

Jesus Is Passing By
What Are You Waiting For?

STEPHANIE OLSON

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ISBN: 099145491X

ISBN-13: 978-0991454914

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my first love, Jesus Christ.
To my amazingly supportive husband, Eric and my
beautiful children Noel, Tessa, and Will.
Thanks to all of you for putting up with me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my editor, and friend, Steve Schwartz. Steve led my mom to Christ, who in turn, led me to Christ. Through his one act of obedience in witnessing to my mom, Steve changed the lives of thousands of people to the Glory of Jesus Christ. Thank you Steve! I can never repay you for what you have given me.

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INTRODUCTION

Deliver me! Help me! Set me free from these chains!

These are words that aren't usually said out loud; however, if you could get into the head of anyone who has been in bondage of any form, this is what they are silently screaming. Bondage—whether that be an addiction, unforgiveness, anger, or anything else that separates us from our Savior—is captivating, seducing, inviting, and, at times, deadly.

Being caught up in sin, even addiction, has become common fare in this nation of ours. We often see television shows that either glamorize sin or make it look like something no “normal” person would ever have to deal with. If we are honest with ourselves, we have all dealt with something in our lives that we know is not good for us, but which we still have trouble rejecting.

For some of us, there is no question what we are suffering with. For others, we have an amazing ability to deny the fact that we struggle with, or have struggled with, a clear temptation. And then there are those of us who say, “Yes, I realize the world has a problem with sin, but I'm glad that's the world and not the Church!”

This is where honesty comes in. It's crucial we understand that Jesus Christ came to set the captives free. That's us. We need to admit that the Church is riddled with sin. The Church needs to be a place where people can come and find refuge. People need to be able to come and cry out to Jesus in the arms of fellow believers who are willing to walk the painful walk of healing with them. We should not travel through this life alone. Yet, we must know that if we are to travel this road with one another, it needs to be a safe road. This is not to say, though, that it won't necessarily be a road without any stones, ditches, or valleys.

What are the things that keep us in chains? Does it need to be an addiction in which someone shoots up heroin until

he can't even stand? Does it need to be someone who is having an illicit affair and can't be faithful to his or her spouse? Does it need to be someone who drinks a liter of vodka a day? No, it doesn't. We can be in bondage to food, sex, gossip, unforgiveness, a bad relationship, or any of a number of things. The critical component here is that the sin, whatever it may be, becomes our god.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, he brought a list of instructions that included the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). Although these gods certainly can be a carved image or a physical idol of some kind, they do not have to be. A god can be anything we put before our relationship with the Sovereign and Holy Creator of the Universe. Anything that we allow to come between Jesus Christ and us is a god before the one, true God.

You may be wondering what gives me the credibility to speak to you about sin in the Church. I am no psychologist or doctor, but I am a woman who has dealt with sin and bondage. In fact, I have a pretty extensive list of addictions and sinful actions, despite the fact that I grew up in the Church. I knew who Jesus was; however, I did not *know* Jesus. I had not learned what it meant to live a life in Christ. It wasn't until I completely surrendered my life to Jesus that I understood what it means to live a life in Christ. It is my desire that everyone experience what I learned. If you are living a life of bondage, please know that our God is a God of healing.

Although my healing has not been miraculous or instantaneous, it has been a daily healing in which Jesus takes me by the hand and leads me through a life of victory. Is it pleasant every day? Absolutely not! It is, nonetheless, a life of victory.

So they told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. ³⁸ And he cried out, saying, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

³⁹ Then those who went before warned him that he should be quiet; but he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

⁴⁰ So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be brought to Him. And when he had come near, He asked him, ⁴¹ saying, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

He said, “Lord, that I may receive my sight.”

⁴² Then Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has made you well.” ⁴³ And immediately he received his sight, and followed Him, glorifying God. And all the people, when they saw it, gave praise to God.

(Luke 18:37-43)

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SIN AND ADDICTIONS—WHO ME?

I said the “sinner’s prayer” at a very young age. I was nine years old when my mother introduced me to Christ—on the potty, no less. So, you see, Jesus can come to you absolutely anywhere! I grew up with the knowledge that God loved me. I also understood that Jesus shed His blood for me and took all of my sins upon Himself. I grew up going to church on Sundays and Wednesdays. I saw my mom read her Bible faithfully and knew she prayed for me every day of my young life. Yet, even with all of this knowledge, I never truly understood what a treasure I could personally have in Christ. I never understood that Jesus loved me simply because He *is* love and that He wanted me to live a full and abundant life (1 John 4:8).

I spent most of my young life feeling somewhat condemned because I grew bored reading the Bible, and if I prayed for more than five minutes at a time, I lost my train of thought. I believed that I was just not filling the bill as a Christian. Being a Christian became a job rather than a relationship—a religion that I was simply not measuring up to.

I would like to share specific details of my story, not to glorify the sin but so you can see the pit out of which God brought me. In the same way, I don’t write this to glorify myself but so that you might see that we serve an amazing, sovereign God! That God loves us so much that He came to set us free—no matter how unworthy we are. He takes what Satan intends for harm and turns it into good for His glory!

When I was growing up, I used to tell my mom not to

worry; I was just building my testimony. For those of you who don't speak "Christianese," it means that I did bad things my mother didn't approve of to create a great story later.

When I was born, my mother was married to an abusive man, my biological father. My mom escaped from the relationship when I was only one year old, and we never saw or heard from my father again. That was probably a really good thing; however, as a young, impressionable girl, I thought, *If my own father doesn't love me, if my own father doesn't want to see me, I must be pretty worthless.* The abandonment of my father was a deep emotional wound that revisited me often. This left such weighty damage that it could only be healed by Christ. However, it would take me years, and a lot of turmoil, to come to that realization. I spent years trying to find anything that would make me feel worthwhile. I spent years wondering why I was so worthless that even my father didn't want to be around me. Unfortunately, I looked in all of the wrong places for the answer.

My mom and I were blessed because we moved in with my maternal grandparents during those early years. They helped, along with my mom, to provide a strong foundation of love and support. I had a happy childhood overall, but nothing seemed to fill the big hole my father left behind.

Eventually, my mom met and married my dad when I was six. He adopted me, and I have always made a distinction between my biological father, the man who gave me life, and my dad, the man who raised me. My dad is a wonderful man; however, he had a couple of things going against him. The first was that my desire to be "daddy's little girl" was all-consuming. In my eyes, he was never going to be capable of meeting my expectations. And the second thing was that no human could have healed my hurts.

We lived a fine life, but it was devoid of God for the most part. We celebrated Christmas and Easter, but Jesus wasn't really a part of our lives until a good friend of my mom's led her to Christ. He told her that you could actually

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have a personal relationship with Jesus and that we are not saved by doing good things but by God's grace through faith. He explained that salvation is a gift, and all we have to do is receive that gift and repent from our sins. My mom became a Christian that day. Her life (and mine) changed. We went to church, and Jesus became a part of everyday conversation. And then on that fateful day when I was nine years old, and in the bathroom, my mom led me to Jesus.

Through junior high and high school, although I had some head knowledge about Jesus, I didn't really understand the meaning of John 10:10: "The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." Jesus really does want us to live our lives in victory. But how? And what does that look like? Well, I didn't know, and that brokenness in my life overwhelmed me.

I craved approval. In junior high, I developed an eating disorder—anorexia and bulimia—as I desperately tried to take control of my life. In high school, although I was very active in cheerleading and music and looked like I had it all, I was dying on the inside. I went through a tremendous depression, during which I considered suicide many times. I was so empty and didn't think I had anything that could fill me up.

It was around this time when I began to drink. I will never forget my first drunk. I felt powerful and important all at the same time. I was more beautiful, I was more interesting, and I was funnier. I felt full for the first time in my life. I had my first blackout that night, the first of many. It was also during this time that I rejected God with a tremendous passion. I had so much anger and resentment. I had so much sin in my life that the last place I felt I could go was to God.

College only amplified all of the opportunities to find anything that would make me feel more worthwhile. I actually taught myself to smoke in front of a mirror to "look cool." Satan had such a hold on me that God was a distant memory.

Drinking became an easy and acceptable lifestyle. My self-worth was found in guys. I became promiscuous and tried to use the empty words of men to heal my insecurities. Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect. My life was spinning out of control. Graduating from college didn't help. The college parties simply turned to bars—nothing changed.

One night while I was in my early twenties, I met a man at a bar and decided he was a great catch. I married him after about a year of drunken dating, and the next two years became a journey of craziness, including emotional and physical abuse. Things were pretty bad. My eating disorder was in a full-blown rage. I was down to about 100 pounds, and I was tired, both physically and emotionally. I remember feeling a desire to sleep for a few days—not die, just sleep. I took some sleeping pills with a whiskey chaser and found myself in the hospital for about a week.

That was one of the best things that could have happened to me. I spent the next few months recovering from my eating disorder and rebuilding my life. I left my husband, found God again, and climbed from what felt like the bottom of a deep pit to, oh, about the middle.

Let me interject by saying that I do not believe God encourages or likes divorce; in fact, He hates it (Malachi 2:16). It grieves Him. However, I do believe that He can turn even our mistakes and poor choices into blessings! God is that good.

This is where my story should improve, but what's a good testimony if it stops here, right? I did many of the right things. I started to read my Bible again and spent some time in prayer. I had an on-again, off-again relationship with God during this time in my life.

By the grace of God, I met and married a wonderful man. I was actually able to quit smoking the same month of our wedding. (I do not recommend this—the timing, not the quitting.) However, my drinking turned into a daily ritual. I still had not figured out how to completely surrender my life, so I didn't. Drinking offered me a way to numb my feelings

so I wouldn't have to experience the pain they caused.

My husband, Eric, and I lived a pretty normal life. Before we got married, we both committed our lives to Christ. A year later, we decided to start a family, and I became pregnant. I stopped drinking during my pregnancy. All was well until I found out when I was five months pregnant that our baby had died. I was devastated. I didn't understand. I had been a "good girl" as of late. Why would God punish me in such a way? We were going to church; in fact, I was actually leading worship on Sunday mornings. What did I do wrong?

During this time, I allowed alcohol, not God, to comfort me because I didn't want to deal with the pain. We waited for two years to try to get pregnant again. When we did, we were blessed with a beautiful little girl. Everything was "good."

As a stay-at-home mom, my drinking became out of control. In all of the years I drank, I never considered myself an alcoholic. I had an image of an alcoholic, and it didn't look like me. I never drank in the morning; I had a family and a decent life. In my mind, alcohol didn't interfere. I was so deceived. I was living a double life. I was a stay-at-home mom who led praise and worship in my church and even spoke to women's groups on occasion, but I wouldn't miss a chance to get drunk.

I would hear God's voice and then promptly ignore Him. What is so important to understand about God is that He is a gentleman. He will never force us to turn our will over to Him. Instead, He gently prods and waits.

When I was a working woman, before my children were born, my drinking would begin the minute I arrived home from work—no sooner. However, without the constraints of a "time clock," my drinking could begin whenever I wanted it to. I would always limit myself to the afternoon because, in my mind, only alcoholics drank in the morning. My drinking began to start earlier and earlier. Initially, it was five o'clock and then three o'clock and then noon.

My drink of choice was wine. My husband started

noticing that the wine was going quickly. I would tell him that I'd spilled it, which was usually true to some extent, but I soon realized I wouldn't be able to keep up the charade. I stopped drinking wine during the day and switched to any other alcohol we had in the house.

I was usually pretty looped by the time Eric arrived home; yet, I was a master at covering my tracks. I would pour my first glass of wine the minute he came home, so I was never lying when I told him it was my first glass of wine for the day. I would play little games in which I would drink the entire glass when he wasn't looking and refill it to the same spot. That way, he wouldn't know how much I'd actually consumed.

