

CONNECTING
MINISTRIES

2022

FREEDOM

Devotional



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CONNECTING MINISTRIES

GATHER • EMPOWER • CONNECT

CM creates a safe place for women to gather, empowering them through the Word of God, and giving them resources and opportunities to connect.



A Big Thanks to our Production & Devotional Team!

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Get ready to spend time with God!

Beloved,


I am thrilled to present you with the Connecting Ministries 2022 Devotional Guide. Our focus this year centers on 2 Corinthians 3:17 “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Throughout Scripture, we are reminded that as believers this same Spirit dwells within us (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19). There are times when we can get caught up in our own sin and brokenness that we overlook the freedom that our souls possess, but God has removed our transgression as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). The world would have us believe that God restricts us and puts limits on our lives. Just like in Eden, Satan tries to deceive us into believing that God is holding out on us. But as Christians, we can recognize this as a lie straight from the depths of Hell and know that God holds back nothing good from His children (Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 11:9-13; James 1:17). His plan may not be our plan, but it is always good (Romans 8:28) and it is better than anything we can imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

How marvelous a concept – that as believers, we are free! Free from the wages of sin that is death; free from the guilt that accompanies sin; free from being enslaved to our flesh; free to live an abundant life where God has placed us; free to worship, love and serve God amidst a fallen and broken world. We have an everlasting freedom that cannot be seized regardless of our circumstances, true freedom that the world cannot know apart from Jesus and His work on the cross. My sisters, let us rest in the freedom that we could never earn, but was graciously bestowed upon us by our merciful, loving and compassionate God.

As you work your way through the devotional this year, remind yourselves of the freedom you have in Christ and rest in Him, for His name is Faithful and True. (Revelation 19:11) It is my prayer that the following guide will encourage you to walk in the freedom you have inherited and bring you closer to Jesus in your spiritual walk with Him.

In Christ,
Starla Canning
Connecting Ministries Devotional Team Leader





“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe. (Hebrews 12:28 ESV)


ENDURING KINGDOM

Growing up, I remember passing by an old brown cloth-clad book sitting in my parents’ house. Aside from the gold embossed letters that caught my eye, I didn’t pay it much attention. Fast-forward to the year of the pandemic. Once again, I found myself in my childhood home, passing by that book. This time, taking considerable interest in the words my four times great-grandmother wrote long ago. She was a Quaker from Ohio, born 200 years ago. After she passed, her diary entries and letters were compiled into a memoir that was published in the late 1800s.

Her words were saturated with trust and love for her God—our same God. They stirred my heart. I’ve felt defeated lately. Maybe it was the pandemic. Perhaps it was simply life with children or life in this new time. To be honest, whatever the reason, I have felt overwhelmed with life and underwhelmed by God.

And then I think, Why am I disenchanted with a God who has given me so much? He’s loved me when I’ve been most unlovable, He’s comforted me when I ached with despair, He’s provided when it hasn’t made sense, and He’s shown Himself when I wasn’t even looking for Him. We worship what we most think about, and I haven’t been worshipping God with my thoughts or my time. I’ve given away that which is fleeting to worry, complaining, or scrolling.





As a believer, the antidote to defeat is worship. Worship stems from gratefulness, and gratefulness happens only after we remember what God has done, is doing, and will do. He promised us a new world—a kingdom untouched by sin, pain, brokenness, jealousy, bitterness, or sickness. A kingdom that is unshakable. Let’s be overwhelmed by the power of that truth.

As my grandmother said, even then in 1857, “Truly, there is much in these days of tossing and trial to cast down and discourage; but oh, what a comfort that there is the same sure Refuge unto which to flee, the same unerring Guide, the same unfailing Friend . . .”

Father, thank You for being the same God across the ages. Thank You for not leaving me to while away my days in despair of the unknown, but for giving me the hope of Your unshakable kingdom to come.

