead. The device that would give me access to hundreds of channels and movies had no power. It was useless.

Scripture tells us that apart from the Lord, we can do nothing; we are useless. He is our power source. Without Him, everything we strive for is futile. Our good deeds, kindness and efforts are dead apart from the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. Just as a vine provides life for the branches, He provides us with salvation, abundant life and eternity with God. True power comes from salvation through Jesus Christ. In John 14:6, Jesus says, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"*. Once we *plug into* the power of the Holy Spirit by accepting the gift of salvation, we become alive in Christ and begin to flourish.

APPLICATION: Reflect on your source of power. Are you relying on God to guide you, or are you relying on your own limited strength? What evidence do you see in your life that reveals God's power at work? Spend time in prayer and ask Him to reveal areas in your life where you need to rely on His power so He can use you for His glory.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for Your accessibility. I need You to be my source of power and strength. Show me how to follow closely to You and abide in You so You can produce fruit in my life to be used for Your glory. Amen.

TRUE LOVE

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

Romans 12:9 (NIV)

I'll never forget the day I was introduced to a student who ended up having a profound impact on my teaching career. He entered the classroom with his shoulders slumped, his head down, and his long, shaggy hair covering his eyes. He sat at a desk in the corner of the room, far from the other students. The tug in my heart told me that he felt alone and unseen. I quickly discovered that he had a reputation for being a troublemaker. Each day, I would make a conscious effort to speak to him, usually about something unrelated to the subject I was teaching. I invited him to my study group to help him with his homework. I inconspicuously placed extra pencils and other supplies on his desk so he wouldn't feel embarrassed for not having his own materials. Over time, he began to smile when I greeted him at the door. I watched him transform during the school year from a shy, timid boy into a curious, more confident young man. He left a note on my desk on the last day of school that said, *Thank you for not being mad at me. You are the best teacher I've ever had.*

We are called to love others as we love ourselves. Love fueled by emotion is shallow and unsustainable, but love fueled by action is life-changing. 1 John 4:10 says, *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Notice that God didn't just tell us that He loves us. He didn't base His love for us on His emotions. He made a choice; He took action by sacrificing His beloved Son. *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35 NIV)."*

APPLICATION: How can you demonstrate love today? Choose one actionable step you can take to show love to someone.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for Your perfect and unfailing love. Help me to love others regardless of my emotions. Let others see Your love reflected in me. Amen.

THE PURSUIT OF TREASURE

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Luke 15: 4-7 (NIV)

My grandmother was known for her southern cooking and 12-layer cakes. When my grandmother passed away, she left her recipe book to my mother. It’s a treasure trove of casseroles, homemade biscuits and other southern comfort foods. Some of the pages are dotted with grease stains, some with faint smears of sauce, and all penned in my grandmother’s handwriting. Recently, my mother decided to try her hand at one of the recipes. She went to the shelf to pull out the recipe book, fumbling past her collection of Southern Living magazines, but the recipe book was gone. In a panic, she began searching through cabinets and drawers, under blankets and couch cushions, but still couldn’t find it. Weeks passed, and she continued to search. One evening as she was climbing into bed, she noticed the corner of a book poking out from under the bed. The recipe book! Tears welled up in her eyes, and she breathed a sigh of relief that her treasure had been found.

The Bible teaches us that the Lord pursues those who are lost. We are His sheep, His greatest treasure. He knows each of us intimately, and He desires for all to come to faith in Him. *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10 NIV).”* You are never too far from His reach, and nothing can separate you from His love.

APPLICATION: Think about your most prized possession. How would you feel if it were lost? To what lengths would you go to find it? Thank the Lord for pursuing you and loving you perfectly.

PRAYER: Father, I am humbled by Your great love for me. Thank You for pursuing me and paying the ultimate price to save my life. Please forgive me when I fail You and help me not to stray from You. I commit my life to You and give You honor and praise for Your faithfulness. Amen.

FROM OUTCAST TO HEIR

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. **Isaiah 53:5 (NIV)**

The Bible tells the story of a woman who suffered from a chronic bleeding disorder for twelve years. She sought the help of doctors and spent everything she had in hopes of finding relief, but the bleeding only grew worse. She was also considered unclean by society because of her condition. She suffered in isolation, gradually losing hope, until she heard that Jesus was nearby. She knew that He had healed many people, and she thought, *"If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed (Mark 5:28 NLT)."* As He walked through the village, the crowd pressing around Him, she reached out in desperation to touch the hem of His robe. Immediately, the bleeding stopped. Jesus turned around and asked who had touched Him. The woman fell to her knees in fear and confessed to what she had done. In His loving kindness, Jesus said to her, *"Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over (Mark 5:34 NLT)."*

Notice that when the woman touched Jesus' robe, she was immediately healed, not because of something she said or because she had already sought help for so many years, and He was a last resort. She was healed because of her *faith*. She believed in Him. Secondly, when Jesus turned to ask who had touched Him, and she fell to her knees, He called her *daughter*. In her isolation and rejection, He saw her for who she was: His precious child for whom He came to save.

Many have asked for physical healing in the name of Jesus. In His sovereignty, He may or may not choose to heal us on this side of heaven. When you profess your faith in Him, you immediately receive the ultimate healing! No matter what pain or suffering you endure on earth, you have the hope and comfort as a child of God that He will never leave you, and you will live with Him for eternity when you pass from this life.

APPLICATION: Are you suffering from physical pain? Maybe your pain is emotional, and your burdens are too great to bear. Ask Jesus for healing. Tell Him your needs and ask Him to heal as only He can.

PRAYER: Father, You are the Great Physician and the ultimate healer. Thank You for drawing close to me in times of pain and suffering. Heal the brokenness and pain in my life and cause my faith to grow as I learn to depend on You. Amen.

INVISIBLE WAR

Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. **Ephesians 6:11-12 (NIV)**

When I was young, my parents had a house rule that my sister and I were not allowed to watch scary movies or any programming that contained spiritual forces of evil. Out of protection for our family, they did not invite those forces into our home, a concept that I didn't fully understand until I had my own children. It's true that we must discern what we choose to watch on TV, the music we listen to, the books we read—everything that takes up space in our minds. What goes into your mind comes out in your life.

There is a spiritual realm around us that contains good and evil forces. We have a spiritual component because we are created in the image of God, but there is an enemy of your soul. Scripture tells us, *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour* (1 Peter 5:8 NIV). The enemy is cunning and manipulative. His schemes aren't always obvious to us because he is the Father of Lies. In *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis, the main character, a demon named Screwtape, gives instructions and insights to his apprentice nephew. He tells his nephew, *Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts*. Often, we fall for the lies because they are so subtle.

But here's the good news: Jesus came and took the punishment for our sins on the cross. He died for the lies we follow. He died to save our souls. *The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work* (1 John 3:8 NIV). He did not leave us in darkness at the mercy of our enemy. Instead, He promised to walk with us and cover us in His righteousness. It is because of Him that we have weapons to fight against the forces of evil.

APPLICATION: Read about the armor of God in Ephesians 6:14-17. How can you protect against the schemes of the enemy?

PRAYER: Father, thank You for paying the ransom for my sin by sending Your Son to die for me. Help me to discern against the lies of the enemy. Protect me with Your armor and cover me with Your grace. Amen.

WHAT DO HONEYBEES AND CHRISTIANS HAVE IN COMMON?

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 1:17 (NIV)

I have an insatiable sweet tooth. Lately, I've been supplementing with local honey to replace sugar and artificial sweeteners, which not only has helped curb sugar cravings but has also profoundly eased my seasonal allergies. What's amazing is the process by which honey is made. In a beehive, the honeybees have various jobs: the queen is responsible for laying eggs, the drones mate with the queen, and the worker bees are responsible for the housekeeping. If the bees failed to complete their jobs, the hive would suffer, and there would be no honey.

Jesus said, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:19-20 NIV)."* As Christians, we have one job: to make disciples. What would happen if we chose not to fulfill the responsibility of our job? The Gospel would stop with us. Imagine all the people all over the world who would never come to faith in Christ if Christians decided not to complete the job. Sometimes we're intimidated to share the Gospel because we fear what people will think of us, or we worry that our testimonies aren't convincing enough. Jesus didn't give us these parameters. He simply said to go. Do you realize that your obedience could result in the eternal salvation of a child of God? This feels like a huge responsibility, because it is! It's so important that Jesus sacrificed His life for it.

In the Old Testament, God promised the Israelites that He would bring them out of slavery and into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. He has also promised that we who believe in Him and call upon His name will be saved, freed from our bondage of sin, and granted access into heaven. Just as honey is sweet, so is the privilege of sharing the Gospel with the world.

APPLICATION: Think of someone in your life who needs to hear the Good News of Jesus. Write down what you might say if given the opportunity to tell them how the Gospel has changed your life.

PRAYER: Father, You are so good! Provide opportunities for conversations and guide me as I seek to share the Gospel with the people I encounter. Make me bold for You! Amen.

HERE AM I, SEND ME

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah 6:8 (NIV)

When I read Isaiah's encounter with the Lord in Isaiah 6, I'm struck by both its beauty and its challenge. Isaiah stood in the presence of God's holiness, His glory filling the temple, and it completely undid him. He cried out, *Woe to me! I am ruined!* because he saw his own unworthiness in the light of God's perfection.

But God didn't leave Isaiah there. In His mercy, God sent an angel to touch Isaiah's lips with a live coal, cleansing him of sin and guilt. After that cleansing, Isaiah heard God's question: *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"* Isaiah didn't hesitate. *"Here am I. Send me."*

That same question still echoes today. God isn't looking for perfect people. He's looking for willing hearts. Sometimes I feel inadequate, fearful or unqualified to do what He's asking. Maybe you've felt that way too. But the same God who forgives us also empowers us. When we say yes, He equips us with everything we need.

Think about how Jesus called His first disciples: fishermen, tax collectors, ordinary men. They weren't impressive by the world's standards, but they were willing. Once they encountered Jesus, their lives were never the same. Filled with His Spirit, they went out and changed the world, not because they were strong, but because they were available.

We have that same opportunity today. God's mission isn't just for pastors, missionaries or church staff. It's for all of us. The people who need Jesus aren't only in distant countries; they're right here around us: our neighbors, coworkers, friends and even family. God is still asking, *Who will go?* The question is: will we respond like Isaiah did and say, *Here am I. Send me?*

APPLICATION: Where might God be calling you to step out in faith this week? Maybe it's starting a spiritual conversation with a friend, inviting someone to church, or serving in a ministry that reaches our community. Let's pray for the courage to say yes, even when it's uncomfortable.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for cleansing me through Jesus and calling me into Your mission. Forgive me for the times I've held back out of fear or doubt. Give me courage to say, *Here am I. Send me.* Open my eyes, and our eyes, to the people around us who need Your love. Fill us with boldness and compassion to share the hope of Jesus wherever You send us. In His name, Amen.

THE SHEPHERD WHO SEEKS

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. ... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.”

Ezekiel 34:11-12a, 16 (NIV)

I love how God reveals Himself as a Shepherd who seeks His sheep. There have been times in my life when I felt lost and didn't know how to find my way back. Yet God came looking for me. He didn't wait for me to figure it out. He came to rescue, heal and restore me.

When I look back, I can see moments when God used others to show that same shepherding love. I've seen friends pray for years for someone who drifted from faith, and others quietly serve those who were hurting and unseen. That's what the heart of the Shepherd looks like in us.

Jesus said, *“I am the good shepherd”* (John 10:11). He laid down His life for the sheep. He did not just save us. He sought us. That truth changes how I see others. When I notice someone who is struggling, I want my first reaction to be compassion, not frustration. The same mercy that found me can flow through me.

People who are hurting are not problems to fix. They are deeply known and loved by God. He already knows their names and is already looking for them. We simply get to join Him in the search. Every act of kindness, prayer and moment of listening can be part of God's work of bringing someone home.