I was blacking out every night. A blackout is an alcohol-induced state in which you experience a period of amnesia without losing consciousness. If I needed to get up early the following morning, I would have to set the alarm by six o'clock that evening because I knew I would be too drunk to set it any later than that. I would often wake up the next morning, not remembering putting my daughter to bed the night before.

One morning I woke up, went in to my 12-month-old daughter's room, and found red wine spilled all over her changing table and crib. I was devastated—but not devastated enough to stop drinking.

My husband and I would fight often. He became my babysitter when we went out for an evening, and he would often ask me why I couldn't just stop at one drink. I didn't know the answer. I just knew every time I tried to cut back, I couldn't. I would make little rules for myself. For example, I would say I was only going to drink on special occasions. Then there would be a really good TV show on, and a drink was readily available. Clearly, they didn't have to be very special occasions. I would say I was only going to drink on weekends. Then we would have a spaghetti dinner on a Tuesday, and you can't eat pasta without wine. I finally said I wouldn't drink at home. No drinking at home? No problem. I

just made sure we went out every night that week.

My daughter was 18 months old at this time, and God was really nudging me to stop drinking. I didn't want to hear it. It was the one area in my life I did not want to turn over to God. I knew deep down that I needed to, but the thought terrified me.

One day I woke up after a particularly embarrassing drunk and decided I needed to make a change. I couldn't ignore God's voice any longer, so I decided to go to a 12-step meeting. I went to an area of town that was not great, but it was a lunch meeting. My assumption was that there would be a bunch of business people at the meeting on their lunch breaks. I couldn't have been more wrong. I walked in and sat down among a group of people who looked a bit harsh, to say the least. I would have left, but I was afraid to draw attention to myself. So I sat. I sat and listened to stories of people I thought had nothing in common with me; however, what I realized was that there was one thing that bonded me to them—alcohol. I heard the similarities in their stories, not the differences.

I left the meeting that day moved but determined it was not for me. I spoke with my husband about it, and he suggested that I try a meeting closer to home. I did. It was a Wednesday night, and the meeting was at a church nearby. As I parked my car, I noticed three very attractive women walking toward the door of the church. One of the women I recognized as someone I had worked with several years earlier. She was someone I admired and respected a great deal. Even though I was incredibly embarrassed to get out of the car, I did. I was certain that these women were on their way to a choir rehearsal.

As we approached the door, my friend recognized me and said hello. One of her friends looked at the directory that was at the front door of the church and moved her finger toward the big sign that listed all of the church activities for the evening to find the room where the 12-step program was located. I was shocked, and my face showed it. My friend

asked if it was my first meeting, and I reluctantly told her it was my second. We went in, and it was at that meeting I first declared I was an alcoholic.

I found out that evening that it was the first time, and the only time, these three women were ever at that meeting. Isn't God good? Though my recovery has not always been easy, God has always been faithful. Regardless of how you feel about 12-step meetings, God provided me the tools I needed when I needed them in order to live a sober life. He gave me the desire and the ability to truly put Him first.

Life didn't become perfect, but my husband and I did stop the horrible fighting. I remember thinking, *Wow, since I stopped drinking, Eric has really changed!* It took a little bit for me to fully understand that I was the one who had changed. Guess I'm a slow learner.

We suffered three more miscarriages after the birth of our daughter, but God, faithful again, has blessed us with two more children, another girl and a boy. He has provided us a life of blessing and joy instead of pain and tragedy. Scripture tells us, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). I am literally a new person. I have a new reputation today!

This did not happen by accident, however. I had to come to Christ broken and ask Him to heal me. I have to do things daily to walk with Him. The first thing I must do is say no to my flesh. We're told in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." We have to die to ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to live in us and direct our every step.

My sobriety is hard work. I must die daily to my flesh. However, this is not the only area to which I must die. Dying to our flesh is a battle for all of us, whether our flesh is screaming for alcohol or whether our flesh is screaming for gossip, cookies, or a reprieve from cleaning the house.

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Second, I have to devour the Word. Psalm 119:11 says, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.” I know that Jesus Christ is the only thing that will keep me from destruction. I have learned that Christ can only fill the emptiness I had been trying to fill for years. I have learned that my desire to be “daddy’s little girl” is fulfilled by Abba Father. John 1:12-13 says, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” I realized I was always Daddy’s little girl. Praise God!

I remember the first time I realized that the Creator of the universe loves me! He loves me! The awe that I felt put me on my knees, unable to speak. I could only cry and praise Him. Luke 7:47 is so true. It says, “Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much” (NKJV). My sins—and they were many—were forgiven!

I have not arrived, not even close. Yet, I am a continuing work of His hands. Psalm 138:7-8 says, “Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You preserve my life; You stretch out Your hand against the anger of my foes, with Your right hand You save me. The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me; Your love, O Lord, endures forever—do not abandon the works of Your hands (NIV).”

My biological father may have abandoned me, but my God did not once abandon me. Although I left Him plenty of times, He remained constant, patient, and faithful. Psalm 139:13-14 says, “For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” I was fearfully and wonderfully made. I wasn’t worthless at all.

And God is so good and so patient. He is here for you and for me. All we need to do is be open to His love. We can’t get the gift of salvation by doing good or working hard. God made it simple. All you have to do is receive that gift,

repent (turn away from your sin and turn toward Christ), and ask (and allow) Jesus to be the Lord of your life. Build that personal relationship with Him by reading His Word and spending time talking to Him in prayer.

Life as a Christian is not perfect; in fact, Jesus was very clear about that in John 16:33. He said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” I still have problems and at times do the wrong thing. The difference now is that I no longer live life on my own. I am forgiven, and I have been set free!

THE FREEDOM TO SAY *NO!*

Freedom is a funny thing. I believe that in order to be truly free, you have to relinquish your own control in some way. Think about that: If we want to be free in a certain area of our lives, we have to sacrifice something in a different area. For example, if I want the freedom to have short hair, I have to sacrifice having long hair. And on a more somber note, as a country, many lives have been sacrificed so that we can live free and independent lives.

Shortly after Eric and I got married, we decided we were going to go and buy a Yellow Labrador retriever. We had found a Lab for sale in the paper on this huge farm that also had pheasants. The breeder had two puppies left—a Yellow Lab (the one we intended to get) and a cute little Black Lab. Eric made the mistake of wanting to see the pheasant farm and left me alone with the two dogs. It took no time at all for me to fall in love with both of them, and by the time we left the farm, we were the proud owners of two dogs. We named them Coco and Chanel, and for those of you who know anything about fashion, you get that.

We have since lost Coco and Chanel but they were great dogs. But we found that Coco, our Black Lab, was a little—okay, a lot—smarter than Chanel. Yet, Coco was the innocent-looking one that always seemed to be the least likely to be at fault when they got in trouble. Because there were two of them, it would appear that they got in more trouble than if there had been only one.

The house we lived in had a 4-foot chain-link fence that worked really well for our dogs for the first 10 weeks or so.

But as the dogs grew, they realized they could easily jump the fence and have the run of the neighborhood all day long. It didn't take us too long to figure out that we would need to implement something stronger in order to keep our dogs in the yard. The next step was a big chain-link kennel. The kennel was big enough for our two Labs to fit in comfortably while we were gone. Needless to say, our two little angels figured out how to pry the door open and escape and then jump the 4-foot chain-link fence. Strike two!

At this point, we decided a little bit of pain would be the answer. We set up an invisible fence. That way, if they crossed it, they would receive a shock from a collar and quickly learn that crossing the invisible fence was a bad idea. Well, I believe Coco, the smarter of the two, convinced Chanel to cross and see how badly it might hurt. Unfortunately for us, the dogs learned that after a couple of quick shocks, they were off to freedom again. So, they would break through the big kennel, suffer through the shock of the invisible fence, and jump over the 4-foot fence. Brilliant.

At one point, I asked a friend to just check on the dogs and make sure that they were still in the yard. She called me and asked, "You have a Yellow Lab and a Black Lab, right?" I said, "Yeah, why?" She then informed me that they were currently running down the street! Ugh. Well, we finally wised up and built a 6-foot privacy fence that they could not jump over. We won!

What my dogs didn't understand was that when they broke through the confines of the safety of our yard, they could run into all kinds of dangers they couldn't foresee. The Humane Society could pick them up, haul them away, and lock them up until we came to bail them out. They could have gotten hit by a car and been seriously injured or killed. In fact, any number of things could have harmed them.

Yet, when they stayed put, they had the freedom to run and play and be safe under our constant watch and care. They thought they were receiving freedom when they escaped, but their true freedom to live a happy and content life was in the

safety of our backyard.

Freedom in Christ is a lot like that. We often think that when we become a Christian, God has so many rules and regulations set up that it looks like quite the opposite of freedom. We often want to break free and do our own thing and live our own lives. Yet, what we sometimes don't understand is that true freedom is turning our will and lives over to Christ and allowing Him to take control.

Our goal shouldn't be to live a life of independence so we can do our own thing. Our goal should be to live our lives, walking in the power of the Holy Spirit and free from the chains that bind us. Turning your will over to Jesus and allowing Him to take control of your life can give you the freedom He wants you to have. How do we allow God to take control of our lives? Well, I'm afraid this is the part that requires a tremendous amount of work. While it may be simple, it certainly isn't easy.

Consider what Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (NIV)." What is this saying? We must be willing to be disciplined enough to say *no* to our flesh. It's not necessarily new to us. If our goal is to be a healthy weight for our body, we have to be disciplined in certain areas to achieve that goal. We must be willing to say *no* to excess food and *yes* to exercise. It may not be what we want to do, but it is what we need to do to get what we ultimately want. Perhaps it doesn't seem pleasant, as the writer of Hebrews maintains, but it "produces a harvest of righteousness and peace." We have to do the work. There is no magic behind it, simply hard work.

In America today we have created a society of fast-food and drive-thrus. We have remote controls and microwave ovens. Simply put, we have it pretty easy. Although technology can be an amazing blessing, let's face it—we have created an environment for the lazy. Even as Christians today, we have a tendency to want the quick breakthrough. In

an article called “Getting Back to ‘Classic’ Christianity” by J. Lee Grady, he states, “In so many churches today the cross is not mentioned. The blood is avoided because we don’t want to offend visitors...In the books Christians buy today you will find little mention of brokenness. We are not interested in a life that might require suffering, patience, purging or the discipline of the Lord. We want our blessings...and we want them now! So we look for the Christian brand of spiritualized self-help that is quick and painless.”¹

Jesus requires much more out of us. He requires us to step up as Christians and do the hard work and give the effort it takes to live a life of victory. He requires brokenness. We need to be willing to go to God and say what David said in Psalm 139:23-24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” If we ask God to search us and show us our wicked ways, guess what? He will! Hard truths will be revealed to us; however, this is the only way that our brokenness can turn into righteousness.

The good news? In Christ, we have a High Priest who completely relates to our struggles. “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil...Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Hebrews 2:14-18).

¹ Grady, J. Lee, “Getting Back to ‘Classic’ Christianity,” *Charisma* magazine, <http://www.charismamag.com/blogs/fire-in-my-bones/6113-getting-back-to-classic-christianity>, 2009,

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Look at that! Jesus gets it. Not only does He understand what we are going through, He has been there. We have a Savior who has gone through temptation and hardships. We have a Savior who understands the pain of saying *no* to His flesh.

TEMPTATION

We will all be tempted in differing areas of our lives. And yet, in James chapter 1, the half brother of Jesus tells us what about temptation? Read with me in the King James Version first. “My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers [or various] temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

Now let’s read it in the New King James Version, “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” Lacking nothing or, in other words, being made whole. But why the change of words in the translations? Why trials instead of temptations? What’s the difference between a trial and a temptation? These are the kinds of questions I ask myself when I’m studying God’s Word.