Kasey Cook,
East Canton, Ohio

For Further Reading: Daniel 2:44; Hebrews 13:15; Revelation 21



Reflection




“But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2b ESV)

STOP STRIVING FOR WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE

It is incredibly exhausting trying to earn God’s love. When I first trusted in the gospel my freshman year of college, I slowly began enslaving myself to what a good Christian is “supposed to do.” I had already spent so many years not reading Scripture, praying, and sharing the gospel that I began heaping shame and guilt on myself when I didn’t. I believed the Father was more pleased with me on the days I woke up early, spent an hour in the word and prayer, talked about what I read with a friend, and struck up a gospel conversation with a stranger.

I was able to do these things consistently for a while, but like a car that is running on the wrong type of gas, I burnt out quickly. Finding security in my works was exhausting. Our Scripture today comes from the last chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet of God, called to preach a message of repentance to the nation of Israel, who had been living in rebellion of His design. The people of Israel had been offering sacrifices to God, but the intention of their hearts was their own gain, not a true posture of worship.





Like Israel, I too was making my relationship with God a religious ritual. I had been pursuing God, not from a desire to know Him more, but to earn His affection. However, the sweetest freedom is found in today's verse! God graciously reminded Israel that He does not care for heartless religion. A "humble and contrite spirit" is one who is aware of their utter dependence on God's grace. God loves the fact that we need Him. We can spend so much time and energy trying to earn the very thing we already have—His grace! As you pursue the Lord, remember His heart. He already loves you deeply.


Father, thank You for the freedom I have in Christ—I don't work for Your love but from it. I repent of all the times I have trusted in my good works instead of Your perfect love. Teach my heart to rest in this truth and to find joy and intimacy in my time with You.

Emily Katherine Morris
Birmingham, AL

For Further Reading: Psalm 34:18; Matthew 5:3; Ephesians 2:8-9



Reflection




“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you to you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 6:5-7 NIV)


MAKING AN IMPRESSION

Do you ever look at a task and think it's too great? I look at the state of our world and I weep. Wickedness is prevailing and, by all accounts, the church has lost ground. Like never before, it is unpopular to be a Christian in our culture. Where did we go wrong? Is there anything we can do?

I once heard “if God repeats himself, you better listen!” He's repeatedly told me the answer is in his design for the family. Before the church or the priesthood, before Israel became a nation, God created the family. Family is God's design, and the enemy hates it! It should be no surprise that the adversary is fighting furiously against the family. We see his schemes in our culture—his attack on marriage, gender, sexuality, and children in the womb. He is relentless, and the church is not exempt from his influence. Meanwhile, social media, entertainment, busy schedules, and hobbies distract us. None of these are wrong, but if they take away from loving the Lord with all that we are, they are idols.

If we want to see change in the world, we must differ from the world, starting with our families. Impress on our children who God is, what He loves, and what breaks His heart.





We are to make Him a part of our daily lives. We must teach our children that being a Christian is not what we do, it's who we are!

You may already live this scripture out. I encourage you to disciple another sister to do the same. Even if your kids have left home, it's never too late to start. And what a beautiful blessing to disciple grandchildren. Our first mission field is our family. I love the imagery the NIV gives, "Impress them on your children." We are to mold, shape, and influence our kids for Christ. They will be influenced, either by us or by the world. We have been tasked with sharing an imperative message, and I think we've complicated God's simple, natural plan. The message of the gospel must start in our homes with our children.

Father, I pray for wisdom and courage to point my family to the truth of your Word.


Whitney Hancock
Strong, MS



For Further Reading: Proverbs 3:3-5;
Proverbs 22:6; 2 Timothy 3:14-17



Reflection



Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. (Romans 8:26 ESV)

GROANINGS TOO DEEP FOR WORDS

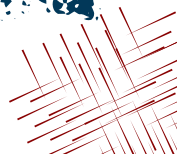
Groanings too deep for words.


Have you been there?

Maybe you are there now.

I was there about three years ago. We had just come home from a four-month hospital stay with our son, who was born with a severe heart defect. In my mind, that was supposed to be the turning point for us. We were home and should have been happy. But I was drowning. Caring for two toddlers and a baby with serious health issues consumed me. I was growing farther and farther from Christ.

