



Selections for Easter



SOUL SCENTS:

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Paula Moldenhauer

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Free to Flourish Publishing
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Soul Scents: Flourish Selections for Easter is adapted from the Soul Scents devotional series:

Soul Scents: Awaken A Spiritual Journey in the Son's Embrace

Print ISBN-13: 978-152275968

Print ISBN-10: 1522759689

Soul Scents: Rooted A Spiritual Journey in the Son's Embrace

Print ISBN-13: 978-1530421268

Print ISBN-10: 1530421268

Soul Scents: Bloom A Spiritual Journey in the Son's Embrace

Print ISBN-13: 978-1533667526

Print ISBN-10: 1533667527

Soul Scents: Flourish A Spiritual Journey in the Son's Embrace

Print ISBN-13: 978-1540523075

Print ISBN-10: 1540523071

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Dedication

*To each of us who long to know Him as He really is,
and to be who we really are, especially Tammy.*

*May we awaken to His love and become rooted in the identity of His beloved.
May we journey deeper into His heart, discovering the wonder of His embrace. May we heal there, living
from victory and in freedom, blooming and flourishing.*

*To Jesus in gratitude for Your choice to save us from the darkness in the world and within ourselves. May
my heart let go of the lesser things. May I journey with You no matter what.*

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A Note from the Author

Dear Friend,

What do you think of when you celebrate Christ's resurrection? My guess is that, like me, your perception is shaped around the Christian tradition where you have the most experience. I've had quite a journey. Raised in a tradition that rejected most holidays as "pagan," there was no Easter celebration at my house. I'd never heard of Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday. Good Friday was something happy and sad that people talked about, but that I didn't understand. Did it have something to do with palm branches? And Lent was for Catholics.

If you come to this devotion today from that place, no worries! It is our goal to look at Scripture and what Christ did at the cross, not focus on any specific tradition or religious plan.

Here's more of my story and why I am excited to spend this season focusing on celebrating the resurrection and all it means for the Christian. The one thing my church did celebrate about the time my friends were celebrating Easter was the Lord's Supper. We didn't have weekly communion like many churches do. This event happened once a year and was scheduled to coincide with the Jewish Passover celebration, which meant some years it fell close to the Christian calendar, and some years it didn't. We observed a very serious (I must admit to almost typing dreary) special evening service where we sang song after song about the cross. The unleavened bread and grape juice were then passed out, and we waited until the pastor quoted Jesus, "Take and eat, this is my body broken for you." And "Take and drink. This is my blood shed for you" to partake of the emblems. After receiving the Lord's Supper, we separated into a men's room and a women's room and washed each other's feet.

The somber service got its point across. Christ gave all to save us from our sins.

But I don't really remember much celebration or focus in my childhood on the *resurrection* of Christ or how the cross changed *everything* for the believer. (Least I misrepresent my past, I want to make it clear that I *was* taught that I was saved by Christ's sacrifice, and I

remember singing hymns on occasion that talked of the victorious resurrection, like the marvelous old song, “Up From the Grave He Arose.”)

There was little that celebrated Jesus’ resurrection in my childhood. Even more tragic was the lack of focus on the wonders of the New Covenant that Christ ushered in by giving His blood. It was like the cross saved us from our past sins and from hell, but it was our job to work really hard to be good from that moment forward. I’m not saying that was exactly what was taught, but that was how I understood it.

I do remember one time my dad preached about how we are new creations in Christ. (He sometimes shared the pulpit in that particular church.) I don’t think I’d ever heard such a thought before, and I’m not sure that the church folks quite knew how to receive that sermon either. I’m grateful for it though. Perhaps that sermon planted the seed that later became a passion for me—understanding the wonders that are ours because of Jesus’ finished work on the cross.

Over the years of adulthood, the Lord took my husband and me to many churches. In one I experienced my first Maundy Thursday service and for the first time on Easter declared triumphantly with my fellow congregants, “He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” (I feel happy right now just writing the words.)

A few years ago the Lord surprised me with a wonderful gift. He opened the doors for me to take a part-time job as a staff singer in a nearby Lutheran church. I’m sure He had many reasons for giving me this job, but I think part of His plan was to help me understand the heart of traditions I’d never been exposed to and to enjoy community with believers who worship differently than I had in the many community churches we’ve attended. (Hubby and I still attend a community church together, so I usually get to worship in multiple styles every weekend. I *love* it.) Having never experienced liturgical worship centered around a church calendar, I am blessed by the opportunity to share this with my brothers and sisters there. Last year’s Ash Wednesday service deeply touched me, and through the Lenten season the Lord led me through some needed repentance, draining me of another round of bitterness and distrust in His goodness. (Funny how that sneaks up on a gal.)

I have a point.

I believe our God adores all types of worship from sincere hearts. I don’t think He is overly worried about the labels or approaches we take. He’s more concerned about the relationship we share. One thing I’ve observed in my thirst to worship Jesus in a variety of settings is how all of humanity needs the victorious, finished work of the cross of Jesus. Without this foundational undergirding, Christ followers become like any other group of people who are trying to win the approval of God on their own. (Even with this understanding many of us who think we understand the cross still miss the magnitude of its message.)

I don't claim to tackle the full wonder of the cross in this short seasonal devotion, but I do pray it will solidify truth you already know and perhaps surprise you as the Holy Spirit takes it deeper and gives it more application.

This devotional booklet offers five weeks of thoughts centered around living as people who were purchased with Christ's blood. I don't attempt to connect specifically a particular tradition or to follow a Lenten calendar. It is my goal to simply think about why our Lord would choose to come to this earth to die and what the results of His sacrifice were. Because my first experience of Ash Wednesday and Lent were meaningful to me, there is a week of devotions relating to what I learned during that time. They invite you to journey with me in opening our hearts to His probing.

While there will be devotions that recount some of the stages of the cross, many of the devotions I've chosen will focus on the *result* of the cross in our lives—the victory, intimacy, and healing that comes from our new identity as Christ's beloved, an identity Jesus lovingly purchased for us as He gave His life. In the last week of devotions, the week leading up to the celebration of Christ's resurrection, I have labeled Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter readings. If that is helpful to you, great! If not, ignore the traditional titles and read the truths. ☺

I introduce this collection with a week of devotions that talk about our innate value to God. It's something He's asked me to look at in recent years, and I felt it was a fitting introduction to devotions based on the work of the Cross in our lives, especially since week two journeys into thoughts of repentance. My friend, we must never forget the tender love of a Father and Son who joined together to give all for you and me. Our God is crazy about us, and the breadth of His sacrificial love proves how dearly we are treasured, even before we came to Him.

Like all *Soul Scents* devotions, this booklet is offered as a tool to help us as we journey deeper into the Son's embrace. Most of the devotions are adapted from *Soul Scents: Awaken* and *Soul Scents: Rooted*, which chronicle my discovery of awakening to God's love and becoming rooted in the new identity He gave me. I also pulled thoughts from the other two books in the series, *Soul Scents: Bloom* and *Soul Scents: Flourish*. (If you are interested in knowing more about the series in its entirety, there is more information in the back of this booklet.)

As you take time to meditate each week on the Scriptures I've chosen, maybe you'd like to settle your mind by coloring as you think about them. If you choose to print this PDF, the weekly trees and daily leaves make coloring spaces and we've included an additional coloring page at the end of this devotion.

You can also find several different free coloring pages, which include the trees, on my website at: <http://paulamoldenhauer.com/gifts/>. If you're reading electronically, I encourage you to check these out! The coloring pages were gifted to us and you by Lisa Joy Samson, the artist

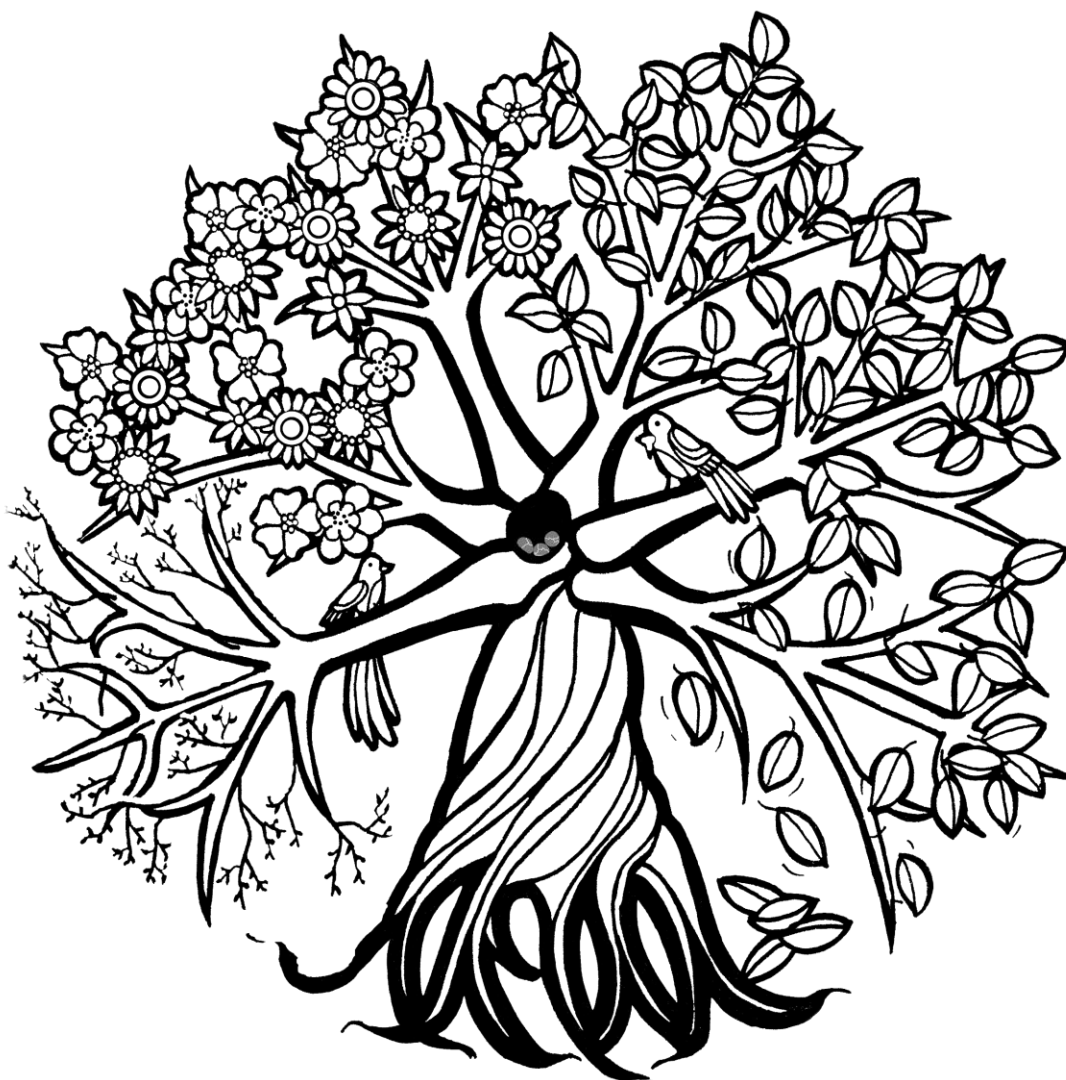
of the inspirational coloring book series which includes the most recent release, *Colors of Hope*. You can also download a free coloring book on her website: <https://lisajoyssamson.com/>

I pray you are blessed as you take this journey with me.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paula". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, looping capital 'P' and a trailing flourish at the end.

P.S. These selections for Easter were taken from the [Soul Scents](#) collection, available on Amazon.com in print and electronic formats. The devotions in *Selections for Easter* are re-labeled and adapted to fit this format.



Week One ~ Of Great Worth



Week One ~ Of Great Worth

Sunday

Ponder:

Worth

Why would Jesus choose to give up the perfection of heaven to experience ridicule and horrific death?

Scripture says that Jesus endured the cross for the “joy set before Him” (Hebrews 12:2). What is that joy? The passage continues by saying that Jesus was given the place of honor when He returned to heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father.

My thinking used to stop there.

But Scripture also calls you and me Jesus’ “rich and glorious inheritance” (Ephesians 1:18, NLT) and says that we’ve been seated in the heavenlies *with* Jesus. There are also a lot of passages which talk about how Jesus longs for the final ceremony when His bride (us!) is presented to Him. It’s hard to believe it is true, but Jesus died, in part, because He wanted *us* as His inheritance. His beloved bride.

Then there’s Father God. What would cause a loving Father to ask such a thing of His son? Luke 12:32 tells us that it was the Father’s “good pleasure” to give the kingdom to us. Ephesians talks of the wonder of God adopting us as His very own children, allowing Jesus to pay the redemption price, to purchase us from darkness.

My friend, we are of *great worth* to our Creator.

Maybe you blaze past those thoughts, accepting them quickly, in the context of the unfathomable actions of the cross. You believe you are loved, treasured even, by God. Why else would God allow the cross of Christ?

But will you believe it tomorrow?

Will you believe it when life doesn’t go as you planned? When someone wounds you? When you stare at your imperfections in the mirror (on the wall or in your soul)?

When the vile voice of the enemy whispers of your inadequacy and failure?

Can you *know* then, way down deep, that the King of All *values* you? That the cross took all of the shame and inadequacy, all of the outsider-living, and placed you in the center of God's heart? That even before the cross God chose you as the recipient of His love because *you* are of *great worth* to Him? That you are part of the royal family of heaven?

If you're like me, you'll have good days and bad days when it comes to living like royalty. But whether or not we stand tall in the noble robes our Father gave us, it doesn't change the fact that we were bought with a price because of our *worth* to God. It doesn't change that fact that His actions rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and placed us close to Him in the kingdom of light. It doesn't change that fact that we are *His beloved*.

We *belong* with our family in the throne room.

Maybe it seems strange to start an Easter devotional book talking about our worth to our Creator, but I believe this is one of the places most attacked by the enemy and also one of the main points of the cross.

Prayer:

Precious Jesus, I believe it. I do. When I think of it in the context of the cross, I believe You value me. But sometimes I struggle to believe I have innate worth in the everyday minutes of life, especially on the days that are busy or full of struggle. I know You are love, and that You love me. You are perfect Love, so of course You love me. But to hold onto the idea that You value me—*treasure* me even—for my innate worth to You . . . that's harder, Lord. Please help me to see You as You are. Please help me to see me as You do.

Meditate:

Hear the heart of Jesus for you in the following Scriptures* from the *New Living Translation*:

- You have captured my heart, my treasure, my bride. You hold it hostage with one glance of your eyes (Song of Solomon 4:9).
- Your love delights me, my treasure, my bride. Your love is better than wine, your perfume more fragrant than spices (Song of Solomon 4:10).
- Open to me, my treasure, my darling, my dove, my perfect one (Song of Solomon 5:2).

(People use different techniques to focus. Maybe you want to read each passage several times. Or only read one each day this week, really slowly. Maybe one of the verses jumped out at you and you want to create a picture, a sculpture, or a collage to remind you of its message. You could pick one to memorize. Write it out. Or listen to it on your phone as you walk or run. Or

meditate on the passage as you color one of the free coloring pages offered on my website. These are just ideas. You and Jesus might have a completely different idea!)

Worship:

We love because He first loved us. He calls you and me His treasure. And we respond that He is ours. You might enjoy this song, “You are My Treasure,” sung by Chris Tomlin. As you listen, lift it up to the Lord as your worship: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ab4q9ocpT8>.

**Some Bible scholars say the Song of Solomon is simply a love story between a real man, Solomon, and a real woman. Others say it is a metaphor for how God loves Israel. Still others say it is a metaphor for Christ and the church. I firmly agree with theologians who say it is all three. I also believe, as some teachers explain, that the Song of Solomon is a wonderful way to discover Jesus as my groom. After all I am His bride. When the Song of Solomon is studied as a personal journey into that bride/groom relationship, it holds treasures untold! I encourage you to consider spending some time there and seeing what the Holy Spirit reveals to you about how dearly you are loved.*



Week One ~ Of Great Worth

Monday: Worthy of the Cross

Then God said, "Let Us (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) make man in Our image, according to Our likeness [not physical, but a spiritual personality and moral likeness]; and let them have complete authority." . . . God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good and He validated it completely.
~ Genesis 1:26, 31 AMP

Lord, I know I'm not worthy, but . . .

How many times have we prayed such words or heard such spoken?

Their presence in the prayer time with my friend was no surprise. The surprise was what the Holy Spirit said when He interrupted us.

My friend offered a lovely prayer from her heart, thanking God for His many gifts. Then she said, "I'm know I'm not worthy of them, Lord, but I'm grateful."

When she paused, a phrase popped into my mind. "She was worthy of the cross."

"You were worthy of the cross," I said.

She gasped.

This experience sent me to the Bible. It's the litmus test for thoughts that seem to come from the Holy Spirit. Scriptures flitted through my mind of man's depravity and unworthiness. One that drew me was Romans 5:7-8. "He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn't been so weak, we wouldn't have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him" (MSG).

God is clear: nothing I do makes me worthy of His great sacrifice. Yet, that phrase, "She was worthy of the cross" haunted me. Was it true? Did Scripture back it?

As I prayed, the creation story came to mind. Everything about the passage validated the worth of human beings and the idea that man was made to reflect God's glory. "Then God said, 'Let Us (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) make man in Our image, according to Our likeness [not physical, but a spiritual personality and moral likeness]; and let them have complete authority.' . . . God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good and He validated it completely'" (Genesis 1:26, 31, AMP).

How could humanity not be of great worth to God? Not only did He create man, but human beings are the one creation upon which He imprinted His own spiritual personality and moral likeness. Genesis tells us God gave another special distinction to humankind. When He created man, He didn't simply speak him into being as He did with the rest of creation. He actually brought him to life by pouring His own breath through him. "Then the LORD God formed [that is, created the body of] man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being [an individual complete in body and spirit]" (Genesis 2:7, AMP).

Man possessed great worth from the beginning because from the beginning He reflected the image of God.

What if we opened ourselves to the idea that we are of great value? What if we saw all of humankind as image bearers of the Creator? How would that change how we love others? If we realize that even people of no faith reflect the glory of God, how might that change our treatment of people we disagree with? If we truly believe we have great value as the crowning, beloved creation of the Most Holy and Beautiful One, that we are stamped with His very image, could we love ourselves more?

If God Himself deemed us worthy of Christ's sacrifice—not because we *did* anything worthy, but because of our innate worth as one He made, loves, and values—it changes everything.

My friend and I received a shift in our spiritual understanding that day. We'll have to rethink our words next time we're tempted to tell God we are unworthy of His gifts or attention. Instead, I hope we will value each other and ourselves a little more, seeking to see the human race with the worth God places upon it.

God, thank You for valuing me, for imprinting Your own glorious nature within me, for creating me in a way You deem worthy of the blood of Jesus. Help me to value people and to look for Your glory in each one. Help me to see that I too have great worth.



Week One ~ Of Great Worth

Tuesday: Cheapened Blood

“Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. And a jeweled ring for his finger; and shoes! And kill the calf we have in the fattening pen. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has returned to life. He was lost and is found.” So the party began.

~ Luke 15:22–24 TLB

“Don’t cheapen the blood.” My friend’s voice was reflective, almost a whisper. She explained how she now understood that when she declared herself unworthy, she devalued Christ’s sacrifice. God believes we are worthy of the greatest gift He could ever give—Himself. If this is true, is there anything we are unworthy of?

My friend and I talked about how in our flawed thinking we often deemed ourselves unworthy of not only the cross, but any number of gifts God offers. “It’s like when we go into a posture of unworthiness, we’re picking and choosing which capillaries of Christ’s blood we can receive. Maybe we’re worthy of this one, but not that one. And when we don’t receive all the benefits of His blood we become anemic,” she said.

I pondered her words over the next few weeks. How often had I felt unworthy of something the Lord wanted to give me? How often had I watched loved ones struggle the same way? I’d made tremendous strides over the years in believing I was worthy because I was bathed in the blood of Jesus. I’d begun to live braver, happier, and freer because I learned to look to His work on the cross for my worth instead of to my own imperfections or to the approval of other people. But what boggled my thinking now was the idea that God said I was worthy of the cross *before* the cross. While I was a sinner Christ died for me (Romans 5:8)!

One day there was a spirited discussion at my dinner table about the prodigal son. You know the one. He takes his inheritance while his dad is still alive and wastes it all on fast women and booze. When he runs out of money he can’t provide for himself and takes a job feeding pigs. He’s so hungry the pigs’ food looks good. Finally he comes to his senses. “I will go

home to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant’” (Luke 15:18–19, NLT).

Meanwhile Dad is doing what he does every day. He’s watching the road, longing for his son. Hoping against hope he’ll one day recognize the beloved form in the distance. If only he could hug him, talk to him, be with him again!

Then it happens. “And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him” (v. 20). The son starts his speech, which is nonsense to his dad. His loving father interrupts with a very different plan. “Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found” (v. 22–24).