Well, let’s explore. James 1:13 says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.” But, we’re told in James 1:2-3 that we should count it all joy when tempted or tested because it produces Christlikeness. Christlikeness sounds like something that God would want for us. And yet, the Greek word in James 1:2 is translated in the King James Version as “temptation.” The Greek word is *peirasmos* —a word meaning a test or a trial that can produce moral and spiritual growth. The Greek word used in James 1:13—translated as “tempted” in the KJV—is the word

peirazō, which means an enticement to sin. We need to know that God cannot and will not ever *tempt* us; however, God can certainly *test* us. Testing is one of the tools that God uses to produce in us endurance and perseverance.

James then tells us to “count it all joy.” Really? I don’t know about you, but during my times of trials, testing, or temptation, it’s often hard to have a tremendous amount of joy, let alone any joy at all.

I shared with you that I have struggled with addiction. The reality is I am one of those people who don’t know the definition of moderation. Moderation—that is one word I’ve never bothered looking up in the Greek.

God has taken me on a journey over the years of stripping me of everything in my life that is blocking me from true intimacy with Him. I am definitely not on the other side of that journey, and I certainly don’t know how it will end, but I know that we should all be on this journey. In my life it started with the really big, obvious things—like addiction and sexual sin. But now, this stripping process has developed into a refining process that can be very painful at times.

Yet, as we just read, James tells us to count it all joy. That’s hard to do when you’re in the midst of a trial. So, how can we understand the word joy? Joy doesn’t focus on our circumstances in life but focuses on the fact that God is a Holy, Sovereign God and that He knows what’s best for us. Having a life full of joy is all about trusting in God and walking away with a peace that passes all understanding.

I have the privilege of working with another ministry that has speakers talking to middle school and high school kids about healthy relationships and the benefits of waiting until marriage to have sex. I am privileged to be one of those speakers. It’s an eye-opening experience to say the least. One of the things that I talk about to these young, impressionable kids is the goals they have for their future.

At some point in our time together, I have them write out three goals they want to achieve for high school, college, and their overall life. Then we talk about them. After I hear

what some of the kids' goals are, I share with them the analogy that life is like a hallway. At this point in their life they are at the beginning of the hallway. At the end of the hallway is the end of their life. Along the hallway are several doors they can open that will offer them opportunities to test their integrity. Sometimes if they open one of those doors and walk in, they may never come out. I continue with the idea that when we walk down a hallway looking down at the floor, we may run into things, we may fall down, and we might not even make it to the end of the hallway.

Trying to walk down the hallway looking at the floor is similar to saying: *I want it now, I want to be satisfied now, I want pleasure now, and I want to be fulfilled now.* But when our focus is at the end of the hallway with our head held up and looking forward—or, in other words, focused on our goals in life—we can successfully walk through the hallway even if there are roadblocks. We have to walk down the hallway of life, often saying *no* to immediate pleasure and satisfaction so that we can reach our goals.

While that is what I tell kids in middle school and high school, can't we be just like that? Joy looks beyond our current circumstances and to our eternal salvation in Jesus Christ. We have to remember one very important thing—this is not our home. And when our focus is on the here and now, when we focus on our pleasure and fulfillment—whatever that may be—we will not walk through the hallway of life very well. We will give in to temptation. We will give in to what society says is right—even when God says it's wrong, we will give in to our fleshly desires, and we will fall. But when our focus is on Jesus Christ and when we allow the Holy Spirit to help us walk through that hallway, we will reach our goal. We will have victory in Christ on this earth and our heavenly home.

When I quit drinking I was not expecting the physical withdrawal symptoms. And while the symptoms I experienced—even though I had been a daily drinker for years—were not severe enough to keep me in bed, they were

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disconcerting. I got sober on a Wednesday, and the following Sunday I actually gave a sermon for one of our church services. I remember gripping onto the podium for dear life because I feared if I would have let go of that podium I would not have been standing. But, nonetheless, I persevered.

Temptations are all around us, but, praise God, we don't have to fight them alone. Even Jesus faced temptation. Three of the four gospels share the story of the temptation of Jesus. All three of them are different in the way they are written; however, each tells the same compelling story.

Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ²being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.³ And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." But Jesus answered him, saying, ⁴ "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.'" ⁵ Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ⁶ And the devil said to Him, "All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. ⁷ Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours." ⁸ And Jesus answered and said to him, "Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" ⁹ Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is

written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you,’¹¹ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’”¹² And Jesus answered and said to him, “It has been said, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’”¹³ Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:1-13)

Through this passage in Luke we see that Jesus was tempted in every area of life where we are tempted. He was tempted by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. In the wilderness, Satan tells Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.”

The lust of the flesh

Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and nights and was undoubtedly very hungry. Yet, He responded by saying, “It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

The lust of the eyes

Then, the devil took Jesus to a high mountain and offered Jesus all authority over the kingdoms of the world. I love Jesus’ response, “Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”

The pride of life

Then Satan took Jesus to Jerusalem and to the pinnacle of the temple. The final temptation is the one where Satan told Jesus to throw Himself off the temple and let the angels catch Him. Jesus replied, “It has been said, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’”

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And Satan left. But before he leaves, he declares that he will return at a more opportune time. What could be a more opportune time than finding your enemy weak and hungry? What could be a more opportune time than your enemy getting you alone? But Satan knew there would come a more opportune time when Jesus was at the height of His ministry. Satan often works that way; when we are ready for temptation, it is much easier to fight. But, what about when we are caught off guard? That's when the enemy can swoop in and hit us exactly where it hurts.

Isaiah 59:19b tells us, "When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD will lift up a standard against him." There is no question that the enemy will come in like a flood, but we do not have to battle him on our own. It is important to know, however, that he will attack us in three places: the lust of the flesh (our fleshly appetite), the lust of the eyes (our desire for power and possessions), and the pride of life (our desire to be recognized publicly and to receive the glory). We must be prepared to stand against the enemy and his temptation.

Jesus' temptation experience with Satan was sandwiched between two powerful moments in His life. Right before Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted, He had just had a great spiritual experience. He had been baptized by John the Baptist, and we're told in Matthew 3:16-17, "When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The temptations began immediately following this declaration, and His powerful ministry began immediately following the temptations. The reality is, Satan does not waste his gunpowder on nominal Christians.

In this passage, we can learn a tremendous amount from Jesus Himself. First, we learn that temptation in and of itself is not a sin. Jesus was tempted and yet He did not sin. In fact,

we're told in Hebrews 4:14-16, "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Praise God, Jesus teaches us exactly how to handle it when we are tempted. James 4:7 tells us to resist the devil, and he will flee from us. Yes, Satan does have power; and he is stronger than we are when we walk in our own strength. However, we're also told greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). If you are in Christ, if you have made Jesus Christ the Lord of your life, then you have the Holy Spirit dwelling in you. That is power!

Jesus even taught us how to battle the enemy. Every time Satan tempted the Lord, Jesus responded with three very powerful words: "It is written." Jesus battled Satan with Scripture, and we must do the same.

Not too long ago I was going through a time when I felt like I wanted to give up. I was fighting a battle against Satan, and I seemed to be losing pretty rapidly. I had made it clear to my inner circle that I desperately needed prayer—and when they are asked to pray, they pray! I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was covered in prayer. Every week the Set Me Free Ministries' (the ministry I am a part of) prayer team comes together for a time of prayer over the phone. It's a beautiful experience in which godly women from all over the country spend almost an hour beseeching, glorifying, and worshiping a God who goes before us in all we do.

During one of these prayer times, as I was still going through my presumably losing battle with the enemy, I was barely holding my head above water. I know that sounds dramatic, but the spiritual attack I was experiencing was so emotionally draining that I had spent that entire morning in

tears. One of our dearest prayer warriors was the first person on the phone with me, and she innocently asked me how I was. That was all it took for the floodgates to open. I told her exactly how I was feeling. As each person joined the call, I shared my darkest feelings, and those amazing women covered me in prayer in the most precious of ways.

And then, as we were praying, the Holy Spirit reminded me of that time when Jesus was being tempted by Satan. He reminded me of those three little words: “It is written.” I had been doing my best to pray, read the Bible, and even worship, but I had forgotten to battle with Scripture. When you take the Word of God and believe that God is who He says He is and will do what He says He will do—including battle for you—then the battle is already won!

After I hung up the phone that day, I immediately grabbed my Bible and found and wrote down Scripture after Scripture on spiritual warfare. I spent at least an hour just speaking and praying those Scriptures with those three little words in front of each one. I did the same thing the next day, feeling as if I were face-to-face with the enemy himself. Only this time, I was facing him with the armor of Jesus Christ!

Temptation is challenging you to battle without the armor of God. Ask King David. He is a familiar Bible character to many of us. He is the one who slew Goliath with just a sling and a stone. He then became the King of Israel. We’re going to read a little about this king who seemingly had everything going for him.

It happened in the spring of the year, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the people of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

²Then it happened one evening that David arose from his bed and walked on the roof of the king’s house. And from the roof he saw a

woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold.
(2 Samuel 11:1-2)

I would like to camp here very briefly. Notice that statement: “at the time when kings go out to battle...but David remained in Jerusalem.” Scripture makes a point of letting us know that at a time when all of the kings went into battle, David did not go. He was supposed to be somewhere and did not do what he was supposed to do. Not only isn't he doing what he should be doing, but his men are in battle, and he's taking a nap. Not very kingly of David.

So David sent and inquired about the woman. And someone said, “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?”⁴ Then David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her, for she was cleansed from her impurity; and she returned to her house.⁵ And the woman conceived; so she sent and told David, and said, “I am with child.”

⁶Then David sent to Joab, saying, “Send me Uriah the Hittite.” And Joab sent Uriah to David.⁷ When Uriah had come to him, David asked how Joab was doing, and how the people were doing, and how the war prospered.⁸ And David said to Uriah, “Go down to your house and wash your feet.” So Uriah departed from the king's house, and a gift of food from the king followed him.⁹ But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house.¹⁰ So when they told David, saying, “Uriah did not go down to his house,” David said to Uriah, “Did you not come from a journey? Why did you not go

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down to your house?”¹¹ And Uriah said to David, “The ark and Israel and Judah are dwelling in tents, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open fields. Shall I then go to my house to eat and drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing.”

(2 Samuel 11:3-11)

David was entangled in a horrible sin. David has sex with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Clearly that is bad enough; David was committing adultery. But when we look at 2 Samuel 23:39 we see something extremely critical in David’s web of deceit. We find out that Uriah, the man David was betraying, was one of David’s mighty men. The mighty men consisted of 37 of David’s top military men. This makes what David did even more appalling. He took the wife of one of his most trusted men.

The situation worsens when Bathsheba becomes pregnant. This most definitely was not in David’s plan, so he begins to scheme. He told Uriah to go to his house and wash his feet (which meant go home and rest), assuming that Uriah would have sex with his wife and cover up his own sin. However, Uriah, being a man of honor, refuses to even step foot in his house because the ark of God and the rest of Israel’s army were all outside in tents. As a man of character, Uriah refuses to have better accommodations than his men.

Think about that contrast. David, the king, is napping at home while his men are in battle; yet, Uriah will not even sleep in his own home out of respect for David and God. Let’s read on:

Then David said to Uriah, “Wait here today also, and tomorrow I will let you depart.” So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next.¹³ Now when David called him, he ate

and drank before him; and he made him drunk. And at evening he went out to lie on his bed with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

¹⁴In the morning it happened that David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. ¹⁵And he wrote in the letter, saying, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retreat from him, that he may be struck down and die." ¹⁶So it was, while Joab besieged the city, that he assigned Uriah to a place where he knew there were valiant men. ¹⁷Then the men of the city came out and fought with Joab. And some of the people of the servants of David fell; and Uriah the Hittite died also.