As we went through the next year battling doctors and our son's issues, I went from praying to God to yelling at God to finally not even bothering. I was weak and tired of it all. During the darkest of days, I know the Spirit was interceding for me. I was so angry with God about my situation that I would scream out to Him, not even knowing what to say. Yet I always went back to Him. I know it was the Spirit helping me. We went through that for months. And even though I didn't know what to pray, the Spirit did.





Christ stayed with me, holding me through it all. I kept praying that God would change my circumstances. I didn't want to go through this anymore. But God wasn't changing things and for that reason, I was angry at Him. I didn't realize how selfish my prayers were. When I started praying for God to change my heart, I saw a shift in my situation. My son did not get better, but my outlook did. I saw who he was as a little boy and not just his health problems.

So when you look at that impossible situation you are in now, and you don't know what to pray or what to say, rest. Trust that God is holding you, and the Spirit will intercede for you.


Lord, I ask that You meet me where I am in this situation. I don't know what to say, but I trust that all things will work out for Your glory. I'm feeling weak and unsure. Help me to lean on You.


LeAnna Tolly
Beaver, WI

For Further Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:8-9; Ephesians 6:18; Romans 8:15



Reflection





Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11 NIV)


THUMBS UP


Some days, do you feel like you need a lift? Do you feel unnoticed? Wouldn't it be nice to hear the words "good job"? You know you are doing a good job, but no one ever tells you. The Bible says in 1 Thessalonians, "encourage one another and build each other up."

I have been a kindergarten teacher for ten years. It's common for the administrator to frequent my classroom for observations. They usually walk in with a laptop or a clipboard, indicating that I am being observed. Once they find a seat in my classroom, they observe all the activities going on between me and my students.

This happened recently. The observation was completely normal until the end. When my administrator completed the observation and was heading toward the door, she turned to me and gave me a thumbs up! The dictionary defines thumbs up as "an indication of satisfaction or approval." This small hand gesture unlocked a feeling inside of me, one I had been waiting on for a long time. She was saying to me, I like what I see, keep up the good work! She gave me her approval.

As Christians, God calls us to encourage each other. He calls us to pay attention to the people around us and lift them up. Who can you encourage? Is there someone you know who would appreciate your approval? Maybe someone you work with—an employee who is doing a great job, but you rarely tell them?





Or someone in your family—your spouse or your kids? It could be the cashier at the local grocery store or your barista at the coffee shop. Is there something you can say to a person that will make them smile? Would giving them a thumbs up completely change their day?

Let's strive to hear God say, Girl, I see you, and I approve! Now, go give someone a thumbs up!


God, I pray for those who are discouraged (including me). Absolute satisfaction and approval are found in You. When life is difficult, remind me to lean into You. You are the ultimate encourager. Help me to encourage others.

*Bridget Shows
Palestine, MS*

For Further Reading: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 3:12-17



Reflection



But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:24 NIV)


BUT GOD...

We all have a story, and I love to listen to the stories of other people that reveal God's glory. Some chapters are full of love and overflow with joy from beautiful moments that light up the storyteller's face. Others are full of immense grief that, just in the remembering, brings an onslaught of tears from deep within the soul who survived a devastating season.

As a survivor, I want to share with you that no matter the details—the good, bad, or the gut wrenching, there is nothing more powerful than when we weave these words into our stories, “But God . . .” Like those moments when we thought all hope was gone, but God reached down His mighty hand and pulled us out of the darkest hole we'd ever known. Those moments when we feared our prayers to bring our prodigal child home had fallen on deaf ears, but God showed up and rescued them with His relentless love. Those moments when a “But God” encounter with The Risen Savior grows our mustard-seed faith into the size of a great sequoia!

Let's not forget this great truth found in Acts 2:24, “But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”





After my late husband was diagnosed with ALS in 2010, this scripture provided firm footing for me through the battles that followed. It's truth that I have clung to, knowing that his grave will not hold him, because our God is victorious over death, hell, and the grave.