Let us remember that the Shepherd who sought us now lives within us. We can be His hands and feet to those who still feel lost.

APPLICATION: Ask God to give you the heart of the Shepherd. Think of one person in your life who may feel far from Him. Pray for their healing and restoration. Look for ways to show compassion through listening, serving or inviting them into relationship.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for being the Good Shepherd who came searching for me when I was wandering. Help me reflect Your heart for others. Open my eyes to the people around me who need Your love. Give me courage to step toward them with grace, patience and compassion. Use me to bind up the hurting and point them back to You. Amen.

A TREE OF LIFE

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and the one who is wise saves lives.

Proverbs 11:30 (NIV)

I picture a tree that gives shade, fruit and strength to everything around it. God says that when our lives are rooted in Him, we become that kind of tree. Our actions, words and character can refresh weary souls and point others toward life.

Over the years, I've noticed that the people who most inspired my faith weren't always the loudest or most knowledgeable. They were steady. They were kind. They loved well, even when life was hard. Watching how they lived made me want to know the God who gave them peace and purpose. That's what Proverbs means by *the fruit of the righteous*. It's a life that naturally draws people toward Jesus because His presence overflows from within us.

When I think about it, most people around us aren't reading the Bible. They're reading us. They're watching how we handle pressure, disappointment and conflict. They see whether our faith shapes our choices or just decorates our words. When our hearts are right with God, our lives begin to speak for Him long before we ever say a word.

Sharing our faith isn't about forcing conversations or having all the answers. It's about being available, listening and letting the Holy Spirit guide us. Wisdom means knowing both what to say and when to stay quiet. Sometimes it's a simple act of kindness that opens the door for someone to see Jesus in us.

I have to remind myself that the fruit God grows in me isn't for me. A tree doesn't eat its own fruit; it exists to bless others. In the same way, our walk with Christ is meant to nourish those around us. When we live in step with Him, people begin to notice something different: peace that doesn't make sense, joy that lasts, and love that heals. That's what it means to be a tree of life.

Let's live in such a way that our faith becomes irresistible. Not because of what we say, but because of who we are becoming in Christ and the living evidence of His transforming grace.

APPLICATION: Ask God to help you bear fruit that blesses others. Think about whether your words, actions and attitude point people to Jesus. Pray for wisdom to know how to share His love in your everyday relationships.

PRAYER: Father, let my life be a tree of life that refreshes and strengthens others. Help me bear fruit that reflects Your goodness and grace. Give me wisdom to know how to share Your truth in every moment. Use me to lead people from darkness into the light of Jesus. Amen.

SHINING LIKE STARS

"Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

Daniel 12:3 (NIV)

Daniel paints a beautiful picture of eternity: those who lead others to righteousness will shine like stars forever. This promise declares that reaching the lost carries eternal weight. The impact of helping someone find salvation in Christ is not temporary. It's everlasting.

Stars shine because they reflect the light they carry. In the same way, believers reflect the light of Christ. Jesus declares, *"You are the light of the world"* (Matthew 5:14). Our role is not to produce the light but to carry and reflect it. This is both humbling and freeing. You don't need to be the source of power. You simply need to stay close enough to Jesus that His light naturally radiates through your words, your kindness and your choices.

There are times when the world feels dark and confusing. It's easy to wonder whether what we're doing matters. But I've learned that one faithful act of love can make a bigger difference than we think. I've seen God use an encouraging word or a simple act of kindness to open hearts in ways that sermons never could. We never know who is watching or how God might use our light to guide someone back to Him.

Our legacy isn't measured by what we own or accomplish. It's found in the people whose lives have been changed because we chose to love like Jesus. The spouse we supported when life was heavy. The child we prayed for. The neighbor we encouraged. The friend who found hope because we refused to give up. These are the lights that shine forever.

APPLICATION: Ask God to show you one person who needs His light through you today. Offer a prayer, encouragement, or a simple act of love. Remember, no effort is ever wasted when it points someone toward Jesus.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for letting me shine Your light in this dark world. Help me stay close to You so that others see Your love in me. Keep me faithful when I feel unseen and remind me that even small lights can lead others home. Let my life reflect Your glory always. Amen.

WHEN GRACE CHANGES EVERYTHING

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

Jonah 3:10 (NIV)

Every time I read the story of Jonah, I am struck by how God's grace can change even the hardest hearts. The people of Nineveh were violent and corrupt. By all human standards, they were too far gone. Yet when Jonah finally obeyed and preached God's warning, they listened. They humbled themselves, turned from their sin, and cried out for mercy. And God forgave them.

I have seen glimpses of that same grace in my own life. There were times when I resisted God's direction, convinced I knew better, and yet He pursued me anyway. I've also seen Him restore people I was convinced would never change. Watching that transformation reminded me that no one is beyond God's reach. His mercy is always wider than our judgment, and His patience runs deeper than our doubts.

Jonah struggled to accept God's compassion for the Ninevites. I understand that struggle. It's easy to thank God for forgiving me, but harder to rejoice when He forgives someone who has hurt others or lived in open rebellion. As the older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) reveals, I must guard my heart from jealousy, bitterness, pride and unforgiveness when God gives what I might feel is undeserved grace. God keeps reminding me that His heart is not like mine. He longs for everyone to turn to Him, even those I may find difficult to love.

If I'm not careful, I can become like Jonah, sitting outside the city walls, frustrated that grace reached someone else. But when grace truly takes hold of my heart, it softens my posture toward others. It reminds me that the same mercy that rescued me is meant to flow through me. When grace breaks through, judgment turns to mercy, enemies become brothers and sisters, and the lost are found. That is the beauty of the Gospel.

APPLICATION: Think about someone you may have given up on. Bring that person before God today. Ask Him to give you compassion and faith to believe that He can still change their heart. Pray that He would also change yours to match His.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for the grace that reached me when I did not deserve it. Forgive me for the times I have been slow to show mercy to others. Help me believe that no one is too far from Your love. Let my life reflect the hope of forgiveness and the power of grace that changes everything. Amen.

DECLARE HIS GLORY

Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

Psalms 96:3 (NIV)

Psalms 96 calls us to do something bold. It tells us to declare God's glory and to speak of His marvelous deeds to everyone we can. That isn't just a command for missionaries or pastors. It's for all of us who have experienced the goodness of God. His glory is too great to keep quiet about.

When I think about declaring God's glory, I think about moments when He showed up in my life in ways I did not expect. Times when He provided for me when I was worried about how things would work out. Times when His peace carried me through seasons of fear or loss. I've learned that sharing those stories matters. They remind others that God is real and still at work today.

I used to believe that sharing my faith meant having all the right words or knowing how to answer every question, like I was trying to pass an exam. But what people often need most is to see that God has changed us. They may debate ideas, but they cannot deny a transformed life. When I tell someone about how God met me in my desperation or forgave me when I least deserved it, His glory shines through my story more than through any memorized talking point I could make.

Declaring God's glory is not about trying to win an argument. It's about telling the truth about what He has done. The Holy Spirit is the one who opens hearts. Our job is simply to be faithful and willing to speak. Every story of God's mercy is a small reflection of His larger story that reaches across every nation and every generation.

When we declare His glory in our own homes, workplaces and neighborhoods, we become part of God's global mission. We may not travel across oceans, but our testimony can still travel across hearts. God uses the words of ordinary people like us to reveal His extraordinary grace.

APPLICATION: Think of one way you can declare God's glory today. Tell someone what God has done for you. Share an encouraging verse, pray for someone, or remind them that they are loved. Every word spoken in truth can point someone toward hope.

PRAYER: Lord, help me declare Your glory with courage and joy. Give me the words to share what You have done in my life. Let my story reflect Your goodness so that others may see Your light and know Your love. Amen.

UNDER THE SURFACE

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me.

Psalm 51:10 (NLT)

As we draw closer to spring, every year I find myself making the same comment: *I'm tired of the cold, and it seems like endless darkness is surrounding us.* Only for my wife to remind me that *Spring is coming.* From the beginning of fall until the start of spring often seems like an eternity for many of us. During that time, we may look good on the surface to others, but we're withering underneath, in the isolation of ourselves and even in the choices we've made. I believe it's safe to say that in these moments, we would all love to be renewed, especially from within.

In Psalm 51:10, David asks that God create a clean heart and a renewed spirit within him. David realized the only way forward was through repentance and God's spiritual renewal. Just as David learned this, we too must evaluate ourselves and ask why we are in a dark place. Sometimes we don't have the answer to that question, and in turn, it can drive us deeper into the idea that we are beyond change. If the renewal is real, how and where can I find it? David gave us some directions on the answer to that question. He poured his heart out to God, and he acknowledged his own personal downfalls. To renew or restore something, it must first be cleaned up, and then it can be brought back to its former state of beauty. It's never an easy process, but the Creator of the universe says you are worth it. Go to God, share your heart, and ask that He renew you from within. When others see you, there will be no question for them but to say that you have been with God. Remember, it's about progress, not perfection.

APPLICATION: Are you allowing yourself to wear the mask of denial and say I'm good when God says, *Let Me renew you from the inside out?* Have you allowed yourself to be comfortable where you are? Allow yourself to embrace that God loves you where you are, but He also loves you too much to leave you there! Get connected and let the Spirit begin to grow amazing things within you by renewing what is broken.

PRAYER: Father, create in me a clean heart, renew Your spirit within me and shine Your light of direction into my life. Reveal to me the community You have for me that will guide me into growing into who You have planned me to be for Your glory. Amen.

NINETY-NINE AND THE ONE

So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!

2 Corinthians 5:16-17 (NLT)

Do you remember playing a game either at school or in the neighborhood? We would line up in the hopes of being chosen for a team. Most of the time, the ones chosen first were based on their abilities to perform in whatever game is being played. I can remember being the one waiting to be chosen, pick after pick, I saw others chosen until, most of the time, I was chosen last because I was all that was left. I was the smallest, least sports-inclined, but I knew the sport being played, and I was not taught how to carry it out because of my appearance. Maybe you're reading this and say *yes, I was that kid chosen last, or I was that kid making assumptions about another.*

As we look at today's Scripture, let's meditate on how our view of others and their abilities can help aid in our spiritual renewal or hold us back from the growth God has intended for us. God used the most unlikely people in the Old Testament to carry out His plan and grow that individual spiritually through it. David took down Goliath (thought to be too small), Noah built the ark (thought to be out of his mind), Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt (a murderer and a rebel), the list goes on and on. Is the ninety-nine defining how God can use you or how He can grow you? Take a stand today and say, *God, renew me and use me wherever You lead. God, I want to be the one. Here I am!*

APPLICATION: What in your past is holding you back from allowing God to renew you? Make that list and pray that healing can begin. Replace that lie with a truth you know God says about you today. Others may try to define you, but only God can refine you!

PRAYER: Father, I want You to renew me from within, begin with my mind and how I view others today. Reveal to me those I need to forgive so I can truly experience the renewal You desire for me. Amen.

TAKING ATTENDANCE

Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NLT)

Being seen by someone and aware of their absence has such an amazing impact on one's life. Remember back in school when the teacher took the role, your name was called, and you spoke up with a response *here* or *present*. Looking back, it encourages me to know that most of the time, someone spoke up in my absence to say, for example, *Billy is not here today*. The sheer fact that someone noticed speaks volumes for some. I've been told many times *God sees you*, and that's for sure encouraging. But my question has always been, does anyone around me see me? Are they aware of my condition in life, whether it's good, bad or indifferent? And then there's the comment that's easy to say; *no one noticed my absence from the last two Sundays at church, so I'm not going back!* I've made that comment many times early in my own walk with Jesus, and even when attending church as an adult.