(2 Samuel 11:12-17)

David's first plan didn't work, so he digs the hole deeper. He feeds Uriah food and drink and proceeds to get him drunk, hoping now he will sleep with his wife. Yet again, Uriah, being a man of integrity, refuses to sleep with his wife. So now David has to do something to cover up the pregnancy and the affair. He does the unthinkable and tells his army commander to put Uriah on the frontline and abandon him there during one of the most heated battle in the hope that Uriah would be killed in battle. David put out a hit on Uriah.

It finally worked. Uriah was killed, David took Bathsheba for his wife, and the two had a son. But this does not go unnoticed by the Lord. God sends to King David the prophet Nathan, who tells him this story:

Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him: "There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had exceedingly many

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flocks and herds. ³But the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

(2 Samuel 12:1-4)

David is furious and tells Nathan that the man who committed such a heinous crime must die! Nathan then stuns David when he informs him that *David* is the man in the story. Immediately, David's eyes were opened, and he says that he has sinned against the Lord. He repents of his sin, and because of his sincere repentance, David is told that the Lord has put away his sin.

What horrific sins David committed, and yet, God calls David a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22). How can that be when David had so much sin in his life? It was his repentant heart that moved the Lord.

Please take notice. We do not have to be defined by our sin and we absolutely do not have to live our lives going back to the same old sin again and again. But turning away from sin is a choice. David made the choice to repent. He made the choice to fall down before the Lord and say *no more!* I will be obedient. I want to live a life following after You, God. David said, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

Let's look again at Isaiah 59:19b: "When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him." This means that God comes to our

defense and fights the battle for us. The enemy doesn't have a chance when we battle him using the power of the Holy Spirit. But let's be honest. The flesh, which is what we are often battling with temptation, is hard to fight. Our flesh, or our outward man, is literally in rebellion against God.

We're told in Romans 13:14 to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." Make no provision for the flesh. What does that mean? It means don't supply your flesh with the bad things it wants. In simple terms, if you are an alcoholic, don't go to a bar. If you have a problem with food, don't bring junk food into your home. If you are attracted to a coworker and you are married, don't have lunch alone with that person. If you have a problem with gossip, don't pick up the phone after you find out a juicy piece of information. Better yet, don't listen to a juicy piece of information in the first place. Make no provision for the flesh.

Our flesh is warring after us to destroy us. If you feed your flesh, it will grow. I heard a pastor say something so striking that it actually left me breathless for a moment. He said, "Some of you are confusing God's patience with God's approval." I want to repeat that. "Some of you are confusing God's patience with God's approval."² He is a patient God, and He loves us very much, but He does not love sin; in fact, He hates sin. God is a Holy God. Because He is Holy, He cannot be in the presence of sin. When we sin, there are consequences, and we have to understand that sin affects our life. In addition to the natural consequences, sin separates us from God.

Jesus was taken to the wilderness—what are your wilderness times? Does temptation ever overtake you then? Jesus was taken to a high mountain. We have those high-mountain moments in life when things are going great with our job, our family, our ministry, and even our relationship

² Idleman, Shane, *Fighting Temptation*, Westside Christian Fellowship, June 2012.

with the Lord. Does temptation ever overtake you then? Jesus was taken to the temple, which was His home, His Father's house. When we are walking closely with the Lord, does temptation ever overtake you then?

In His Word, God makes us a promise. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

With all and any temptation, God provides a way out. I often hear people say, "God only gives us what we can handle." But the Bible never says that. We are often given things we simply can't handle, at least not in our own power. We are, however, given the promise that we will not be tempted beyond what we can bear, but that He will always provide us a way out. We can always stand against temptation, but not in our own power. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

David made some pretty big missteps, and yet, he lived a life following after the heart of God. We need a life that desires to follow after Christ. We need to be in God's Word daily; we need to have a prayer life that seeks after God; we need to allow the Holy Spirit to take over so we can live lives of righteousness and obedience.

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WHAT DO WE DO WITH TEMPTATION?

Temptation is something that happens to all of us; yet, it is something we often don't like to talk about. It can seem at times that temptation is a sign of weakness. However, when we look to Jesus, we realize that the act of being tempted does not imply weakness at all.

Remember 1 Corinthians 10:13? It says, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." Notice that this Scripture does not say we won't be tempted if we simply have enough faith. It doesn't say that eventually we will get so spiritual that we won't be tempted. No, temptation will come. Jesus promises us that. Yet, He also promises that when temptation does come, it will not be more than we can bear, and He will always provide a way out.

We need to be on guard with our own personal weaknesses at all times. Have you ever noticed when you are struggling with something—no matter what it is (food, drugs, sexual immorality, anger)—the longer we say *yes* to the temptation, the harder it is to see the way out? Whenever we give in to our flesh in an area of temptation, the easier it is to give in the next time.

God is ready to help us fight our weaknesses. The problem is we often try to fight them on our own. We need to pray, "Lord, You know I struggle in this area, please help me fight this temptation." Turn your desire over to Him. He will help. He may not remove the desire completely, but He

will provide a way out.

Jesus was tempted in all things. He spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness with Satan. He was tempted, yet each time Satan offered Him something, Jesus countered by quoting Scripture. According to 2 Corinthians 10:4, “The weapons we fight with are not of this world. On the contrary they have divine power to demolish strongholds.” We have the Word of God as a powerful weapon. We have worship and praise as a powerful weapon. The powers of hell cannot defeat us if we use these weapons of warfare against them.

Keep in mind, Jesus’ temptation in life was not limited to this time in the wilderness. Jesus fought off temptation daily. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus spent time in prayer before He was crucified. He knew that He had to spend a tremendous amount of time with His Father in order to do His will. He even told His disciples, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” Jesus was in such agony that the Bible says, “His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44).

Jesus knows what we are going through. He has experienced temptation. He knows how hard it can be to deny ourselves and be obedient to God. Yet, God provides us with the tools to get the job done: an opportunity to walk away from a negative situation, speaking and praying Scripture, spending time in prayer, praising God through good times and bad. Don’t wait, however, until you are standing directly in front of your temptation. Fight the battle before the temptation occurs. He will provide a way out!

As Christians, we need to be honest with what is tempting us. We need to look objectively at what God calls sin. For instance, Philippians 3:19, speaking of the enemies of the cross, says this, “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” Yet, why does it seem that there are so many overweight, even obese, people in the body of Christ? Why has obesity become the acceptable sin? Christ requires something of us that is not easy but is necessary. He requires

us to rise up to a standard of holiness that we can't attain in our own ability. It requires help from the Holy Spirit. It requires obedience.

Several years ago, I spent the morning in what seemed to be the school of the Holy Spirit. The class was "Lessons in Obedience." All morning it appeared that God was showing me through little life lessons why it is so important to be obedient to Him. My two youngest children, Tessa and Will, were getting in the car to head off to preschool for the morning. Needless to say, as they often do, they had been fighting all morning. Getting into the car was no different that day. I told my daughter to get in to her booster seat and buckle up, and then I gave my son the same instruction. My son, the younger of the two, decided he didn't want to get in his seat, but he wanted to open all of the car doors. This upset Tessa immensely, and she determined that she was going to correct this situation.

Tessa began "mothering" Will. My response was to tell her to get in her car seat and buckle up. I also repeated that same direction to Will, but it was all to no avail. Neither one of them was listening to me. Is anyone out there familiar with this situation? Anyone?

As I was getting into the car myself, Tessa inadvertently poked Will in the eye while trying to make sure he was being obedient to Mom. I explained to Tessa that if she had just listened to me initially and done what I had asked instead of worrying if her brother was doing what was right, she would have been just fine and Will wouldn't have had a painful poke in the eye.

Through this incident, God so clearly showed me that we adult children in the Kingdom are no different. Look at what Jesus said to Peter when he was concerned about what John was doing.

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“I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don’t want to go.’ Jesus said this to let him know by what kind of death he would glorify God. Then Jesus told him, ‘Follow me.’ Peter turned around and saw behind them the disciple Jesus loved—the one who had leaned over to Jesus during supper and asked, ‘Lord, who will betray You?’ Peter asked Jesus, ‘What about him, Lord?’ Jesus replied, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? As for you, follow me.’ So the rumor spread among the community of believers that this disciple wouldn’t die. But that isn’t what Jesus said at all. He only said, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?’”
(John 21:18-23; NLT)

Notice that Peter was so concerned about what would happen to John that Jesus essentially told him, “Quit worrying about him, I’m talking to you.” When we are obedient to God, He will take care of us. God is a God of justice. He will always make sure that people are held accountable for their actions; however, that is up to Him, not us. If we can learn to be obedient without worrying about whether or not God is going to “take care of that other person,” we will be truly blessed with the peace and joy of Christ. Obedience to God is all about ourselves, not anyone else. This is one of the secrets to true happiness.

My second lesson that day began while I was dropping Tessa and Will off at preschool. We were walking behind a woman with two small children, and one of the little girls, who appeared to be around two, had her shoes on the wrong

feet. Now, my kids, when they were that age, loved to be independent and often put their shoes on by themselves. There were quite a few times their shoes ended up on the wrong feet, and depending on how quickly we were trying to leave the house, I may or may not have noticed the error.

I kindly pointed out to the mom that the shoes were reversed, thinking that she, too, just hadn't noticed. She turned to me, smiling and said, "Oh, I know. Sometimes she puts her shoes on by herself, and she'll get them on the wrong feet. I hate to correct her, and it doesn't seem to bother her, so why should it bother me?"

Holy Spirit teaching tool time! Was He telling me to mind my own business like I told Tessa? Well, it was a bit of a different lesson. How often do we do something wrong and the Holy Spirit corrects us? If you're me, it's a lot! But the Holy Spirit has a way of correcting us with a tremendous amount of love. As parents, we should be able to relate to this very thing. When our kids put their shoes on the wrong feet, we should absolutely encourage them for attempting to step out and be independent. However, without having correction, they are never going to learn the right way to accomplish things. As parents, we can see the big picture. Shoes put on incorrectly will ultimately damage our children's feet. If we let that go for too long, it will have serious consequences. In addition, shoes on the wrong feet may be a bit uncomfortable, but if our children don't fully know how shoes should feel, they may not completely recognize the discomfort.

Sometimes we have a tendency in life to do things that grieve the Holy Spirit. It's possible that we may have been doing this for so long, it's really all we know. Even if we are convicted by our actions (or, in the case of the shoes, feel a bit uncomfortable while doing it), we may not completely recognize that life could be so much better if we were doing the right thing. More importantly, if we continue to do the wrong things in life, we will ultimately face serious consequences.

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Romans 12:2 says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Now, yes, if we are obedient to God and do His will, He will be pleased. Yet, let’s look at this verse a little closer. If we do God’s will, *we* will be pleased. When we are obedient to God, we are blessed and will have the fullness of joy in Christ! In essence, we will enjoy the outcome.

Back to the little girl with her shoes on the wrong feet: Yes, she will need to take the time, sit down, and put her shoes on again. She may not want to change her shoes, but if she doesn’t, she will have to face some unpleasant consequences later on. If she does the right thing now, she walks around comfortable and with a full ability to run.

We may have to say *no* to our flesh and do some things that may seem hard to do at the time; however, if we are obedient to God, we will have a peace in life that no one can explain, and we will have the ability to run our race!

God is a Holy, Sovereign God. Although He is a God of mercy, grace and forgiveness, He can’t be in the presence of sin. As Christians, we are required to humble ourselves before Him and become more Christ-like. This isn’t something that is done quickly or easily. It’s a process that is never complete until we are in His full glory.