As in the story of Joseph, God takes what the enemy intends for destruction and turns it into a "But God . . ." chapter in our story that He will use in the saving of many lives! The Author of our story is the Author of The Story—which is about grace, mercy, hope and healing. His name is Jesus. I pray you surrender your life and your story to Him. You can trust that He will prove repeatedly that He is enough, no matter what.


Father, You are the God that death cannot hold. I trust You to hold my life in Your hands.

Dawn Mason
Hartselle, AL

For Further Reading: Genesis 37:18-36;
Genesis 45:1-11; Romans 8:28



 *Reflection*



Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 NIV)


STRUGGLES FOR OUR GOOD AND HIS GLORY

My husband, kids, and I had a conversation about our favorite superheroes and why we liked them. I really didn't have a favorite, but I could answer the question of why I like certain characters. I like the flawed superheroes because they are relatable.

Many times, when we talk to others (especially those who don't know Jesus' love) we aren't willing to be real about the adversity that we've endured. That puts a wall between us because they can't relate.

God never wanted us to have hardships, but we live in a fallen world where difficulties are a part of life in spite of that. However, God gives us the comfort to get past those trials. He also uses those trials to reach others.

Three years ago, I was diagnosed with breast cancer at only 38 years old. Hearing the words, "You have cancer" was devastating. It was even harder to tell others about my diagnosis. My family and friends responded in so many ways. Some people were encouraging, while others shed tears. Through it all, I trusted God had me in his hands and would help me through this process. So, when someone asked how I was doing or how I could be so calm, I was able to share my faith.





I told people why I didn't spend my time worrying—because God has granted me His peace through the Holy Spirit (John 14:27). When it's my time to join Him, I know He has a place for me where there is no more crying or pain (Rev. 21:4). When I shared my adversities, the barrier broke down, and it gave me an opportunity to bear witness to the love of Jesus. Even though a fallen world caused my cancer, I can share God's comfort, because He has comforted me (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

I encourage you to share your struggles, so that God can use your trials for His good (Rom. 8:28).

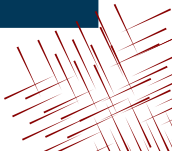
Lord, thank You for giving me comfort through my trials. Allow me to share that comfort with others so I can show them Your love.


Jennifer Birshbach
Green Bay, WI

For Further Reading: Psalm 56:3; James 1:2-3



Reflection







Whoever conceals their sin does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy. Proverbs 28:13

THE TRUTH ABOUT HALF-TRUTHS

In front of me is a purple water bottle. Specifically, it's light purple, but still purple. Imagine someone says that bottle is green. I'd clearly know they are lying or have a visual impairment. Now if that person said the bottle is mauve, I would concede and agree that it could be considered mauve. They take it an inch further and say, actually it looks more like light lilac. I would again concede and consider that one could call it lilac. Next, they say, actually that bottle appears to be white. I would allow myself to agree that in the right lighting, it could appear white, accepting that someone could reasonably call it white. Now, I've not only allowed them to lie to me, but also trick me into allowing someone else to believe a lie. If a third person called it white, I wouldn't bother correcting them.

This is a silly example, but accurately portrays how Satan tricks believers into accepting falsehoods. He starts off with a premise and slowly inches us closer to the lie. He presents to us half-truths, hoping to push us further and further from scriptural truth. Before we put away falsehoods and speak truth, we must acknowledge that half-truths are insidious, if not more so than blatant lies.





Recently, I felt compelled to confront a believer about a scriptural falsehood she not only was accepting but also promoting. She did not intend to believe the lie. It would grieve her to know she was accepting distortions. But over time, she allowed herself to concede little by little to false teaching from other believers. Make no mistake, Satan is working on every one of us with half-truths. It's his mission to use those half-truths to mislead us into doing his dirty work—convincing other believers of falsehoods we have come to accept.

Sisters, do not concede to half-truths. We're not only lying to ourselves, we're corrupting the body of believers. Ephesians 6 says to stand firm in the Lord with the armor of God. That's the way to fight off that wily enemy. Immerse yourselves in Scripture to the point of being firmly equipped with the truth, so the devil's half-truths have no power to deceive us.