As we talked about the story of the prodigal son, I remembered my friend’s words about cheapening the blood. This story of the wayward son didn’t include an illustration of the cross. It wasn’t so much about dealing with our sins as it was about dealing with our worth. The son’s worth was certainly not based upon his behavior. *Before* the father cleaned him up, he was valued. What was his value based upon? Being his father’s son.

My friend, our Father loves us. To Him we are of great worth. Our value doesn’t change based on behavior or anything else. *God* deems us worthy of everything He wants to give us. He loves his children. He sees their potential. He wants to give good gifts to them. We have to change our mindset. Next time we are offered an upgrade in life—a new job, a special friendship, a new ministry, or even material things—we need to intentionally see those gifts as blessings from a father who offers them because of His love. We must resist the temptation to see ourselves as unworthy of them. That goes for the intangible stuff too, like forgiveness, happiness, peace, and love. The only One whose opinion really counts obviously thinks you’re worth it. If we’re worthy of the blood is there anything we’re not worthy of?

Wow! Father! Open my eyes to how You see me. Help me to believe I am of great value and teach me to receive with gladness every gift You wish to bestow. If You deemed me worthy of the blood of Jesus, You believe me worthy of every good thing. Thank You for the innate value I have as Your beloved child.



Week One ~ Of Great Worth

Wednesday: Partying with the Father

“Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!” And they began to have a wonderful time.

~ Luke 15:22–24 MSG

So the party began.

~ Luke 15:24 NLT

The lessons of the story of the prodigal son continue. That day when we sat around the dinner table discussing it, we talked about which character in the story we most related to. My husband surprised me by saying he often felt like the prodigal son, unworthy of the father’s gifts. Tears sprang to my eyes. How could my kind, loving man see himself as unworthy? He had modeled God’s unconditional love to me for years, daily showing me how he valued me.

Later, when we were alone, I asked him about this (and later he gave me permission to share his story with you). “Help me understand why you feel this way,” I said. “For years we’ve talked about grace, about how we are worthy because of Christ’s blood.”

“Well, I guess it isn’t exactly worthiness, maybe.” He paused. “When I see myself as the son, I can receive the ring the father gives. It symbolizes family identity, and I believe God welcomed me into His family. I can put on the robe. To me that symbolizes royalty, the position of the family. I believe I’m a son of the King, so I’m okay with the robe.”

He was quiet for a while, and I waited, praying to understand.

“I just don’t know how to walk into that party.” He said. “How do you act in that situation?”

I realized then that my husband's struggle was to feel comfortable in the honor the Lord wanted to bestow upon him. He could see himself as worthy because of Christ's blood but to be celebrated made him uncomfortable. So did playing at the party. He knew how to serve. He'd been the Lord's servant for years, but how did one behave in celebration and freedom—especially as the guest of honor?

We sat quietly for a moment, and an illustration grew out of my heart.

"Suppose you get a card in the mail from the owner of Disneyland. The owner invites you to spend a day enjoying all Disneyland has to offer. Every expense is covered. You can ride what you want, eat what you want, buy what you want. And even more, there is a ceremony honoring you. All the owner asks is that you show up at 4 p.m. in a particular hall and receive the honor he wants to give.

"I would be excited, but it would also make me really nervous," I said. "I mean, I don't know the layout of Disneyland. Which rides would I like best? Would long lines make me late for the four o'clock appointment? And what if some of the rides messed up my hair or dumped water on me? I would be embarrassed to walk into a special ceremony disheveled. Besides I'm not sure how much fun something like that would be by myself.

"But suppose the invitation read a little differently. What if the owner of Disneyland said he would meet you at the gate himself? He couldn't wait to share his special place with you, and he knew exactly which parts you'd like best. He had it all planned out. He knew the place intimately. Which rides and restaurants were close together. Where all the shortcuts were. He also had a room prepared for you to freshen up in before the ceremony. A special outfit he chose for you to wear awaited there. You'd be free to play all you wanted until the ceremony without worrying about ruining your clothes. Not only would you benefit from his understanding of how to navigate Disney, you'd enjoy sharing the experience with him."

My husband smiled. "Again it's about the relationship. Hold onto that, Paula."

We talked then about how the father in the story of the prodigal son must have acted. We believe he wouldn't have left his son to enter the party alone. He would have known the neighbor's tongues were wagging, so he would want to firmly establish his son as beloved and welcome. He would surely have walked around the gathering, reintroducing his son to his friends, saying, as he did to the older brother, "Celebrate this happy day! My son is home!" His love and pride in his son would be evident, and he would model for everyone that his son was valued and worthy of his position in the family, no matter the past mistakes.

Friends, if you're like my husband and me, you find it isn't always easy to navigate unfamiliar situations, even really good ones. Sometimes we humans struggle to believe we are worthy of the best offerings from the Lord's heart. Even if we learn to believe in our innate worth, we can fear how we will navigate the expansive offerings of His love.

But as my husband reminded me, it's about relationship. God never leaves us to navigate alone. When He blesses, He walks beside us, expanding our experiences, showing us new and marvelous things. He knows the environment. He knows what most ministers to our hearts and what helps us believe in His love. He knows where we are most insecure. He may lead us into situations that expose our insecurities, but He walks with us and heals us of those struggles as He blesses us.

Father, thank You for being a good Father. A Father who walks next to me as I experience new things and who gives the best gifts, the ones that heal me and minister to my heart. Give me courage to meet You wherever You are. Help me not to ignore Your invitations out of feelings of fear or unworthiness. Help me to walk bravely into new places of blessing and influence, trusting that You have everything planned out and will help me navigate the unknown.



Week One ~ Of Great Worth

Thursday: A Valued Pearl

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him.

~ Ephesians 1:3 MSG

I've been immersed in this week's devotionals. Pondering worthiness. My value to God. Eating and sleeping and breathing the deeper mindset of worthiness the Lord is revealing. I've read the beautiful words of value in Psalm 139:

You are the one
who put me together
inside my mother's body,
and I praise you
because of
the wonderful way
you created me.
Everything you do is marvelous!
Of this I have no doubt (13–14, CEV).

I've flipped to Ephesians, another reminder of our worth to God, thinking about how before the world was even created He knew us and chose us. He planned even then to prove His love, to show, through the blood of His Son, how deeply He values us. Even then He wanted us to be part of the family. He longed to bless us.

"Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son" (1:4–6, MSG).

Still, the concept of being worthy of love, valued *as I am* even *before* Christ's blood washed me clean, feels big.

"I still struggle to say it. Can you say it?" I challenged my husband.

His determined eyes held a hint of a smile. "I am worthy of the blood of Christ." I liked how his solid declaration filled the room, but it still felt awkward to me.

"Maybe if you make a clear delineation between being worthy—of value—and being deserving—worthy because of what you do—it will be easier for you," he said.

I nodded. Scripture (and my own heart) consistently said I was not *deserving* of God's lavish gift of the cross. How many years had I listened to sermons and songs and prayers and conversations pointing to the fact that nothing I did was deserving of Jesus' death?

But God keeps pushing the envelope. He won't leave me alone about this. He wants me (and you!) to understand that because of the value He placed upon His children, because we are His beloved creation who reflected His image, He deems us worthy of Christ's blood. One of the definitions of worth is *deserving*, but we aren't *deserving* because of our works or because of anything we could do that is of value to God. We are *deserving* because of our *innate value* to Him. *We are worthy because we have worth.*

God isn't a liar.

I try not to stumble upon the words: "I am worthy of the blood of Christ."

I am worthy. I am worthy. I am worthy.

My son is dating a lovely young woman. When they first started seeing each other, my prayer group prayed for their relationship. During the prayer time we were given a picture of a beautiful pearl being fashioned by God's hand. God showed us how much He values that young lady.

It reminds me of the story Jesus told about the pearl of great price. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:45–46, NIV). Of course this story is about how we react when we understand the great value of what God offers us. But as I thought of this story, the Holy Spirit flipped it around, showing me that it is also what God did because of us. Our value was so great in His sight, that He gave all—His very life—to purchase us.

Jesus and His kingdom are the pearl of great worth.

But so are we.

Jesus believed we were of enough value that He purchased us with His very blood.

Now we surrender in kind, choosing to release our old life to receive a new life as valued and worthy citizens in His kingdom.

Oh, Jesus! Thank You for believing I was worthy of the blood You shed. For thinking of me even before You created the world. For imprinting Your own DNA into mankind. For fashioning me in my mother's womb. For choosing me to be the recipient of Your highest blessings in Christ. Reshape my thinking. My inadequacies and failures keep me humble, but even as I acknowledge that my greatest efforts are undeserving, You spread Your arms on a cross, declaring I am worthy. My flaws don't affect my worth. Thank You for valuing me always. No matter what.



Week One ~ Of Great Worth
Friday: Reflected Glory

But we Christians . . . can be mirrors that brightly reflect the glory of the Lord. And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him.

~ 2 Corinthians 3:18 TLB

The unseasonably warm weather lured me outside to clear the brain fog of too many hours at the computer. Plopping into a deck chair, I leaned my head back, closed my eyes, and then tilted my face toward the too-bright sun. Even through lidded eyes I saw a flaming orange orb burning before me. Its magnificence blinded me, too powerful for unprotected gazing. But oh, how glorious the warmth and refreshment that washed over me as I rested in the light!

Scripture says the heavens declare God's glory (Psalm 19:1). We believe it as we shield tender eyes from the sting of a blazing sun or gaze upon billions of shimmering diamonds upon a black velvet sky when night falls.

The glory of the Lord floods the earth. We hear it in the thunderous crash of ocean waves and the lilting melody of finches. We inhale it in the clean, scent of freshly mown grass and the gentle fragrance of lilacs. We taste it in raspberries and chocolate and lemons. We see it as light plays upon anything of beauty, bringing forth nuances we hadn't quite noticed before.

But there's one place I believe God sees glory that we often struggle to recognize. Ourselves.

Do you believe you reflect God's glory back to Him and to the world? Can Paul's words in Second Corinthians really be true? Are we actually beings who mirror the magnificence of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? The concept makes me uncomfortable.

But it's there. In God's Word. In the letter from His heart.

Second Corinthians clearly states we are mirrors who "brightly reflect the glory of God." Other passages in the Bible support the idea. "Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact

representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3, NIV), and we are being made into the image of Jesus (Romans 8:28–29).

Even with God's own words backing the concept, it's hard to deeply receive the idea that God sees His own glory reflected through *me*. Do you struggle with that too?

I found a definition that helped. Glory is "something that brings praise or fame to someone or something; something that is a source of great pride" (merriam-webster.com).

Now the thought is a little more manageable. You and I bring praise and fame to God as we reflect His nature. We are God's source of great pride. As we are remade to be like Jesus, we reflect back to God His own glorious goodness.

If life is a journey into the Son's embrace, there is much we must learn, first-hand, about who God is and how He sees us. Often our concept of God and the way He interacts with man skews our perception of relationship and inhibits our ability to draw near to Him. How different life is when we begin to grasp more deeply the character of a loving Father and how His Son's sacrifice restored us to their original intent: you and I living as sons and daughters of the King of Kings.

Precious God, it's easy to celebrate Your glory in creation. Beauty delights me. But it can be difficult to believe I reflect Your glory. Help me believe in this beauty. Show me how I reflect Your glory back to You and to the world You call me to serve. Since all that is good and beautiful is from You, this is not arrogance. It's an acknowledgment of Your creative genius and a celebration of Your redemptive work.



Week One Response

Response prompt:

Jot a few notes that show how you see yourself differently after this week's thoughts on our innate worth in the eyes of our Lord. This isn't a selfish exercise. As I said at the beginning of the week, we love because He first loved us. When we receive His love more fully, truly believing we are His treasure, we are able to love Him more fully too. The love is a circle, flowing from Him to us, and then through us back to him. This kind of love brings Him glory. He is glorified as He loves us, and we reflect His glory when we love Him and others. Have you received the identity He has for you? How deeply? On the surface or in a deep, solid place? Do you believe you are of great worth to Him? A treasure?

Not everyone like taking notes or journaling. Have freedom in these weekly response times. Write full sentences or make bullet points. Or write a poem or song or prayer. Or blow off writing and draw or paint imagery that helps you remember.

My daughter, Sarah, has an interesting way of taking notes during sermons or as she reads, so I asked her to create something as an example of how she would take notes on the last devotion of this week. We included it on the next page as an example of one way you could do this week's response. Sarah mentioned that she is usually more personal in her responses, but she made this one more generic so it could relate to anyone. If she'd done it for private use, it would likely be more raw and make sense only to her.

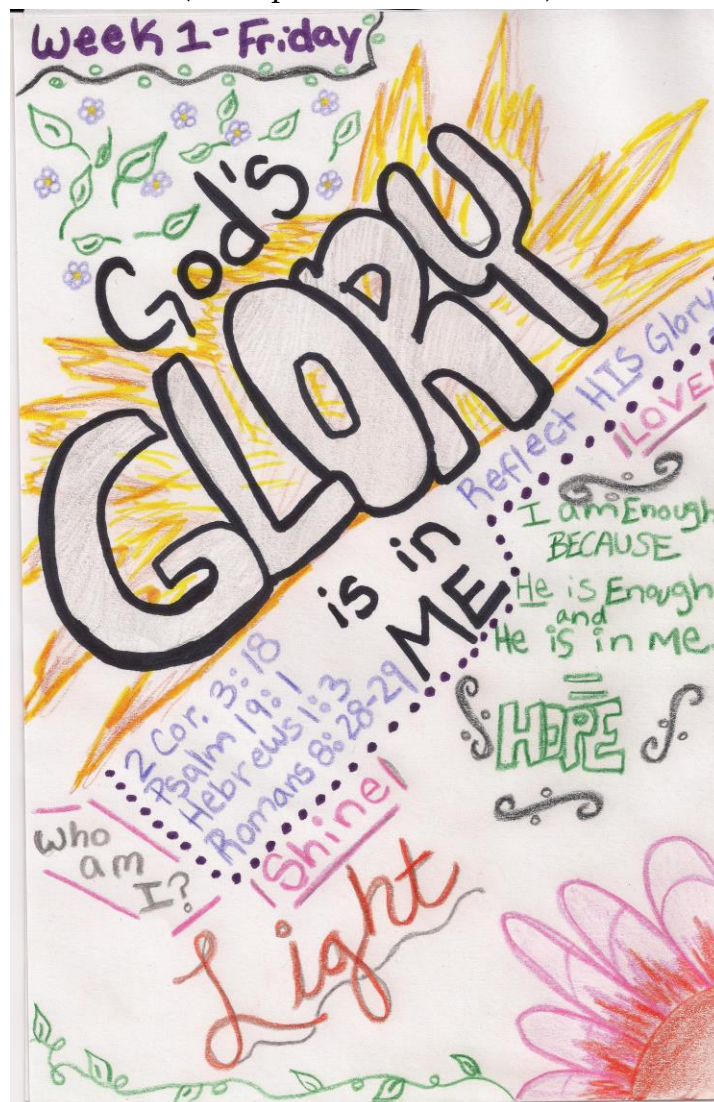
We want you to have freedom to respond to each week's concepts the way that works for you! You can mix up your approaches or do a tried and true method you enjoy. We do encourage you to take the time to do *something* in response, though, so that whatever the Holy Spirit wants to focus on with you has space to sink in more deeply. Ask the Holy Spirit to help solidify it in you as you do.

☺ Freedom to be yourself, my friend. ☺

For the especially brave:

I just had a strange experience. As I pondered the core message of this week of devotions, I was prompted to Google two words: "Treasure Song." What came up was a song by Bruno Mars with that title. I clicked on "lyrics" and thought, Hmm . . . what's God up to? I could see Jesus singing those words to His treasured bride. I clicked on the YouTube video. The introduction had a cuss word I especially dislike. The music was not my style. I am not into pop culture and know nothing about the performer. But as he sang, tears sprang to my eyes. I believe God uses all kinds of venues and people to share His heart, even if they don't know He's speaking through them. That's what happened for me with this song. I believe this song depicts (albeit in pop culture words) how Jesus feels about us. If you are up to braving the coarse beginning, give it a listen as you experience this week's response time. But pray about it first. It might not be for you just because it was for me. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sds5SpNd1Mw

(Example of Sarah's notes)



[illegible]



Week Two ~ Cleansing



Week Two ~ Cleansing Grace

Sunday

Ponder:

Repentance

You stand before the Lord, fully forgiven, fully accepted, and fully loved. His unconditional regard for you is clear. You are His treasure. You are a new creation in Jesus. Old things have passed away. All things are new (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus accomplished much at the cross.

So how does a Christian process repentance without losing sight of his or her identity as one who is freed from the sin of the past and changed into a being who reflects God's glory?

When my youngest son took driver's ed, the instructors purposely put his car into a slide to teach him how to handle this type of emergency. They told the parents that the students are taught to always keep their eyes on where they want to go. When they do that, their actions follow their focus, and they will steer the car out of the slide and back onto the road. If they look toward the ditch instead, that's where they will end up.

Wow. The spiritual application for this metaphor is huge. As Christians when we look toward the sin-problem, we continue a downward slide, but when we look to Jesus and the new creation we are in Him, we come out of the slide and live like the One we're focused upon.

The Lord often reveals to us the places where we're prone to slide. He doesn't reveal them so we can work harder. He reveals them so we can surrender to the work *He* is already doing to change us from the inside out. Thanks to the cross, we are already cleansed, given a new heart, and filled with God's Spirit. The changes we need aren't core changes, they are simply allowing old thinking and habits to fall away so we can live more and more in tune with the person we already are in Jesus.

Teacher Graham Cooke says that God doesn't deal with the old man, the sinful man. He only works in the new man, the new creation we are in Jesus. He believes God is all about giving up-grades to the new man. When God reveals something He wants to change, what He

reveals is only an indication of where He is working next to give us new understanding about who He is and who we are in Him. What He reveals indicates where He is working to remake us in the image of Jesus and is a promise of an “up-grade” in our relationship with Jesus.

As Christians we can get caught up in focusing on our faults. We feel sorrow and guilt. We also feel powerless to change. Repentance as a new creation in Christ is different. It’s an empowering conviction. Repentance is not a cycle of regret, saying you’re sorry, and blowing it again. It’s not wallowing in powerless guilt. Repentance is an actual change in our belief system that results in behavioral change.

This week’s set of devotions chronicles God’s gentle probing as He revealed a lie that was holding me back in my destiny as a new creation. As you journey through them, would you ask the Lord to reveal something in you He wants to heal? I believe our struggles usually go back to a lie we believe about God or ourselves. When the lie is revealed, new freedom comes. The sin or struggle no longer has hold on us because we understand the lie beneath it, and we understand the truth and grace Jesus offers to that situation. We repent by re-thinking this area of our lives and allowing new truth and God’s grace to transform us into Christ’s image. As we break out of old behavior cycles, we don’t beat ourselves up when we struggle or misstep. We look to Christ, to the new identity He gave us. We receive His forgiveness, and we focus on Him. He is the author and perfecter of our faith. He will finish the good work He started.

Prayer:

Lord, I don’t want to spend my life in a cycle of saying “I’m sorry” instead of experiencing actual repentance. Reveal to me a place where my belief system is wrong and holding me back. Replace the lies with Your truth. Even as I feel sorrow over my “stuff,” help me to remember that You see me as precious and beloved, a new creation, covered in the righteousness of Jesus. Remind me that You are all about transforming me into Christ’s image and that You finish the good works You start. You don’t despair over me. You simply reveal fault lines in my thinking and behavior so I can learn new truth and be continually changed to be more like Jesus. I give You permission to reveal what You need to, and I ask that You keep me standing firm on the foundation of the work of the cross as You do it. I understand that growth takes time.

Meditate:

Hear the heart of Jesus for you in the following Scriptures from the *New Living Translation*:

- This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun (2 Corinthians 5:17)!
- But thank God! He has made us his captives and continues to lead us along in Christ’s triumphal procession. Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere,

like a sweet perfume. Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God. But this fragrance is perceived differently by those who are being saved and by those who are perishing (2 Corinthians 2: 14 – 15).

- So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority. When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature (Colossians 2:10-11).

(Consider trying something new as you focus on these verses. There were several ideas last week. Another idea that helps me is to read them in several versions of Scripture to glean fuller meaning. You might enjoy that as part of your meditation time.)

Worship:

Here’s an old hymn, “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us,” performed by Selah.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKDujmtyAVk>. This YouTube video includes the lyrics on the screen. I encourage you to watch one time through so you don’t miss all this song is saying, and then to listen again. Maybe the second time you want to sit with your eyes closed and just soak in the wonder of the message. Maybe you want to dance, slowly, majestically, right there in your living room as you listen. Nobody has to see you. It’s an offering to God, not a performance. If you’re like me, you have neither a background in dance nor a special talent for it. But God doesn’t care, not if you simply are moving the body He created in worship to Him.



Week Two ~ Cleansing Grace
Monday: Blackened Streaks

But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.

~ 2 Corinthians 3:18 KJV

Have you experienced an Ash Wednesday service before? Well into adulthood I attended my first one. The worship seeped deep into the hidden places. As the pastor traced the blackened streaks upon my forehead, tears sprang to my eyes.