That was until someone asked me a very challenging question. What does your community look like? Are you part of a community group, a small group, or do you attend any events at the church? How can you expect to be noticed when you make every effort to hide and go unnoticed? Wow, what a set of questions, what a challenge. My personal experience proved those questions true; I put myself out there, and here I am, many years later, part of such a strong community. They notice my absence; they're aware when I'm upset, mad, happy or even hurt. Having a community is beneficial for being renewed by God daily through relationships. If you want to change, you must make a move. If nothing changes, then nothing changes.

APPLICATION: As you look around in your life, especially here at church, are you part of a community? Are you a key part of someone else's community? Commit to starting small, engage with two or three people, and let them introduce you to others. Before you realize it, you'll be part of a bigger community. That's where you can begin to see what renewal looks like because you now have many examples.

PRAYER: Jesus, I allow myself to get comfortable sometimes with being isolated from others. Let me not forget the importance of allowing others into my life and of stepping out and being that person for someone else. Thank You for being like that in my life. Amen

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (NLT)

As a kid, one of the most incredible things about Saturdays was cartoons. One of my favorites, and still today, is *Transformers*. Automobiles that transform into robots. They looked one way externally but were something else internally. As I thought about this, it brought Romans 12:2 into clearer view for me. Spiritual renewal begins within our minds. I have at times allowed my actions not to match what I know to be true internally, essentially allowing myself to say I'm Holy Spirit Jr., looking one way on the outside but being another way inside or vice versa. I've met many believers who may not have looked spiritually well on the outside from my limited perspective, but had an amazing walk with God.

Spiritual renewal is allowing God, through the Holy Spirit, to change our minds and hearts. To recenter ourselves, putting Jesus in the center of who we are. The caterpillar and the butterfly are a great example, a painful process but a beautiful outcome. Change happens for the caterpillar by embracing the struggles from within the cocoon, allowing God's beauty to be revealed through it. We, too, must embrace our hardships and trust what God is doing. He is renewing His original masterpiece.

APPLICATION: Ask yourself, do I only view myself through the lens of my eyes or through the filter of God's? Sit in silence today for five minutes, asking God to help you view your struggles through a different lens and perspective.

PRAYER: Father, it seems the closer I get to You, the more the struggles intensify. Help me today through Your words and Your Spirit to see just a portion of what You are doing to renew me. Amen.

PROGRESS

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Jesus Christ, is calling us.

Philippians 3:12-14 (NLT)

Spiritual renewal is an ongoing process in life completed only in the presence of Jesus. Paul shares with us in Philippians that he hadn't been perfected, but rather kept running the race set before him. If you've ever run a race either as an adult or a child, you get that it can be exhausting. I'm sure that if I asked, you'd agree that resting before a race is necessary. But during the race, you pace yourself, you stay hydrated, and look ahead to your destination. This is certainly what renewal is like for us. We allow our prayer time to rest us, His Word to sustain us and hydrate our dry and weary bones. We stay in step with the Spirit and look ahead to where we're going. In our journey, we need to keep our eyes on God, even though tough times can set us back and even discourage us. I believe that as God begins and continues the process of renewing us, the parallels with running a race are important to remember.

Who is guiding us to focus more on what's ahead instead of the lost progress of the past? The great news of the past is that it lays a path that we may follow forward if we choose. No race is run perfectly; it comes with highs and lows. God wastes nothing. He is creating a more forward-focused runner, a more conditioned runner and a purpose-driven runner—one who develops spiritual muscle memory that leads us to Jesus.

Always keep in mind why we run the race and where the race ends. The prize isn't some earthly trophy that just gathers dust; it's an eternal prize that will outlast the test of time. A step towards God is the beginning of spiritual renewal, and God will honor that. Two steps back and three steps forward is progress, and progress is what keeps you on track to the end of the race.

APPLICATION: PRAY - READ - RUN - REST - REPEAT!

PRAYER: Lord, life is so draining at times. The race seems long. Renew me so I can finish this race in a way that's pleasing to You. Remind me why I run this race of life, for the heavenly prize that awaits. Eternity with You, Abba. Amen.

MAKE IT SO

And I am sure that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

Philippians 1:6 (NLT)

So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessings if we don't give up.

Galatians 6:9 (NLT)

As we close out this week's readings, let's recap our week on spiritual renewal. First, it's recognizing our need for God and our current condition, our state of mind. I had an outside building that was so cluttered and full of unnecessary things that I wouldn't turn loose of, and it became overwhelming. Until one day, I decided I needed to do something, but where do I begin? It came down to dealing with what was the first thing in front of me, what was blocking me from getting to the other things that needed to be dealt with. We must start somewhere to move forward. That's what repentance is: seeing the thing that's blocking us from God and His plan to renew us and choosing to surrender that to Him. When we do that, God reassures us that He has heard us and sees us. Not just that, but He wants to begin to change us from the inside out, renewing our minds to think and be more like Him.

As He works for us and cleans us up, He gives us a better view of things. Not physically perfected, but making progress. God places others in our path that benefit our walk, but do not hinder it. That's what community is all about: accountability and transparency. We run the race together in community; a race is not to be run alone. That's called isolation; the enemy's greatest tool is to get us alone. Our Scripture today assures us God will keep working on us, keep our eyes on the prize and don't give up. As mentioned earlier this week, the Creator of the universe says you are worth it.

APPLICATION: In your quiet time today, ask God to show what is in your way that's hindering your walk. Ask Him to help you choose to remove that from your life. As the great captain from Star Trek says, *Make it so, Number One.* God, because You are first, please change me.

PRAYER: Father, I choose today to listen to what You have to say to me, give me the desire and strength to get out of the way of what You are doing in my life. Renew my spirit and grow my life here on earth. Amen.

THE BEAUTY OF A TRANSFORMED COMMUNITY

Don't be concerned about the outward beauty of fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God.

1 Peter 3:3-4 (NLT)

When Peter wrote this passage, he wasn't discouraging spending any time or money on our appearance. But instead, he was pointing to a deeper, more powerful type of beauty. That beauty grows and becomes apparent inside a Christ-centered community. In the early church, people were drawn to the way that Christians lived. These people were drawn to a different type of life and love being lived out by early followers of Christ.

The people that we spend time with influence who we become. When we surround ourselves with a community of people who are pursuing Jesus, we begin to take on the qualities of Christ that are magnetic to the people around us. Think for a minute about the people around you who present a strong, quiet spirit who is a fantastic listener, or the calming presence of someone who doesn't need to win every argument, or the strength of a man who just shows up to serve and has an innate sense of responsibility for those around him. These qualities are formed over time, often through encouragement, accountability and shared stories of the family of God.

This transformed way of living becomes its own kind of outreach to people. People notice when a community loves well. They notice when forgiveness is freely and generously given, when humility replaces competition, when joy isn't tied to circumstances, and when courage rises from a deep and abiding sense of faith in Christ. A community that lives this way creates an alternative society that is markedly different from the world around it.

Peter reminds us that the church's impact doesn't begin with strategy but with lives shaped and changed by the Holy Spirit.

APPLICATION: Pay attention today to people whose presence shapes you. What qualities do you absorb from your community? Ask God to form His character in you through the people He has placed around you.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for creating us to grow within a community. Shape my inner life so that it more closely reflects Your character. Help our church become a community whose beauty points people to You. Amen.

A COMMUNITY THAT BUILDS COURAGE

So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

Nehemiah 4:6 (ESV)

The people rebuilding Jerusalem's wall faced constant pressure. They were surrounded by opposition, mocked by enemies, and discouraged by the amount of work that remained. The task was overwhelming, and progress possibly felt slow. Yet Nehemiah records a powerful turning point: the wall reached half its height. It wasn't because the people were exceptionally skilled or fearless, but because they worked together with enthusiasm and saw real progress on their community project.

This verse reveals something important about how God often works. Courage doesn't always come before action; sometimes it grows as people step forward together. When individuals unite around God's purpose, their strength multiplies. What felt impossible alone becomes achievable in community.

The same is true for the church today. Outreach and evangelism can feel intimidating. We worry about saying the wrong thing, or even about doing something that dishonors the name of Jesus. But thankfully, God's mission isn't dependent on us. One of the greatest gifts is having brothers and sisters in Christ to work on this mission together! We should encourage one another, share the work, and remind each other that this mission is the most important.

When believers live in biblical community, courage becomes contagious. One person's faith strengthens another's faith. One story of obedience inspires someone else to take a step forward. Over time, a community shaped by shared purpose becomes visibly different from the world around it.

Nehemiah's builders weren't just working on a wall; they were restoring the identity of the people of God. In the same way, our community shapes how we see ourselves. God did not design us as spectators. He invites us into partnership and participation in His kingdom. As the Holy Spirit forms our community, our shared life becomes a testimony to God's work. People notice when a group of people has a shared purpose and works with enthusiasm, joy and commitment, even when the work is hard.

God advances His purposes through ordinary people who refuse to give up or go it alone.

APPLICATION: Consider where God may be inviting you to step forward alongside others instead of on your own. Ask Him to show you how your participation can strengthen the courage of your community.

PRAYER: Holy Father, thank You for placing me in a community that shares Your mission. Give us the courage to work together with joy and perseverance. Use our shared life to point others to You. Amen.

THE QUIET POWER OF LIVING IN HARMONY

How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!

Psalms 133:1 (NLT)

The psalmist describes harmony here as wonderful and pleasant. When I think of something wonderful and pleasant, I think of a great, home-cooked meal, a beautiful piece of art, or a perfectly designed basketball play. When God's people live in harmony, something beautiful takes shape, something the world can recognize as unique and rare.

The author here isn't mentioning how different brothers might be. I've got two boys, and let me tell you, harmony is rare! Harmony isn't about being the same or agreeing about every little thing. It means choosing relationships, grace and love over things like conflict, taking offense and self-interest. Harmony requires a daily decision to stay committed to one another, even when it would be easier to pull away. That kind of shared life carries quiet power.

In a fractured world, people are looking for places where relationships truly matter and aren't just transactional. Many have grown weary of division, cancel culture and walking away when things get hard. But people truly yearn for a community that lives differently. A community where people listen and value others, and share their lives with one another. Harmony becomes a witness to the world of God's transforming work before a word is even shared about Jesus.

This is how Christian community truly reaches the world. The early church lived differently. Their unity, given by the Holy Spirit, formed a shared identity that challenged the norms of the world in which they lived. That early church was known by its love.

Harmony like this doesn't happen by accident. It is cultivated by people who follow Christ and authentically live out the one another's of Scripture. These people don't get it right every time, but everyone knows and understands that in the community shaped by Christ's love. A church that lives this way becomes a refuge for the people in the surrounding world, pointing towards a different kingdom.

God delights in communities that reflect His heart. When His people live together in harmony, the world catches a glimpse of what a world under the reign of Christ truly looks like.

APPLICATION: Reflect on your role within your community. Where can you pursue harmony today? Is there someone you can forgive or encourage? Ask God to help you contribute to a shared life that reflects His love.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, thank You for calling us into life together. Teach me to pursue harmony with humility and grace. May our community reflect the beauty of Your Kingdom to those around us. Amen.

LOVE IN ACTION

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.
Proverbs 14:31 (NIV)

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.
1 John 3:18 (NIV)

Love is one of the most beautiful words—and one of the easiest to keep abstract. We say God is love. We sing about love. We talk about loving others. But Scripture insists that love is more than what we feel or say; it also involves how we see others and what we do. Jesus never loved from a distance. He touched lepers, noticed the unseen, fed the hungry, and crossed social boundaries to restore dignity. Love, in His hands, always moved toward need.

Mother Teresa famously said, *Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.* Her work in Calcutta focused not on eliminating poverty overnight but on treating each person as infinitely valuable—washing wounds, holding the dying, learning names. Love, for her, was intensely practical and deeply personal. One act of love at a time. Then another. Then another.

That is love in action. Not dramatic. Not efficient. But deeply Christlike.