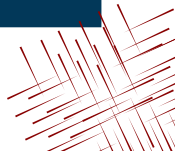
Father, guard my mind from scriptural distortions. Expose the falsehoods I have accepted and train me to recognize truth.


Steená Jimenez
Sharpsburg, GA

For Further Reading: Ephesians 4:14-15; Colossians 2:8; Colossians 3:9-10



Reflection





I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free. (Psalm 119:32 NIV)

SATISFY ME WITH YOUR LOVE


I have type 2 diabetes. I feel a twinge of shame whenever I say this. Diabetes is a preventable disease. Genes play a role, but lifestyle is the greatest factor. So when I say out loud, “I have type 2 diabetes,” I admit my actions took me down this path.


At first, I ignored the warning signs. It was more fun to eat all the foods that I should avoid. I thought to myself, “I’ll do better later.” I was a slave to food and its entertainment.

For a year I tried intermittent fasting. It felt powerful to only eat for a few hours a day. But I was fooling myself. When my “window” would open, so would my mouth, and the overeating within those hours erased any good of fasting. Despite the appearance of control, I remained a slave.

For a year I gave up sugar. It was a year of pity parties. On my birthday, I felt so sad because I chose not to eat cake. I didn’t trust myself to resume my sugar-free promise afterwards. My heart mourned for the comfort of my sweet treats; I remained captive.

Finally, I gave up all the restrictions and asked my doctor to prescribe diabetes medications. Then, I let myself eat whatever I wanted whenever I wanted. I thought this would make me happy. But my indulgence in food did not satisfy; I remained chained.





I had exhausted the suggestions of the world, but my body remained sick and my heart preoccupied. Finally, I reached for the Scriptures and the Lord reminded me of my freedom in Christ: how He guides my steps through His Holy Spirit, how my heart is free when I follow His lead, how indulging in the Lord leads to health and life!

The Lord asks me to be still, to listen to His Spirit as He directs my body to heal itself through His power! He made my body able to tell me when to eat, how much to eat, even what to eat if I view food as a means for His glory! As I pray and follow the Holy Spirit, I know the Great Healer is healing me!

Father God, You are able. Every new day, set my heart free from the things of this world. Satisfy me with your love. And may I glorify You in my healing!

Katie Albers
Owensboro, KY

For Further Reading: Psalm 32:8; Isaiah 58:11; Matthew 11:28-30;



Reflection



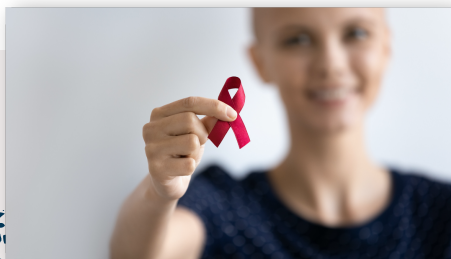
A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity. (Proverbs 17:17 NIV)

NEVER ALONE

Several years ago, I underwent genetic testing and discovered that I was born with a genetic mutation which is linked to a very high incidence of several types of cancer. Because of my genetic mutation, physicians advised me to undergo preventative surgeries. This led to the removal of my ovaries, fallopian tubes, and my breasts. Following the removal of my breasts, I underwent breast reconstruction. The road was long; it wasn't easy. However, the Lord sent friends to walk that road with me.

Rewind to a Sunday shortly before I received my genetic test results. The aunt of a friend that I had not corresponded with in many years attended the same church. That day, she asked me to pray for her niece. She told me some lab work had come back for my friend and the results indicated she should have her ovaries removed. Immediately, I knew what my results would reveal. I also knew God was going to surround me with everything I needed, even the people I needed to walk with me through the journey.

No road is traveled alone. God will send the friends you need at the time you need them. Doctors diagnosed my friend with the same genetic mutation.