The liturgy invited the Holy Spirit to search within. To root out sin. To cast down idols. It asked me to speak words of repentance. Trouble brewed inside. I didn't yet understand, but I gave permission for revelation.

By definition to repent is to feel regret, to rethink, to change.

Repentance in a Christian is an interesting thing. We've already made the choice to accept Christ's gift of salvation, hard earned at the cross. His righteousness covers us and declares us holy. We live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Every fault is already forgiven: today's, yesterday's, and tomorrow's.

The Lord wants us to live from an identity of *already forgiven*.

A painful memory of my childhood is how my precious, sweet Grandma, who knew the Lord and constantly pointed me to Him, didn't understand this concept. She believed Jesus was her Savior and loved Him with a loyalty almost baffling to me as a young child. Her lips moved almost continually in silent prayer. Many times her belief in God and His ability to help in trouble shored up my own young faith.

But Grandma didn't have the freedom a deeper grasp of grace would have given her. Guilt and fear often held her back.

One time when she tucked me in for a special overnight at Grandma's house, she told me, "Every night I ask the Lord to forgive me for anything I did wrong during the day, in case I

sinned, and didn't know it. If something happens to me in my sleep I want to be right with God."

It still hurts to think of the bondage this kind of thinking held over her. She didn't understand she was already acceptable to God because of Jesus. "For it is from God alone that you have your life through Christ Jesus. He showed us God's plan of salvation; he was the one who made us acceptable to God; he made us pure and holy and gave himself to purchase our salvation" (1 Corinthians 1:30, TLB).

Maybe a lot of people feel like she did. In church service after church service we sing songs and pray prayers that beg for God's mercy. Yet hasn't He already extended mercy?

"But God is so rich in mercy; he loved us so much that even though we were spiritually dead and doomed by our sins, he gave us back our lives again when he raised Christ from the dead—only by his undeserved favor have we ever been saved—and lifted us up from the grave into glory along with Christ, where we sit with him in the heavenly realms—all because of what Christ Jesus did" (Ephesians 2:4–6, TLB).

In His grace Christ cleansed us and made us a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are even seated with Jesus in the heavenly realms!

Then why celebrate Ash Wednesday?

Why repent?

Because we're like the apostle Paul, who said, "So you see how it is: my new life tells me to do right, but the old nature that is still inside me loves to sin. Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me from my slavery to this deadly lower nature? Thank God! It has been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free" (Romans 7:23–25, TLB).

Paul was comforted by the same truth that comforts us today: Jesus moved in, cleansed us by His blood, and now the Holy Spirit convicts, slipping into our secret places and revealing where we're thinking and living in the old way. "The Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image" (2 Corinthians 3:18, NLT). The King James Version of the Bible says we are changed from "glory to glory."

We repent, not out of fear of hell, not because we are worthless sinners, but because we are new creations, citizens of God's kingdom, and we want to repent—to "rethink" and "change"—anything that gets in the way of becoming more like Jesus.

My friend, as you rethink life and ask the Lord to help you become more like Jesus, you repent from the safe place as one already forgiven and accepted.

Precious Jesus, Your sacrifice changed everything. Thank You for walking the road to the cross, for entering such degradation and pain so I might be cleansed and freed from the powers of sin and death. Holy Spirit, thank You for dwelling within me, probing the places where I need to rethink life. I give You

permission to reveal any place where I'm thinking in the old ways instead of like a kingdom citizen. Please change me from glory to glory.



Week Two ~ Cleansing Grace
Tuesday: From Railing to Rest

God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He's set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.

~ Colossians 1:13 MSG

Ever railed at God?

Ash Wednesday's immersion of surrender and repentance opened me to the Holy Spirit's work. The probing of inner places revealed some ugly stuff. My response included both crying out *to* God and yelling *at* God. Grief and hurt had dogged me for several weeks, and I struggled to find my way out of a fog. I couldn't seem to identify the root cause of my pain, but the Ash Wednesday service with its prayers to cast down idols and reveal unexposed sin aided the process.

As I journaled Thursday morning, a single sentence, unrelated to the paragraphs on either side, scrawled upon the page. When I finished writing for the day, I reread the unexpected phrase exposed by a blank line on either side.

What was it?

Revelation.

The words expressed a deep fear I hadn't yet fully understood. Attached to the fear were lies I needed to face and reject. Attached to the lies was a sinful lack of trust in God. It's hard to repent—to rethink—our response to life when we don't understand the lies and fears lurking within.

That week the Lord revealed sins of idolatry, faithlessness, and ego. The next week a pastor, Scott Nickell, said something profound. "At its core all temptation is about unbelief." He talked about how it was unbelief that kept the generation of Israelites who'd been rescued from slavery in Egypt from entering the Promised Land.

Scott's thoughts are grounded in Scripture. "God was patient with them [the Israelites] forty years, though they tried his patience sorely; he kept right on doing his mighty miracles for them to see. 'But,' God says, 'I was very angry with them, for their hearts were always looking somewhere else instead of up to me, and they never found the paths I wanted them to follow.' Then God, full of this anger against them, bound himself with an oath that he would never let them come to his place of rest" (Hebrews 3:9–11, TLB).

The writer of Hebrews then brings conviction to us. "Beware then of your own hearts, dear brothers, lest you find that they, too, are evil and unbelieving and are leading you away from the living God. Speak to each other about these things every day while there is still time so that none of you will become hardened against God, being blinded by the glamour of sin. For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as we did when we first became Christians, we will share in all that belongs to Christ" (v. 12–14).

What's encouraging about my experience is how faithful God is to reveal the sins of unbelief that harden our hearts to God's plan. Instead of leaving us to wallow in the temptation of unbelief He makes it His personal priority to give us revelation so we can turn from sin. As we offer surrendered hearts that are willing to rethink the junk that bogs us down, He gets rid of the sins we thought we were doomed to keep repeating (Colossians 1:13). We enter the rest of the Promised Land—the rest of a new kingdom established by Jesus, a place where we live forgiven and free. A place where all things are in our Lord's capable hands.

Have you asked Him to reveal false beliefs—hidden sin, even—that holds you back?

Precious Father, thank You for taking personal interest in me. Thank You for lovingly revealing my unbelief so I can be set free from it and learn to resist the temptation to harden my heart when disappointment and fear assault. Probe where You need to, Holy Spirit! Reveal my fears and the lies attached to them. Give me understanding so I can rethink my response to life and live forgiven and free, trusting in You.



Week Two ~ Cleansing Grace
Wednesday: What have I Done?

Don't you realize how patient he is being with you? Or don't you care? Can't you see that he has been waiting all this time without punishing you, to give you time to turn from your sin? His kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.

~ Romans 2:4 TLB

One of the gifts of recent years is a part-time job the Lord gave me as a paid singer in the Soli Dei church choir. Not being raised in a liturgical tradition, I've enjoyed the rhythms of the church calendar and being exposed to another style of worship. Since my husband and I attend a community church with multiple services, most weeks I'm honored to worship at the Lutheran church with my friends in the choir as well as with my family at our home church. Oh how I love worship music of all styles! I'm as comfortable in my choir robe as I am rocking out to drums. I've also been known to slip away to a nearby charismatic church to enjoy worship dance or to head to another part of town and enjoy the pageantry at a friend's Catholic Church. God's people are everywhere, and there is great delight in joining with them in worship of our shared King.

It is due to this part-time job that I attended the Ash Wednesday service I've talked about in the last two devotions. My sweet Jesus also used the music of this job to break through my turmoil and finish the work of repentance in my heart.

The railing I mentioned yesterday was grounded in anger at God. I simply didn't like how He was handling my life. I was tired of hardship. When He dug up the lie on that Thursday, I didn't immediately repent. I spent two days thrashing about in confusion and anger. The wrestling with God allowed my processing to take the lie to its deepest places to be more fully uprooted. It needed to be banished once and for all, no stone unturned! God was patient with me. He'd revealed the lie and offered the truth. He let me thrash about because He

knew I needed to also deal with the emotion I'd stuff down so I could fully heal from the damage the lies was doing.

By Saturday morning I was spent.

Exhausted, I hauled myself out of bed for a three-hour Easter music rehearsal. Entering the choir room is entering a beautiful community. And in that sacred assembly of fellow believers with voices lifted in song, the same Spirit who inspired the great composers of long ago took their music, reached across centuries, and stilled my heart. It started with Mendelssohn's healing melody as we sang, "Grant us thy peace so graciously."* The music swelled to fill the rehearsal space and the space of my soul. Weary of the questioning, the wrestling, my words became a prayer. Oh how I needed peace. *Yes, Lord, grant me peace.*

My heart then broke with an allegory by Tchaikovsky called "The Crown of Roses (Legend)." We sang, "The boy said humbly; 'Take, I pray, All but the naked thorns away.' Then of the thorns they made a crown, and with rough fingers pressed it down . . ." The Lord's sacrifice is no children's story. The harsh words, barbed whip, and thorned crown really did pierce His body and soul. And like the humble boy in the song, He allowed it. The God-man received the whip, the scorn, the cross, and succumbed to a cruel death.

But it was Richard Shephard's "Good Friday Reproaches" the Spirit used to cleanse me of the last vestiges of anger and distrust. Our director, Andy, is committed to communicating the message of the pieces he chooses, and this piece has a particularly emotive refrain. For at least five minutes we sang two sentences: "My people what wrong have I done to you? What good have I not done for you?"

Over and over those words echoed and reverberated in the rehearsal hall. Andy encouraged reflective word emphasis, dynamics, leaning into the text, making it spark with emotion and meaning.

My people what wrong have I done to you?

What good have I not done for you?

Part of repentance is to feel regret.

I'd been rethinking my life. Struggling to let go of the sin of unbelief and to change my way of thinking. Now I ached with regret. It was as if Christ Himself spoke to me in that refrain. "How have I wronged you? What good have I kept from you?"

Then the Spirit whispered a line from another song I'd heard. "But tell me now, where was my fault in loving you with my whole heart?"**

Oh my.

Our Jesus gave everything at the cross because of His heart full of love for us.

As I sang with my lips, I confessed with my heart, "Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus. I'm sorry. You've done nothing but love and give. Like a selfish child who doesn't get her way, I've ignored Your sacrifice and accused You of not loving me well."

It's amazing how tender He is even when He calls for repentance, how even in asking us to rethink our attitudes and behaviors, He floods us with a magnitude of love.

My friend, do you hear it too? The heart cry of Jesus, the One who gave all for us? Do you hear Him whisper, "What wrong have I done? What good have I withheld? Where can you fault Me? I've loved you with all I have."

The enemy constantly tries to confuse God's people and steal their joy. The vile whisper reverberates, saying God withholds from us, that His love is not to be trusted.

But where is fault in the One who spread His arms and gave all?

He left the splendor of heaven
Knowing his destiny
Was the lonely hill of Golgotha
There to lay down His life for me

If that isn't love
The ocean is dry
There's no stars in the sky
And the sparrow can't fly
If that isn't love
Then heaven's a myth
There's no feeling like this
If that isn't love***

Thank You, Jesus. I am undone by Your selfless love. You have no fault. All is done from love. You withhold no good thing.

*"Verleih Uns Frieden (Grant Us Thy Peace)", text by Martin Luther, translated to English by Andrew Halladay. Music by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy

**From "White Blank Page" by Mumford and Sons

***"If That Isn't Love" by Dottie Rambo



Week Two ~ Cleansing Grace
Thursday: Suffering and Glory

Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you'll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want.

~ I Peter 4:1–2 MSG

I don't like suffering. In fact I try to avoid it. During that Lenten season someone thoughtlessly attacked one of my most tender places. I'd offered up vulnerability, choosing transparency in an effort to communicate grace. But I was misunderstood and judged. It hurt. A lot.

But Jesus is tender, isn't He? My little issue of hurt feelings was nothing compared to the suffering of Christ, but He gently tended to my pain, whispering He'd suffered too and issuing an invitation into the fellowship of His suffering.

Jesus was often misunderstood and judged. People thought He was grandiose and self-absorbed when He declared Himself the Son of God. Even those who wanted to believe He was something special didn't like it when the road led not to power and financial gain, but to the cross.

As Jesus faced His greatest test of suffering, even His friends turned from Him. They didn't want to hear what He had to say. How dare He talk of pain and death? Peter rebuked Him for such thoughts. Judas gave up on Him rather than let go of his selfish plans and enter the suffering of his Lord.

Yes, Jesus understood the pain of offering up your best only to receive judgment and ridicule in return. Instead of defending Himself and calling down the angels to rescue Him, He walked the road of suffering. He chose obedience to His Father over escaping the pain.

I've had much deeper suffering than the incident I referenced. Some of my suffering has been undeserved like Jesus' was, but often part of the pain in times of suffering was born of my

own resistance to hardship, or as *The Message* says, “that old sinful habit” of expecting to get my own way, trying to get what I wanted instead of surrendering to the more difficult path the Lord asked me to walk.

Each of us has our own journey of suffering. Some people’s suffering is public—especially those who go through serious illness or sudden public loss—like losing a loved one to a car accident. Other people’s suffering is private. Their pain includes abuse or situations they feel they can’t talk about, and for these suffering saints it is difficult to find a safe community of support.

My friend, suffering isn’t easy. Even Jesus asked God if there wasn’t another way to accomplish His will. The Lord isn’t angry with us when we struggle to surrender to hard times. When we face genuine suffering, we have a Lord who is well acquainted with grief and sorrow. He understands our pain and validates our struggle. He also demonstrated the way through the suffering. He didn’t pretend it wasn’t happening. He didn’t run from it. He gathered His closest friends around Him and begged them to pray with Him; then He poured His heart out to His Father. When He prayed, He asked God to release Him from such a painful path, but when His Father didn’t, Jesus surrendered to suffering. He laid down His will and chose intense pain, dying a criminal’s death; but in surrendering He also received glory. On the other side of the pain God highly exalted Him, giving Jesus the name that is above every other name (Philippians 2:8–9). He was not only restored to His former glory, He was elevated.

As we follow Christ’s example, comforted and supported by a Friend who is well acquainted with sorrow, we too are restored, strengthened, and invited to share in glory. Scripture says, “In his kindness God called you to share in his eternal glory by means of Christ Jesus. So after you have suffered a little while, he will restore, support, and strengthen you, and he will place you on a firm foundation” (1 Peter 5:10, NLT).

Maybe you’re wondering why I would include a section on suffering in a week of devotions about repentance and cleansing. It’s easy in suffering to become bitter. Often it’s during suffering that the enemy sneaks in and plants lie weeds of anger and distrust in the good soil of our hearts. I don’t claim to suffer well. But I am learning that leaning into the suffering instead of fighting it, that surrendering to the healing work during suffering, helps me let go (eventually) of my sinful habit of wanting my own way.

Please don’t misunderstand. During suffering we get to be real. Sometimes that includes yelling at God, crying, questioning everything coming at us. It’s not healthy to shove down emotions in times of intense pain. Going numb is okay short-term, as a coping mechanism to get us through crises, but emotion shoved down long-term festers.

My friend, if you suffer today, remember your Best Friend is well acquainted with your pain. It’s okay to wrestle with Him and to ask for a way out, but if He calls upon you to

continue the path of pain for a while, know that He will use the suffering. You will share in the glory of Christ, and He Himself will restore you.

In times of sorrow and grief I look to You for comfort, Jesus. It helps to know You understand, firsthand, what it is like to grieve, to be accused, to face judgment, to be misunderstood. You know physical pain, relational pain, and spiritual pain. You understand rejection and hardship. Thank You for choosing the path of suffering so I am saved. In those last, hardest hours Your friends deserted You, but You never allow me to walk through suffering unaided by Your presence. Thank You that You never leave me. Thank You for empowering me to follow the Father even on painful paths. Thank You for promising to restore me and inviting me to share Your glory.



Week Two ~ Cleansing Grace
Friday: Polishing Grace

*Marvelous grace of our loving Lord.
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.*

~ "Grace Greater Than Our Sin," Text by Julia H. Johnston, Verse 1

*And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.
~ I Peter 5:10 NASB*

Sometimes people get nervous when talking about grace. They're concerned to fully rely on God's forgiving grace gives us a license to ignore our faults. But living in a rule-driven state doesn't make us holy, either. Focusing on rules almost always results in guilt from failure or pride from success, neither of which is conducive to experiencing consistency in our relationship with God. Sometimes, trying really hard to be good actually puts so much focus on sin that we grow worse instead of better! Rule-focused living also makes it hard for us to be graceful in our relationships with other people.

As Christ-followers we want to be holy. Some people think we're left with two options—to accept Christ's forgiving grace and believe He covers our sin (and give up on change) or to work really hard to live a holy life by following all the rules and make ourselves change (which sets us up for either obvious failure or outward performance without inner transformation).

There is another way.

My dear friend since childhood, Caryl Kirtley, told me a story that illustrates this. She wrote: "For hours I painstakingly worked to get all the years of tarnish off the silver I inherited. While I scrubbed, God gave me an 'aha.' We're like that silver. We have areas that aren't too

tarnished; areas that are so tarnished, deep in the crevices, that it seems we will never be beautiful again; and in-between areas. Overall, not a pretty sight! BUT when we give ourselves over to Him, He works on those places—removing the tarnish and leaving a beautiful patina—more beautiful than we imagined possible. And it's not a one-time process. No matter how immaculate we try to remain we live in a dirty world that inevitably gets on us. Just like silver, not kept pure and clean, we find ourselves in His hands many times over as He removes new tarnish."

Her words illustrate how fully *God* is the One who polishes us. Like a set of silver we can't get all the tarnish off ourselves. It takes an Outside Source.

This story illustrates another truth: Silver is always silver. Its worth is unchanged before or after the tarnish is wiped away, but when silver is polished its beauty increases. Caryl says the more frequently she places herself in the Father's hands, the less severe the polishing job. Her thoughts remind me that the real answer to my failure and struggle is continuous surrender.

And even in that, there is grace.

We've talked a lot this week about repentance and cleansing. These two words used to make me tired. As I type today, I feel peaceful. I've discovered that the Christian life is less about effort than it is about surrendering to a Loving Father who is faithful to continue the good work He started in me. But let's get real. Surrender isn't always easy, either. On my own, I often don't want to submit to His polishing cloth. Sometimes the best I can do is to pray He'll make me willing. In these times, I'm encouraged by the words in Philippians 2:13, "For God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him" (NLT).

God does it all. He even gives me the desire to surrender. And even as He's using that polishing cloth, His attitude toward me is full acceptance and unconditional love. When I'm changing, even when it includes recognizing parts of myself I don't like, my innate worth is *never* at stake. God made that clear when He purchased me at the cross.

He's simply making me shine.

I try to be patient with myself. The Father will rub the tarnish off one area quickly, but another area may take more time. In His mercy He doesn't scrub some places until He knows I'm up to the polishing.

Malachi 3:3 tells us God is "as a refiner and purifier of silver" (KJV). We can trust Him as the Master Designer of our life. My friend left one piece of her silver tarnished. When placed next to those she polished, it's a visible reminder of God's work. He continually polishes us, making us shine.