Putting love in action doesn't always mean solving problems; often it means stepping toward people. It looks like patience when it would be easier to withdraw, generosity when resources feel tight, and forgiveness when resentment feels justified. It is love that costs us something—time, comfort, pride—and gives life to someone else. This sort of love shapes communities, economies, relationships and ultimately the world.

If you want to bring lasting change, here's some direction from Romans 12:9-21:

- Love sincerely.
- Hate what is evil, cling to what is good.
- Honor one another above yourselves.
- Share with those in need.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice.
- Mourn with those who mourn.
- As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

APPLICATION: Look back at that list. What's one way you can put love into action today?

PRAYER: God, You have set the example of what it looks like to put love in action. In Jesus, You didn't love from a distance but entered our world, bearing our burdens and seeking our good. Teach us to love as You love—with courage, compassion and a willingness to give ourselves for the sake of others. Amen.

LOVE GOES

No, O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8 (NLT)

Love isn't a feeling. Love is an action. Think about when you first fell in love with someone, maybe in grade school or later in life. That feeling didn't just make you sit there and think, *Wow, I really like them*. It caused you to float, to pursue, to chase, to talk to them, maybe even stalk them! The point is, when love gets in us, it always moves through us. Simply put, love goes. It moves, it takes on action.

That's why the Bible often speaks of works. It shows that when the love of God is in us, it will move through us. You cannot awaken the love of God without walking it out in the world. Social renewal begins in the quiet places of the heart before it ever reshapes communities, institutions or nations. Scripture reminds us that God's work of renewal is both personal and communal. When God restores individuals, He calls them to become agents of restoration. As Isaiah declares, "...you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in (Isaiah 58:12)"—a calling extended to all who walk faithfully with God.

Imagine if God told us He loved us yet refused to heal anyone, come to earth, answer our prayers, meet our needs, or listen to us. That kind of love is merely emotional, showing no investment—a love that never goes. Yet this is often how we treat God. We say we love Him, but neglect those in the world, rarely share our faith, or help those in need. The love of God sent Him into the world, and having been transformed by Him, His love in us will always send us as well. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and restored dignity to those society discarded, showing that social renewal begins when people are seen not as problems, but as beloved image-bearers of God.

APPLICATION: As we pray for social renewal, may God soften our hearts and sharpen our discernment. May we learn to act justly without losing tenderness, and to love mercy without growing weary. Through compassionate justice, God renews not only societies—but also His people.

PRAYER: God, give us clarity on who and how to show Your love today—through a text, time with the hurting, or serving others. Speak, Lord, and make us faithful to say yes! Amen.

FAVORITISM

*My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? **James 2:1-5 (ESV)***

Do you treat people differently based on what they have or what they can do for you? We don't often talk about it, but favoritism is like carbon monoxide—unseen on the outside yet poisonous, with deadly effects in the church. Favoritism—treating people differently based on appearance, status or advantage—reveals a heart drifting from the values of the kingdom of God.

James gives a clear and powerful example. When a wealthy person enters wearing fine clothes and receives special treatment, while a poor person is dismissed or dishonored, distorted values are exposed, and division is created in the body of Christ. Favoritism may appear subtle or socially acceptable, but Scripture names it as a serious spiritual issue.

At its core, favoritism fails to see people as God sees them. God does not measure worth by income, influence, appearance or success—He looks at the heart. David was overlooked because people looked outward, but God saw his heart. Throughout Scripture, God lifts the humble and cares for the poor, the outsider, and the overlooked. Faith—not status—matters in God's kingdom.

Remember, none of us earned our place with God. We are welcomed by His blood and sacrifice, not by anything we have done. If God placed no conditions on you, how can you put conditions on others?

APPLICATION: This passage invites us to examine our hearts. Do we gravitate toward people who benefit us, while overlooking those who make us uncomfortable or offer nothing in return? James calls us to live our faith with integrity, letting God's love reshape our instincts and priorities.

PRAYER: God, we invite You to search our hearts. Show us how we are treating others. Reveal how deeply You love the people around us, and give us Your heart for the world. Amen.

GOD'S ORIGINAL INTENT – CREATED TO INFLUENCE

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. ..."
Genesis 1:28a (NLT)

Ask a group of young people today what they want to be when they grow up, and you may hear an answer that would have sounded strange just a generation ago: YouTube influencer. Recent surveys report that more than half of Gen Z dreams of building a platform, gaining followers and shaping opinions online. In a world driven by likes, views and subscribers, influence feels like the ultimate goal.

But the call and desire to influence didn't start with social media. It began in Genesis.

Genesis 1:28 is often called the *cultural mandate*. God did not put us here on earth just to have fun and then go to heaven. When He told Adam and Eve to *fill the earth and govern it*, He was inviting them to reflect His character in the world He had made. They were to cultivate, create, lead and care for creation in ways that displayed God's wisdom and goodness. In other words, they were created to be influencers long before platforms, algorithms or screens.

That calling didn't disappear when sin entered the world, though it was deeply distorted. Human culture, our work, families, art, technology and communities, became broken and bent away from God's original design. Yet God never abandoned His intention to work through His people. He continues to place us in specific neighborhoods, workplaces, schools and relationships so His light can be seen there.

Jesus prayed that His followers would not be taken out of the world, even though they don't belong to it (John 17:14-16). He described us as salt and light; ordinary, everyday things that quietly but powerfully shape their surroundings. Salt doesn't draw attention to itself, but it preserves and brings out flavor. Light doesn't argue with darkness; it simply shines.

Most of us won't have thousands of followers or viral videos. But every Christ follower has a sphere of influence. God uses faithfulness in unseen places just as much as public platforms. Whether you're raising children, running a business, caring for patients, creating art, or serving quietly behind the scenes, your life can point others to Christ.

You were created to reflect God's glory right where you are, not to chase attention, but to steward influence with humility and love.

APPLICATION: Ask God to help you see where He has placed you to influence others for His glory today.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for calling me to reflect You in this world. Help me live with faithfulness, humility and love, and use my life to point others to You. Amen.

SALT AND LIGHT IN A CHANGING CULTURE

"You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavor?... It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless. You are the light of the world... Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see..."

Matthew 5:13-16 (NLT)

Years ago, a friend asked me to pray that she could find a new job. She was tired of working at her company and wanted to work for a Christian organization with other strong believers. She was surprised when I told her I'm not sure that's what I should pray for. I asked whether she had considered that the Lord might have placed her exactly where He wanted her to be, not for her comfort, but for influence. That idea seemed to have never crossed her mind. She said it would be much easier to work with a group of Christians. I replied, *Exactly. But where in Scripture does Jesus call us to an easy life?* She was not pleased.

Most of us have heard sermons for years about being salt and light. We know the language. Salt preserves, slows decay and adds flavor. Light reveals truth and pushes back darkness. But exactly how does one do that? Jesus never called His followers to blend into the background. He called us to make a difference in a broken world.

Sadly, Jesus says some disciples will lose their saltiness and become useless. If we talk and act like the world, in person or online, then we can't change the world; the world has changed us. And light that is hidden under a basket might exist, but it helps no one.

Throughout history, some Christians believed being salt and light meant attacking non-Christian culture and condemning people. Many of us have seen a street preacher shouting through a megaphone, holding a sign listing sins, and threatening hell. While these men may be sincere, we need to ask not only whether this is effective but also whether it is what Christ meant by being salt and light.

Jesus was clear. *Let your good deeds shine out for all to see.* Salt and light are not primarily about winning arguments. They are about visible acts of love, kindness, faithfulness, courage and truth in everyday life. That kind of light overcomes darkness.

APPLICATION: Think of one practical good thing you can do today for someone who needs grace more than judgment.

PRAYER: Lord, help me not seek an easy life, but a fruitful one. Give me awareness of all the opportunities around me to shine the light of Jesus in this dark world. Amen.

MY KINGDOM IS NOT OF THIS WORLD

Jesus answered, "My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight... But my Kingdom is not of this world." **John 18:36 (NLT)**

William Wilberforce was a quiet, persistent man, not a revolutionary with an army. As a member of Parliament in 18th-century England, he became convinced that following Christ meant opposing the brutal slave trade that enriched his nation. For decades, he faced ridicule, political defeat and exhaustion. Yet he refused to walk away. Motivated by faith, prayer and moral conviction, Wilberforce worked patiently within his culture until England abolished the slave trade. He did not confuse God's kingdom with political power but allowed God's kingdom to shape how he used influence.

Jesus was not the Messiah the people of Israel expected. They longed for a political and military leader who would overthrow Rome and restore national power. When Jesus spoke of a kingdom, they assumed He meant land, laws and armies. Standing before Pilate, Jesus clarified everything. He was a king, but His kingdom was not of this world, established by force or sustained by human power.

That distinction has always been hard for God's people to hold. Throughout church history, Christians have often been tempted to grasp political power in hopes of producing righteousness. The desire for justice is good, but when the church ties God's kingdom to a nation, party, or ideology, the Gospel becomes distorted. History shows that when the church gains power, it often loses credibility.

Still, Jesus does not call His followers to withdraw from culture. He sends us into the world, just not to rule it the world's way. Like Wilberforce, we are called to influence society through truth, courage, sacrifice and love. We affirm what is good, confront what is evil, and advocate for the flourishing of all people, especially the vulnerable.

Jesus did not come to make any nation *Christian*. He came to form a people from every nation who live under His reign. Cultural influence flows not from force, but from lives transformed by humility, justice and grace.

Tim Keller often noted that Christianity spreads through persuasive truth and visible love, not coercion. The early church had no political power, yet it transformed the world. God can still do that today through ordinary people like us who trust His kingdom more than earthly power.

APPLICATION: Is there someone God may be calling you to stand up for or speak up for? Ask Him for courage rooted in love.

PRAYER: Lord, guard my heart from confusing Your kingdom with earthly power. Transform my life by the humility, truth and love of Christ. Amen.

MAJOR ON THE MAJORS

Again I say, don't get involved in foolish, ignorant arguments that only start fights. A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone, be able to teach, and be patient with difficult people. **2 Timothy 2:23-24 (NLT)**

Ever encountered someone who must be right about everything? They carry strong opinions on every topic and are always ready to debate. If you disagree with them, you are either uninformed, stupid, or you have questionable motives. Theology, politics, COVID, Sam's versus Costco, diet choices. Their view is correct, and everyone else is wrong.

Our culture feels constantly angry, especially online. Sadly, Christians are not immune. We can be drawn into arguments that heat up quickly and produce little fruit. Paul's warning to Timothy feels current. The servant of the Lord is not called to win arguments but to reflect Christ.

Throughout Scripture, God calls His people to exercise wisdom and discernment about theological and ethical matters; in other words, to do theological triage. Like a doctor on a battlefield, we need to discern or triage the issues. Not all matters carry the same weight. In the Old Testament, idolatry was a first-rank offense that brought judgment and exile.

By contrast, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for *majoring on minors*, meticulously tithing herbs and enforcing Sabbath traditions while neglecting the *weightier matters* of justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

The apostle Paul told the Galatians that distorting the gospel of grace was a first-rank issue, a matter worth dividing over. Yet in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, he described disputes about food, holy days and personal convictions as *disputable matters*. Believers could agree to disagree in love. Paul went even further, warning Timothy and Titus to avoid foolish controversies altogether, arguments that were not worth the time or damage they caused.

The message is clear. Not every disagreement deserves our energy. Not every opinion requires a response. God calls His people to protect the Gospel, pursue holiness, and practice love.

To major on the majors and minor on the minors means knowing what is essential, holding it firmly, and handling everything else with humility and grace.

APPLICATION: Before engaging in a debate this week, ask yourself: Is this central to the Gospel? Will this conversation build faith, unity and love? Choose kindness over quarrels, clarity over noise, and Christlikeness over being right.