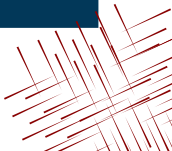
We reconnected and traveled the journey together. I am reminded that perhaps my friend needed me in the same way I needed her. Do you feel like you are traveling a lonely and broken road? Remember, dear friend, it is on that road that the Savior will meet you. In times of adversity, Jesus will be there. You might not recognize Him at first. He may not appear in a tunic and dust-covered sandals. He could come to you in the form of another broken woman—a woman who needs a strong and encouraging friend to walk alongside her. Perhaps you'll walk together down an untraveled road. One thing is certain, He will come. Look for Him, precious one. He will be there. You may be broken, but you are never alone. He is there to restore. You are cared for and adored.


Lord, in times of adversity, You are my friend. You created me to love others and to be a friend as well. Who can I help?

Beverly Henry
Decatur, AL

For Further Reading: Psalm 46:1; Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12; Matthew 18:20

 *Reflection*







And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:11-13 ESV)

REJOICING IN THE PRESENT

I tend to glamorize the past. Though I'm sure my college years were riddled with hardships and uncertainties, I can only remember them fondly. It was the “time of my life” when I lived with all my best friends in one of my favorite cities. My friends now live scattered around the country, and we get together maybe once a year. My day-to-day life is mostly filled with feeding babies and keeping a house relatively tidy. There is less freedom and spontaneity, but my life is still full of joy. However, if I think too much about how life used to be, I find myself growing bitter. Why do I have to cook the meals? Can I get one night of uninterrupted sleep? Reminiscing about the greatness of my past erodes my happiness and contentment in the present.





The people of Israel in Ezra 3 were likely feeling the same way. After years in exile, God stirred the heart of King Cyrus to let the Israelites return to the promised land and rebuild the temple. They even followed the same specifications that King Solomon used in the building of the first temple. This return shows that God remained faithful to His people and His promise.

If that's true, then why are the older men crying when the rest of Israel are celebrating? There is a sense that this new temple is not like it used to be. Returning to something long desired, only for it to feel different can be grieving. It would be like me returning to my college town. It wouldn't be the same. Additionally, the prophets made many end-times promises that these older men knew would not come to fruition in their lifetime. The Messiah wasn't reigning, and Jerusalem was not being exalted. They were wearied by the fact these prophecies had not been fulfilled yet, so they wept with longing for all to be restored.

Has your preoccupation with the past or longing for the future ever kept you from rejoicing about what God is doing in the present?

Thank you, God, for being a promise keeper. I trust You will do what You say You will do. Forgive me when I refuse to rejoice in what You are doing now because I'm focusing on what used to be or what will come. Open my eyes to Your glory around me.

Paige Bierman
Birmingham, AL

For Further Reading: Psalm 90:12; Isaiah 43:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:16



Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results. (James 5:16 NLT)

THE POWER OF EARNEST PRAYER

How close do you feel to your family and fellow believers? Who do you pray for regularly? Should you make amends with anyone? Do you worry about circumstances you can't control? James, the brother of Jesus, reminds us there is something simple we can do to strengthen relationships and impact the world. Something powerful that produces wonderful results. Pray earnestly.

To pray earnestly means to pray with sincere and intense conviction—to be serious about prayer. The movie *War Room* illustrates this well as it relates to marriage. A woman named Liz learns to pray earnestly for her headstrong husband and gets miraculous results. The next time a conflict occurs in your life, remember the devil is behind that dysfunction. Don't give him the satisfaction.

Put on the armor of God and stand firm against the devil's strategies. Satan wants to isolate everyone because God created us to be a part of his community—the church. "Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere" (Ephesians 6:18b). One way to be persistent (a hack, if you will) is to write your prayers on paper so you can repeat them. That forces you to slow down and craft a more passionate prayer. Include Scripture. Stand on God's promises!

James encouraged believers to "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other." This applies to fellow believers and to marriage. When making amends, confession and forgiveness free us from guilt and resentment, respectively. It also shows others we're sincere. Confession, forgiveness, and prayer restore relationships.



Many things are out of our control, but we're all able to pray. In Acts 16, Paul and Silas prayed and sang hymns to God as they sat in jail. Can you imagine how earnestly they prayed and praised God to spark the earthquake that freed them?