Soul Scents

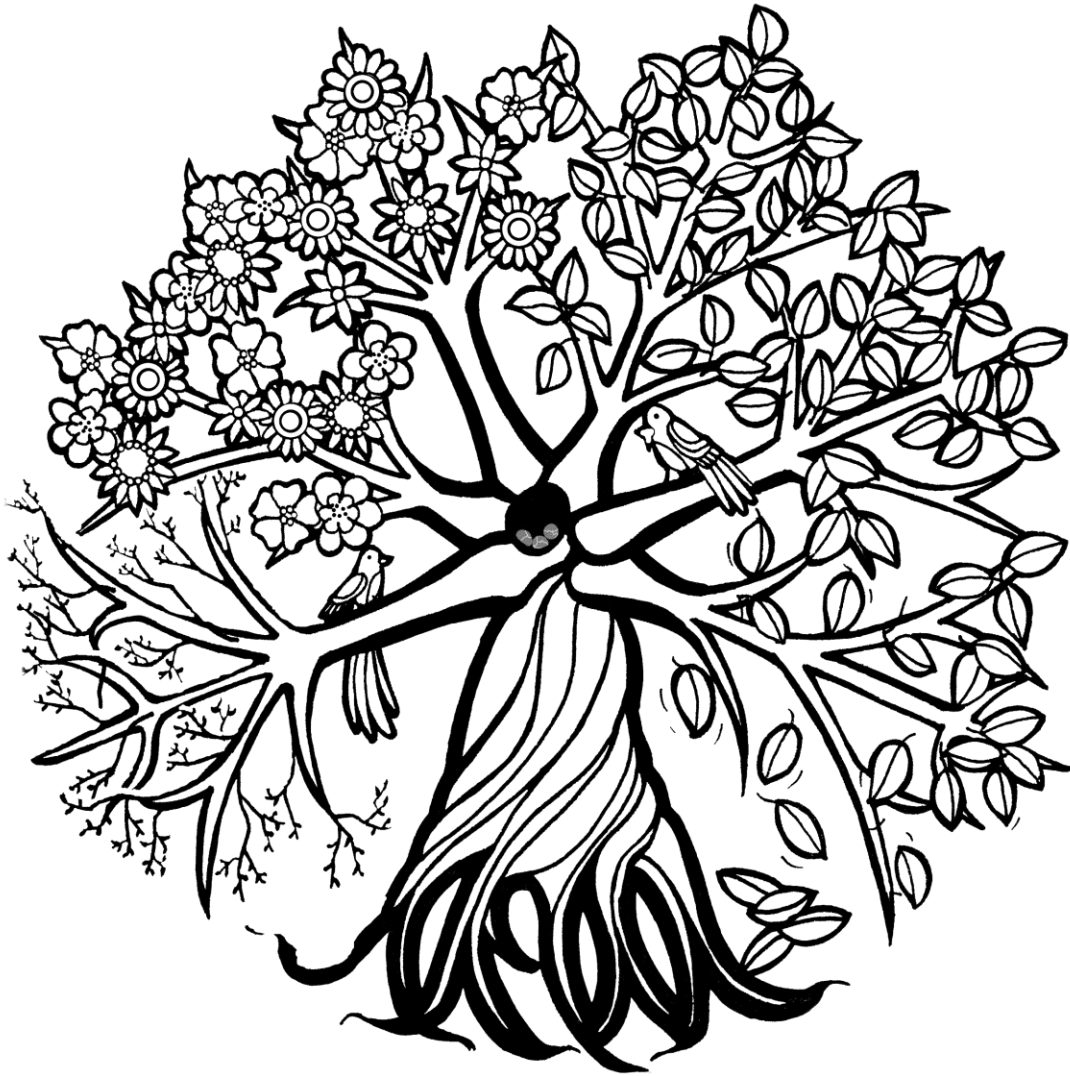
Wow! Thank You for making me shine. Give me the desire and ability to surrender to Your polishing cloth, and help me to believe Your work really does reveal a beautiful patina in my life.



Week Two Response

Response prompt:

Jot a few sentences or bullet points to help solidify your most important take-away this week. Maybe it's a place of repentance the Lord revealed to you. Maybe it's a new approach to facing your faults while standing in the identity of a person made completely new by Jesus. Maybe you experienced a new sense of cleansing or freedom. Celebrate it! (Remember that you get to do this your way. You don't have to write. Draw. Dance. Sketch stick figures. Make something out of play dough. The point is to pause and respond to the new truth and grace you're living in now.)



Week Three ~ Celebrating Grace



Week Three ~ Celebrating Grace

Sunday

Ponder:

Grace

As the calendar moves toward the tender remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, as well as the jubilant celebration of His resurrection, my heart moves toward gratitude for His grace. That word. It is *rich*. Every time I think I understand God's grace, He blows my socks off with a new experience of how glorious it really is! It's easy for those of us who grew up hearing about grace to think we have it all figured out. But to me grace is like looking into a sky of stars. The more you stare and try to drink in their beauty, the more beauty there is to be discovered. You can never count them; there is more to that sky that you can ever understand.

This week's journey into grace doesn't begin to scratch the surface. Grace isn't something we can really understand by definitions or doctrine because the best part about grace isn't its intellectual significance. It's what it does to us on the inside. It's the *experience* of grace.

Still, new truth often starts in our minds before diving deep into our souls. When I think of grace, words like deliverance, freedom, forgiveness, empowerment, joy, peace, and strength come to mind.

God, in His grace, sets us free *from*. From the law. From the fight to be good. From sin. From condemnation. (The list goes on!) God, in His grace, also set us free *to*. To joy. To holiness. To relationship. To unconditional acceptance. To love.

It is by God's grace we are set free from our past, and it's by His grace we are free to enjoy our future. It is also by God's grace, working within us, that we are empowered to change and to become people of impact. People whose lives touch other lives. People who offer grace.

This is a big deal.

Think about it. Can you give something you don't yet have? How can we give God's freeing, forgiving, empowering grace to others, especially those dearest, like our spouses and children and best friends, if we haven't experienced it for ourselves?

How fully do you understand grace? How fully do you *receive* the grace that is freely offered? Do you allow God to pour it all over you, into, and through you? What would it look like to do this more fully?

Prayer:

Lord, no matter how well I think I understand Your grace, I know I don't understand it fully. And even what I understand, I don't always know how to walk in. Help me glean new insight about what Your grace really is and does as I meditate on it this week. Reach down and open my heart wide to *experience* Your grace. Let it so abound in me that I can't help but offer it to others.

Meditate:

Is there anything you've not noticed before in the following Scriptures about grace from the *New Living Translation*?

- Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life (Titus 3:7).
- God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it (Ephesians 2:8–9).
- Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace (Romans 6:14).
- Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 1:12).
- So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most (Hebrew 4:16).

(If something special jumps out at you, consider copying it down or printing it off. Decorate it with colors that express how the new revelation makes you feel, and hang it on the refrigerator or bathroom mirror.)

Worship:

Write a Psalm of praise thanking God for His grace to you, draw or paint something that expresses your emotions of gratitude for grace, find your favorite hymn or worship song about grace and sing it or dance to it, or do something completely different!



Week Three ~ Celebrating Grace

Monday: A Whole New Way of Living

*Sin and despair, like the sea waves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold
points to the refuge the mighty cross.*

*Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within,
Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin!*

~ "Grace Greater Than Our Sin," Text by Julia H. Johnston, Verse 2 and Refrain

With Christ's obedience to the cross came a whole new perspective to our relationship with God. As the calendar counts toward the celebration of Christ's death and resurrection, my heart is awed by the changes this act of ultimate sacrifice ushered in.

The stories of the Old Testament show a lot of law-centered activity. Instead of being empowered by an indwelling God, Old Testament believers struggled with hearts the Bible calls deceitful and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9).

Though a merciful God provided a system of annual sacrifices so the people could push their sins forward year after year, religion was increasingly built upon rituals and rules, far more than God Himself initially commanded. Man interpreted God's instructions adding law upon law to the original intent.

After the incarnation and resurrection everything changed.

Jesus taught of a new way. He told his disciples his yoke was easy and His burden was light. When Christ died He took our every sin upon Himself and canceled it.

Gone.

Forever.

Then, wonder of wonders, the God who became human and walked among us, moved inside and cleaned us up, sending the Advocate to live *within* us (John 14).

God gave His followers a new heart, replacing the heart of stone, the one that had been desperately wicked, with a heart that desires the things of God (Ezekiel 11:19; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 10:16).

Instead of a religion of striving to be good but never living up to a mountain of expectations, God offers a new way, the way of the indwelling Spirit. This new way is based upon words like forgiveness, love, trust, guidance, and empowerment.

Now, His followers are never condemned (Romans 8:1). They are offered love and mercy, set free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2), and invited to enter into His rest (Hebrews 4). As we keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, the Holy Spirit transforms us into the image of Christ (Hebrews 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Unfortunately, religion today often does what it did with the Israelites of old. Man interprets God's wisdom adding more rules and boxes than God intended.

It's such a comfort to realize we can trust God to make us what He wants us to become. We can let go of religious culture and lean instead into our Savior's loving arms. In God's own way and time He will complete the good work He started in us (Philippians 1:6).

Christ's birth, death, and resurrection ushered in a whole new way of living.

Thank you, Jesus, for humbling Yourself and coming as a little child. For walking the Earth and showing us the new way. For surrendering to death so that we might live in intimacy with You forever. Thank You for coming as Spirit in our very selves and empowering us to walk out the new lifestyle You offer. Teach me to rest in Your miraculous work of cleansing and empowering. Help me trust You to make me all You want me to be.



Week Three ~ Celebrating Grace

Tuesday: Disney Got It Right

Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.
~ John 1:16 NIV

Disney's movie *Enchanted* got it right. It isn't healthy to ignore genuine emotion.

In the fairy tale an animated princess falls through a well and pops into real-life America. No longer a cartoon, a flesh-and-blood woman, Giselle (played by Amy Adams), meets a flesh-and-blood man, Robert (played by Patrick Dempsey).

Robert is appalled to learn that Giselle is marrying a man she just met. Giselle believes the man is Prince Charming, that they fell in love while he sang to her, and this is all that is necessary to start a life with him. Incredulous, Robert talks to Giselle about real relationship, which includes knowing each other's likes and dislikes, dreams and struggles. He says real love includes conflict and real emotion, and she isn't facing reality with all her happy singing and surface emotion.

Later in the story Giselle gets mad at Robert. She expresses her anger; then in a moment of insight she says, "I'm mad!"

We laugh as she dances through the room repeating, "I'm mad! I'm mad!" and giggling.

I resonate with this scene because I've struggled with feeling okay with being mad. My go-to response was to feel guilty and blame myself for problems rather than admit genuine anger. As I began to understand anger is an appropriate response when one is hurt, I had a real life Giselle moment. I drew a boundary that was not well-received. The other person heaped on the guilt and demeaned me. As I walked away, I felt angry at how I'd been mistreated. The old me would have blamed myself for not being kind enough or good enough. I'd be consumed with guilt for letting the other person down.

The new me was angry.

My brother and I were together when this incident occurred. When we were clear of the other person, I practically danced with joy. Like Giselle my declaration of “I’m mad!” was a declaration of freedom. I told my brother. “I can’t believe it. I’m *mad*! It’s the appropriate emotion when mistreated!”

The painful exchange became a celebration of grace.

Living in a grace-filled culture gives room for appropriate emotion. Living with God as one covered by grace gives room for normal emotion as well.

One time I struggled with the Lord, trying to work through a deep issue. As I journaled I felt Him prompt, “You’re angry with Me, Paula. Why don’t you just admit you’re mad instead of feeling guilty about the emotion you’re trying to hide. It’ll save us a lot of time.”

In relationships of grace we are free to have normal emotions. That includes our relationship with God. He is not afraid of our anger. In fact, He’d rather us be real and blurt out what we feel than try to “nice” it up like a “good little Christian.”

Our position as beloved of God is based on what Christ did at the cross. His behavior, not yours or mine, establishes safety. Once covered in the blood of the Precious Lamb, Jesus, we are never condemned or rejected.

Grace accepts us even when our emotions aren’t pretty.

Precious Jesus, Lamb of God who takes away my sin and shame, thank You for placing me in a safe relationship with the Father. Thank You that in His culture of grace I am never condemned or rejected for negative emotion. This freedom makes my heart swell with joy.



Week Three ~ Celebrating Grace

Wednesday: Marvelous Grace

*Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
Freely bestowed on all who believe!
You that are longing to see His face,
Will you this moment His grace receive?*

"Grace Greater Than Our Sin," Text by Julia H. Johnston, Verse 4

Before I understood grace, life was about working hard to be good enough for God and others. A black and white life, it was based upon my perception of right and wrong, the culture I was raised in, and my life experiences.

Some people take it a step further. They believe being a good person and doing acts of kindness guarantees eternity in heaven. They work to put enough points on a cosmic tally sheet to balance the bad of their lives.

In my case, working hard to please God made me easy prey. People could tell me I wasn't good enough or point out my mistakes, and I'd bend over backwards to live up to their expectations. I often chose my activities based on a bogus list of expectations. I thought God and others embraced or pushed me away based upon my performance. I was kept in a state of hungering for conditional acceptance.

Some people tweak this thinking a little. They take up a cause and work hard, in an effort to justify the bad in them by giving themselves to the service of mankind. They, too, are easy victims. As they perform, a calculated word can trick them into a tailspin. They respond similarly to the way I did, seeking to be accepted by God and others based upon their lists of accomplishments or good deeds.

It's a no win situation.

Deep down we know we can never measure up. We'll eventually blow it—sometime, somewhere.

God's grace offers a better way. Jesus washes us clean. The fancy Bible word is justified. I love the old church camp explanation for the word justification: "just as if I'd never sinned."

Christ's justification allows us to live from a position of victory. We already have the complete, unconditional acceptance of the Father. We have nothing to earn. We no longer perform for approval.

John 3:17 says God sent Jesus to save us, not condemn us. John 3:18 continues, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (NIV). The point of this Scripture is if we look to our own goodness, we'll never be free of condemnation. It is by looking to the perfection of Christ and His willing sacrifice that we can step out of our own self-loathing.

God's mercy extends to all people, offering an escape from guilt. His mercy welcomes each to draw near to His heart and discover how it feels to be set completely free from all our faults. He simply says, "Come. Hand me the keys to your life. Accept My grace."

God's multifaceted grace frees us from condemnation and welcomes us into His family. It brings us into relationship with God, and then transforms us from the inside out. We discover a great desire to be all He wants us to be. Slowly, we stop beating ourselves up and trust Him to change us. Once we invite Him into our lives, we seek to follow Him, one step at a time, making choices based on His will and not the approval of others.

As the season of Easter draws near, I encourage you to examine yourself. Do others easily manipulate you? Do you make choices trying to earn God acceptance or people's approval? Are you a control freak, trying to make your world perfect? These struggles hint to a need for a deepened understanding of grace.

In great mercy Jesus stands before us, arms of love outstretched, longing to welcome us into emotional rest. Grace is free, full, and for the asking.

Father, please help me accept Your forgiveness which frees me from the bondage of sin and guilt. Open my heart to understand Your gift of grace and help me to respond to it anew.



Week Three ~ Celebrating Grace

Thursday: Dragon Scales and Grace

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide.

What can avail to wash it away?

Look! There is flowing a crimson tide.

Whiter than snow you may be today.

~ "Grace Greater Than Our Sin," Text by Julia H. Johnston, Verse 3

God in His grace doesn't leave us like we are. While His grace covers our sins, it is also His grace that changes us, transforming us into the image of Christ. And, sometimes, God's transforming grace works through pain.

In difficult seasons I prayed for intimacy with Christ. While I did come to know Him better, I also struggled as I experienced hard times. Assault after assault left me frightened, and I began to shut down from God. I knew intimacy with Him meant being open, but I didn't invite the Lord into the situation. I feared more pain. A numb deadness covered me while depression threatened.

Finally, I asked a friend to pray with me. She confronted the lie—that I could ignore all that had happened and the resulting anger seething beneath the surface.

"You're hurting already," she pointed out. "Why not be real before God?"

I cried and poured my heart out to Jesus in the midst of a small circle of praying women.

Later, alone in the car, I tried to process the pain I'd admitted. "You know, God," I said, "sometimes getting to know You hurts like crazy. Intimacy with You can be very painful."

Instantly, a scene from a book in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series played through my mind.

A boy named Eustace sneaked into a dragon's lair to steal the jewels the beast guarded. Instead of claiming the treasure, Eustace's greed caused an enchantment to turn *him* into the *dragon*. Horrified, Eustace, trapped inside the dragon's body, pounded around the cave, trying

to shed the horrible skin he now lived in. No matter what He did, Eustace couldn't shed the ugly dragon scales. In desperation he finally called to Aslan, the Christ figure in the book. The majestic lion bounded into the cave and ever so lovingly came to the boy's rescue.

But the process was painful.

Layer after layer of dragon skin had to be ripped away by Aslan's sharp claws before the boy could be free of the shell that held him captive.

As I remembered the story, the Lord whispered to my heart, "It's not intimacy with Me that hurts, Paula. It's getting rid of the old skin that enslaves you."

Like Eustace, tough, thick scales, caused by my own sins and lies from the enemy, covered the real me. My loving Lord came to the rescue, allowing pain that ultimately resulted in His purposes—the shedding of another layer of outward scum and the revealing of the person He is making me to be.

I chose to go to that raw, angry, tired place I was afraid of. I spat out my accusations against the Lord and cried for mercy, begging Him to carry me to faith and truth once more. In this process, I had to be honest before Him and see where that took me. I had to give Him permission to extend a strong, sharp claw and rip away the stain of sin in my life.

For a while it felt I'd gone backward in my walk of faith—frustrated by doubts, anger, and fears. But when I emerged on the other side of the season, I realized I'd only gone deeper in my relationship with the Lord.

During this time a phrase from a song sung by Sara Groves ministered to my heart. "And in His hands, the pain and hurt feels less like scars and more like character."

I'm glad God ripped away that yucky old layer of scales. I have no doubt but that in His perfect time, He'll tackle yet another rough place.

Thank God His grace never leaves us in old skin. God slowly and patiently pulls it away, revealing new, pink skin beneath, and we emerge as the new person He has seen all along.

Thank You for making me a new creation in You. Give me the courage to enter into the seasons that help me shed old skin, remembering in Your hands the pain and hurt is less like scars and more like character. Thank You for always seeing the amazing me I'm becoming but can't see and for Your commitment to make sure that transformation takes place.



Week Three ~ Celebrating Grace
Friday ~ The Scent of Grace

As far as God is concerned there is a sweet, wholesome fragrance in our lives. It is the fragrance of Christ within us, an aroma to both the saved and the unsaved all around us.

~ 2 Corinthians 2:15 TLB

Any parent of multiple children between the ages of 8 and 18 know the drill. Even when you limit their outside activities, there are days when you wish you could clone yourself. I still remember one of many weekends years ago when our family of six endured three straight days of nonstop running. Two of our boys played in a hockey tournament, and our daughter competed in a gymnastics meet. Though the events were scheduled close together, they were in three different locations—none of which were on our side of town.

At the end of the push we came home hungry and tired. After eating out between events, I didn't feel I could pull the "let's just get a pizza" card. I dug through the fridge, coming up with a big bowl of pasta and some veggies. Since I don't have much storage in my kitchen, I have a pantry of sorts in our garage. I put the noodles in to heat and rushed out the back door and down our steps in hopes I had a jar of spaghetti sauce in the cabinet outside.

As I came down the stairs, I noticed a few blossoms on the rosebushes by the garage door. I wanted to enjoy them, but instead I cringed at the weeds in their bed. Sighing, I continued my mad dash toward the door.

Suddenly, I screeched to a stop.

The fragrance of roses filled my senses.

I paused only a second, but in that moment I felt God. The perfume of the flowers took me out of my hurry mode long enough for me to experience beauty and a tug toward the Divine.

I wish I could tell you I chose to stop and embrace the moment. Or that I at least breathed a prayer of thanksgiving. But I didn't. I rushed into the garage, grabbed the sauce, and flew back up the stairs.

Real life consumed me. Feed the kids, clear the table, assign chores, sort the laundry, meet that writing deadline.

Gazing at the computer screen, too depleted to write, my mind went back to the rosebush.

Too often, I treat God's grace like I treated the rose. I catch a whiff of its beauty and rush on, noticing all the little weeds of my life instead of embracing the wonder of amazing grace. A grace He pours over me and through me like sweet perfume.

I stared at the computer awhile, longing for that rosebush. Finally, I pushed my chair back, releasing myself from the next task on my to-do list. I needed to (literally) stop and smell a rose.

A light rain had fallen, and the air outside smelled damp instead of perfumed as I tramped down the back steps. I went to the blossom, stuck my nose right in the middle of that flower, and inhaled deeply. The fragrance was heavenly. I spent a couple of minutes pulling the unsightly weeds, pausing every little bit to sniff the rose.

You see where this is going.

It's joy to pause and let the wonder and beauty of Christ soak into our souls. When we inhale deeply of the fragrance of His character, the busyness, the irritations—the weeds—of life are more manageable. We recognize the sweet fragrance of His grace surrounding us, living in us, flowing from us.

Oh, Jesus! How I need Your grace. Every day. Every hour. Every minute. Teach me to breathe deeply, inhaling its perfume. Whether life is a blur or a saunter, it's better when I dwell in Your fragrance.



Week Four ~ Glory to Glory



Week Four ~ Glory to Glory

Sunday

Ponder:

On-going Salvation

“The salvation of your soul is not just about where you go when you die,” writes John Ortberg. “The word salvation means healing or deliverance at the deepest level of who we are in the care of God through the presence of Jesus.”*

Maybe you want to read that quote three or four times.

Your soul, the eternal you, the *youest* you, experiences *on-going* salvation. The Bible says we’re changed from glory to glory. I don’t think that means from one glory to another glory. I think that means from glory to glory to glory to glory to . . .

Our soul was created by our God. It is the eternal part of ourselves. It is the part of us that carries His vision for all we are meant to be. It is glorious!

Then life happens. The world seeks to tarnish. The enemy seeks to dismember us, disengaging us from our deepest self, trying to shut down our destiny and cover up our glory.

God hates that. Jesus hates that. Holy Spirit hates that.

Jesus chooses the cross. For the glory set before Him.

A lot was accomplished at that cross.

We discover the cross, and in an instant original glory shines from our eternal soul.

Jesus’ blood cleans off the tarnish. Holy Spirit moves in. We live as one with our Creator.

And every single day the Holy Spirit works in accordance with the Father and the Son and us, taking what is already glorious and continuing its *on-going salvation*. The victory is ours. Thanks to the cross we live *from* victory not struggling toward it. Part of our on-going salvation is shining more and more, from glory to glory. As we discover our Creator’s original intent and

design, we step more fully into the identity and destiny He made for us before the foundation of the world.