PRAYER: Lord, give us discernment to know what truly matters. Guard our hearts from pride and quarrels. Teach us to stand firm in the truth of the Gospel while walking in humility, patience and love. Make us servants who reflect Jesus in both conviction and compassion. Amen.

GENTLE AND RESPECTFUL

Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way.

1 Peter 3:15-16a (NLT)

Years ago at Georgia Tech, I had a good friend named Steve who was a bold witness for Christ. His life had been radically changed, and he wanted the Gospel to shape our campus culture. One afternoon, as I walked out of the library, I saw two Hare Krishnas wearing white robes and shaved heads, handing out literature and trying to convince students that their version of Hinduism was the way to God.

As I got closer, I noticed Steve locked in a debate with them, confidently sharing the Gospel. A few minutes later, the conversation ended. Steve joined Bobby, another close friend from church, and me as we walked several blocks back to the dorm.

Steve was fired up. He told us how he smoked those two guys. He said he made it clear their gods were false gods and that Christ alone is the way, the truth, and the life. Unless they repented and trusted Christ, he said, they would burn in hell forever. He explained how he systematically destroyed every argument they raised.

I was impressed and asked him questions as we walked. Bobby said nothing.

When we reached the bottom of the hill in front of the dorm, Steve, still riding the high from the encounter, reminded us that Peter says we should always be ready to explain our hope as Christians. After listening silently for blocks, Bobby finally spoke in a quiet, steady voice. *The end of that verse says to do this in a gentle and respectful way.* Then he turned and walked away.

Steve and I stood there in stunned silence.

Later, Steve said it felt like he had been hit upside the head with a board. All these years later, I have never forgotten Bobby's words. Peter makes it clear that we can fail in two ways. We can stay silent when we should speak, or we can speak boldly without gentleness or respect.

Sadly, I have done both. I have kept quiet when I should have shared Christ or Christian ethics, and at other times I have spoken without showing respect to someone who sees the world differently.

APPLICATION: Ask yourself this question honestly. Would you rather win the argument or give someone a glimpse of the love of Christ?

PRAYER: Lord, give me the grace and humility to speak when I need to speak, and to do so with gentleness and respect. Amen.

MATTHEW'S PARTY

Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. But when the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with such scum?" When Jesus heard this, he said, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do."

Matthew 9:10-12 (NLT)

Influencing the culture is rarely clean or comfortable. A few years ago, some of you may remember when drag queens began volunteering for children's story hour at our local libraries. Many Christians were shocked and outraged. Complaints poured into city council offices, the Library Board of Trustees, and branch managers. Our Five Forks library became ground zero. Protesters showed up on both sides.

Most people were peaceful, but the news footage told a familiar story. Shouting. Anger. Name-calling. Christians and activists yelling past each other. The branch manager was stuck in the middle. It was ugly.

Around that same time, a friend of mine became a new pastor in the Five Forks area. Instead of leading protests, he spent weeks walking into local stores, businesses, and yes, even the library. His goal was simple. Get to know people and let them know the church was there to serve.

When he asked to meet the library manager, the man came out tense and nervous, braced for another confrontation. My friend smiled, shook his hand, thanked him for serving the community, and asked if there was anything he could pray for him personally.

The manager stood there, stunned. That was not what he expected.

The religious leaders in Jesus' day were furious that he spent time with tax collectors, traitors, prostitutes and people they labeled as *scum*. *This man welcomes sinners and eats with them*, they complained. Jesus did not excuse sin or participate in it, but He also did not avoid sinners. He moved toward them.

I have never changed someone's heart by shouting at them. I have never argued anyone into the Kingdom.

This will make some of us uncomfortable, but I wonder how different things might have gone if one angry Christian had put down a protest sign and invited a drag queen to dinner instead.

Jesus said lost people are sick and need a doctor. He is the Great Physician. And I am grateful, because I was once lost and sick with sin myself.

APPLICATION: Be radical. Invite someone far from God over for a *Matthew Party* and treat them like a friend, not a project.

PRAYER: Lord, help me act more like Jesus than a Pharisee when I engage people labeled as sinners. Give me love, courage and humility to share the truth of the Gospel with grace. Amen.

WEEK FIVE • SATURDAY

THE SEARCH FOR COMFORT

He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

2 Corinthians 1:4 (NLT)

Today, let's remember that our truest and deepest comfort comes from God.

One day, I finally came to my senses. I realized I had to stop looking for comfort in the world and find it in Jesus. My way was not working.

We do beneficial things-walking, listening to music, reading, and enjoying nature. All those things are good, but they should not be the ultimate source or the first source of comfort. God's comfort is available to us at any time and through any storm we face. He is comfort. If God really is all-knowing and all-powerful, He will bring good out of the bad, turn graves into gardens and hold you up with His victorious right hand. His comfort is the kind that gives you rest through any storm. The comfort the world offers is superficial and lasts only a little while until you need more. It's not enough to sustain you. He is.

So how do we find our comfort in Christ? There are many ways, but here are a few:

- Realize He will never leave or forsake you.
- Find comforting Bible verses and meditate on them throughout the day.
- Find purpose in the suffering. Believe that He will turn trials into testimonies of His faithfulness.
- Ask God to comfort you.
- Realize that no matter how much we try to hold onto control, there is only One with control. He can be trusted.

In Him, we find comfort in remembering that He is our great Shepherd, protecting us, loving us unconditionally, and guiding us on the right path. The comfort He gives us is unlike the comfort the world can provide. C. S. Lewis said *If I find in myself a desire which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.* I take a few things from that, but one thing is that the deep desire for comfort can only be met by God.

APPLICATION: What areas of your life are you enjoying superficial comfort or no comfort at all? Ask God to fill those areas with true comfort from Him.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, You are the true source of everlasting comfort. In times of hardship, help me to be comforted by You and Your truths in Your Word. Help me not look to this world for things to fill me up, but to seek comfort in You. Amen.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.

2 Peter 3:9 (NLT)

Today, let's remember God's never-ending patience toward us.

Most of the time, I don't want to wait for things. I prefer to get my packages the next day. I prefer not to wait for food, especially when I'm hungry. I fail miserably at this because if He doesn't answer within a few minutes, I'm on to the next thing. As humans, we have to wait on something every day, whether we want to or not. We wait in line at stores, we wait in traffic, and we wait for others to reply to us. Waiting isn't easy when it's something that we want. But the one who is incredibly patient with us sees patience differently than we do.

I learned that patience and waiting are good. They are not easy, but good. They help develop our character, and we learn what's truly in our hearts when we're forced to wait for something. We begin to see God's work in us as we wait for Him to move. We cannot comprehend or understand God's timeline. His patience with us is a true gift. Over 2,000 years ago, Jesus said He would be back soon. *Soon* has been 2,000 years and counting. God is patient because He loves us and wants others to come to know His love and patience. Do you believe that today?

If you haven't surrendered your life to Jesus, God is patiently waiting. He wants you to turn back to Him and become part of His family. If you're in a season of chaos, unforgiveness, anger or any other struggle, God is patient and waiting for you to turn everything over to Him and let go. He will take care of you.

APPLICATION: In what areas of your life do you seem the most impatient? Ask God for patience in those areas and surrender your timeline to His.

PRAYER: Jesus, it's difficult living in a world where we must be patient. But You are always patient. Help me become more like You in this area, and help me realize You always know what's best for me. Help me not see delays as denials but as Your blessing. Amen.

MOMMA, SING ME A SONG

Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who take refuge in him!

Psalm 34:8 (NLT)

Today, let's remember the goodness of God.

God's goodness is part of His nature. He's always good, no matter what happens in this dark world. We sing, pray and tell others about God's goodness, but what about when life isn't going so well? When we lose a loved one, experience illness, or don't get the new job? His goodness is constant and will never change. It's who He is. We see the acts of goodness throughout the gospels as Jesus performed many miracles. He healed the sick, caused the blind to see, cast out demons, calmed storms and more.

I remember last year at Thanksgiving, I asked my mom to sing me a song (I knew she'd say yes!). She started singing the hymn *God is so good... God is so good. He is so good to me.* It was not only the first time I heard her sing, but it really opened my eyes to how good God really is. Even through the trials we'd faced as a family over the last few years, my mom still viewed God as good. Not once did she look at God and think He was bad or out for revenge. My mom realized that God's goodness is who He is and not based on circumstances.

I've personally struggled seeing God's goodness. I couldn't understand why God allowed bad things to happen in my life. I had to realize that goodness flows from God. His character is unchanging. He's the same yesterday, today and forever. His ultimate goodness towards us was sending Jesus to die. His grace is sufficient. His yoke is easy. His burden is light. His goodness is everlasting, His love is enough. His wisdom is pure. He surely is good. Even when prayers go unanswered, He's still good. Even when life feels stressful and out of control, He's still good.

Wake up and taste the goodness of God today. It's life-changing.

APPLICATION: Listen to *King of My Heart* by Bethel Music. Afterwards, write down three or four ways you've seen God's goodness.

PRAYER: Lord, I pray that You'd create in me a confidence that no matter the situation in my life, You are still good. Help me see Your goodness in new and fresh ways and open the eyes of those who have not seen it. Amen.

FAITHFUL THROUGH IT ALL

The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease.

Lamentations 3:22 (NLT)

Today, let's remember God's forever faithfulness.

We serve a faithful God. When I started my faith journey several years ago, I began to see God's faithfulness everywhere. I heard testimonies at Celebrate Recovery. These were testimonies of people who thought they were too far gone and were ashamed to run back to God. I began to see God's faithfulness when I encountered storms in my life, and prayers were answered. I saw God's faithfulness when I prayed for weeks, months and years, and suddenly He came through.

I was listening to a sermon one day, specifically on the subject of worry. He told the story of how he got married and went to seminary school. He took a job pastoring at a small church. The church was about an hour's drive each way. One day, his car broke down. Eventually, the car was fixed, and the cost was more than he could afford. His wife remembered cups of change her grandfather had filled over the years. The change machine at the grocery store revealed they had just the right amount to fix the car. God provided what they needed.

I look back and see that God was faithful each time I thought He wasn't hearing my prayers. He was right there holding my hand as I walked through the valley. He's loyal enough to love us even though we put him on the back burner when things get busy. While writing this, the book of Job came to mind. Job was a prosperous man, wealthy and with a lot going for him. God allowed Satan to destroy Job's children, servants, livestock, herdsman and home, but Job continued to trust God. In the end, God was faithful enough to give Job back twice what he had owned after Job expressed frustration toward Him and asked many questions. Even in that doubt, God remained loyal to His servant, Job. As David Jeremiah wrote, *God is faithful, and that trumps all our problems, years, tragedies and the very prospect of death itself.*

APPLICATION: Think on or write down the times you've either experienced or witnessed God's faithfulness. Encourage someone else by telling them the story.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, create and develop in me a belief that You are always faithful. I believe, but help my unbelief. Help me see Your faithfulness and give me peace in every season. Amen.

COMPASSIONATE BEYOND MEASURE

But you, O Lord, are a God of compassion and mercy, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.

Psalms 86:15 (NLT)

A man with leprosy came and knelt in front of Jesus, begging to be healed. "If you are willing, you can heal me and make me clean," he said. Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out and touched him. "I am willing," he said. "Be healed!"

Mark 1:40-41 (NLT)

Today, let's remember that God is a God of all compassion.

When you think of compassion, you may be thinking about the way you treat your family, friends, strangers or even how someone has treated you. But what comes to mind when you think of God's compassion? You may think of His tenderness, gentleness, care and unfailing love He has shown you. God pays very close attention to our lives and everything in them. Not even a hair on our heads can fall off without Him seeing it (Luke 12:7).

Throughout the gospels, Jesus showed compassion to others on numerous occasions. In the verse above, Jesus was deeply filled with compassion, and He answered the man's requests. Jesus saw a need and met it.