Since there's little we can control in this fallen world, perhaps God designed prayer not only for communication and spiritual warfare, but to cultivate a closer connection with us. He wants us to talk to Him, to cast our cares on Him, to confide in Him, and to rely on Him. Pray earnestly and trust Him to move those mountains in your marriage, church, or elsewhere.

Father, you've promised that earnest prayer is powerful and produces wonderful results. Help me pray with passion, persistence, and patience.


Danelle Young
Owensboro, KY



For Further Reading: John 9:31; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17

 *Reflection*






Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
(Matthew 5:4 NIV)


GOD OF ALL COMFORT

During a difficult time when my father's health suddenly declined and my beloved uncle passed away unexpectedly, I found out I was pregnant. That helped me cling to hope. My husband and I agreed to keep the happy news a secret until after our doctor appointment. At my first OBGYN visit, three words changed my life: There's no heartbeat. We were devastated! My family was already reeling, so I chose not to tell anyone about the additional grief we were experiencing. Despite this, we were still never alone in our pain and sadness. Jesus was with us the entire time, holding our hands and wiping our tears. He never left our home.

We certainly mourned, but God comforted and consoled us. We sensed His presence and attentiveness during our lowest hour. He had a plan even though we didn't understand.

Fertility became an issue after our loss. Once again, we kept the trial private. During that lonely journey, an acquaintance reached out to me to discuss her own infertility struggles. For the first time, I shared my own heartache with someone else. We began encouraging and praying for each other. I couldn't believe someone I knew was going through something similar at the same time. And she chose to talk to me about it! It was an incredible blessing. Not long after that, another friend contacted me following her own miscarriage. Again, I shared our experience with her, and we began encouraging and praying for each other, too.





This happened with SIX ladies! This hadn't been a topic I'd discussed before, and suddenly I was surrounded by women going through the same things I was. We comforted each other through our anguish. This very traumatic experience allowed me to relate to others and share Him in a way I wouldn't have known otherwise. Those six ladies and I have all rejoiced together since then in various ways. By God's grace, my husband and I conceived and now have a little boy!

Dear God, thank You for never leaving my side, especially when I don't think I can take another step. Bless those who mourn. Help me to comfort others as you have comforted me.


Ashley Lovett
Calvert City, Kentucky

For Further Reading: Psalm 147:3; Isaiah 41:10



Reflection

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“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(1 Thessalonians 5:23 NASB)


PROTECTED BY THE POWER OF GOD

I grew up a red-headed Daddy's girl who considered herself strong, independent, and self-sufficient. As an adult, I realize I also grew up a people pleasing perfectionist whose love languages were words of affirmation and physical touch. This created a perfect storm for the enemy of my soul to work some major chaos in my heart, mind, and body during the first half of my life.

After forty-five years of life, my heart, mind, and body have been through a lot. I've been pushed to a breaking point pursuing athletic fitness, broken by stubborn grit refusing to ask others for help, wounded by words, marred by sinful choices made by myself and others, and hardened in attempts to act like everything is fine so no one sees how not fine I am. However, I have also experienced the grace and mercy of God and possess faith, hope, and love through the eternally relevant truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In 1 Peter 1:3-8, we read that God's great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through faith in Jesus to obtain an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and never fading. We are told we are protected by the power of God for a salvation yet to be revealed. In this passage, we learn it is this very hope which helps us press on, even rejoice, in the trials that we face.





Life can be hard. Things we worked so hard to obtain can be destroyed, lost, or stolen in a moment. Our bodies can be defiled by others, by sickness, and even our own bad choices. Our mind, physical abilities, and precious possessions, no matter how hard we try to maintain and keep hold of them, fade away. My red hair is now colored, my body occasionally struggles to simply walk, my mind fails me at times, and my daddy is now with Jesus, but it's okay. My hope is in the Lord and my future is protected by the power of God.

Heavenly Father, the older I get, the more meaningful 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 becomes. I look forward to the day when my spirit, soul, and body are entirely sanctified and I stand before You whole, blameless, and without shame. May the proof of my faith result in praise, honor, and glory to You.