At times we discover new truth. At times we face down old lies. Always we are being transformed. Shining Brighter. Experiencing deeper healing.

Glory to Glory.

On-going salvation.

Hallelujah! All praise to Him.

**Soul Keeping by John Ortberg*

Prayer:

Thank you Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit for on-going salvation. Thank You for creating me to be glorious, for fighting for my glory through the cross, and for the on-going salvation that changes me from glory to glory. Help me to believe all of this is true. Uproot the lies that say it is not and that seek to dim my glory through shame. You called me out of darkness into glorious light. I praise you!

Meditate:

Focus on 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 in several translations.

- Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord (KJV).
- Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (NIV).
- For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image (NLT).

Don't you love the John Orberg quote? It reminds me that while our eternal salvation is instantly secured, salvation is also freedom in our deepest places, both instant and on-going change. You might want to sit with that quote again.

- The salvation of your soul is not just about where you go when you die. The word salvation means healing or deliverance at the deepest level of who we are in the care of God through the presence of Jesus (John Ortberg).

Worship:

Spend some time with Passion's "Glorious Day," featuring Kristian Stanfill. Do whatever the Spirit leads. Listen. Turn off the sound, and read the words. Turn on the sound, and sing. Sit. Stand. Raise your hands. Dance. Listen once. Listen every day this week.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gklJ2XZwDHc>.

Consider this old hymn. How does its truth illuminate the message of "Glorious Day?" How does Glorious Day illuminate the truth of the hymn? Do you know this hymn (on the following page)? Can you sing it? Play it on an instrument? Write a new verse to it?

Victory

Hallelujah, what a thought!
Jesus full salvation brought,
Victory, victory;
Let the pow'rs of sin assail,
Heaven's grace can never fail,
Victory, victory.

Refrain:
Victory, yes, victory.
Hallelujah! I am free,
Jesus gives me victory;
Glory, glory! hallelujah!
He is all in all to me.

I am trusting in the Lord,
I am standing on His Word,
Victory, victory;
I have peace and joy within,
Since my life is free from sin,
Victory, victory. [Refrain]

Shout your freedom everywhere,
His eternal peace declare,
Victory, victory,
Let us sing it here below,
In the face of every foe,
Victory, victory. [Refrain]

We will sing it on that shore,
When this fleeting life is o'er,
Victory, victory;
Sing it here, ye ransomed throng,
Start the everlasting song:
Victory, victory. [Refrain]

Hymnal of the Church of God, 1953 (Timeless Truths)

Author: Barney Elliott Warren (1897)

Tune: Hallelujah, what a thought



Week Four ~ Glory to Glory
Monday: From Victory

*Hallelujah, what a thought!
Jesus full salvation brought,
Victory, victory;
Let the pow'rs of sin assail,
Heaven's grace can never fail,
Victory, victory.*

~ "Victory" by B. E. Warren

In my mind the twanging voices of the small, country congregation where I grew up belt out the old hymn: "Victory, yes, victory; Hallelujah! I am free, Jesus gives me victory. Glory, glory, hallelujah! He is all in all to me." Southern gospel style added slurs to the phrases, and I still hear the slightly off-key sounds of one dear singer.

I loved that hymn as a girl. I liked my dad's voice hammering out the low notes and the energy of a song so joyful. But looking back I didn't understand phrases like "Jesus full salvation brought" or "Hallelujah, I am free!"

I understood being saved from hell but not walking in victory.

Years ago a pastor, Clay Peck, taught me that we begin from a place of victory, not failure. When we receive Christ, we are set free from all the sin that entangles us, and we can live as one already perfected in Jesus.

Another way to say this is: Because of Christ the tag after our name says saint, not sinner. Our whole identity is different:

- No longer orphans, we are God's children (John 1:12).
- No longer inadequate, we are made complete in Christ (Col. 2:9-18).
- No longer condemned, we are free from any charges brought against us (Romans 8).

- No longer afraid, we have power, love, and a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7).
- No longer citizens of a fallen world, our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20).
- No longer apart from God, we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6).
- No longer directionless and messy, we are His workmanship created to do good (Eph. 2:10).

Each morning as we climb out of bed, we step to the floor with a God-given identity: victorious. Because His mercies are new every morning, we begin as perfect—with a clean, pure, holy, forgiven heart.

We never start from behind, working our way up from our faults and failures. Every sin is crushed and forgotten beneath the beloved feet of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Each moment is new.

When we mess up again, our Lord wraps His arm around us and whispers, “Let’s try it My way next time.” He never condemns us because we are free from all charges of misbehavior. God’s forgiveness is constant. It is a completed work of Jesus at the cross.

Because of Christ we never start from a place of defeat.

We always start in victory.

Heaven’s grace never fails.

Father, help me believe I walk forward in victory—in the identity of a saint, one saved by Your grace. Help me remember I don’t have to play catch-up or work my way out of my faults before I can start living to Your glory. Help me grasp this truth: My starting place is victory.



Week Four ~ Glory to Glory

Tuesday: Visiting the Basement

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free.

~ Luke 4:18 NLT

A few years ago God began pressing upon some very tender places, unpacking boxes I'd left in the basement of my heart for a very long time. In 2015 He asked permission to begin another round of healing. A deep, deep round.

A hard one.

As Jesus and I entered dark places, I was shocked at how much healing was left to do. I thought I'd come so far, but now He revealed a whole basement of stuff we needed to deal with. Ever so gently He told me it was okay. He'd allowed this place to go untouched until I was strong enough for the unpacking of its musty boxes. I needed time to grow in my identity as His beloved before I was strong enough to face the messy pain.

Being changed from glory to glory is an on-going process. Growth takes time. Jesus is patient and committed to our healing.

Originally this Easter booklet was not going to contain this devotion or the next three, adapted from my book, *Soul Scents: Flourish*, which deals with journeying out of abuse and the effects of abuse. I'd planned to continue with devotions like the first two you read this week, which were taken from week six of *Soul Scents: Rooted*, entitled From Victory.* Then I sensed the Lord stopping me. Tapping my shoulder and redirecting my attention.

If I'm going to talk about living *from* victory instead of *toward* victory, it's only fair for me to talk about process.

God is *so* good.

Most of the devotions you've read so far are from my first two books in the *Soul Scents* series. Their truths are absolutely foundational to a life of increasing intimacy with Jesus and all the wonderful things that brings. Things like more peace, joy, and love.

Victory.

As I wrote the devotions in those books (about fifteen years ago) I experienced grace and freedom as I had never before. God, in His wisdom, kept me focused on these truths, which were new for me, for a lot of years. Over time I shed more and more of the crap that held me back in life. Things like guilt, performance-driven behavior, shame, and perfectionism. I fell more and more in love with Jesus and actually came to understand that I was fully loved and accepted by Him. That it was *safe* to live in authentic relationship with Him.

I hope you're on that journey too.

While God led me many years ago to draw boundaries to protect my family and myself from the kind of abuse I'd experienced in childhood, He allowed a portion of the deep-processing I needed for healing to lay quiet for a lot of years. See, in His tender journey of on-going salvation, Jesus moves at just the right time, in just the right way, when we are able to go where He wants us to go.

Not all of us have suffered on-going abuse, but everyone has been assaulted by evil. Most of us have some basement cleaning that's needed, places deep inside where our core self, our *soul*, was wounded.

When we think of the cross, it's natural to think of rescue from sin and the gift of eternal life, but on-going salvation is so much more. Consider Jesus' words. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free" (Luke 4:18, NLT).

What does that sound like to you?

To me it sounds like freedom. Healing. Hope.

On-going salvation is about healing our soul. Helping us to live whole and connected within ourselves, our relationships, and with God.

I think this is why Jesus tapped me on the shoulder today and asked me to spend some time talking about inner healing. He is Light. In Him is no darkness at all. When He saved us, He took us from the kingdom of darkness and moved us into the kingdom of light.

Let's contrast those two. The dark kingdom is where we are told constantly that we don't measure up. We are flawed. Probably unloved. Not only that, but we are horribly inadequate and certainly not capable of great works of eternal significance. Here we are down-trodden. Unlovely. Dismissed. Unworthy. Alone.

The kingdom of light is different. It's the place where we are told that we are adored. We've been bought with a price and every sin has been washed away. We are clean and beautiful. Loved every single moment. Never, ever alone. Always in the circle of fellowship

with Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit. We are capable, empowered by the indwelling Spirit that Jesus sent into our new hearts, which were made right and beautiful by His blood. We have a glorious destiny on this earth and in the eternal realms.

What are you thinking now?

If you're like me, you're probably evaluating where you think you live. Here's the thing. Whether or not you're experiencing it, you live in the kingdom of light. Jesus already changed your address from the dark place and moved you into your new home.

But we don't always feel like we're there, do we?

In Scripture Satan is called the great deceiver and the father of lies. John 10:10 reminds us that Satan's goal is always destruction, but Jesus came to give us a full and satisfying life.

I've never met anyone who feels every single moment that they are living in that bright, happy place. But I've met a lot of people who experience kingdom of light living on a daily basis. People who have a light kingdom life, mindset, and understanding. Oh friends, we are all attacked. Regularly. The great deceiver, also called the enemy of our souls, wants to bring us down. He already lost the eternal battle, so now he's trying to do whatever he can to keep you and me miserable and ineffective during the days we have on this earth, the days until we are forever out of his sphere of influence, living in glory with our God.

I just had an epiphany as I typed. I've heard that phrase, "enemy of our souls" all my life. I thought it meant that Satan was trying to keep my eternal soul from heaven. But it's more, my friends. You and I have an eternal soul that is who we are *now*. It's *that* soul he attacks. He wants to keep us weary, disconnected from our deepest place where God dwells, that special, eternal part of us that was created for glory. He wants to trouble, disengage, and dismember *that* soul.

The soul. That deepest, most central part of who we are is the soul Jesus came to set free forever. And that doesn't start at the pearly gates. That freedom started at the cross. This soul is the *eternal you* who Jesus claimed as His bride. It's the one the Father delights in and Jesus adores. It's the one created, before the beginning of time, for good works which our Creator prepared even then for us to do.

It's glorious!

If you're like me, at the right time the Spirit will carry up a box or two from the basement and ask you to trust Him enough to open the lid. Or maybe, as He did with me recently, there will come a time He will take your hand and lead you down the stairs into the basement room itself. When he does, it'll be important to remember who you are. His beloved. Bought with a price. The one He adores. Altogether lovely.

In the basement you'll have to deal with flaws. Flaws within yourself, within others, within your life. And *how we see our flaws determines how we weather this journey we're on*. Our stories are different. Some more shocking than others. But we've all been hurt.

The sting of evil is still the sting of evil, however it is perpetrated.

And sometimes looking at our stories is painful. We were created for the Garden of Eden, not a sin-stricken, fallen world. The stories hurt, and as we focus upon the wounds in an effort to resolve them, we see our flaws and the flaws of others. We don't excuse evil, but we do remember we are an eternal soul, saved by grace, made lovely and perfect by Christ's blood. It's important as we open basement boxes and heal that we understand God's perspective on our faults and failures and those faults and failures of people who hurt us.

Our *flaws*. Their *flaws*.

We humans are hard on ourselves and others, holding people to high, unattainable standards. We experience tremendous judgment and pain when we (or they) don't "live up." Sometimes we're so overwhelmed with our flaws that we go to the other extreme and pretend they don't exist. Or we acknowledge our flaws but blame others for our faults and failures. Sometimes we do that with people who've hurt us too. We make excuses for the people who've behaved badly or pretend the incidents never happened.

All of this is, of course, a lie.

In our modern society the word *sin* dredges up a strong reaction. But sin is simply anything that falls short of how God handles things. It's anything we think or do that is outside the boundaries of love. Given that broad brush stroke, it's easy to see we all sin. Scripture says, "If we say that we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he can be depended on to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. And it is perfectly proper for God to do this for us because Christ died to wash away our sins. If we claim we have not sinned, we are lying and calling God a liar, for he says we have sinned" (1 John 1:8—10, TLB).

God's perspective is simple. We have sinned. We do sin. We will sin.

Others have sinned. Do sin. Will sin.

If we say we have no fault, we are lying. But the good news is that in each instance of sin, there is grace. If we admit our sins, He forgives us and cleanses us. If we admit others' sin against us, we begin the path of healing and forgiveness. We learn to see the other person as someone God loves.

Most of us struggle with what to do when we see our flaws or the flaws of someone else. Recently, during a prayer time with some dear friends, God showed us His perspective on flaws. He reminded us that His blood has cleansed every imperfection, and we stand before

Him as blameless. When He looks at us, He sees the person He created us to be. He sees the new creation we are in Him. He sees a precious work of His very own hands, a work He knit together in our mother's womb.

Sure. He knows we struggle with faults. The psalmist says God knows we are “but dust.” But He isn’t wringing His hands in despair when He sees our flaws. He already executed His perfect plan. He saved us, made us blameless in His sight, and is determined to change us from the inside out. The One who started a good work in us will be faithful to complete it (Philippians 1:6). He works all things for our good to make us more and more like Jesus (Romans 8:28–29).

God is creative. He wanted to drive the point home, so during our prayer time He gave my friends and me an acronym for FLAW:

Free to

Live

As

Worthy

I’ve had quite a journey learning to accept my flawed self. But if God is not freaking out about our imperfections, why do we? Our flaws don’t have to bring shame and self-judgment. They don’t have to lead to ugly, unhealthy thinking about ourselves. (That thinking is dark world thinking, applauded by the enemy.)

How about a paradigm change?

The next time you are overcome with one of your flaws, try God's way of thinking. Even with that imperfection you are *Free to Live As Worthy*. Stop and praise God for the work of the cross, the blood that changed you and made you righteous, redeemed, and holy. Accept yourself without pretending the flaw isn’t there or judging yourself for its existence. Stand up straight in your identity of a worthy child, beloved of God. Turn your focus to praise for the change God is doing within you as He remakes you to be more like Jesus. Then from a mindset of one who is *Free to Live As Worthy* (even with a *flaw* or two or two hundred), ask Him to empower you to overcome.

Jesus, next time I recognize a flaw in myself or others, remind me that because of Your blood we are Free to Live As Worthy. Instead of judgment, help me receive Your grace, mercy, and unconditional love. Then help me extend the grace You’ve given me.

**If you would like to read the original collection, From Victory, you’ll find it in Soul Scents: Rooted. (<https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B01D3VL2I6>), or I am happy to email you the full week of the*

From Victory devotions. Contact me at Paula@paulamoldenhauer.com If today's devotion or the next three in this week's collection hit especially close to home, pray about reading Soul Scents: Flourish, which chronicles my journey out of emotional, spiritual, and mental abuse, and invites readers to live more fully as citizens of the kingdom of light, beloved and free. You can find Soul Scents: Flourish at: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B01N0S6R15>



Week Four ~ Glory to Glory

Wednesday: I AM

At that time, you will know that I am in the Father, you are in Me, and I am in you.

~ John 14:20 VOICE

Identity. We have no clue how it drives our lives. How it shapes our daily, minute-to-minute choices.

Perception. Of God. Again—we have no clue how it drives our lives and shapes our daily, minute-to-minute choices.

Today's devotion is an invitation into my journal, my musings—and His. I'm just audacious enough to believe God meets me there, when I'm quiet in my recliner, snuggled beneath my fuzzy blanket, journal and pen in hand. (He meets me other places, too. Increasingly I believe there is no divided secular and sacred space. There is only space. And where there is space HE is. But I digress.)

I share these secret conversations because they are for you, too. Oh, there are pieces I keep to myself, admonition and identity that applies just to me. But what I am about to share is universal. It is about you and me and all of God's children and Him. I've pulled the passages below from a month of talking with Him, but the thread connects, and so I encapsulate it for you to experience as a whole. As you read what is to come, open your heart to hear His Words for yourself.

It began as I pondered concepts from great thinkers like Madeleine L'Engle and Staci Eldredge. They were of different generations but wrote a similar concept. And now I processed, pen in hand. Would you do me a favor as you read these ponderings? Would you put yourself in the place of "I" when the writer speaks and "you" when Jesus does? Everything below is based in God's Word, so it's okay to do that. I've changed the tense to present tense in the hope that as you read, you can read like you and Jesus are talking. Now. Real-time. The experience starts with you thinking.

I am seventeen and twenty-three and forty-eight. I am all the ages I have lived. Nothing is lost. There is much beauty. But also much pain. Wounds. At twenty-three. At nine. And forty-nine. "Lord, You know about those. Even the deepest."

I sit a while, remembering. The insecure feelings creep over me.

Unsafe.

Shamed.

"Remember who you are," He whispers.

I take a deep breath. "I am chosen. Adopted by the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Healed. Righteous because of Christ's blood. I am she who You conform to the image of Christ. A worshiper. A child of God."

"Good. What else have I told you?"

"I am your beloved. Treasured. Valuable. Valued. I am a lover of Jesus."

"Ah, dear one." His voice is sweet. So sweet. "I have loved you with an everlasting love. You are delight. Delighted in. Upon. Through. With. For . . . I am delighted in you—in who you are. I am delighted upon you. My delight rests there for all to see. You are not only remembered, but favored. Chosen. I am delighted through you. Through the way you love. With you. With all you are. With your delights. When you are touched, joyful, delighted, I stand with you, enjoying. Delighting because you are delighted, sharing the joy of what delights you. Delighted for you. For the gifts I give and will give."

It's interesting that as I ponder that I am all the ages I have lived, that just when I think about the things that feel like damage and ruin, He reminds me of who I am and how He sees me and who He is and how I can view Him.

"I dance over you singing at the top of My lungs, rejoicing in you," He says. "I nurture you, quieting you with My love, cradling you in My arms, singing a lullaby. I dance with and through you. In My arms you learn the steps. I Am El Shaddai. God Almighty. I Am Elohim. God of gods. Creator. The all-sufficient God. I Am Jehovah-Jireh. God Who Provides.

"I Am goodness. I embody it. All that is good flows from Me, for that is who I Am. I Am grace. My personality is grace. My actions are grace. The results of My work are grace. I can't do anything that is outside of My character of grace. I Am love. I delight in loving. It is impossible for Me to act outside My character of love. I Am justice. Love and justice are not at war within Me. I Am wisdom. I Am hope. I Am joy. I Am beauty.

“Remember what Paul taught in Romans 8:29 about transformation into the image of Christ? I am making you to be like me. You are becoming goodness, grace, love, justice, wisdom, hope, joy, and beauty.”

The beautiful dialogue quiets me. But I’m learning not to ignore the shadows. “There is still shame tracking me, haunting me. Remember my faults, Lord.” I remind Him of the other things *I* see in me. Things not so good.

“Oh my beloved! Lay those things before me, and *let them go*. To me you are altogether lovely. You do not embody these things. You are a new creation. I focus on that. The struggles, the faults? They are not a part of your central character just as they are not a part of who I am. I am helping you to *let go* of those things, remaking you in My image. Even in the things you don’t like about yourself, I AM is on the job, remaking you.”

I take it in. Try to readjust my thinking. “Please help me, Jesus. It’s easy to focus on my faults instead of the new person You have already made me to be. I so want my ugly parts to go away.”

“They were dealt with at the cross. You are brand new. You are covered with My blood. Remade in My image. That stuff you worry about? I will lead you forward, away from it, out of it. Look to Me. Focus on Me and what I am doing in you. *Let the rest go*. I *finish* the good work I start. Simply surrender as I nudge you to turn away from all that.”

“Lord, sometimes I need to get it out. The worries, insecurities, wounds, hurts. I don’t know how to be real and do what you’re asking.”

“I don’t expect you to be without emotion,” His voice is tender. “Just keep your eyes on Me. Remind yourself My words are true. Believe that I speak. Live from the words I give you, not from the world’s wisdom, not from your fleshly response. As a human, you will feel. You will question. You will get confused/angry/afraid. But come back to Me every time. Seek My advice. Ask for My strength.

“I come to you with My peace and My joy. I give to you, placing it into your heart with My very hand. Breathing the breath of life into your heart and mind. All of you alive! No deadness. No stopping. No pushed down or held back. Nothing dead. All alive to Me. Full of life! Ready to flourish! Flourishing already.”

Flourishing.

It is His goal for us. You and I were His goal at the cross. He died to move us to the light kingdom. To heal our deepest places.

Healing. Bringing life to the dead places. Flourishing freedom. In an instant when we respond to Him in faith, His Deity connects with us. Then, in the secure place of unity with Him, the healing is finished—and begun. He heals in a moment. He heals over a lifetime. The wounds too deep for this world He heals in eternity. All of who we are is encompassed in His healing, even as we are being healed. He is patient, walking softly around our closed doors, waiting until we are strong enough for the deeper healing. Healing us, He makes us strong enough for more healing.

He is Jehovah-Rapha, our healer. Healing is a good thing. Healing gives us deeper freedom and increased intimacy.

To brave the healing journey we travel clinging to who He is and who He says we are to Him.

During that month of discussion, I talked with Him about hopes. Fears. Dreams. He made me some beautiful promises, and I told Him I felt unqualified, unworthy, and a bunch of other “un” words.