God has deep compassion for our hurts, feelings, setbacks and suffering. He's not standing idle, watching us go through life in pain and doing nothing. Just as an earthly father would, He is quick to come to our side and help us step by step. Think about when you were young and hurt yourself playing outside. Your parents came rushing to your side and cared for you without condition or anger. That's genuine compassion. That's the compassion Jesus modeled.

One moment that comes to mind of God showing His compassion in my life was when I was going through tough seasons of heightened anxiety. It was difficult to function, and I saw no end in sight. I met Jesus during my anxious moments, and I could feel His tender care each day as anxiety began to fade and faith began to grow. I prayed about everything, and He heard my plea for healing and help. I prayed and saw my anxiety slowly start to melt away.

APPLICATION: Ask God to fill your heart with an overflowing amount of compassion. He is compassionate beyond measure.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for the deep compassion You have towards me. As I go forward today, help me show compassion to others and have the strength to do so even if I don't feel like it. Amen.

AN ABUNDANCE OF MERCY

But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. **Ephesians 2:4-6 (NLT)**

May God give you more and more mercy, peace, and love. **Jude 1:2 (NLT)**

Today, let's remember the mercy of God.

God has an abundance of mercy. He's shown His mercy numerous times throughout the Bible. Most importantly, his mercy was shown when He sent His son to die for our sins so we could experience eternity with Him, not only when we die, but now—each day. As broken people who fail to live the way God designed us, the blood of Christ covers our sin and sets us free. Mercy is a characteristic of God that should bring peace and comfort anytime you feel the mistakes are too overwhelming or hope feels too distant. His mercy is enough to overcome the most profound shame, the toughest addiction, or the most painful trials. God's mercy can set you free from hurt and pain you didn't think was possible.

Throughout my own recovery journey and the mistakes and failures I've made, I thought Jesus was out to punish me for everything I had done. There was no way He would have mercy on me. I figured that trying to find forgiveness for what I'd done was something He would hold over my head forever. At the time (and little did I know), He was waiting with open arms for me to come back to Him. He promises that He has removed our sins and forgiven us, so accept that invitation today.

By His mercy, He wipes those mistakes and failures away and sees us as His perfect, beloved children. If I could leave you with one thing about His mercy, it's that you don't have to earn it. You have to accept what was done on the cross. As I've since learned, grace is giving us what we didn't earn, while mercy is Him holding back what we do deserve. Priceless.

APPLICATION: Take a few minutes today to reflect on God's mercies that you've experienced and the sacrifice of His Son.

PRAYER: Jesus, thank You for Your new mercies each day. Thank You for sending Your Son to die so I can experience eternity with You. When I forget or feel like I don't deserve Your mercy, remind me that I don't deserve it, and that's why mercy is so good. Amen.

THE HIGH COST OF NOW

"The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons."

Luke 15:12 (NLT)

Luke 15:11-32, usually referred to as the story of *The Prodigal Son*, includes a younger son, an older son, and their father. The tragedy of the younger son began long before he got into trouble; it started with a single word: *Now*. In the ancient world, asking for an inheritance while the father was still alive was essentially saying, *I wish you were dead*. The son wanted the father's provision, but he didn't want the father's presence.

The High Cost of Now is the steep price we pay when we prioritize immediate gratification over long-term maturity. I've seen this in my own life—maybe you've detected this impulse in your own life as well. We live in a culture of *now*—instant streaming, instant credit and instant results. But in the Kingdom of God, fruit takes time to grow. When we demand God's blessings before we have the character to handle them, those blessings have the power to destroy us.

Essentially, the son wasn't ready to handle the money well because he bypassed the years of wisdom he would have gained by spending time with his dad. Unfortunately, his wealth didn't build a future; it fueled a collapse. We often pray for breakthroughs and open doors, but sometimes God's *not yet* is His greatest mercy. He knows that if He gives us the estate today, we might lose our souls tomorrow.

Following God requires the discipline of waiting. It means trusting that God's timing is better than our urgency. When we try to rush God, we usually end up wasting the very things He wants to give us.

APPLICATION: Think of one prayer request that feels delayed or a goal you're tempted to take a shortcut to reach. Ask yourself, *Am I more in love with the blessing or am I seeking the God who provides it?* This week, practice waiting by choosing to thank God for His timing rather than pressuring Him for an immediate result.

PRAYER: Father, forgive me for my impatience and for the times I've wanted Your gifts more than the gift of knowing You. I trust that You not giving me what I want when I want it is usually for my protection and growth. Give me the grace to stay close to You today, knowing that being with You is what I need most. Amen.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE PIGPEN

“A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him.”

Luke 15:13-16a (NLT)

The distant country always promises freedom, but it eventually delivers a fence. For the younger son, that fence circled a pigpen. In Jewish culture, pigs were the ultimate symbol of uncleanness. For the younger son, the pigpen became not only a place of poverty, but a place of utter spiritual and relational bankruptcy.

The good news is that the Theology of the Pigpen teaches us a startling truth: The bottom is often the only place where the view of home becomes clear.

Desperation has a way of stripping us bare. As long as the son had a few coins left, he could pretend he was in control. As long as he had friends at the bar, he could ignore the hollow ache in his chest. It was only when the music stopped and the hunger set in that he came to his senses. We often view our lowest points as signs of God’s abandonment, but in reality, the pigpen is frequently the site of God’s most intense pursuit. It is the place where our pride finally runs out of fuel.

The theology of the pigpen isn’t about the filth; it’s the realization of being far from God. He doesn’t wait for us to clean up before He starts drawing us back; He uses the very stench of our failure to remind us of the fragrance of home. If you feel like you’re sitting in the mud today, take heart—the pigpen isn’t your destination; it’s your wake-up call.

APPLICATION: Identify the hunger in your life that you’ve been trying to satisfy with things that don’t last, and name it honestly before God. Instead of hiding your mess, use this low point as a pivot point to turn your face back toward the Father’s open arms.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You that no matter how far I wander, You never stop looking for me or leave me in the mud. Give me the courage to stop hiding my failures and instead use them to direct me back to You. Help me believe that Your grace is deeper than my deepest pit. Amen.

THE RUNNING FATHER

"I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.' "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him." **Luke 15:18-20 (NLT)**

Everyone has their own spiritual journey. And along the journey, we all need different things at different times. I've often been asked, *Do we pursue God, or does He pursue us?* The short answer is yes. Scripture tells stories of both—us running to God and God running to us.

Sometime last year, a woman approached me after a worship service. Her head was lowered, her shoulders slumped, and tears bore the weight of her loneliness and distress. Shaking a bit, she finally put into words what she was feeling. She mentioned a death in the family and being very lost and confused. What struck me most was how she ended the story, *No one understands, and I feel so alone.* I could have responded in many ways. I could have told her to read her Bible and pray more. I could have given her the name of a good counselor. I could have told her about an upcoming class on grief. Sometime down the road, those may have been helpful steps. But what she needed in that moment was to know that God had been running after her. I asked her if she'd like to meet the One who would hold her and never let her go. Her head lifted a little. And after a moment of silence, I led her in prayer. That day, she said yes to Jesus.

God calls us to pursue Him—to do part of the running. But during this part of the young woman's journey, she needed to know that God was pursuing her. That He was already running toward her with open arms.

APPLICATION: Run home to God today. Bring Him all your thoughts and the desires of your heart. Tell Him about the burdens you've been carrying and let Him care for you.

PRAYER: God, You are my dwelling place. Before I even arrive, You have already made room. Thank You that with You I have nothing to hide and nothing to prove. Today, I come running home to You, remembering that You have already been running to me. I'm grateful beyond words. Amen.

THE PRODIGAL AT HOME

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'" "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him..."

Luke 15:25-28 (NLT)

We often define *prodigal* by the distance traveled, but the heart can wander miles away while the body never leaves the front porch. The older brother is the prodigal at home. He stayed in the house, kept the rules, and maintained the family business, yet he was a stranger to his father. Filled with resentment, he lived like a victim.

Being a prodigal at home is a subtle danger for those of us who have done everything right. We show up to church, we volunteer, and we avoid the big sins. But over time, our devotion can turn into a transaction. We start to believe that because we stayed, God owes us.

I've experienced this in my own journey. After years of destructive decisions and a life far from God, I came running home. I began doing good things. Unfortunately, I slowly became the older son, filled with pride and entitlement.

The Father doesn't just want your obedience; He wants an intimate relationship. If you find yourself bitter, judgmental, or feeling like God is a demanding boss rather than a loving Father, you might be a prodigal at home. The invitation is the same for you as it was for the older son: stop looking at your performance and start looking at the Father who loves you.

APPLICATION: Examine your heart for any bitterness—the feeling that God owes you because you have sinned less than other people. This week, do one act of service that no one will see, doing it only to enjoy being close to the Father rather than trying to feel good about yourself.

PRAYER: Father, forgive me for the times I've stood in Your house but lived like an orphan. Help me not compare myself to others or rely on my own goodness to earn your love. Amen.

THE SLAVING SYNDROME

“but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’” *“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.’”*

Luke 15:29-31 (NLT)

If serving God and loving others feels more like a chore rather than a privilege, you might be living like a slave. The older brother might be the most tragic figure in Jesus’ parable because he was lost while standing in his own backyard. He didn’t squander his inheritance on wild living; he stayed. He worked. He obeyed. For him, the problem was that he didn’t see himself as a son—he saw himself as a slave.

The *Slaving Syndrome* occurs when our relationship with God shifts from delight to debt. It’s the subtle belief that our relationship with the Father is earned by doing good things rather than by simply receiving His love. To a slave, a father’s house is a workplace; to a son, it’s a home. Because the older brother viewed his relationship through the lens of performance, he couldn’t celebrate when his brother came home. After all, his brother had done some really bad stuff!

The Father’s response is one of the most tender lines in Scripture: *My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours* (verse 31 from the NIV). The cure for the *Slaving Syndrome* is remembering that we don’t work *for* God’s love; we work *from* it. You aren’t an employee trying to earn a bonus; you are an heir invited to a feast.

APPLICATION: Identify one area of your life where service feels like a heavy obligation, and consciously shift your focus from completing a task to spending time with the Father. Ask God to help you trade the exhausting mindset of a hired hand for the secure confidence of a beloved child.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for being a Dad who wants me no matter what I’ve done, good or bad. Soften my heart today, wash away my resentment toward You and others, and help me rest in the truth that I am already fully loved by You. Amen.

THE PARTY IS THE POINT!

"But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began."

Luke 15:22-24 (NLT)

Many of us grew up with a version of Christianity that feels more like a funeral than a festival. We focus so heavily on the repentance part of the story—the sorrow, the mud and the confession—that we overlook where the whole thing is headed. The climax isn't a lecture or self-loathing, it's a party!

When the father sees his son, he doesn't take him to court. He doesn't tell everyone in the village how bad his son is. Instead, he honored him (a ring and sandals were often reserved for people of high status). A radical truth is that the heart of the father is fueled by joy. God isn't a judge who can't wait to shame us; He is a joyful host who has been waiting for an excuse to throw a banquet!

Salvation isn't just about confessing sin (though it does include that). It's about being fully alive and feeling the joy of the Father. If our faith doesn't eventually lead us to music and dancing, we've missed what God is really after. But when we realize that the party is the point, it changes how we view the Christian life and how we feel each day. The only question is whether we are willing to put on the party clothes and join the dance.

APPLICATION: Identify one way you can celebrate God's goodness this week that feels extravagant. Stop treating your faith like a chore and start treating it like an invitation to a feast.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You that the end of my story isn't a pigpen, but a party. Forgive me for being so serious and somber that I forget to celebrate the miracle of salvation and Your love. Teach me how to dance in Your presence and be a person who invites others into the joy of being found. Amen.

REMEMBER ME

One of the criminals hanging beside him scoffed, "So you're the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you're at it!" But the other criminal protested, "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Luke 23:39-43 (NLT)

It's interesting how people can have different perspectives on the same situation. The words expressed by the two criminals crucified beside Jesus give insight into how they experienced life in the face of death.