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THE CROSS

We need to strive to live holy and obedient lives because of what Jesus Christ did for us. It seems that in today's culture, there are a lot of ideas on what it takes to get to heaven. We are so often told that there are many paths to heaven and that any of them will take you there. We are told that it doesn't really matter what you believe, just as long as you are a good person. We are even told that Jesus' death on the cross results in salvation for everyone. We don't need to follow Him; we don't need to know Him; and frankly, we don't even need to believe in Him. We can all still get to heaven. But is this what the Bible tells us? We can't truly know who God is and how to seek Him and break free from our chains unless we know what the Bible says.

Recently, I heard someone share that a very profound question was presented to a room full of seminary students—students studying to be pastors. If you came upon a person in a car crash and found out they had only three minutes to live, what would you tell them to make sure they had the security of spending eternity with Christ? The answers were shocking. They said things like: *I would tell them how much Jesus loves them. I would tell them that God is a God that can do amazing things. I would tell them about the Lord's Prayer.* But not one of the students shared the True Gospel. The person in the illustration would die, not knowing Jesus and spend eternity in hell and a life separated from God. Horrific.

I want to share a story with you. It is told by Robert Coleman in his book *The Heartbeat of Evangelism* regarding the

prominent preacher of old, Dr Charles Berry.³ In his younger days, Berry had struggled with the concept of the cross and its meaning.

When he began his ministry, like many people with humanistic training, he had looked upon Jesus more as a great moral teacher than a divine Saviour. He viewed Christianity as essentially living a good life.

Late one night during his first pastorate in England, while sitting in his study, he heard a knock. Opening the door, he saw a poorly dressed Lancashire girl. "Are you a minister?" she asked. Getting an affirmative answer, she continued anxiously: "You must come with me quickly. I want you to get my mother in." Imagining that it was the case of some drunken woman out on the streets, Berry said, "Why? Go and get a policeman." "No," said the girl, "my mother is dying, and you must come with me to get her in—to heaven."

The young minister dressed and followed her through the deserted streets for more than a mile. Led into the woman's room, he knelt down beside her and began describing the kindness of Jesus, explaining that he had come to show us how to live unselfishly. Suddenly the desperate woman cut Berry off. "Mister," she cried, "that's no use for the likes of me. I am a sinner. I have lived my life. Can't you tell me of someone who can have mercy on me, and save my poor soul?"

³ Coleman, Robert, *The Heartbeat of Evangelism*, pp 16-17, June 1985, Navpress Publishing

“I stood there,” said Dr Berry, “in the presence of a dying woman, and I had nothing to tell her. In order to bring something to that dying woman, I leaped back to my mother’s knee, to my cradle faith, and told her of the cross, and the Christ who was able to save.” Tears began running over the cheeks of the eager woman. “Now you are getting at it,” she said. “Now you are helping me.” And the famous preacher, concluding the story, said, “I want you to know that I got her in, and, blessed be God, I got in myself.”

That is some story. But that’s where we seem to be so often at church. I spoke to a youth group awhile back, and these kids were absolutely on fire for God. It was exciting to see some of the things they were doing under their leader, the youth pastor. I went to attend the church service after the youth service, and I was broken-hearted to find that the senior pastor never once mentioned the name of Jesus. The sermon he told was factual, but it was something I could have heard on a television show, watching any secular host. I thought, *If I didn’t know Jesus when I walked into this church, I still wouldn’t know Him when I walked out. How many people are actually sitting in these pews week after week and are still going to hell because they haven’t heard the True Gospel?* My heart broke.

The Bible is God’s love story to us. It’s His story of His character and redemption, and the story of redemption begins in Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. Life was good for Adam and Eve as they walked with God in the Garden of Eden. It was beautiful, and they were in a perfect relationship with God as they could commune with Him all day long. But Satan, our enemy, came along and lied to Eve, telling her she could be like God. It began there. The fall of that man into a life of sin resulted in all of us being born into

sin.

Satan said, “He told you that you were going to die? You aren’t going to die!” Isn’t that what Satan does so often? He tells us that we can do it on our own, that we don’t need to surrender anything to God. Those lies from the enemy still plague our society even today. But, praise God, He immediately began setting up His plan for redemption.

Genesis 3:15 says, “And I [the Lord] will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed [capital S]; He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise His [capital H] heel.” The Seed that the Father was referring to is Jesus Christ.

We see God’s love demonstrated throughout the Old Testament, but when we see the birth of the Messiah, we begin to truly understand His amazing love for us. Imagine what Jesus did for you and for me. He is God and yet, because He loves us, He came out of the heavenlies to put Himself in a human body, so that He could be flesh on earth. So that He could feel our pain, experience what we experience, but, more importantly, to become a sacrificial lamb for you and me.

But why in the world would He do that? I can’t help but wonder, *If there were many paths to heaven, why on earth would Jesus go through what He did? Why would He have suffered in that way?*

Leviticus 17:11 tells us, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.” The Jewish people knew that life was in the blood. Without blood flowing through our veins, we have no life. And what is atonement? Atonement is a covering for our sin.

Hebrews 9:22 says it this way, “And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission.” Remission of sins, or put another way, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. So the Jewish people would take their animal sacrifices to the Temple of God and make sacrifices to atone

(or cover) for their sins. But look at what Jesus did for us! He is God who became flesh. He was both God and man. He came to earth, lived a sinless life, was crucified on a cross, died a ghastly death, and in three days was resurrected from the dead. He became that blood sacrifice for us.

I believe that throughout my years as a Christian, I have “story-booked” the torture and torment that Jesus went through. We so often see beautiful pictures of Jesus on the cross. He is positioned elegantly, and His beautiful hair is neatly coifed under the creatively made crown of thorns. His body is not at all bruised, bloodied, or broken. These are our mental pictures. Of course, this makes it easier for us to digest the horrific truth of what Jesus actually went through for us.

However, this is not at all reality. Jesus was beaten, humiliated, and treated with absolute contempt. He was brutalized beyond recognition. And why? Why would Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, allow Himself to be removed from His heavenly body, to be trapped inside the body of a man? Why would He allow Himself to feel pain, temptation, hurt, grief, and anguish? Why would He allow Himself to become human when He is God?

So often we misunderstand the anguish of Christ. When we read about the beating of Jesus, we see the writers are referring to a process called scourging. The Romans would take a whip with several leather ropes. On the ends of these ropes were placed sharp pieces of bone or iron balls, and when the criminal was whipped, it would literally tear chunks of flesh out of their back. Some men died of scourging alone; they didn’t even make it to the cross. The cross, however, was a painful death that only criminals were subjected to. Often they would hang on the cross for days, slowly suffocating because the body could no longer hold itself upright and the lungs would have no ability to get air. It was a painful and gruesome death.

But even so, that wasn’t what truly tortured Jesus. When He hung on that cross, He took on all of our sins. Every sin

you've committed, every sin I've committed, even the worst sin we can think of—the putrid, disgusting, vile things people do—Jesus took on Himself. God who hates sin, God in flesh who had never once committed a single sin, took on every sin known to man on His shoulders. Imagine. And the Father had to look away. The only time ever the Father couldn't look at His Beloved Son.

But that very act was for you and for me. Why? Because He loves us. Our Jesus was beaten, bruised, slaughtered, and took on His shoulders all of our sin to make a way for us. Jesus did that for us because, as we are told in Romans 3:10, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” And in verse 23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The Bible makes it clear that we are all sinners. That's why we need a sacrificial lamb—because we are a sinful people with no way to remove our sins on our own. But the blood of Christ covers those sins. And why do we need our sins covered? Because our Holy, Sovereign God hates sin and cannot be in its presence.

We are told in the Bible that God's wrath and judgment is severe. It is only through the blood of Jesus Christ that we can be saved from God's wrath. Revelation tells us that Jesus is the door, but we have to open the door to be with Him. It's an action we have to take. We have to receive it. Jesus came to this earth the first time as a baby, grew into a man, and lived a sinless life to make a way for us. But He is coming back and putting His feet on this earth again. When He comes back the second time He is not coming back as a baby, but He is coming back as a judge.

I heard a wonderful illustration by a speaker once. She shared a story of a woman who, in a torrential downpour, ran from her car to the church with her unopened umbrella in hand. As she entered the church sopping wet, the speaker asked her, “Why in the world did you not open your umbrella?” The woman laughed and said, “It seemed like too much trouble.” The speaker went on to say, the wrath of God is just like that rain. The rain doesn't pick and choose where it

falls. It rains on absolutely everything. The rain touches everything until you open your umbrella. When you are in a downpour and open your umbrella, you are covered from the rain.

God's wrath rains on everything. His wrath will pour out on the entire world. But when we open our umbrella, when we take on the blood of Jesus Christ, when we accept Jesus as the Lord of our life and turn completely away from our old, sinful lives, and turn toward Jesus, we are completely covered and protected from God's wrath. And we are forgiven. Not by anything we do, not by being good, or working hard, or following a law, but by saying *yes* to Jesus and *no* to sin.

The speaker went on to say, don't ever let it be too much trouble to open your umbrella. There are some of us who have been living with an umbrella in hand our whole lives. We go to church on Sunday, we say we believe, but we have never really opened the umbrella. We have never really surrendered our lives over to the Living, Almighty God. We say we believe, but there hasn't been a true change in us. We still live the same old life we lived before we met Jesus. We look just like the world. Some of us have to open the umbrella and truly surrender to Him and be willing to follow Him, no matter what.

But salvation does not come from following the law of the Old Testament. We are saved by grace through faith. Read Ephesians 2:4-9, "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

We aren't saved of ourselves. It's a gift of God. But a gift we have to accept, receive, and freely acknowledge. We're

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told in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

We become a brand new creation when we are in Christ Jesus, and we have eternal life. It doesn't matter what we have done, it doesn't matter who we were, it simply doesn't matter. We are just like the dying woman in the story we read earlier who said, “I'm a sinner and I need to save my soul.” Our soul is saved when we put a believing faith in Jesus Christ whose blood was shed for our sins to save us from God's wrath. When we say *yes* to Him, we are covered. When we repent, say *yes* to Jesus and ask God to forgive us of all of those vile sins, He says, “Yes, My child, I forgive you.” And our sin is removed as far as the east is from the west.

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WHO ARE WE IN CHRIST?

Once we completely surrender to Christ, we must know who we are in Him. The world tells us to have self-confidence. But when I did an extensive search in several different translations of the Bible, I found the word “self-confidence” only once, in only one translation, and it was not a positive context. Nehemiah 6:16 indicates that the enemies of Nehemiah fell short in their own eyes because they recognized that God was much greater than they were.

Hebrews 10:35-36 states, “Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise...”

But is this referring to confidence in ourselves, confidence in what we can do in life? No, absolutely not. I want to backtrack a little to give you context on this verse. Hebrews 10:19-23 says, “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

Please allow me to give you a very brief biblical history lesson before we move on. Before Jesus walked on earth, the Tabernacle was built as a dwelling place for God. It was separated into three areas: the Outer Court (a place of

sacrifice), the Holy Place (a place of worship), and the Holy of Holies, also called the Most Holy Place (a place of communion adoration). The Holy of Holies was the area in which God dwelled. Separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place was a veil that was so tall, the top couldn't be reached. It was about 60 feet high, 30 feet wide, and four inches thick. In fact, when putting the veil up, it took 300 men to hold it. The veil was in place to deter anyone from approaching God's awesome presence with irreverence. In fact, the only person who could access the Father directly was the high priest, who had to go through meticulous measures to enter. Hebrews 9:7 tells us, "But only the high priest ever entered the Most Holy Place, and only once a year. And he always offered blood for his own sins and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance" (NLT).

Jesus and His last moments on the cross are illustrated in Matthew 27:50-51, "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split."

As Jesus drew His last breath on the cross, the veil was miraculously torn from top to bottom. No man could have torn the veil because the height and thickness made tearing it humanly impossible. Why did God tear the veil? Because when Jesus died and shed His blood for us, He became our High Priest. At that very moment, we were given direct access to God through Christ. We no longer require a human high priest because we have Jesus! God loves us so much, and desires intimacy with us so much, that He sent His Son to die for us. We don't need to go through anyone; we can go straight to Him.