He said, “I AM your qualifier. I AM your worthiness. I AM brought you through the experiences you need to do what I AM has planned.”

I told Him I knew the journey was about His ability, not mine, and I surrendered to His plan. Then I added, “I am afraid.”

“No.” His tone was gentle. “Do not use ‘I am’ for identity statements. I AM is *Me* in you.”

In those precious chapters where Jesus spoke to His disciples right before His death, He spoke repeatedly of the wonder, joy, necessity, and glory of us living in wholeness—oneness—with God. He said, “Because I live, you will also live. At that time, you will know that I am in the Father, you are in Me, and I am in you” (John 14:20, VOICE). And, “Abide in Me, and I will abide in you. A branch cannot bear fruit if it is disconnected from the vine, and neither will you if you are not connected to Me” (15:4). Later He prayed for His disciples and for all who would follow Him throughout the ages, “Father, may they all be one as You are in Me and I am in You; may they be in Us, for by this unity the world will believe that You sent Me. All the glory You have given to Me, I pass on to them. May that glory unify them and make them one as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may be refined so that all will know that You sent Me, and You love them in the same way You love Me” (John 17: 21–23).

“Am” is a linking verb. In English class they teach that whatever is on the other side of “am” renames “I.” God wanted me to own more fully the new identity He gave me through Christ, so He told me not to give myself names that are outside of who *He* is within me. Often I’ve said things like, “I am overwhelmed. I am tired. I am afraid. I am inadequate.” Since this conversation with Him I’m trying to break that habit. *He* is never inadequate or afraid or any of

those things. If God indwells me (and isn't this the crux of Christian thought?), then His resources and character are also inside me. If Scripture says God remakes me to be like Jesus, then using identity statements about myself that differ from who Jesus is contradicts the work God is doing. I want to lean *into* this process to be more like Jesus, not to push against it!

I've thought a lot about His admonition not to use "I am" statements with things outside of His character. This isn't a legalistic demand or a rule. I'm not sinning if I say, "I am tired." Or "I'm overwhelmed." There is no guilt if I use *I am* in a negative identity statement. His intent is not to box me in legalism; it is to set me free of lies. He simply offered a new way to think about myself, a gentle reminder that my new identity is eternally linked with *His*. I am being remade into *His* image.

Sweet friend, as we open basement boxes for the purpose of healing, you and I will be tempted to return to old identities. It's okay to talk with our sweet Jesus about how we feel. We can tell him we *feel* ashamed or unworthy or inadequate, but it's important that we remember that those things are no longer who we are in Christ. There may come a time in the next several weeks (or today) when you're tempted to say, "I am horrible!" or "I am unloved!" I encourage you to make a conscious effort to turn those untrue identity statements to *I feel* statements and then to add "but God" to them. You might pray, "Lord, I feel unloved, but I know that I am loved. You proved it at the cross, and You prove it every day." Or, "Lord I feel horrible. I know I have sinned and fallen short of Your glory, but I also know You have forgiven my every fault and failure. Your sacrifice purchased me from the enemy and made me new, one with the Trinity. I am not horrible. I am forgiven and being remade into the goodness of Christ Himself."

Holy Spirit, I ask You to be a gentle reminder, constantly renewing my mind with the truth of who the Father says I am in Jesus. Help me to let go of identity statements that don't reflect His character and the character You are growing within me. You are good and loving and holy and You remake me to be good, loving, and holy. Help me to remember who You are and who I am because of You. Please keep me grounded in these truths.



Week Four ~ Glory to Glory

Thursday: Dropping the Rope

I am the LORD your God. I am holding your hand, so don't be afraid. I am here to help you.

~ Isaiah 41:13 CEV

My journey has been to learn to breathe my own air.

To have the right to my own air.

Even after escaping abuse as a young woman, the temptation to take my own life was never far away until one day that insidious voice whispered, telling me to end it all, that it wasn't worth the pain. Then another Voice spoke. It reminded me that I was happy in my new marriage where the love was real—not earned, simply given. I was safe in my new house with the pretty yellow kitchen I'd always longed for. Teaching third graders, who every day filled my heart with love and joy, delighted me. I told the bad voice I wanted to live.

I tried to save my abuser. I did.

When I was in my thirties, the Lord explained He'd never asked me to. That I'd felt like a failure every day of my life because I'd taken on the impossible task of saving that person from herself.

As I drew difficult boundaries in an effort to be whole, a story I bumped into on a site for people like me offered a metaphor I could apply. It went something like this:

There was once a person walking across a bridge, minding her own business. A man jumped in front of the first person and said, "Could you please hold this?"

The first person, puzzled, tried to help out and took the end of the rope that was offered.

The second person then jumped off the bridge, dangling, precarious, above the deep expanse, the other end of the rope around his waist.

The first person begged the other to come to safety, pulling hard upon the rope to rescue, but the second simply laughed.

"You're responsible for me now!" the second said.

"But I never asked to be your keeper!" the first said. "Please reach for the bridge. I can pull you up."

But the second refused and fought against any effort that would get him on solid ground once again.

After much tortured consideration, the first realized she would never have a life of her own if she didn't drop the rope she'd never asked to hold in the first place. She let go.*

That's how it felt to me. That I was ultimately responsible for my abuser. When I chose, for the sake of my children to draw boundaries, it was like dropping the rope. I feared she would kill herself. She'd always threatened to do so. I fretted. Poured over books on intercessory prayer, still determined to rescue. Praying, pleading with God to do something.

Exhausted, I attended an Easter service. Afterward a friend told me someone had given her a suicide note the night before. I burst into tears. Her experience was too close to home, probing my deepest fear. I was afraid that in dropping the rope I'd given my abuser over to destruction. My friend gathered a prayer team. I told them of my pain, how I'd been interceding, crying out to God on her behalf.

"Sometimes we have to leave the deeper intercession to others not so close to the situation," the prayer team leader said. "When that happens to me, I simply imagine myself taking my loved one's hand and ushering him or her to the Lord."

I closed my eyes. Imagined taking her hand to lead her to Jesus.

The vision suddenly took on a life of its own. In it she jerked her hand from me, stomped her foot, and refused to move. She glared at me the way she sometimes did when the evil took over and hatred spilled forth.

Confused by her response, I knew I had to go to God, even if she refused to come with me. I kept walking toward the hazy presence I saw on the throne before me. My God received me. I was at peace.

Then He did a marvelous thing. The sweet presence on the throne went after *her*.

He left the splendor of heaven

Knowing His destiny

Was a lonely hill called Golgotha

*There He laid down His life***

It was the Easter story in action. She wasn't abandoned. I could never take her to the throne, but God would never stop pursuing her, inviting her to come and rest in Him.

I was not her Savior. I never could be. The task was not mine but His.

I share this story because as I worked today, it was as if God pointed at this story and then at this Easter devotion. Evidently someone out there has a basement box or two like mine. Oh sweet friend, if it's you, I promise He will help you through this.

When He took me to the basement I talked about this week, I was once again assaulted by a self-hatred I thought was only from my past. The depth of its horror shocked me. Some of it felt like *those* days, the days I had no right to my own air, when all life was sucked from me. In His healing room I sobbed and shook. I put away all the "right" answers, the good-girl ones, the Christian ones. And I simply said the stuff that needed to be eradicated from my system.

What came first was the repeated crying, the chattering teeth that barely let the words out, "I couldn't help her. I couldn't help her. I couldn't help her." A few years ago I saw a counselor who helped me understand I'd long lived with low-grade PTSD. Something about saying those words brought back some of the symptoms, the shaking and chattering and inability to speak normally.

The little girl still needed to grieve her inability to save. The grown-up woman had heard Jesus' voice say she wasn't responsible, and she had fought hard to receive the freedom Jesus gave. But somewhere deep inside the pain was still great, still shoved deep, still crying out in failure. Still a kid burning her abuser's suicide note. A teen. An adult.

Powerless.

"I couldn't help her. I couldn't help her. I couldn't help her."

I can't help her.

My tears fall again. My shoulders shake.

Oh sweet friend. Do you feel it too? Is there someone you've taken responsibility for that you can never save? Have you taken upon yourself a task that will only leave you in failure?

It is not your responsibility to carry.

It is not mine.

We cannot save.

Only Jesus saves.

Only His love breaks the final chains.

It's okay when we need a good cry. It's good to face our limitations. To let go of what is not ours to carry.

It feels hopeless when we drop the rope, but we weren't meant to hold it. Not only did we never ask for that kind of responsibility, but our sweet Lord never put that rope in our hand.

He asks that we let go of the bondage, of the rope holding us to destruction, but He never stops holding our loved one in His hands.

I just saw a new ending to the rope story, one not written on the site, but one written by God's own hand. I see the person on that bridge never falling, for Person Two was never actually dangling precariously. God Himself holds Person Two and all like her. He allows the kicking, screaming selfishness. He doesn't force Himself upon them even when they make bad choices. But He keeps calling. He left the throne to go after them, and He never stops wooing even the most stubborn. No matter their choices, He is there. Loving them. Offering hope.

He already did what we cannot do.

He saved them.

Precious Jesus, thank You for choosing that lonely road of Golgotha, for leaving Your perfect throne and entering our mess. Thank You for saving me. Thank You for going after my loved ones. I release responsibility for them into Your infinitely more capable hands. I cannot help them. You are the only answer. I choose to let you heal me. Just as you long to do. I choose my address in the kingdom of light, right where You put me already. I reject the darkness.

*Research revealed that this metaphor is likely based on a fable called, "The Bridge," by Edwin H. Friedman. It was printed in Friedman's Fables, Copyright (C) 1990 by Guilford Publications.

**"If That Isn't Love" by Dottie Rambo



Week Four ~ Glory to Glory

Friday: Shadows and Roses

I said to myself, "Relax and rest. GOD has showered you with blessings. Soul, you've been rescued from death; Eye, you've been rescued from tears; And you, Foot, were kept from stumbling."

~ Psalm 116:7–8 MSG

Growing. Changing. Healing.

Christ's work of on-going salvation.

The kind we've been talking about is a communion experience. Of ourselves we are not strong enough, but over time, as we seek Him and discover Him, we trust Him. His life flows through His Spirit into ours.

We've talked about the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. We know what it feels like to live in both.

Let's use a new metaphor: Us the rose. The soil the kingdom.

Jesus takes us from the arid deserts, the over-farmed fields, the hard, unrelenting ground full of toxic waste and transplants us in rich, black soil. He nourishes us. He urges us forward by His love and grace, and as our trust grows, we respond more quickly to His gentle promptings.

Flourishing in the new garden isn't a one-time, easy experience. We stretch toward the sunshine. And sometimes we rest there, drinking it in. But sometimes the shadows chase us. They try to block the sun; they tempt us to return to old thinking. Sometimes we bloom for years, our roots expanding, going deeper into His love, then one day His sweet voice whispers and asks, as He asked me a few years ago, to dig deeper into the shadows that chase so they are more fully vanquished.

So we can bloom and expand once again.

As I wrote *Soul Scents: Flourish*, the Lord showed me something new in a familiar verse. After two days of digging and receiving and drinking in the new truth—a truth that poked at a

wound of the past—I was elated. New hope surged. New territory was claimed. I felt the cosmic shift, the moving forward. I began to write about it, but schedule required me to stop before I could write all I understood in this glorious, new perspective.

The next day, a Thursday, the attack came.

Lies. All of it.

I knew they were lies, not from within me, but from without.

I prayed for God to rescue me from the unrelenting thoughts. I cranked up the praise music. Instead of isolating—oh how I wanted to isolate—I messaged not only my prayer group, but the next layer of praying friends, asking them to pray the voices away. I fought hard. The attack finally broke when I went to Facebook and publicly proclaimed what I knew to be true:

God is a shield about me. When the enemy of joy and life and celebration comes in to steal from me, my God is Mighty Warrior. He fights for my thoughts. For my peace. For my joy. He treads down evil and despair. He shouts in conquering victory. My God is the lifter of my head. He is glorious, powerful, worthy of worship and praise. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He always wins! Let the oceans roar. Let the thunder resound. Let the birds sing. The flowers bloom. The sunsets burst with color. My Lord cannot be held down or held back. He fights for me with His power, but also with His grace and beauty and tenderness.

After the attack lifted, I felt physically exhausted, my limbs weighted down like lead. That night the Lord blessed me with the healing presence of my son and his girlfriend. As the weekend came, I chose to rest, to enjoy family, to watch movies, attend church, go to a Rockies game, and make homemade pizza. I planned for Monday to be wildly productive. It wasn't. Then Tuesday came. I once again hid tears as my husband and I awakened. I didn't want him to worry while he worked away from me, but I felt the grief consuming me. Again. Then allergies hit, and I spent a few hours with a tissue box as my eyes streamed and my nose ran, and the sneezing continued incessantly. Too empty to write, I spent the morning reading about who my sweet Lord really is.

My eyes continued to water; the burning in my face continued. But my spirit clung to the truths spilling across the page in the book I read. And I knew it was the message of my heart, of all I write, of my life. I am His.

We are His.

Because we are His, He speaks tenderly to us, calling us to Himself, leading us to health and safety. As we take time for Him, over days and weeks and months and years, we know His voice more and more intimately. We learn to respond to His promptings, for we know His heart

is to see us flourish—healthy and strong! Strong enough to face the deeper healing when He calls. Even if it means tears, allergies, and struggle.

Nourished by what I read, I took another allergy pill and went to sleep. True to His sweet character, He bedded me down in lush, green meadows (Psalm 23, MSG), and I rested. When I awoke, the grief had lifted. And then . . . I wrote.

Maybe you're wondering why I just shared all of that with you. I share these things because it is imperative that I am real about the healing journey.

It isn't a quick fix.

It will be opposed.

But we know how to walk victoriously. We simply come under the protection of our Lord's mighty hand. We seek His guidance. We follow His voice. When life feels too much, we rest. When He's refreshed us, we press on. We're seeking to let our roots grow deeply in the soil of His love. In the past we were planted in foreign soil. We are still recovering. As we grow and expand and become like Jesus, He is always healing us, changing us, transforming us from the inside out. He has transplanted us to the soil of His love, and our emaciated roots are healing, lengthening, widening. He's making us strong because He loves us. It is His greatest pleasure to see us connected to Him and thriving! And as we mature, becoming beautiful plantings of righteousness in the Garden of His Love, our loveliness will call others to Him so they, too, can come under His protection.

I close with an excerpt from a poem written for me by my dear friend, Deb, on the day the battle raged and I reached out for prayer. I share because it is God's heart for *you*, too.

The Rose of Sharon

September 15, 2016

By Deborah Lynn

I want you to rest in My Presence,
while I fight your battles!

You are My Rose, My beautiful flower
One that was created to offer My sweet scent
To delight with color
To offer with food
To attract others by what they need
To be strong
To weather each and every storm

To bend
But never to break.

ΛΩ

I want you to rest in My Presence,
while I fight your battles!

In season or out, you remain to awaken
again in the light of dawn.
Your roots, planted in the soil I chose,
are strong, yet fragile
Are right, yet wrong
Are pure, yet tainted.

You were planted in alien soil.
Soil that allowed you to grow,
and know a little of the Son.
And, although you were My anointed seed, planted in this soil to bloom,
It was difficult
Because your soil was polluted,
and the earth hard.

ΛΩ

Each season you grew — first one color,
then another.
Year after year, you grew,
but your colors were plain.
You thought you were created to speak
the language of love.
You were,
But what the seasons brought
were not what you had hoped.
There were years of drought, years of storms,
Years misunderstood, and years left alone.

ΛΩ

You thought I had forgotten you.

I have not.

I never did.

Nor will I ever leave you.

I love you far too much.

ΛΩ

It is the depth of Love that has

sustained you in this soil.

Do you know, that of all the variations of color

I still do not love one more than the other?

They cannot be separated

I love them all.

What I know

What you do not know

Is all the color of who you are.

You are still far too blinded by what you saw,

What you felt, what you thought you knew.

Like a horror story

they continue to play reruns,

Plaguing you, haunting you,

making you cower in fear.

But these shadows, although they have shape

And you can recognize and name each one,

They are but shadows of what once was –

A weak attempt to corrupt

the beauty I have created.

ΛΩ

Where you were, you are no longer.

What you knew, you know no longer.

What you see, you see much bigger.

But your vision at times is clouded by the threat

Of passing storms
that remind you of what was.

Look again.

Keep looking.

See what I see.

Do not allow your gaze to wander.
Do not listen to the rumbles.
Focus on My mirrors — they have the truth
Of what is the fullness of beauty
that I have made.

ΛΩ

The beauty of the rose is full, its colors radiant.
And in that alien soil,
amongst the storms of old,
scars were born.

But all you see are the scars,
the pain,
and the remaining wounds.
Those very scars are the array of your beauty.
They track along your stem
and across your petals.

But
You are
My rose.

ΛΩ

Every scar you bear, every color you exude, every scent you offer,
Are the very things that others
love so much about you.
Not the scar itself, not the color, not the scent,

But the endurance,
The colors that show the changes of seasons.
And most of all
They love the scent I have given you,
The scent that beckons them near.

It draws them, and they know you understand.

Let them gather your pollen
to make honey of their own.
Let the honey you exude
heal the wounds of the heart.

See it.
Know it.
Take it.
Taste it.
Digest it.

And let it heal your own.

ΛΩ

Then open your bud once more to see —
to see clearly.

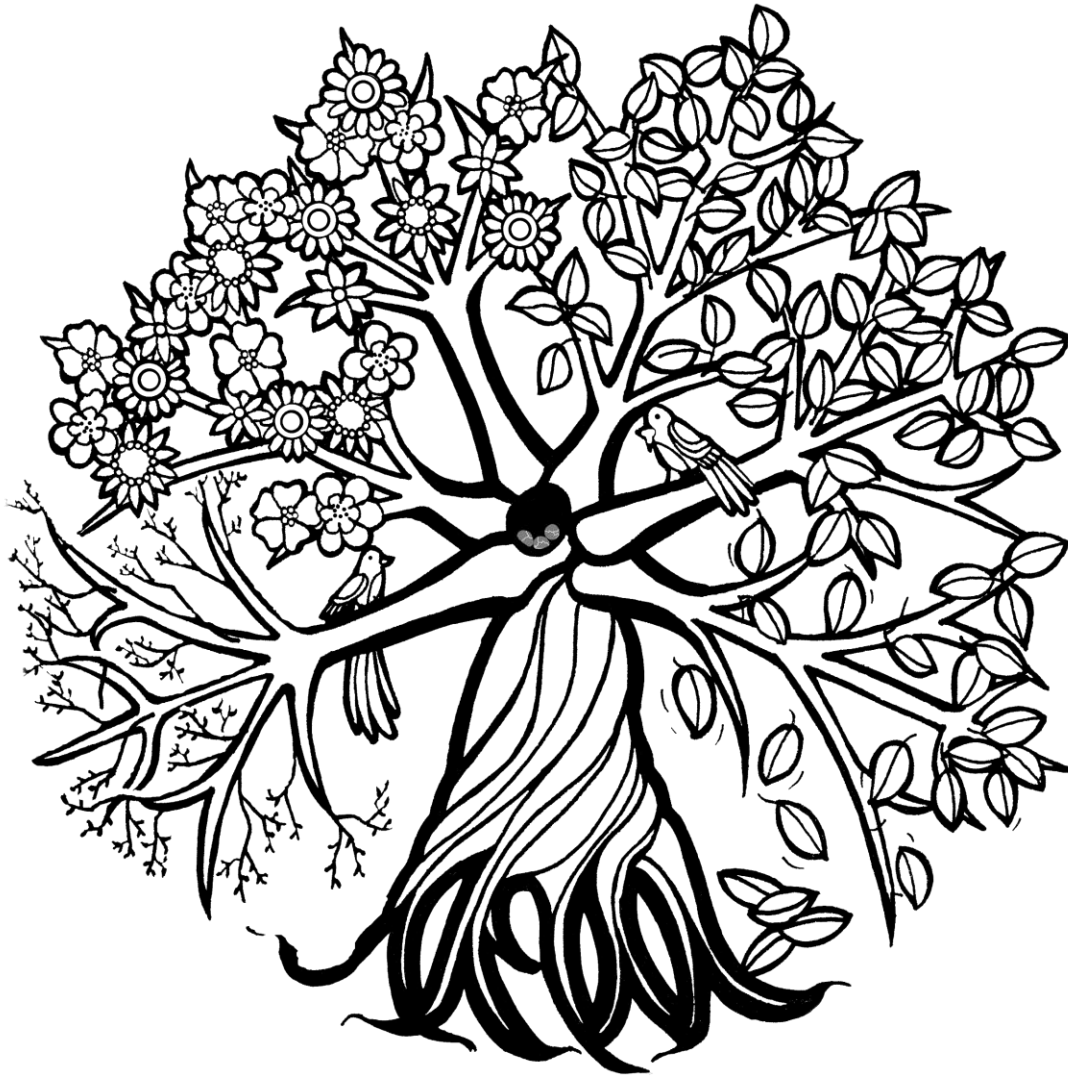
To see that you are no longer in alien soil
And no longer tormented by the storms.
But that you live
And breathe
And have your being
In the garden of My Love
In the center of My Heart.