Nicole Love Halbrooks Vaughn
Decatur, AL



For Further Reading: John 10:27-29; Philippians 1:6



Reflection

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Notes . Prayers . Thoughts



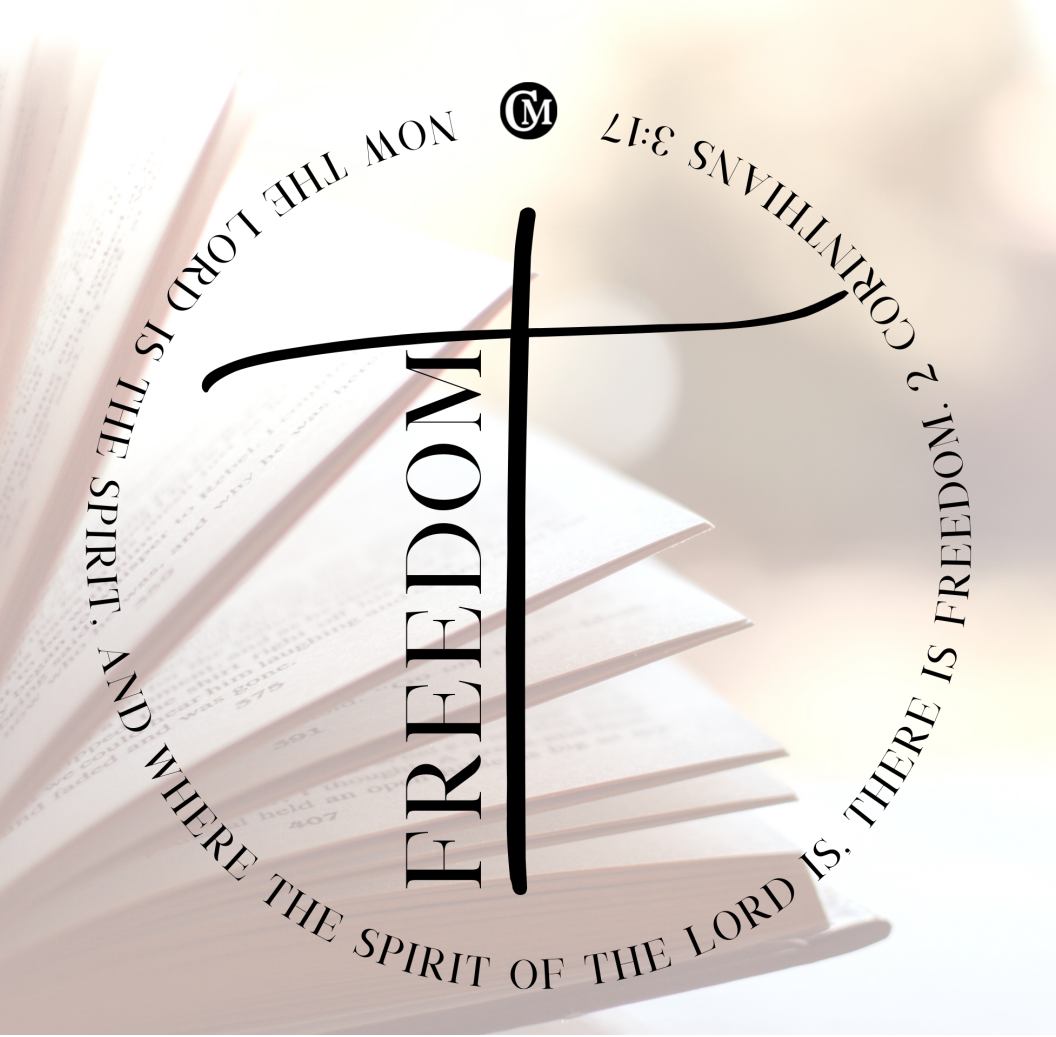
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Notes . Prayers . Thoughts



A large, empty rectangular area with a white background, framed by a dark blue border, intended for writing notes, prayers, or thoughts.



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