The confidence we are to have is the confidence to come boldly to the throne because we have a High Priest, Jesus Christ. It is so important for us to understand who we are in Christ and who we are to Christ.

I have a confession to make. I am one of the most insecure people I know. The problem with that, outside of

the insecurity, is that people often don't believe that I'm insecure at all. And what makes it even more difficult is that because I give off this air of "confidence," when I do feel insecure, it can be very hard to find someone to talk to who believes what I'm saying. The entire time I'm sharing, they tend to think, "She has no idea what insecurity really is."

I had to learn that it does not really matter what others think of me. For an insecure person, that is really hard to say. The reality is that it shouldn't matter what other people think of us because I want to tell you what the Creator of the Universe, the King of all kings, the Sovereign Holy God thinks of us.

Let's look at Ephesians 1:3-6: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved."

Do you grasp what that is saying? If you are in relationship with Jesus Christ, if you have accepted Christ as the Lord of your life, when God the Father looks at you, He sees Christ! He blesses you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies and when He sees you, He sees you with no fault! He sees you without blame! He sees you as holy! And then, because He loves you, He adopts you into His own family! And listen to this, "it gave Him great pleasure" (verse 6; NLT). It gave Him pleasure because He loves you! He loves us!

We need to know who we are in Christ. 1 Peter 2:9 says this, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

He called you! You are royalty. That's really hard for

some of us to grasp. We don't feel like royalty, and we certainly don't feel chosen, and yet, we are. Job was a guy who had what would seem to be one of the toughest lives ever lived. He lost everything, he lost his kids, he lost his fortune, and he lost his health in almost one shot. And yet, he said in Job 29:14, "I put on righteousness, and it clothed me."

What does that mean? Let's look at Luke 4:18-19. Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read from the Scriptures in Isaiah and said, "The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD." Then He closed the book and said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (verse 21). In other words, I am the One Isaiah is talking about.

And when we turn to Isaiah 61, we see what else Jesus does for us. Verse 10 tells us, "He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness."

He clothes us with the garments of salvation and covers us with the robe of righteousness, just as Job spoke of. The word "salvation" in the Greek can also be translated as "deliverance." He delivers us and makes us holy. And here is the critical piece. Isaiah 64:6 tells us that our righteousness is like filthy rags. Without Christ, we walk around with our own filthy rags, but the beauty of Christ is that He doesn't just spruce up our filthy rags. He removes them and completely replaces them. But more than that, He doesn't replace them with just any robe; He replaces them with *His* robe of righteousness.

Satan wants to heap condemnation on us. He wants us to feel miserable about ourselves. He wants us to see ourselves the way he sees us. But we need to see ourselves the way Christ sees us. He sees us as royalty, righteous, and absolutely beautiful! But here's the kicker. When we put on Christ's robe, that is exactly what Satan sees as well, the robe

of Jesus Christ.

We're in a battle, a spiritual battle, whether we want to be or not. We're in a spiritual battle whether we believe it or not. We are in a battle against Satan, our enemy. And yet, when we do what Ephesians 6:10-18 tells us, and we put on the armor of God and go into battle, Satan looks at our armor and sees Christ.

We have to know who we are in Jesus Christ, and we have to know *whose* we are. We are His. It's not about self-confidence; instead, it's about having the confidence that Jesus loves us more than we can imagine. It's about having the confidence that He wants the best for us and has a purpose for our lives. It's about having the confidence that He battles for us. It's about having the confidence that the most powerful Being in the universe loves us very much.

SEEKING AND BUILDING A RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM THROUGH PRAYER, HIS WORD, AND WORSHIP

Becoming victorious in the face of temptation and hardship is never easy. It requires something of us that we simply do not have in our own power. We need the help of the Holy Spirit if we are truly going to live a life of victory. We must be willing to seek God and, ultimately, be obedient to what He wants us to do.

Seek and obey Him, seek and obey Him. This has been a consistent theme in my life lately. God has been asking me to seek Him in the morning and then obey what it is He wants me to do (and I'm pretty sure He's not just asking that of me). Sounds pretty simple, but it can be quite a challenge. I was talking to a friend of mine about the word "seek." When you seek something, you don't just scan the room for it. Think about the parable of the woman with the lost coin. She had 10 silver coins and lost one. Did she just forget about that lost coin? No, she turned her entire house upside down to find it. She searched for it.

When we seek something, we are searching for it. We are on a quest for it. That's how we need to search for God. We need to be earnestly seeking His voice and His will for our lives. Deuteronomy 4:29 says, "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul." God makes us a promise that if we seek Him, we will find Him.

Then, and this is the hard part, we must be obedient to Him. Being obedient when we don't always understand what

it is that God is doing can be a huge challenge. However, we don't have to understand in order to be obedient. God's plan and God's timing are usually not our original plan and timing. God is funny that way, but He seems to know what He's doing. I can honestly say that after being obedient to God, I have never walked away saying, "I wish I hadn't done that!" Not once. Of course, when I follow my own will, there have been, oh, a few times that I have walked away saying that!

God never asks us to be obedient to Him without giving us the strength or the resources to accomplish His task at hand. He will never ask you to do something that He doesn't give you the ability to do. God tells us in Deuteronomy 30:11 that what He has commanded us is not too difficult for us to achieve. Our lives will never have that victorious and peaceful contentment unless we are obedient. Yet, if we truly put Jesus Christ first in our lives and seek Him with all of our heart, mind, and soul, we can have the abundant and joyful life that He intended us to have.

My oldest daughter has always been obedient, calm, and very easy to raise. When she was a toddler and we noticed she was getting into trouble, we would say, "No, Noel." And she would instantly stop whatever she was doing and never do it again. She listened to everything we said and was such a good girl that we were convinced that we were the best parents that God ever created. My husband and I would see parents with children that were more, shall we say, difficult, and we would look at each other and say, "Parenting issue!"

Needless to say, God must have sensed that we needed a little humbling, so God gave us Tessa. Tessa is the kind of girl that some might call precocious. She has always been one of my challenges in life. By the time she was five years old, she had had five emergency room visits and one hospital stay. The girl has no fear and is on full tilt at all times!

Eric and I were clearly humbled with Tessa. We repented by falling on our faces and begging for forgiveness for our horrible attitude. We knew God had cleansed our sin, and then we were blessed with our third child, Will. As a boy, he

is pretty much Tessa on steroids, with fewer hospital visits. I get it, God, loud and clear!

During the summer some years ago, a friend and I took our kids (five between us) to a nearby lake to spend the day. We had a wonderful time playing in the lake and an attached swimming pool that was a part of the area. At the end of the day, we were all headed to the locker and changing rooms. We had the entire group marching in a bit of a procession. Everything seemed to be going smoothly when in the locker room, as I was doing the head count, I realized that Tessa was missing. She was only three-and-a-half years old at the time, so I instantly panicked, thinking about the massive lake that was just a few feet from the locker rooms.

I raced to the water to look for her, but the color of the water was muddied, and I couldn't see a thing. I was yelling Tessa's name at the top of my lungs with a fear so intense that I could barely breathe. I quickly ran to the staff offices and explained that I couldn't find my daughter; I needed help. The woman behind the desk looked at me with a confused look until I uttered my next tribal scream: "I need your help now!" That woke her up a bit, and she yelled for security, and they immediately began a search for my missing child.

I had no intentions of leaving there without my daughter. I scoured the pool, nothing; I looked around the lake again, nothing. I ran back into the locker room, thinking that maybe she found her way back there without being seen. Nothing. All of a sudden, a woman hastily walked up with a crying Tessa in her arms. I practically melted on the floor in tears when I saw her.

Scooping her up in my arms, I hugged her and let her know in no uncertain terms that she scared me beyond measure. The woman who had found her explained that Tessa was looking for us in the parking lot. She simply wasn't paying attention when we were walking and stopped watching us. Missing the direction we were headed, she was suddenly lost and didn't know where we were.

After I was able to calm down, God used that experience

to show me how we are often like that with our Heavenly Father. I consistently tell my children when we are in a store or in a crowded place, “If you can’t see me, you are already lost.” And what happened to Tessa is exactly what can happen to us during the good and bad times in our lives. Tessa’s focus, as we were walking to the locker rooms, was no longer on me. Once she couldn’t see me, she was already lost. When we stop focusing on Jesus, we can easily get lost. We get lost in the shuffle, in the crowds, and in the emptiness of our lives.

Just as my reaction with Tessa was a full-on search, Jesus does the same with us. The reality of sin is ugly, scary, and severe, and yet, Jesus can overcome absolutely anything. Although He will not force His will on us, and He won’t grab us and make us do what He wants, He does not stop “searching” for us. He will fight for us in desperation, but at the same time, He allows us to make the decision to come to Him.

Prayer

The first way to build an intimate relationship with our Savior is prayer. A relationship is a two-way street, and spending time with Him is key; simply talking to Him all day long. Yes, we should have a special time of the day we devote to Him, but simply talking to Him like you would talk to a friend also creates intimacy.

Tell Him what’s going on in your day, the details in your life. He wants to hear about the stuff that no one else in your life will listen to without rolling their eyes. Picture our Jesus listening to you absolutely captivated about your bad hair day. That is who our Jesus is.

His Word

Prayer is the way we communicate with Him, and His Word is one of the ways He communicates with us. He certainly speaks to us through people and in our spirit, but His God-

breathed Word was written to reveal His character to us and to tell us how much He loves us. His Word has been given to us for a reason.

I talk to so many Christians who say things like, “Well, I pray all the time, but no, I don’t read the Bible very often.” But look at what Hebrews 4:12 tells us, “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” And 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

The word inspiration in the Greek is *theopneustos*, which does not mean the Bible was inspired like we might think of a writer being inspired to write a great book. It means divine inspiration. The word comes from joining the word *theos*, which means God, and *pneo* which means to breathe out. So, literally, we are told in Scripture, the words are breathed out by God and penned by man. So, when we understand the Bible is God’s true Word, literally breathed out by Him, we can then understand how vital His Word is to our life.

Today, there is a tremendous amount of deception in the Church and the world. Matthew 24:4-5 says, “And Jesus answered and said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, “I am the Christ,” and will deceive many.””

Now, if some guy walks up to you claiming to be Jesus, you probably won’t be deceived. It is obvious that this guy is not Jesus. But what if you have someone preaching a slightly different cross to you, a slightly different Jesus? The only way you can know if you are hearing about the true Jesus of Scripture is to know the Scriptures. Anybody, even a respected pastor, can tell you they are speaking the truth, but unless you are in the Word, You cannot know it is truth.

And let me add, when you combine praying God’s

Word, there is nothing more powerful. I can't tell you how powerful it is taking a scripture that might have some significance in that moment of your life and praying it or speaking it out loud. The power the Word of God wields is amazing.

I never thought I had issues with fear in my life until my first child was born. I can't tell you what happened, but the fear practically paralyzed me. I would run into her room, while she was sleeping, every half hour to make sure she was still breathing. One day I was talking to a friend of mine about the fear I was dealing with, and she said so simply, "Stephanie, fear is not of God." That had honestly never occurred to me. I decided that if God wasn't the author of my fear, Satan must be, and the One I serve is much more powerful. I found scripture upon scripture on fear and wrote them on index cards. The minute that fear started to rise up, I would say each scripture aloud. It didn't matter if I was standing in my kitchen, in the grocery store, or in my car, I would speak them. Yes, maybe a few people thought I was crazy, but you know what, the fear would go away.

I still struggle with fear, but I now know how to combat it—and every other issue in my life. I pray and speak God's Word. The more you spend time in prayer, the more you spend time in His Word, the more intimate the relationship and the more victory you have in your life. It's not a once-a-week thing, it's a lifestyle.