One of the criminals appeared angry and abusive as he taunted Jesus with disrespect. Those in difficult circumstances sometimes put down others to feel better about their own situation. It's almost always ineffective.

The other criminal saw what was happening in a different light.

First, he recognized he answered to God as he admitted he deserved to die for his crimes. He took responsibility for the consequences he was facing.

Second, he declared Jesus had done nothing wrong. It's possible he witnessed the makeshift trial where Jesus was sentenced to death, and might've heard Pilate say to the crowd, *What crime has he committed?* Though likely referring to the fact that Jesus committed no crime, the criminal rightly spoke of Jesus as an innocent man who never sinned.

Third, the criminal recognized his chance for life was in the hands of Jesus. The crowd and the other criminal viewed Jesus as just a man dying on a cross. But this criminal viewed Jesus as a King who was his only source of rescue. He acknowledged Jesus as King and trusted Jesus as the One who could save his life.

What did the criminal gain from this perspective? The immediate benefit of peace and a positive attitude from trusting his life to Jesus. The long-term benefit was that Jesus granted the criminal a place alongside Him in paradise that very day.

How did this criminal, turned child of God, gain this perspective of Jesus? I suggest the same answer Jesus gave to Simon Peter in Matthew 16:17, *"For this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."* I pray we listen to the Spirit of God today so we may experience life from His perspective.

APPLICATION: Ask God to give you His perspective on the situations you face today.

PRAYER: Father, please give me Your eyes to see life from Your perspective today. Amen.

WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him." "Mary!" Jesus said. She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher").

John 20:14-16 (NLT)

In John 20, we see that Mary Magdalene went to Jesus's tomb to pay her respects. However, when she arrived at the tomb, the body of Jesus was no longer there. I can only imagine how she may have felt. On top of the pain of witnessing the death of her friend and mentor, who showed her such unconditional love, she was now discovering that the body of Jesus was no longer there—had someone stolen the body of Jesus and taken Him away? How would she be able to show care for His body? Why was this terrible act of disrespect added to the travesty of taking the life of Jesus?

Mary saw that the body of Jesus was missing, and her sorrow was magnified. But she didn't see the full truth of the situation until she recognized the voice of Jesus speaking directly to her. Though she was seeking Jesus, she was overwhelmed by her circumstances and found it difficult to recognize the voice of Jesus. When she heard Jesus, she experienced the relief and joy that came with recognizing His presence.

The daily challenges of life can seem overwhelming. The weight of those challenges can be magnified when compounded by a crisis. But when we search for the words of Jesus to speak to our situation, we can find peace in knowing that He is with us, He sees us, and He can guide us through this day.

APPLICATION: Ask Jesus how He feels about you and write down the thoughts that come to your mind. Read Psalm 139:1-18 and write the verse that stands out to you.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for being with me today. Remind me of Your presence as we walk through this day together. Amen.

HE IS HERE

And just as they were telling about it, Jesus himself was suddenly standing there among them. "Peace be with you," he said. But the whole group was startled and frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost! "Why are you frightened?" he asked. "Why are your hearts filled with doubt? Look at my hands. Look at my feet. You can see that it's really me. Touch me and make sure that I am not a ghost, because ghosts don't have bodies, as you see that I do." As he spoke, he showed them his hands and his feet.

Luke 24:36-40 (NLT)

After Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus. After this encounter with the risen Jesus, those two followers went back to Jerusalem to share their experience with the eleven remaining apostles of Jesus. Suddenly, Jesus appeared and began saying the words in this passage.

Just as Jesus was eager to reveal Himself to His disciples, He is also eager to make His thoughts known to us. When we read what Jesus says in the Bible and ask Him what He wants us to know, we can often receive His truth. But sometimes it's challenging to hear Him on our own. Years ago, a friend and I began reading a chapter a day in the Bible and writing down a verse that was significant to us. We would meet once a week to share the verses we chose and what we felt God was saying. Though my friend had never read through the Bible, he shared insights that seemed to come from the Spirit of God. As we shared the verses and thoughts we sensed from God, it was like Jesus was right there with us, because the things we were saying didn't sound like something we would come up with on our own.

Getting together with others who are seeking to know Jesus better can help us receive a message from Jesus, even when it's tough to recognize His presence on our own.

"For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Matthew 18:20 (NIV)

APPLICATION: Ask Jesus what He may be saying to you. Get together with someone who's also seeking Him to see what Jesus has revealed to each of you. You might find the Spirit of Jesus there.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for putting Your Spirit inside those who trust their lives to Your Son. Please reveal to me what You want me to know today and show me who I can partner with to know You better. Amen.

OPEN MY MIND

Then he said, "When I was with you before, I told you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and in the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said, "Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' You are witnesses of all these things."

Luke 24:44-48 (NLT)

After He had risen from the dead, Jesus reminded His disciples of statements He had made before He sacrificed Himself on the cross. He affirmed the sacredness of the Old Testament Scriptures, referring to the law of Moses (the first five books of the Bible), as well as the prophets and the Psalms (the rest of the Old Testament books). He helped them see that the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament prophesied many years earlier about specific aspects of the Messiah that were fulfilled in the life of Jesus. One of those key elements was the fact that the Messiah would suffer and die for our sins, then rise from the dead on the third day. Some of these prophecies can be found in Hosea 6:2, Psalm 16:10, and Isaiah 53:6. Jesus helped them understand that His death and resurrection made forgiveness for sins available to all who would repent.

Why didn't the disciples understand these truths before Jesus explained them? I realize I often don't recognize or understand obvious things around me unless someone points them out. I remember an instance when I was sitting on the couch watching a football game when my wife walked by, asked if I wanted some cookies, baked them in the kitchen, then served them to me on a tray. It wasn't until she said, *Look at me*, that I realized she had been wearing a ski mask during that whole process.

The Spirit of Jesus is available to speak to us today. As we read Scripture, His Spirit wants to reveal the life-giving truth Jesus wants us to see.

APPLICATION: As you read portions of the Bible, ask God's Spirit to reveal what He wants you to know.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for giving us Your thoughts through the Bible. Please reveal what You want me to see and help me understand what You're saying. Amen.

DO YOU BELIEVE?

Eight days later, the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. "Peace be with you," he said. Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!" "My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed. Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me." **John 20:26-29 (NLT)**

Thomas was a follower of Jesus who was not present with Jesus' disciples when He first revealed Himself after He had risen from the dead. Thomas witnessed Jesus' crucifixion, but he had not seen Jesus alive until this encounter described by John. It's understandable that Thomas was having a hard time believing that Jesus had actually risen from the dead.

Sometimes it can be challenging to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is truly alive today when we can't see Him physically. I didn't see Jesus die with my own eyes, and I didn't see Him physically walking around after He was dead for a few days. Just as Jesus recognized the doubt Thomas was feeling, He also recognizes the difficulty we have with believing something we cannot physically see.

Jesus wasn't disturbed by the questions Thomas had. He invited Thomas to examine and touch the wounds in Jesus' hands and side, encouraging Thomas to physically see that Jesus was alive. Though Jesus affirms the blessing we experience when we trust in Him with childlike faith, He also welcomes our exploration of the evidence of His reality.

The prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, the many eyewitnesses who saw Jesus die and be raised from the dead, the changed lives of those who saw Jesus alive, and a wealth of other evidence strengthen our faith that Jesus is truly the Son of God.

Do you believe that Jesus is raised from the dead and alive today? Why?

APPLICATION: If you or someone you know has questions about the reality of Jesus' resurrection, follow Thomas' example and explore the evidence. Books like *More Than a Carpenter* or *The Case for Christ* can be a great start.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for understanding any doubts I have about You. Strengthen my trust in You and show me evidence that reassures me of Your resurrection and reality. Amen.

HE WAS SEEN

He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him.

1 Corinthians 15:4-8 (NLT)

This passage is from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus who lived in the town of Corinth. Paul was affirming a foundational fact of our faith: that Jesus died for our sins, was buried and was raised from the dead on the third day, fulfilling the prophecies of Scripture written hundreds of years earlier. It appears Paul recognized it was an outrageous claim to say that someone had been raised from the dead after being buried for three days. So he referred to key people who had seen Jesus alive after seeing him die. These people, including Paul, were eyewitnesses who were still alive at the time he wrote this letter. In other words, Paul was saying that if you don't believe me, there are more than 500 people you can interview to hear eyewitness accounts that Jesus was alive after He died.

Many times, a criminal is convicted in court based on the eyewitness testimony of two or three people. If I didn't see something for myself, I could be convinced of the reality of an event if someone I trust shares what they saw with their own eyes. Jesus was seen alive by more than 500 people whose lives were changed by what they saw.

Though we likely haven't seen a physical appearance of Jesus, we can still see the evidence of His effect on the lives of people around us. My faith in Jesus grows stronger as I hear the ways people have experienced Jesus. Consider the ways Jesus has revealed Himself to you through His Word or through others.

APPLICATION: How have you seen or experienced the presence of Jesus? If you're unsure, find someone you can ask that question.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for providing eyewitness evidence to the resurrection of Jesus. Help me notice how Jesus is working around me, or lead me to someone who can share their Jesus experience with me. Amen.

FAMILY BEYOND DISTANCE

Written by Cesar Ausejo
Brookwood Missionary Partner in Peru

“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”
Matthew 12:50 (NIV)

When we think of family, we often picture the people living under our roof—those we see every day at the table, on busy mornings, or during long evenings. But in the Kingdom of God, *family* stretches far beyond blood and geography. It is a family built by grace, carried by the Spirit, and united under Christ.

When you come on a mission trip, it’s not just travel—it is a *family reunion*. You step into homes, churches, mountains, jungles, laughter, need, worship and work. You meet relatives you’ve never seen before, yet somehow, your heart knows them. You recognize them instantly—not by last name, but by love. That is the miracle of the Body of Christ.

Here in Lima, I have the privilege of being the host of that reunion. Like preparing a family gathering, I cook the meal, open the doors, arrange the chairs, and create a space where long-distance relatives can meet one another. When you come, I watch strangers embrace like cousins who have only been apart for a season. Together we share stories, serve, pray and realize that our family is much bigger than we ever imagined.

And when family gathers—the Kingdom advances.

This Christmas, our family will grow a little more. We’re preparing a celebration for 150 children in the highlands of Lima, giving them both Christmas gifts *and* school supplies as the Peruvian school year begins in March. We’re also joining Huellitas in the jungle for their Christmas outreach in mid-December—sharing joy, hope, prayer and the love of Jesus where it is needed most. Thank you for praying, giving, sending and standing with us. When you support us, you’re not funding a family only—you’re adding chairs to the family table. None of this is possible without you. Let’s keep building the Kingdom—together.

APPLICATION: Pray for our mission in Peru. Pray for many to be saved.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You that You are a God of family. That You not only save us, but You join us together as friends and kingdom-builders in the greatest story ever written. Help me see the world through Your eyes and give me a heart for the many children of Yours, most of whom I’ve never met. Amen.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Written by Alex and Jeremiah Klinec
Brookwood Missionary Partners in Budapest

He says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

Isaiah 49:6 (NIV)

For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

Acts 13:47 (NIV)

Isaiah 49 reveals the Father's purpose for the Son: to gather Israel and be a light to the Gentiles. In Acts 13:47, Paul applies this calling to himself. We find this metaphor compelling and convicting because we clearly saw light and darkness at a recent outreach event in our neighborhood here in Budapest, Hungary.

Although Hungary is a historically Catholic nation, we find that the average Hungarian is truly living in darkness. In a literal sense, this looks like the adoption of American traditions, such as Halloween, with a really dark, scary feel. Catholic Hungarians have celebrated All Saints Day for a millennium, but Halloween has only recently become popular as the internet connects cultures around the world. For the fourth year, we partnered with neighbors for our annual Halloween event, offering family-friendly carnival games, cookies, apple juice, and *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown!* instead of frightening decorations.