Precious Jesus, Thank You for planting me in the center of Your heart. The garden of Your love is fragrant, peaceful, safe. Turn my gaze to You, teach me to rest in the new place I am planted. Help me to live! To breathe deep, long breaths of freedom. Open me up, heart, mind, soul, body, and spirit, to Your love! Show me how to receive it and drink of it and allow it to make my roots strong and healthy. Help me

Soul Scents

not fear my scars, but to see them as healed, healing, and beautiful. Help me to ignore the shadows that try to attach themselves. Let me see them slide off me, no longer able to dull my colors. You have healed me. Are healing me still. The scars and struggles only serve to make me stronger, more authentic, more accessible to a world full of scars and gaping wounds. As You heal me, draw others into the safety of Your healing. Let us live together in the garden of Your love.

* Deborah's writing can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/identity.calling.destiny/>. An artisan as well as a poet, DeLynn's artwork can be viewed at: <https://www.facebook.com/WaterFallColors>.



Week Five ~ Crucifixion Community



Week Five ~ Crucifixion Community

Sunday

Ponder:

Relationship

Don't you love the word reconcile? Merriam-Webster defines it as "to restore to friendship or harmony" and "to make consistent or congruous." Google says to reconcile is to "to restore friendly relations" or "to make or show to be compatible."

What feelings come up in you when you think of reconcile? My initial emotional response includes things like peace, joy, excitement, and a sense of safety. If I dig deep enough, I can also feel fear. There are certain situations and relationships where compatible, harmonious experiences don't happen. In those places I can't "reconcile" the situation with the kind of life God wants me to live. There are "irreconcilable" differences.

Before the cross there were irreconcilable differences with humanity and God, and God's heart grieved. He longed to restore friendly relations with the people created in and from love. He ached to once again be compatible. He wanted to be reunited with those He adored.

Christ's loving sacrifice not only made us compatible with God, John 14 says it we are made *one* with God. We have a highly relational God.

God's work of reconciliation is not only transactional—cleaning us up for eternity in heaven, it is *intimately relational*. The Trinity lives in perfect, congruent, harmonious community. They invite us into that kind of life with them. Thanks to the cross we are *one* with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we are welcomed into that perfect community with out-stretched arms.

My favorite hymn is "In the Garden." It just started singing in my mind. "And He walks with me and He talks with me. And He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known."

That's intimacy. Notice the hymn doesn't say that nobody else has ever experienced as *much* joy as the writer does when walking and talking with Jesus. He says no one else has known the joy *they share*. In other words, the intimacy between this hymn-writer and Jesus is unlike the intimacy other people experience with Jesus, just as the intimacy you share with Jesus is unlike the intimacy I do.

Intimacy is like that. Unique to the people who are intimate. Isn't that beautiful? You and Jesus get to have your own, intimate, unique relationship. It's from God to you and nobody else can have it. He is thrilled to pursue you with His love and to tenderly develop intimacy with *you*. He is patient. He knows relationships have hurt you in the past. He knows your trigger points and longs to heal them so they no longer stand in the way of relationship with Him. He knows what you like and loves to surprise you with good gifts. He rejoices in being with you *today* and longs for *eternity* where even greater intimacy will be possible.

Second Corinthians explains that God not only reconciled us to Himself through Jesus, but He also gave us the "ministry of reconciliation" (5:18). I used to think that meant we were all to be evangelists, telling others about God. In the context of the whole chapter, telling others that reconciliation with God is possible is certainly part of what the ministry of reconciliation is. But I now understand the ministry of reconciliation in a greater context. Consider the two verses right before verse eighteen. "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here" (vs. 16–17, NIV).

Wow.

Right before Paul says we have the ministry of reconciliation, he isn't talking about evangelism. He's talking about seeing others as God does. The New Living Translation says that we no longer evaluate others from a "human point of view."

Paul is admonishing us to stop looking at other believers' outsides and to instead concentrate on the fact that they are new creations in Jesus, just like we are. God gave us a new identity, and He gave other believers a new identity, and we are to see each other through *His* lens. We are a community of new creations, wholly accepted and forgiven. *Beloved*.

As I ponder the last few days of Jesus' journey to the cross, I see a lot of relationship—with God and with His earthly community. The One who came to show sacrificial love did so in the context of relationship with humans. Complete with the messiness that comes with that. He navigated with love, wisdom, and boundaries. He understands our struggle to trust God and each other, and He fought to bring reconciliation to our race.

He fought for our relationship with Him, the Trinity, and each other.

Prayer:

Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. Thank You for bring us into perfect harmony, for making us one, for offering intimate relationship with me. Help me to know that You are fully committed to our relationship. Help me to trust You more and more. Show me how to navigate authentic relationship with others. Please help me find like-minded community who is learning to see me as You do, a new creation. Help me to see them as You do too.

Meditate:

- *I will never leave you or forsake you ~ Jesus*

Consider these thoughts from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. I've highlighted portions of focus by using italics. These are mine and not in his original paraphrase. If you're uncomfortable reading a paraphrase, consider reading the selection and then comparing it to the Bible translation you prefer. Does the basic intent differ? Is there a nuance the Holy Spirit might want you to consider that you hadn't seen before but noticed in *The Message*?

- This is how we know we're living *steadily and deeply* in him, and he in us: *He's given us life* from his life, from his very own Spirit. Also, we've seen for ourselves and continue to state openly that the Father sent his Son as Savior of the world. Everyone who confesses that Jesus is God's Son participates *continuously* in an *intimate relationship* with God. We know it so well, *we've embraced it heart and soul, this love that comes from God* (1 John 4:1–16).
- It wasn't so long ago that we ourselves were stupid and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulder, hated and hating back. But when God, our kind and loving Savior God, stepped in, he saved us from all that. It was all his doing; we had nothing to do with it. He gave us a good bath, and we came out of it new people, washed inside and out by the Holy Spirit. Our Savior Jesus poured out new life so generously. *God's gift has restored our relationship with him and given us back our lives. And there's more life to come—an eternity of life! You can count on this* (Titus 3:3–8).
- We don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what *we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new*. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! *All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other*. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah,

giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: *Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you* (2 Corinthians 5:16–20).

- [God Is Love] My beloved friends, let us continue to *love each other* since love comes from God. *Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God.* The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to *clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God* (1 John 4:7–10).

Worship:

"Above All," written by Lenny Leblanc, Paul Baloche and made popular by Michael W Smith, is a special song to me. This YouTube video has the words with it. It's up to you how you want to worship with this song today. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzOgA2RV6Hs>.

When's the last time you pondered the words of the beautiful old hymn (printed on the following page), "In the Garden?" How do you want to worship with it today?

In the Garden*

I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses;
and the voice I hear falling on my ear,
the Son of God discloses.

Refrain:

And he walks with me, and he talks with me,
and he tells me I am his own,
and the joy we share, as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of his voice
is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
and the melody that he gave to me
within my heart is ringing. [Refrain]

I'd stay in the garden with him,
though the night around me be falling,
but he bids me go; through the voice of woe,
his voice to me is calling. [Refrain]

Author: C. Austin Miles (1913)

Tune: GARDEN (Miles)

Songs of Response

Published in 220 hymnals

**This version of In the Garden is found on <https://hymnary.org> and was taken from Baptist Hymnal, 1991*



Week Five ~ Crucifixion Community

Monday: He Thought of Me

For the Lord your God has arrived to live among you. He is a mighty Savior. He will give you victory. He will rejoice over you in great gladness; he will love you and not accuse you. Is that a joyous choir I hear? No, it is the Lord himself exulting over you in happy song.

~ Zephaniah 3:17–18 TLB

Picturing Christ on the cross, I was deeply moved as the congregation sang, “Crucified, laid behind a stone, You lived to die rejected and alone, like a rose trampled on the ground, You took the fall . . .”

I envisioned my Lord hanging, His arms outstretched, His head dipping in agony. Christ taking my sin.

“... And thought of me, above all ...”*

Suddenly the picture in my mind changed, growing beyond my pondering.

Christ stood before me.

I watched as though a movie played before me.

Jesus reached for my hands, and we twirled in a happy circle. As we danced He threw back His head and laughed in sheer joy.

I sensed His heart though I heard no words. “This is why I did it,” he said, “to enjoy you forever.”

Enjoy me?

A thrill ran through me, and I felt deeply loved. It seemed beyond comprehension that Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, enjoyed me so much He chose the cross so we could be together forever. Beyond comprehension, but oh so wonderful!

Zephaniah 3:17 says God thinks we’re so special He actually sings over us. I once heard that a Jewish rabbi said, properly translated, the scripture actually means He dances over us!

Take a moment. Can you see it? The God of the universe dancing with joy over you and me! Maybe initially the Three of them hold hands and form a circle, dancing around us. Then perhaps the Persons of the Trinity take turns. Jesus, the bridegroom, pulls us close to one of those slow, romantic melodies. God the Father chooses a sentimental song for the Father-daughter dance, and on-lookers wipe their eyes. Then the party gets going, and Holy Spirit calls us up to teach us a new line dance.

Maybe my imagination is carrying me away, but these images bring home to me the Scriptures that call Jesus the groom and me His bride. Coupled with the image I received that day in church it is easier to believe Jesus chose the cross not only out of obedience to His Father, but because He looked forward to His inheritance, the wedding gift His Father promised—you and me.

Jesus, help me to truly believe You enjoy me. Rejoice over me. Delight in me. Want to dance with me. Thank You for Your bridegroom love. Open my heart to receive it in ever-increasing measure.

* “Above all” by Lenny LeBlanc and Paul Baloche



Week Five ~ Crucifixion Community

Tuesday: Unity

I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me because of their testimony. My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father—that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me.

~ John 17:20–21 NLT

Stay here and keep watch with me.

~ Matthew 26:38 NIV

“Wow! Jesus prayed for ME!” Excited, I wrote a note in the margin of my Bible so I’d always remember that Jesus prayed John 17:20–26 with me in mind. This happened several years ago. Since then I’ve developed a bit of a love affair with the Scriptures from John chapters fourteen through seventeen. I’ve come to love them, in part, because these chapters fall between when Jesus washed His disciples feet (Chapter thirteen) and when He went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, where He was arrested (Chapter eighteen). I can’t help but feel especially tender about these four chapters because of the timing. If you knew you were about to die, what would you most want to tell your loved ones?

What strikes me about the Scripture we’re focusing on today is how relational Christ is. He’d just spent a lot of time in John fourteen explaining to His disciples that on the other side of what was about to happen would come a oneness they’d not yet experienced. He promised to send them a Comforter, His own Holy Spirit, so that they could be one with Him, just as He is one with the Father. He made it clear in these passages that this gift was for all who believe in Him.

Then in chapter seventeen he comes back around to the concept of oneness again, praying specifically for each person who will know Him because the disciples will tell them. Over the course of history what Jesus shared with the disciples, they shared with those who

listened to them, and those people told someone, and eventually, someone told you and me about Jesus.

It's breath-taking to think that as Jesus faced a cruel death, His thoughts turned not only to His disciples but also to you and me. He prayed that you and I would be one with the Father and Him, and that we would be one with fellow Christians. Jesus said it was this spiritual unity that would cause other people to believe in Him. He focused not only on community with His disciples, but on the community of the ages—the connection between Jesus and you and me and people to come.

Jesus' precious prayer was about relationship.

Christ's relational focus continues during those most difficult hours as He continues the path of the cross. Before this prayer Jesus had shared a last supper with His best friends. John said of that time, "Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end (12:1, NLT)."

Can't you see it? Jesus reclining at a table with those closest to Him. They share the wine and break the bread. He washes their feet. He seeks to prepare them for what is about to happen, talking about His blood as wine, the bread as His broken body. They talk of servanthood. Of betrayal. Of sacrifice. It is a time of relational intimacy. *He loves them to the end.*

Soon He goes to the Garden of Gethsemane where He will be betrayed. He knows, even then, that His friends will soon scatter in fear, deserting Him as He faces the biggest trial of His life on earth. But that doesn't change His relational focus. In His greatest hour of need where did He turn? To His Father and His best friends. He goes to pray, taking the eleven with Him. But He didn't stop with the outer circle; He took an even more intimate step. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me" (Matthew 26:38, NIV), He asks His closest friends, Peter, James, and John. With them nearby He pours forth His anguish to his Father.

It's interesting Jesus didn't sneak off to be alone and pray as He often did. In this time of great emotional anguish, He stayed near those who loved Him best. He knew they couldn't fix what was happening to Him. The trial had to be faced. But, being fully human, He wanted companionship in His time of greatest need. He knew, too, that they needed to be with Him, to understand His choice to surrender to the Father's will.

Even when hanging upon the cross, Jesus continues this focus on relationship. The gospels record seven phrases that Jesus spoke from the cross. Five of the seven have to do with relationship.

Jesus spoke with the thieves who hung on either side of Him.

He prayed that God would forgive those who crucified Him.

He asked the beloved disciple to care for His mother.

He prayed to His Father. Two of the most oft repeated phrases of the cross connected Him to eternal community. He quoted David's words from the Psalms when He cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?" and again when he prayed, "Father, into your hands I commit My spirit." Christ's words spanned centuries of relationship.

Jesus knew His sacrifice would bring about wonderful, magnificent changes in the area of relationship. When He spoke His final words, "It is finished," and breathed His last breath, the curtain in the temple that separated people from the presence of God was ripped in two.

God is now accessible, living in relationship with His people for eternity. His followers—past, present, and future—were suddenly and forever connected to Him, without the barriers of the old covenant. What grace to be granted intimate relationship with the King of Kings!

You and I are connected to the Trinity now and through that connection to all those who have gone before us and will come after us. Someday we will experience this in fullness. King David, Jesus, the disciples, and the believers to come—all living in perfect unity, joyfully worshiping the Father. We'll stand side by side with Moses, your great-grandmother, Martin Luther, Queen Esther, Uncle Joe, Nate Saint, and even that Christian with whom you can't see eye to eye. All differences will fade in the unity of the Spirit and all relationships will be perfect and whole.

In Jesus' most painful hours He showed us by example what is important. He lived out His destiny with relational integrity.

He loved until the very end.

And He made the way for love to continue forever.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I'm awestruck at the thought of eternity in perfect, intimate relationship with You. Thank You, Father, for sending Jesus. Thank You, Jesus, for enduring the cross so we can live together forever. Thank You, God, for making us one! Help us to follow Your example of relational intimacy, growing in our trust and experience of You and learning from Your perfect love how to live in unity and love with our fellow man.



Week Five ~ Crucifixion Community

Wednesday: Vulnerable and Betrayed

I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me.

~ Matthew 26:21 NLT

Have you ever been courageously vulnerable only to be hurt?*

Most of us have.

There's a reason we hide our pain instead of sharing it.

In my late thirties and early forties I went through about seven years of hardship upon hardship.* In the early years of this difficult season, I was also in a friendship circle change, and I struggled to find friends I felt safe sharing the deeper parts of the pain with. When I finally summoned the strength to share more openly, a well-meaning friend said *exactly* the *wrong* thing. I thought, "Oh, yeah. This is why I quit sharing." Temptation to crawl back into my private place and shut out community was strong.

Often honest communication and a bit of risk-taking is all a relationship needs to thrive and overcome difficulty. But, as we all have experienced, sometimes it doesn't matter how hard we try. We still get hurt. Relationships don't heal. The other person chooses to move on. Or we do.

So what do we do when we seek to enter community as Jesus modeled for us, but we find that being vulnerable brings pain?

As I meditate on that question, a scene from the last supper comes to mind. Jesus is sitting with His closest friends, His twelve disciples. He shares Passover with them. Right before He institutes the taking of the Lord's Supper, He remarks that one of His friends will betray him.

Judas says, "Is it I?"

Jesus says, “It’s you.” He doesn’t play games, but gives a direct answer. There is no record that He said anything further—no accusations, anger, trying to persuade otherwise. Just honest communication.

You’d think that would be enough betrayal for one night, but after the Passover celebration ended, Jesus and His friends go to the Mount of Olives and to the Garden of Gethsemane. As they walk, Jesus tells His friends that all of them will desert him. Peter argues, but Jesus knows the truth. Even His best friends will leave Him when the going gets rough.

I think it is interesting that even in this knowledge He invites his friends to be close to Him, as we talked about yesterday.

As I’m thinking about the times my friends have betrayed me—or I have betrayed them—I see two kinds of betrayal. There is a Judas betrayal and a Peter betrayal. Both betrayals come from a weakness of character, a lack of understanding the big picture, and a spiritual immaturity.

The difference is the heart.

Judas’s betrayal was premeditated. Instead of repenting and trying to make it right with Jesus, he stayed in wrong thinking, hardened to change. He took away all chance of reconciliation.

Peter’s betrayal came from a heart that was weak but full of love. Peter grieved his actions, repented, and accepted forgiveness. He stayed near to Jesus even in Christ’s death, still hoping for reconciliation.

Jesus forgave them both, but He allowed Judas to go on his way, knowing the relationship was severed. Peter He pursued—both before and after his betrayal.

Perhaps, herein lies an answer to our question. When intimate, vulnerable relationships bring pain, and the people we trust betray us, we can follow Christ’s example.

First, we communicate honestly and refuse to play games as we navigate the difficult waters. Then, we forgive as He forgave. Knowing that Jesus, too, has felt the deep pain of betrayal, we go to Him for comfort in the confidence that we have a Savior who understands. As we let Him minister to our wounds, we also seek His counsel. He can show us whether to pursue the relationship or let it go.

As we are changed from glory to glory, we need healthy community. We need safe places to be authentic with our journey, but vulnerability is hard and not always safe, even for Jesus. Like Jesus, we have community we pursue and community we walk away from. Our community is very important to the Lord. He knows healthy community helps us make positive change, and unhealthy community can stunt our growth. Sometimes He keeps us where we are in our relationship circles and asks us to take more time alone with Him. Other times He brings believers who know better how to walk with us to our existing community. But sometimes He

has us walk away from a person or even a whole relationship circle. It can feel lonely in the transition, and there are situations where He allows us to have reduced relationships for His purposes, especially the purpose of honing our hearing so we know *His* voice better.

My experience is that when it is time, God replaces the old community with one more suited to where I am on the journey with Him. I believe the safest community happens when believers view each other as God does, as beautiful, new creations, fully forgiven. Even as those in community see wounds and struggles, they don't judge. Instead they help each other live in the new identity God has given. There will still be messy days, but they grow to trust each other's hearts and learn to work through the struggles. Even in the best community, vulnerability isn't easy.

How safe do you feel in authentic community?

Let's narrow that down. How safe do you feel in intimate, authentic community with God? When is it easy to trust Jesus? The Father? The Holy Spirit? When is it hard?

What about with people? Do you know anyone who is safe enough to be real with? Are you?

There is no perfect formula for finding a safe community where you can be authentic and vulnerable as you heal and stretch, but as you come to know, in increasing measure, the perfect love of God, your heart feels safer. His perfect love casts out fear.

As we navigate difficult relational waters, the comforting truth is that Jesus cares about our relationships. He has felt the betrayal we've felt. He's been vulnerable only to be taken advantage of. He's walked away from close relationships, and He's pursued close relationship that went awry. As with anything else in life, He's there with us, working for what is best.

Jesus, I'm sad that You, too, walk through the pain of being hurt by those closest to You, but it also brings me comfort because I know You truly understand how I feel when I'm betrayed. You led the way, showing me what vulnerable love looks like, even as You lived out healthy boundaries. I'm glad I can come to You when I walk through a painful relationship. I know You will understand, minister to my heart, and show me how to respond. Please deepen my trust in You and continue leading me into increasing intimacy with You. Help me with human relationships. Show me when I need to let go and when I need to pursue. Please open up authentic, vulnerable community where I can grow from glory to glory with others who love You.

*You may appreciate reading Matthew 26 and John 21 as you meditate on these thoughts.



Week Five ~ Crucifixion Community

Maundy Thursday: The Only True Sacrifice

Come away my beloved.

~Jesus

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

~Jesus

Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death?

~ Romans 8:35 CEV

Do you ever feel a mistrust of relationship with Jesus? Does increased intimacy with Him make you afraid? It's happened to me on numerous occasions, even after beautiful season when He loved me so well that I thought I would never pull away again.

A few years ago I sat on my new deck, the one that replaced the small porch that hung, falling off, from the back of our house during some long, hard years. But now a bright pink geranium added a splash of color to the round, glass table. Everywhere flowers bloomed—from pots in the corner of the deck and planters hanging from trees. In the yard below, the fragrant rose bush by the garage door boasted her first rose of the season. A soft southern breeze teased my hair.

My heart was troubled.

The yawning years of hardship had stolen much from me. I wanted to put it behind me. Now that the hard years were over, and I was healthy. Healed.

Or at least healing.

Wasn't I?

But I couldn't seem to move on the way I wanted to.