Worship

Another way to build an intimate relationship with Christ is spending time worshipping Him. The Old Testament in 2 Chronicles 20 tells of the story of Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah. He was told that a great multitude of armies were coming to attack him and his men. He was extremely fearful and, verse 3 says, "He set himself to seek the Lord." He gathered all of the cities of Judah, and he stood in the assembly and prayed a powerful prayer, acknowledging God's past intervention and cried out for His help once again.

God responded by saying, “Do not be afraid nor dismayed because of this great multitude, for the battle is not yours, but God’s” (verse 15). Listen to this, “You will not need to fight in this battle. Position yourselves, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord, who is with you, O Judah and Jerusalem! Do not fear or be dismayed, tomorrow go out against them, for the Lord is with you” (verse 17).

Then notice what the Bible says, “And Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem bowed before the LORD, worshiping the LORD” (verse 18). This is so important to recognize. Jehoshaphat and his men had a battle stance—it was to worship the Lord. Their battle stance was literally on their hands and knees.

When we are facing battles, struggles, and trials in our daily lives, regardless of what they are, we need to take our stance—and that battle stance is worship. I had a situation not too long ago when I was going through an extremely rough time. It seemed that if anything could go wrong, it did go wrong. It wasn’t just simple little frustrations in life, but a severe spiritual attack. I was home with my two youngest kids and was experiencing a pressure that was so overwhelming I could barely breathe. I didn’t know what to do. There was no changing my circumstance, so I did the only thing I knew to do—I took my battle stance.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, we are exhorted to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” I picked up my iPod, which was loaded with worship music, curled up on my couch and just worshiped and praised Him. I didn’t praise Him for my circumstances, but rather praised Him in the midst of my circumstances. I praised Him for who He is. I praised Him because He is faithful even when I’m not. I praised Him because He loves me even when I don’t feel loved. I praised Him because He redeemed someone as unworthy as me. I praised Him because He is worthy. And do you know what? Within a half hour of just spending time in

His presence, the anxiety I had been feeling was completely lifted. My circumstances didn't change at the time, but just like the Lord said to Jehoshaphat, "The battle is not yours, but God's." He goes in before us and has already won whatever battle we are facing.

God is looking for worshipers. Worshipers are not just the people who are standing up in front of your church service on Sunday morning singing great songs; He wants us to be consistent worshipers. Praising His name through the good times and bad. He has a purpose and a plan for you that is even better than you can dream up in your most marvelous dreams. Regardless of where you have come from or what you are struggling with, He has an amazing life in store for you.

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TRUSTING HIM

Does living a life of victory mean we won't have any problems? No, absolutely not. In fact, that is one of the promises Jesus made, "In this world you will have trials and tribulations, but cheer up! I have overcome this world" (John 16:33). We have to realize that seeking Christ has to become a lifestyle, not simply one piece of our life, but who we are.

How do we accomplish that when things in our life just don't make sense and when really bad things happen to "good" people? A friend and neighbor of mine died suddenly and unexpectedly. She was a seemingly healthy 38-year-old mom and was pregnant and already at full-term with a little baby girl. She left behind a 5-year-old boy, a precious 3-year-old girl, and a loving husband who became a widower and a single dad in one tragic moment. How do we wrap our minds around something like that? How do we make sense of such a tragic loss? I don't know the answers, but I know the One who knows.

It is so important to throw our hands up and cry out to Him when we don't understand what is happening. "Why, God, why does this happen?" We may not find out the reasons but Exodus 34:6-7 speaks of God's own description of Himself saying, "Yahweh—Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin" (HCSB).

God is never in a hurry to fulfill His promises, but He always does, and He always takes care of us. I'm going to repeat that. God is never in a hurry to fulfill His promises,

but He always does, and He always takes care of us. His timing is perfect even though at times it looks like, to us, that it's way off.

Those of you who are parents know that sometimes you can see the bigger picture that your children can't see. One day, my daughter Tessa wanted a snack, and I told her she couldn't have one. What I didn't tell her was that we were going out that evening to have a big celebratory dinner. We were going to one of her favorite restaurants, and I knew she would love the evening. She continued to whine about wanting a snack until I finally revealed our plans. She was extremely excited, so I explained to her that if she had just trusted me she would have been willing to say *no* to her snack. I explained that Mom and Dad know the big picture of life in our family, and we knew that if she had eaten a snack, she would have ruined the big dinner we had ahead of us.

We can do the same thing with God. He knows the big picture that we cannot see. So often, we try to “have our snack” while God keeps telling us to wait. If we don't trust God and wait, however, we will miss a huge blessing that God has in store for us.

But trust is so difficult when life doesn't go the way we plan or desire. When my husband and I were married for about a year, we decided we were going to begin our family. We are both very much type A personalities, so when it came time to have children, we knew exactly how many we would have, when they were going to be born, and, frankly, we were prepared to tell God what sex each baby should be and in what order. We were available to help God in whatever way He needed us. We read all of the books on the most efficient way to have a baby. We knew the basics, of course, but there are things you should do to increase the likelihood of conceiving. The point is, we were planners.

Sure enough, we became pregnant right away and all was right with the world. I was diligent about everything—what I put in my body, exercise, and staying healthy. This baby was going to be flourishing. One day—it was a Tuesday—I went

to the doctor for a routine doctor's appointment. I was in my fifth month and couldn't wait to hear that baby's heartbeat. As the doctor put the Doppler on my bulging belly, I listened intently. Nothing. The doctor didn't seem concerned. Apparently, a few of the machine's cords would go bad, and there were times you couldn't hear the heartbeat right away. She ran to get another Doppler, and we tried again. Nothing. Again. Nothing. Fear started to creep in.

She immediately ordered an ultrasound, and my husband met me at the hospital. We sat through a completely silent ultrasound; the sonographer wouldn't utter a word. Our greatest fear was realized. Our baby had died. Our perfect child, our perfect plan, was gone. And then we were told that because I was so far along, I would have to go to the hospital and deliver my baby. No joy, no balloons, no visitors, no life. I was devastated.

Before Eric and I went to the hospital, we stopped by my parents so they could feed us and spend some time with us. My mom and dad prayed with us, and then my mom played us a song that had been significant to me in the past. It was called *He Never Failed Me Yet* by Robert Ray. The song speaks of God's unfailing mercy and power even in the darkest of times.

I have to tell you, I recoiled at the song; the words made me cringe. How in the world could that be true—that God hadn't failed me—because right now, right here, I felt God was failing me? That night we went into the hospital, and I delivered a baby boy the size of my hand. I was angry, hurt, and confused. I would like to say that in the next few days I turned to Jesus and all was well, but that wouldn't be true. During this time in my life, I was a practicing alcoholic. And although I had quit drinking during my pregnancy, it was the alcohol that I turned to for my healing, not Jesus. I drank the pain away and did everything in my power to numb the feelings. In my mind, God *had* failed me.

People, trying to be kind and say something profound, were often very hurtful. "It was God's will that your baby

died.” “Don’t worry, you’ll have others.” “It was God’s way of correcting a mistake.” The pain was overwhelming. Eric and I waited about two years before we tried to have another baby, and when we did, we had an extremely uneventful pregnancy that gave us a beautiful baby girl, Noel.

I was terrified that something would happen to Noel when I was pregnant with her. I was driving home one day and praying that God would protect this baby. I’ll never forget that after I prayed, I felt such a tremendous peace and in my spirit felt the Lord say, “Your baby is safe and this is my promise to you.” As I looked up, there was a beautiful rainbow in the sky.

Eric and I were both under the impression that our first pregnancy loss was a terrible fluke. It was made evident after we tried to have another baby that it was not. We lost our second baby, and I again drank the pain away. Eventually I got sober and we tried again. We lost two more babies, but this time, it was different. I was sober, and instead of being angry and drunk, I turned to Jesus in my pain. I pressed so deeply into Him. I read His word for comfort. I cried and cried. I told Him how angry I was. I buried my hurt in His lap and allowed Him to heal my pain. And what I learned was that the song, *He Never Failed Me Yet*, was true. He had never failed me.

We have to know and trust that God loves us. Was it God’s will that my babies died? No, absolutely not. So, why do bad things happen? We live in a fallen world, there is sin, and we have an enemy who has come to steal, and to kill, and to destroy (John 10:10). He hates us and he wants to see us destroyed.

Oh, but, Jesus! Jesus loves us more than we can ever comprehend. He loves us with a love beyond measure, and when we are hurting, He grieves with us. Psalm 56:8 says, “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in Your bottle. You have recorded each one in Your book.” He loves us so much that He collects our tears! But be assured that anything that God allows—not causes, but

allows—to happen in our lives will be used for His glory if we allow it because God wastes absolutely nothing. We may not see the good in our painful and terrible circumstances right away—or maybe not even until we are on the other side of glory—but I promise you, we will see it.

It's important to apprehend Who we are dealing with. We often have this image of Jesus as this gentle man. His eyes are sparkling. Perhaps He is holding a lamb while He walks through green pastures. Of course, our Jesus is gentle when He needs to be, but our Jesus is so much more than that.

In Exodus, God has called Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to “let My people go.” Moses, quite insecure, doubted his abilities to do this job. After a brief argument with the Lord, he asks God what he should tell the Israelites if they ask who sent him. And God has an answer. Look at Exodus 3:11-14 with me. “I AM has sent me to you.” But let's turn to the New Testament and look at something extremely critical. Look at John 18:1-6:

When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered. ²And Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with His disciples. ³Then Judas, having received a detachment of troops, and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. ⁴Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forward and said to them, “Whom are you seeking?” ⁵They answered Him, “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus said to them, “I am He.” And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. ⁶Now when He said to them, “I am He,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

Let's unpack what is truly happening here. When Jesus asks them who they are seeking, they respond Jesus of Nazareth, and Jesus responds with "I am He." But, He's not just saying, "I'm Jesus, right here." No, in the original Greek it is translated as "The 'I Am' is here, or I AM. And the power of God knocked down perhaps as many as 600 soldiers! Do you see? It is the same I AM that went before and with Moses. It is the same I AM that died for your sins and mine. It is the same I AM that is with you right now.

Jesus! Jesus is the Creator of the Universe, the King of all kings, the Word that became flesh. He is omniscient (all-knowing), He is omnipresent (everywhere present), and He is omnipotent (having infinite power). Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last, who is and who was and who is to come. Jesus is the Almighty, Holy, and Sovereign God! I AM! That's Who we're dealing with.

It is the same Jesus who created the Universe, who parted the Red Sea and let the Israelites walk through on dry land, who rained manna from the heavens, who healed the woman with the issue of blood by a touch of His cloak, and who raised Lazarus from the dead. It is the same Jesus who took on all of your sins and mine, the same Jesus who conquered the grave, the same Jesus who walked on water. It is the same Jesus who is with you in times of trouble, the very same.

We don't have to sit back and wait for God to act. God gives us tools to help us trust and not to fear. Philippians 4:6-7 tells us to "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

I struggled with that passage. How in the world do I *not* worry about anything? How is that possible? And then one day, as I was praying and spending time in His Word, it hit me. It's the taking every situation to God in prayer and

JESUS IS PASSING BY

petition. What does it mean to petition? Well, when we look back in the Greek, it's more than just asking. It is entreating, begging, or imploring God for our needs. But then there was one more word that made me cringe—thanksgiving. Ah, yes, we need to petition with thanksgiving, and it is *then* that the peace of God—which transcends all understanding and defies all human limitation—will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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JESUS IS PASSING BY

When we are struggling with temptation and sin, sometimes it is easier to stay in our “what we know” instead of reaching out and grabbing on to the One who will bring healing. I want us to look at a woman in the Bible who had a similar journey.

So Jesus went with him, and a great multitude followed Him and thronged Him.