Hungarians tend to be reserved, leaving few chances to form new relationships. By hosting a trick-or-treat station, we opened our yard and porch to neighbors, creating conversations, building relationships and hearing repeatedly that people felt genuinely welcome. One of our volunteers told us that he had never seen Hungarians so open to having conversations about deeper topics. We were able to hand out *The Pumpkin Gospel* (A Sütőtök Evangéliuma) tracts to 150 people. In a maze of 30 trick-or-treating stations in our neighborhood, our home was a place of joy and light for everyone walking by.

APPLICATION: Are you showcasing God's light to those around you, or are you *hiding it under a bushel*, as the old children's song says? The Bible teaches us that God has put His light in our hearts. Let's let it shine!

PRAYER: Dear Father, we confess that sometimes we try to hide the light You have placed in our hearts. We ask that You give us more opportunities to share Your light with others. May our homes, workplaces, cars and gathering places be spots of Your light and love for others. Amen.

CHILDLIKE TRUST

Written by Alex and Jeremiah Klinect
Brookwood Missionary Partners in Budapest

because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

James 1:3 (NIV)

In the summer of 2021, we were in limbo. We bought plane tickets to move to Hungary for mission work, but had to postpone the move. At first, we had no idea how long the delay would last. We owned very little, unsure where we would live or what the coming weeks held. We also faced a medical issue without insurance and, needing negative COVID tests to enter Hungary, were cautious about gathering with others. What made this time even more difficult was caring for our two-year-old son. He didn't understand what was going on, and he couldn't verbalize much. We often felt worried. *Were we doing the right thing?*

Yet, every day, our blonde-curly-haired toddler trusted us. He adored us. He was excited about being with us, no matter where we went. Our son knew he could trust us because we provided him with safety and security. He never complained (except for the occasional tantrum because he was, after all, two years old).

Throughout our summer of limbo, we developed the very same attitude towards God. God has always, always, always provided. We always had a place to live, food, clothes, medication and community. We knew we could trust Him no matter what came our way.

On September 6, 2021, the day before our rescheduled flight to Budapest, we received negative COVID tests and a police exemption letter permitting entry. Though our season of limbo ended, our journey of trusting God continued. We are now in a far more stable season. We have a wonderful home, supportive landlords, and growing long-term relationships in Hungary. Partnering with two local churches, we invest in ministry locally and regionally. Still, we are deeply grateful for our time in limbo—God's kindness shaped us and helped us grow.

APPLICATION: Think about ways God has taken care of you. Who can you encourage today with your trust in God's provision?

PRAYER: Dear Father, we are blessed beyond measure because of Your great love for us. You continue to provide for all our needs. Thank You for Your extravagant grace that carries us through difficult times and brings us to the other side so we can encourage others. Amen.

ABIDING IN CHRIST

Written by Amy and Patrick Nave
Brookwood Missionary Partners in Fairbanks, Alaska

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” **John 15:4-5 (NIV)**

The word *abide* means to dwell or remain, or to continue in a particular state or relationship. Often, abide signifies endurance or steadfastness. Abiding in Christ is the central theme in John 15:1-11. So much so that John uses the word *abide* ten times in eleven verses to point out how meaningful our relationships are to walking with God. We see in this passage that abiding is so much of our daily walk. Abiding is walking daily in a personal relationship with Jesus, characterized by trust, obedience, prayer, and joy. As believers, we must daily strive to walk as close to Jesus as possible, such that if we leave one of these out, our walk will suffer. Also, the ability to bear fruit is dependent upon our walk with Him. We must be abiding in Him for us to produce fruit, but bearing fruit actually does not depend on us at all. Throughout Scripture, we see His power at work in us when we are walking with Him.

I have had a season of walking with my joy incomplete because I have not fully trusted God. Trying to do things on my own or solve problems without going to God first robbed me of what I know Jesus has for me. Often, we listen to the enemy rather than to the word, leaving us feeling empty. As believers, we should listen only to one voice: Jesus, and Him alone. This takes a daily walk with Him and a desire to grow in Him. His Grace is always there for us, and we have that promise as we walk with him.

APPLICATION: Reflect on your daily walk. Are you abiding in His fullness according to His word? Is there complete trust, complete obedience, complete joy? Is your prayer life strengthening these areas, or are these areas lacking?

PRAYER: Father, lead me to abide in You every day. Help me to trust in Your ways, give You my complete obedience, and seek Your provisions for my heart. Give me the desire to talk to You every day in prayer. Help me to give You praise and honor because You are worthy. Amen

WATER FOR THE THIRSTY

Written by one of our missionary partners in India.

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

John 7:37-38 (NIV)

When I first arrived in the villages where God called me to serve, the earth itself told the story—dry, cracked soil and people accustomed to walking miles for muddy water. Each summer, the wells failed, children grew sick, and survival meant endurance. An elderly woman once told me she could live without food at times, but never without water. Her words stayed with me like an echo in prayer. That night, reading Jesus' invitation, *If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me*, I realized He was speaking of more than physical need. The Lord began to burden my heart both for the dry ground and the dry hearts of this village.

We prayed for months for God to provide clean water. When the first bore well burst forth, people shouted, laughed, and cried. One woman knelt, lifted the cool water, and said, *This is life!* I whispered, *Yes... and there is another water that never runs dry.* That day, under a neem tree, we shared about the Living Water—Jesus—and many believed.

Since that first well, the Lord has helped us dig many more in nearby villages. Each provides clean water and a place for the Gospel. Every pump handle feels like God's heartbeat. Men who once worshiped idols now worship the living God, and women come with pots and leave with peace. God's miracles often begin with simple obedience, meeting earthly needs while revealing heavenly truth—physical water satisfies for a moment, but Living Water transforms eternity.

APPLICATION: People everywhere are thirsty—for hope, love, peace or meaning. God may use you to quench that thirst with food, water or prayer. But point them to Jesus, the true source. Ask Him to make you a well of Living Water, flowing through kindness, generosity and bold Gospel sharing.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for being the Living Water that satisfies my soul. Help me remember those still far from You. Use my life to refresh the weary, give hope to the hopeless, and let Your Spirit flow through me like a river, turning dry places into streams of life that glorify Your name. Amen.

CARRIERS OF THE GOSPEL LIGHT

Written by one of our missionary partners in India.

"I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness."
John 12:46 (NIV)

I still remember my first visit to a village that had never heard Jesus' name. Deep in the forest, surrounded by mountains, people lived without electricity, roads or hope. We walked for hours, carrying a few Bibles, tracts and rice packets. When I asked an elder, *Do you know Jesus?* He looked at me blankly and asked, *Is He from another village?* That night, by a small fire, I felt the weight of that question—how many still live in darkness, not knowing the Light? I read aloud: *I am the Light of the world.* By morning, the elder returned, saying, *I want to know this Light.*

From that day, I understood my calling more clearly. God did not send me to comfortable places—He sent me to dark places. Every time I see a small group gathered under a tree, singing for the first time, *Yesu Prabhu naa rakshakudu* (Jesus, my Savior), I am reminded that His light is more powerful than any darkness.

There were times we faced rejection—once, men threatened to burn our Bibles and chased us away. That night, we prayed with tears. Two months later, one called us for prayer, and when God healed him, his whole family accepted Christ. The home that once rejected the Gospel became a house church, echoing worship through the hills. Light doesn't argue with darkness—it shines. We may feel small, but a single candle can guide many. God asks not for perfection, but faithfulness. Our task is to shine, and His Spirit does the rest.

APPLICATION: You may not be in a remote village, but you are called to be a light. In your workplace, neighborhood or family, let your actions—words, prayers, acts of service—reflect Christ's love. Shine, not by your strength, but by His light shining through you.

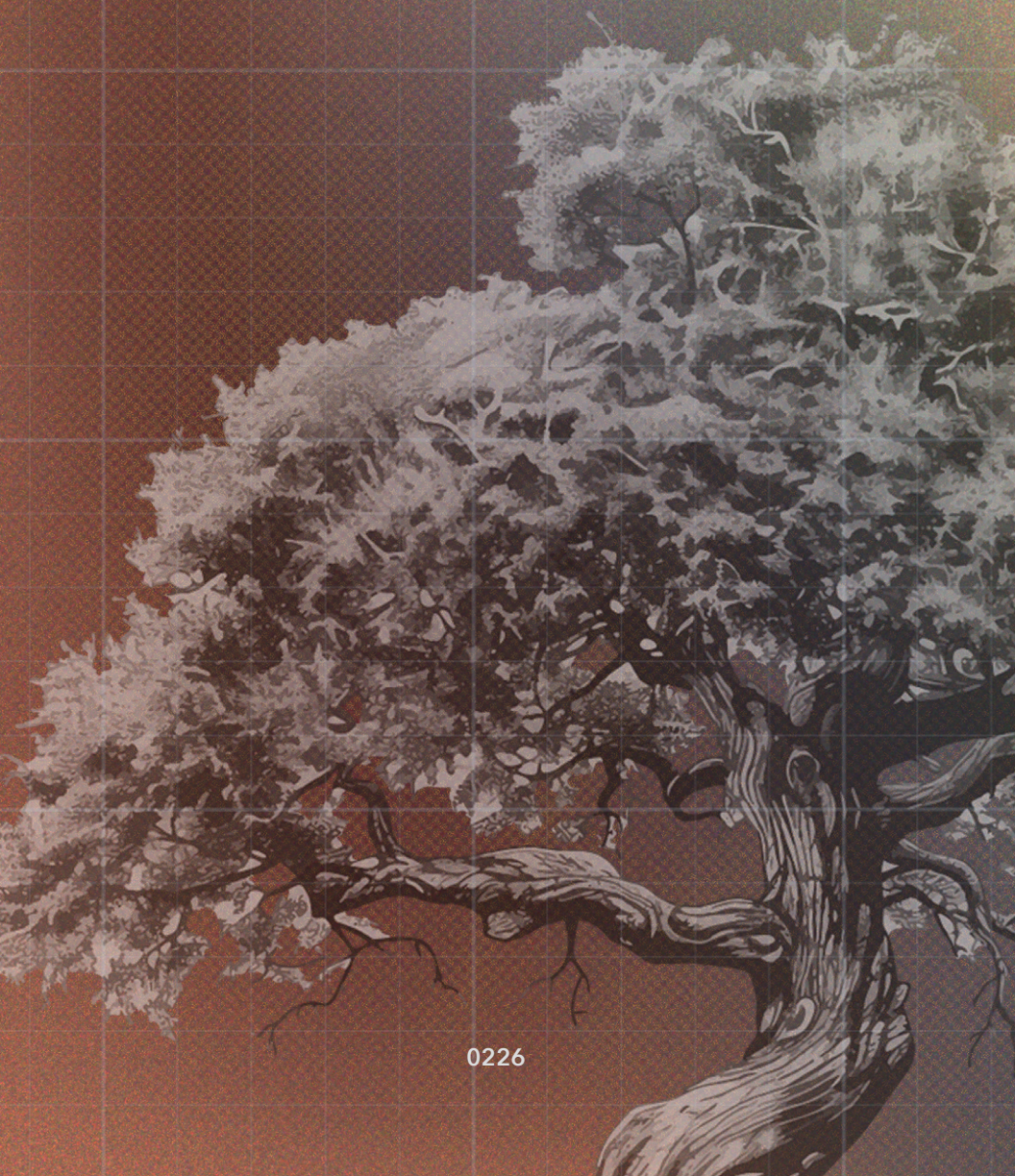
PRAYER: Lord Jesus, thank You for calling me to carry Your light into places of darkness. Forgive my fear, fill me with boldness, and let my words, hands and heart reflect Your goodness, so every place and soul may know You are the Light of the world. Amen.



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