Now a certain woman had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things from many physicians. She had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment. For she said, “If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well.”

Immediately the fountain of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of the affliction. And Jesus, immediately knowing in Himself that power had gone out of Him, turned around in the crowd and said, “Who touched My clothes?”

But His disciples said to Him, “You see the multitude thronging You, and You say, ‘Who touched Me?’”

And He looked around to see her who had done this thing. But the woman, fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to

JESUS IS PASSING BY

her, came and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth. And He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction.”
(Mark 5:24–34)

Wherever Jesus went, great crowds would follow. The Bible says Jesus was followed and thronged by a great multitude. The word “thronged” depicts a crowd that was pressing in and jostling. Have you ever been in a really crowded place? My parents took our whole family to Disney World over Christmas one year. It was great, but it also happened to be the busiest Christmas season they had ever had—record-breaking busy. It was so busy they actually had to close three parks—Magic Kingdom, Animal Kingdom, and Hollywood—because they were at capacity. At one point in the Magic Kingdom, it was so crowded, we were at a standstill. It was wall-to-wall people. I was holding on to my kids’ hands as tightly as I could so I wouldn’t lose a single one of them—which would have been easy in that crowd that pushed, jostled, and thronged us.

That’s what it would have been like with Jesus, and He’s better than Disney! People wanted to get as close to Him as possible. Masses of people would form, and they would jostle people just to get near Him. And here comes this woman who had been suffering with some sort of abnormal blood flow for twelve years. Twelve years, can you imagine? She went to doctor after doctor, and we’re told she had suffered many things from many physicians. We really don’t know what it means that she “suffered many things,” but Luke tells us she spent her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any of them. But whatever it means, we do know that she suffered for twelve years and went to many people for help, and no one could help her. How frustrating and discouraging that must have been. And then she hears about Jesus. She knows that she has to encounter Him. Here she is in this massive crowd of people and she sees Him! Jesus is

passing by!

Now, we know from the Law that this woman—because of her flow of blood—was unclean. Not only should she not be anywhere near a rabbi, but she shouldn't have even been in the crowd of people. She should have been hidden away because of her affliction. But this woman was willing to risk everything; she was willing to risk penalty of law, humiliation, and embarrassment just so she could touch Jesus. She had so much faith that she thought: *I don't need to have Him lay hands on me; I don't even need to have Him look at me, if I can just touch the hem of His garment.*

Jesus may have been wearing a full outer garment, as opposed to the prayer shawls that we might see today, and this garment—called the *tallit*—symbolized so much that we don't fully grasp today.

In part it symbolized being protected under the Almighty Wings of God. Psalm 91 says, “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.’ Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the perilous pestilence. He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge; His truth shall be your shield and buckler.”

Under His wings—that's where we need to take protection. When we are battling temptation, we need to take protection under His wings. There is covering and peace under His wings. Where do we go when we are facing temptation? Where do we go when our heart is broken? Where do we go when we don't think we can face another day? We can safely abide under the shadow of the Almighty and take refuge under His wings.

The tassel of the garment—called the *tzitzit*—would have probably been the piece that the woman with the issue of blood reached out and touched. The *tzitzit* represented the Word of God, the ultimate source of all authority.

But take a close look at verse 27. It says, “When she

heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment.” She came behind Him. Now, picture this scene with me. Here is a woman fighting her way through this massive crowd because Jesus is passing by. My guess is she falls once or twice as she is trying to get to Him. She could have given up and gone home, but she is focused on only one thing and that is Jesus. But now He’s ahead of her and she’s behind Him, so in order to reach Him, she has to chase after Him.

Not only was this woman saying, I want to encounter the Messiah, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, but she was saying I want to take cover and protection under His almighty wings. She was saying that she was going to trust and surrender to Him, being completely willing to chase after Him to get to Him. We can’t risk everything if we don’t first trust, and we can’t trust until we fully surrender.

And then, when she reached out her hand and touched the hem of His garment, she was immediately healed. Jesus knew power had gone out of Him, and He asked who touched Him. His disciples were astonished that He was even asking. “Are you kidding me? Everyone’s touching You! You are in a mass crowd.”

I read a commentary that said, “There is a difference between the touch of physical nearness, and the touch of desperate faith. It is possible to be ever so near Him without trusting Him, but impossible to touch Him by faith without His knowing it and without being healed.”⁴

How many of us go to church on Sunday and spend the morning in the presence of the Lord only to come home and walk in our own power the rest of the week? How many of us are not willing to cry out to the Lord in those desperate moments and truly surrender? How many of us walk at a distance from Jesus and watch Him pass by and not chase after Him?

⁴ MacDonald, William, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995, p.1333

Now, of course, Jesus knew who touched Him, but Jesus was requiring of her a public confession of her faith. Imagine, she is unclean, in a crowd of people that she shouldn't be in, and she has done the unthinkable by touching a rabbi as an unclean woman. I'm sure she would have preferred to slip away unnoticed and praise God in the privacy of her home, but our Jesus often requires more of us than that. And so, He calls her out. Imagine the humiliation of now having to stand up and say, *It was me who touched You*. But she does, and He comforts her in a way only Jesus can by saying, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction." This woman risked everything to chase after Jesus to be made whole, and we can only be made whole by the One True God—I AM.

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IT'S TIME TO SURRENDER

Think of a caterpillar for a moment. When we fully surrender to Christ, we are like a caterpillar getting ready to go through a great transformation. The caterpillar is covered in a cocoon during this amazing process. It's dark, probably a little scary at times, and it's a long process. If you've ever had the chance to witness this transformation, the cocoon looks like it would cause claustrophobia and is certainly not a place where we would want to spend any time. Right before the cocoon opens, it shakes—sometimes violently—and then, suddenly, a beautiful butterfly emerges from the empty shell that it leaves behind.

The transformation that Christ does in our life is not unlike that caterpillar; we are just a wormy little creature before Christ gets a hold of us. Sometimes the things that we have to go through to grow and transform seem dark and scary. And I don't know about you, but God has taken me through some changes in my life that cause me to feel like that shaking cocoon. Yet, when we emerge from the past life and become that new creation in Jesus Christ, we emerge a beautiful butterfly, ready to spread our wings and fly. We leave behind an empty shell. But God uses that empty shell to bring us to the place of our transformation.

If someone were to stop the cocoon process of the butterfly, the butterfly wouldn't be able to live. If we weren't able to go through the pain, we wouldn't get to the healing. We need to go through the pain to get to the healing.

I can honestly say that although my past has not been easy, I have experienced a tremendous amount of shame and

have felt unworthy and truly lost at times, I have seen Him use the pain from my past and turn it into something beautiful to glorify Him. What Satan intends for harm, God can use for our good and for His glory!

The bottom line is what God calls sin really is sin. Sometimes it's hard for us to recognize what sin is because society tells us something different and we've been taught untruths. It doesn't matter if society tells you it's not sin. It doesn't matter if it doesn't seem like sin to us. What God calls sin is sin, and sin separates us from a Holy, Sovereign God. But I think today, in the world we live in, we are used to creating our own version of God. We're often told that God can be anything you want Him to be.

But let's take a look at Exodus 3:13. God had just told Moses to go to Pharaoh and bring God's people, the Israelites, out of the bondage they were in as slaves in Egypt. And Moses said, "What? You want me to go? Who am I? But the LORD tells Moses that he's not going alone; he's going with the Holy, Sovereign God.

Then Moses asked God this question: "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God tells us I AM WHO I AM. But that's not what we're told today, in society and even at times from the pulpit. We're told that God can be whoever we want Him to be. We're told that He is only a God of love and not a God of wrath. We're told that there can be many paths to Him and Jesus isn't necessary. However, God tells us exactly who He is from Genesis through Revelation. In His Word, God shows us His character, His love for us, and His desire to have a personal and intimate relationship with each and every one of us. He shows us that when we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us because He desires us. But He shows throughout His entire Word that He is a God of both love

and judgment. We have to take God at His Word by His Word, but in order to do that we have to truly know the God of the Bible. And we have to determine whether we really want the Truth. Sometimes the Truth is very painful; sometimes it's hard for us to understand, but nonetheless, the Truth is the Truth.

Our Father in Heaven has a love letter for you with His character, love, and desire for you written on every page of His Word. It's critical that we are in His Word often so that we can truly know who He is and so we will distinguish Him from all the counterfeits.

When we know who He is, then we understand that when we are being tempted, when we are going through trials and tribulations, unforgiveness, anger—or anything else that pushes us to the edge—we can trust Christ to walk us through it. We don't have to do it alone.

What are you going through today? What temptations seem to consume you? What trials are so overwhelming you don't know how to keep your head above water? What issues in your life seem to go unresolved no matter how many people you turn to?

We all struggle with difficulties in life, but we do not have to be defined by our sin or troubles. We do not have to live our lives going back to the same old sin. It's a choice. We can repent and fall down before the Lord and say *no more!* I want to be obedient. I want to live a life following after You, God. I want You to make me whole.

But we can't do it on our own. We have to surrender. We have to choose to follow God. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to move in our lives. It's a choice to cry out for help when we want to sin. It's a choice to say *no more*. In fact, there are very basic things we can do. If we're in a destructive relationship, we may have to say *NO* to that. If we use food as a comfort instead of turning to Christ, we may have to say *NO* to unhealthy food choices. If we are an addict to drugs or alcohol, we may have to say *NO, I will not take another drug or drink*. We do have to do some of the hard work but then

allow the Holy Spirit to take over. Are you ready to be made whole? Jesus is passing by.

What is holding you in bondage? What chains do you need to break free from? That woman with the issue of blood risked everything to chase after Jesus for her healing. What are you willing to risk? Are you struggling with finances? Surrender it to Jesus. Do you have health issues that you suffer from? Surrender it to Jesus. Do you have an addiction to drugs or alcohol? Surrender it to Jesus. Are you holding unforgiveness, bitterness, or resentment toward anyone? Surrender it to Jesus. Do you struggle with food, eating too much or too little? – surrender it to Jesus. Do you struggle with your time with the Lord, or your walk with Christ isn't where you want it to be? Surrender it to Jesus. Do you battle pride? Surrender it to Jesus. Surrender these things to Him. Don't hold on to them and don't try to make it better on your own. Cry out to Him and ask Him for help. Surrender it all to Jesus, He came to set the captives free, and He wants us to run to Him! Jesus desires us.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me,
 Because the LORD has anointed Me
 To preach good tidings to the poor;
 He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
 To proclaim liberty to the captives,
 And the opening of the prison to those who
 are bound; ²To proclaim the acceptable year
 of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our
 God; To comfort all who mourn, ³To console
 those who mourn in Zion, To give them
 beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning,
 The garment of praise for the spirit of
 heaviness; That they may be called trees of
 righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that
 He may be glorified.

(Isaiah 61:1–2)

EPILOGUE

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Glory to God! I'm no longer a drunk but I am a new creation! You know it's funny; I am literally not the same person I used to be. I have had the privilege of seeing people from my past, the bad 'ole days, and they can't believe who I've become. They can't believe the change. Those who only know the "new me" can't even picture the "old me." That's how it is with Jesus. When He invades our lives we are not ever the same. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we won't struggle. We will. But we will never struggle in the same way again.

I was an alcoholic, an addict, a harlot, a liar, a thief, and on and on. And although I can still be tempted in areas of my past, the godly sorrow that I felt, and still feel, for the sin against my King drives me to true surrender. It's not easy living a life surrendered to Christ, but I would never want to walk with the enemy again. Praise God that He makes all things new! Jesus is passing by! What are you waiting for? Run to Him!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Olson is a speaker, a worship leader, an author, and the CEO of The Set Me Free Project. She lives in Nebraska with her very supportive husband, Eric; their three children, Noel, Tessa, and Will; and their yellow lab, Winnie