A friend prayed for me. She saw Jesus inviting me into healing waters. My husband concurred. He encouraged me to set aside my goals and seek God. He thought I needed to rest and stop striving to perform. When I let go of my need to be productive, I felt the whisper of Jesus' invitation to come again into the garden of love with Him.

Many years before the Lord had drawn me into His love through the study of the Song of Solomon. Half-way through, as I studied chapter four, the Lord had touched my heart, asking permission to send a bitter north wind for the purpose of strengthening and refining my family. When I surrendered, my family entered seven difficult years of struggle, and the Song of Solomon study, mostly untouched, sat beside my recliner. I knew someday He would call me back to this book of romance with Him.

I waited a long time. Longed to return. But when the invitation was issued, I hesitated. I had some trust issues. Some things must be understood if I dared.

Maybe you've been there.

Life got hard. His presence was difficult to see or feel. Maybe He was silent. After the hardship ended, you feared intimacy with Him again. Felt angry about the distance you thought He allowed when you needed Him most. Felt afraid the intimacy you once shared with Him would never return.

Today's devotional writing is how I processed these things as I sought enough safety and understanding to continue the journey of intimacy with Jesus.

Scared. I hesitated. As I did, a metaphor grew and I wrote. Initially not for publication. Just for me and Jesus. But now I share with you. Maybe you'll relate.

I chose this for Maundy Thursday because as I wrote this metaphor, a deeper understanding of all Jesus sacrificed emerged.

I wrote of myself as a woman standing just outside the King's gate. She is not any woman. She (like all who love the King) is His beloved. But as she emerges from years of dwelling in a strong tower, feeling locked up as a storm raged on and on, she finds herself afraid of the garden she once loved, the place of intimacy where she once spent time with the King, her beloved.

Come with me as I take this journey as His Beloved. Maybe you'll find yourself there too. Hungry for intimacy. Afraid to reach for it. Longing for—and finding—Him. You can be the "I" in the story, too. Notice what the woman discovers as her deepest sacrifice in the time of hardship. Notice when Jesus reveals His.

April 2015

I stand at the garden gate. It is outside the main castle. The entrances to both are locked. Tall, iron, forbidding. The tears flooding my cheeks are not silent. I rattle the gate, calling for You.

Afraid.

So afraid You aren't there.

And that if You are, You will not open for me.

I'm heartsick for the garden. The beautiful place we rested and laughed and embraced. That place where the warm breeze was scented with saffron and cinnamon. Where wild honey hung in trees and every gaze landed upon a profusion of color—flowers in magenta, peach, white, lavender, and yellow.

The garden is barely visible beyond that locked gate, a whiff of its fragrance alluring. I glimpse color like my heart craved in the tall, foreboding, gray tower where I hid while the storms raged.

You said it is safe to return to the garden. But if I enter again, how long can I stay? If I allow such sweetness in my life again, I cannot not survive its loss if I'm asked to leave.

You promise You will never leave or forsake me. That whether in the garden or the tower or the mountains I need never fear the loss of You.

But it was hard to lose that romantic sweetness we shared in the garden.

The bitter north wind no longer rages. I survived.

You wove my life like a beautiful tapestry. Faithful. You've every right to my complete trust.

But my heart experienced such loss!

In the tower I cried at each injustice, at each attack, at each surrender, at each heartbreak.

I imagine myself upon the stone table. My surrenders were many and deep. Often You had to pry my fingers open. But the deep sacrifice was not the loss of dreams, the false accusations of others, or even the many hardships my family endured.

There was only one truest sacrifice.

Loss of garden intimacy with You.

I turn away from the castle gate. Shut my senses, ignoring the fragrance of the garden that calls to me. I return to my little house. My bed.

Not Yours.

There I sense You even before the bed moves. You sit next to me, but I'm not ready to look at You. I curl in fetal position, weeping, my back to You. "You romanced me like never before, then You stopped." The accusation is flung through clenched teeth.

You place a gentle hand on my shoulder.

I stiffen but don't shake it off. I want every piece of You I can handle, even if right now it is only this unseen hand as I look at the wall to avoid Your gaze.

"You can't stay in the garden when a storm rages." Your voice is gentle, patient. "I couldn't leave you there. I couldn't allow the bitter north wind to pelt your tender skin with hail and sleet."

"But I missed being with You." I turn, glimpsing Your tender expression through my blurry, tear-filled vision. "Can You promise me I'll never again have to leave the garden?" I sit up, lock my eyes upon Yours. Your gaze remains gentle though I know mine is hard and unyielding. "What can You promise me?"

I'm making bargains instead of being Your lover, but I don't care.

"That I will never leave or forsake you. That I only do what is best for you. That you will never regret walking with Me, holding My hand."

"If You loved me so much, wanted to be with me like You said, why ask me to leave the garden? No, don't answer. I know. I had to have the bitter north wind to become all I'm meant to be. Yada yada. But the loss of that kind of intimacy with You. . . it hurts, even now." I hiccup as another sob escapes. "I can't reconcile it."

"Oh My love. Gardens aren't safe in storms."

We're silent for a while. You run a gentle finger across my cheek. I don't flinch, but neither do I reach for You.

"My surrender to the Father began in a garden too. Remember Gethsemane? Father and I didn't enjoy garden intimacy that night. I noticed no beauty. Instead I sweated drops of blood. I didn't lose relationship with Him, even in the pain. But it wasn't sweet. After the surrender came the sacrifice."

You pause, and I sense the importance of what is to come.

"You asked what I can promise you. I'll say it again. I will never leave or forsake you. You will never once have to suffer *that*. Neither the Father nor I will ever turn away from you."

I get it then, what You mean. "I've never had to suffer as You had to." My voice, barely a whisper. "The suffering of the cross wasn't the physical pain, the rejection of those You loved, or even the suffocation of the sins of the world. It was that moment . . ."

"As I took the sins of the world upon Myself, My Father turned away." You pause, clear your throat. "He asked Me to be forsaken so you never, ever would."

I reach for the beloved hand now.

"*That* has *never* been and *will never* be required of you."

We sit for a while, quiet. The warmth of our clasped hands makes its way to my heart.

“My treasured one. My darling. For eternity My sacrifice forged us together, made us one. Nothing in heaven, on earth, or underneath the earth will ever separate us.”

Your pain is deep, the moment between us so intimate that I can't process any more. Awed by Your sacrifice I can only weep silently. You mold Your strong body around mine, cradling me as I slip into exhausted sleep.

Oh, Jesus, there is no greater joy than intimacy with You. The times when You romance my heart leave me worthless for the treasures of this world. Maybe I didn't know that until all else was taken away. Even in the stripping, I didn't see clearly. I grieved all I lost. And that was okay. There was much to grieve. But now I know what I wanted most was to feel You romance my heart. To hear Your tender words of affection. To bask in the glory of Your love. It was hard, though, Jesus. My attention was on survival, not on Your declarations of love. Open my ears that I may hear Your sweet somethings all the days of my life, whether I dwell in gardens or face storms. Let me never again become so lost in pain that I also lose my hearing. For I know You sing over me. You quiet me with Your love. Precious Jesus, my Lover and King. Life may not always hold the sweet moments I crave, but never, ever have You asked me to live separated from Your love. Thank You for surrendering to separation from Your Father. You who had never known what it was like to be blocked from His love chose the separation so that I would never have to experience it. I believe more fully than ever that You will never leave or forsake me. Nothing can separate me from Your love.

*This allegory is part of a longer story included in “A New Perspective,” Week Twelve in *Soul Scents: Bloom*. <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B01HG55FAG>.



Week Five ~ Crucifixion Community
Good Friday: Take Up Your Cross

Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

~ Hebrews 12:1–3 MSG

Keep your eyes on Jesus, our leader and instructor. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterwards.

~Hebrews 12:2, TLB

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me.

~Luke 9:23, NLT

I sat in my recliner, journal in hand. The Lord and I talked about some hard issues. He reminded me that in the eternal life He plans for us, all will be healed. We will be whole individually and united in healthy community.

Then the Lord said He wants me, and others who hurt, to take up our cross and follow Him.

I've heard the phrase all my life. Though I know it is from Scripture, I never liked or understood it.

"I don't even know that that means, Lord."

“Accept your burdens and wounds and follow Me into healing,” He explained. “All who walk on this earth have been and are subjected to darkness. Accept, as I did, the scars of the world, but do not be defined by the whip and lashes of the enemy. Be defined by the resurrection of the Father.”

For a year and a half I’ve pondered those words. Today there is more clarity. I feared taking up my cross because I thought I had to carry a burden my whole life. I thought He called me to a lifetime of sacrifice and pain, walking that long, long road to Golgotha.

But that’s not what the Scripture means.

We don’t spend our earthly existence carrying our burden down the weary road of death. He came so we can have abundant life! His yoke is easy and His burden light!

Jesus meant that we would each experience our own Golgotha. Our own nails and scarring. Our own lashes of the enemy. We must accept, as He had to, that we will have pain and trouble in this world. We accept that evil has hurt us. Different for each of us, our hurts have the same root. Evil.

Evil used us. Abused us. Wounded us. Scarred us.

Taking up our cross is *not* about staying in the pain.

We surrender not to the evil and its devastation, but to God’s plan for our life.

That’s the “taking up” part.

We choose our Father’s plan.

When we take up our cross, we allow God to crucify all that rails against Him. The bitterness. The shame. The rebellion. The willfulness. We release our questions and our struggle.

We surrender to God not to evil.

That moment of surrender is the taking up of our cross.

It’s choosing God’s way over our own. It steps away from our old thinking and into the resurrection victory we’ve been talking about throughout this whole Easter devotion. We choose His plans. We live for His purposes.

Three of the four gospels have Jesus telling His followers to take up their crosses. One, Luke, adds the word *daily*. I like this one best because I’ve learned that while there may be one big surrender, when I choose the cross for the first time, my life is really about continual, on-going surrender to God and His ways. He’s the Creator of our souls. He understands us. He knows how to walk in intimate relationship with us in a way that prepares us for surrender to His ways. He nurtures our hearts, helping us let go of our old thinking and selfish plans and planting His new ways and glorious destinies in our heart.

So how do we daily take up our cross? We look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, disregarding its shame (Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus was able to take up His cross because He didn't lose sight of the love of His Father. He didn't forget where He was headed. Even in the time of His sacrifice He was so focused on the Father's plan that all else was out of focus.

His cross didn't—doesn't—define Him.

The risen King is defined by victory.

The victory that purchased our own.

Jesus' death and resurrection went into the very bowels of darkness to release all who've been held captive by the enemy, including you and me.

Like Jesus, we accept the scars, but we don't live in the scars.

We accept the wounding, but we don't live in the wounding.

We are a people defined by victory, surrendered to God's plans and purposes.

We rejoice as God *redeems* all the enemy thought he'd stolen from us.

Victorious, we stand tall, letting the shame of our wounding fall away. We cease pretending it didn't happen. We stop hiding. We glory in what our God does within us as He takes every ounce of pain the enemy meant for evil and turns it for our good.

Our Bridegroom kisses our every scar and says we are altogether lovely, without blemish (Colossians 1:22). The shame of the attack, of our cross, is past, and now we join Him sitting in honor at the right hand of the Father (Ephesians 1:20, 2:6). Now we hold our head high and step into authentic community with Jesus and the community He gives us.

Redeemed, we take up our cross daily and follow our Beloved.

Father, I take up my cross. I give You the anger, the railing, the grief, the questions of the pain and shame I endured. I accept that I have been wounded. I no longer reject my scars or the self I was when I was wounded. I surrender to Your ultimate authority and plan for my life. I am no longer defined by what happened to me. It no longer holds me back from intimacy with You or others. It no longer holds me back from the glorious destiny You have planned for my life. Instead, surrendered into Your hands, my cross becomes a stepping-stone to victory. Another laying down of my will to choose Your plan. Praise You Jesus! I am resurrected with You into victory! I am reconciled to You, to the Father, to the community where You place me, living in the kingdom of light, being changed from glory to glory! Oh, Jesus! You are good. You are my Beloved, and I am Yours!



Week Five Response

Response prompt:

Which relationship is the hardest for you, relationship with the Divine or with people? Where do you feel the most intimacy? Where do you feel the safest?

Or . . .

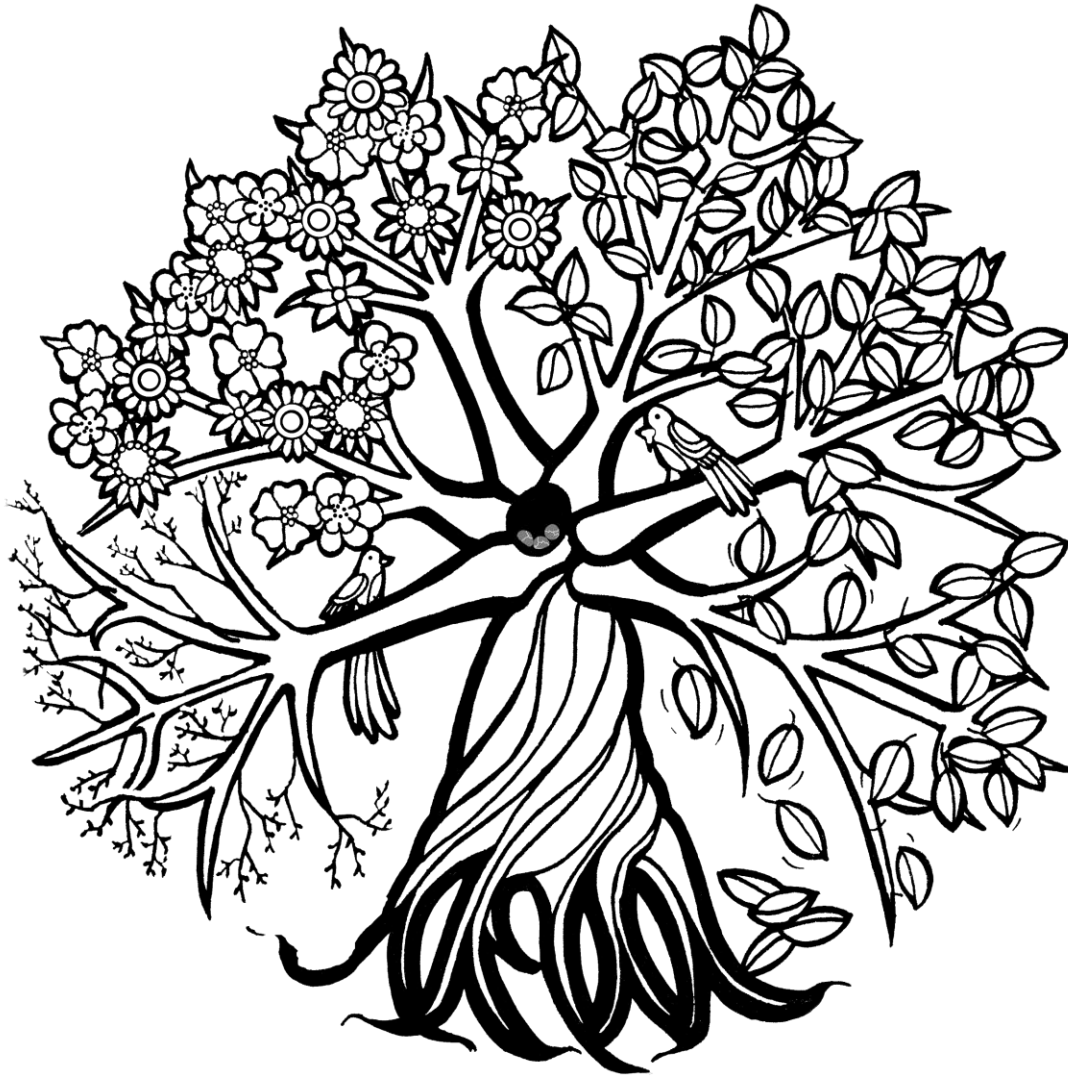
Maybe you'd like to ponder Christ's ultimate sacrifice as part of your Good Friday worship. Do you agree that His greatest pain was when the Father turned from Him, and He cried out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" If so, how do you feel about Jesus' promise to never leave or forsake You?

Or . . .

What cross do you need to accept without letting it define you? Where is your greatest surrender?

Or . . . what are you already pondering?

[illegible]



The Resurrection!

Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us.

~ Romans 6:6–11, MSG



Resurrection Sunday

He Arose!

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

~ Mark 16: 5-7 NLT

"Christ the Lord is risen today. Alleluia." I awoke with the old hymn playing, singing in my heart. "Son of men and angels say: Alleluia! Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia! Sing ye heav'ns, and earth reply: Alleluia!"

Much to my husband's surprise, I burst out in song from beneath the covers. "Alleluia!"

But I don't believe Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of James awoke quite that way just over 2000 years ago. The night before, the women had gone out after sundown to purchase spices to anoint Christ's body. There was no joyous song in their heart as they walked to the tomb the next morning.

In fact, I imagine they both dreaded and anxiously awaited the task before them—rubbing the cold, lifeless, hardened body of their beloved Jesus with spices. It was to be a final act of love, their last connection with Him.

I can almost feel the heaviness of their steps as they walked to His grave worrying over how they would move the heavy stone from its entrance. Their pace must have quickened, then slowed. How they longed to honor Him—how they loathed this final good-bye.

But a surprise awaited them.

Instead of a lifeless body, an empty tomb and a glowing man in a white robe greeted them. The angel told them Jesus had risen. "But go," said the angel, "tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

The angel could have had any message for Jesus' friends that day. He could have told them the theological implications of the resurrection. He could have chided them for their lack of faith. A long recounting of prophecy fulfilled could have flown from his lips.

But his message basically said, "He's alive, and He wants to see you in Galilee! Tell His best friends, especially Peter, who's still beating himself up over his betrayal of Jesus, that the Lord wants to be with you guys!"

Christ rose, and He wanted to see His friends. That's the kind of Lord we serve.

Jesus is a glorious, powerful, magnificent Lord to be sure, but in His glory He is not distant, domineering, or untouchable. Our God is One who wants to be with us. Emmanuel.

Scripture tells us Jesus died to reconcile us to the Father and to Himself. He allowed Himself to be separated from His friends because He wanted to be even closer to them. He tore down the wall of sin that had long kept Him from His creation so we could grow in intimacy and come to know our God as our Best Friend. Just as He promised in John 14, He who had walked *with* them would now live *in* them. He would change His disciples—then and now—from the inside out, empowering them with a brand-new clean heart and teaching them to live *from* victory.

Community with Jesus is forever and always. We begin our friendship with Him here and continue it for eternity. The same is true for relationships with our friends who discover His embrace. Ours is a bond that will never be broken. We are resurrected with Christ, new creations, learning to live in harmony with God and our fellow man. But there's more! As precious as our communion is with Him and His people today, a brighter day will come when we will taste the power of the second resurrection. We will join with our loved ones who've gone before us in spending eternity with our Best Friend.

Hallelujah! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!!

Christ has won the victory!

Risen to be close to us forever, never to be separated.

Up from the grave he arose;

with a mighty triumph o'er his foes;

He arose a victor from the dark domain,

and he lives forever, with his saints to reign.

He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!*

Can you hear the fanfare of trumpets? Smell the newness of spring? Feel the warmth of loving Light? Darkness—confusion, sin, weakness, unbelief—is conquered and with it eternal death. In its place is a new kingdom, established by God the Father through Jesus. It is a

kingdom of victory where God's people dwell with Him, live beneath the rule of His loving reign, and learn to love others (and themselves!) as they are loved by their King.

As Christ-followers we are translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. We live, "always thankful to the Father who has made us fit to share all the wonderful things that belong to those who live in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us out of the darkness and gloom of Satan's kingdom and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son, who bought our freedom with his blood and forgave us all our sins" (Colossians 1:12-14, TLB).

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids His rise, Alleluia!
Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!
Soar we now where Christ hath led, Alleluia!
Foll'wing our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like Him, like Him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!**

No longer are we held down by sin and condemnation, for the Son didn't come to condemn but to save (John 3:17), and for those who come to Him there is never again condemnation (Romans 8:1). No longer do we strive, struggling for righteousness, fighting from our own meager resources to survive in the domain of darkness. Through Christ sin is conquered, and we are reconciled to our Creator-Father. Through Christ we are given the identity and relationship of beloved. Because of the cross God's own Holy Spirit moves into our lives and changes us from the inside out, remaking us to shine with the glory of Christ's character, love, and power. We are free to flourish in love and grace, free to become all He had in mind before even the foundation of the world.

King of glory, Soul of bliss, Alleluia!
Everlasting life is this, Alleluia!
Thee to know, Thy pow'r to prove, Alleluia!
Thus to sing, and thus to love, Alleluia!***

Alleluia! All praise and honor and glory and power be to You, precious Jesus, Savior of the world! Thank You for walking the road of suffering so I can be released from the domain of darkness and live in the glory of Your light! Praise You, Jesus! King of Kings and Lord of Lords! All creation cries out in joyous adoration. You have risen! Hallelujah! Risen to walk in power and majesty. Risen to welcome us into the throne room. Risen to be my Friend forever. Hallelujah!

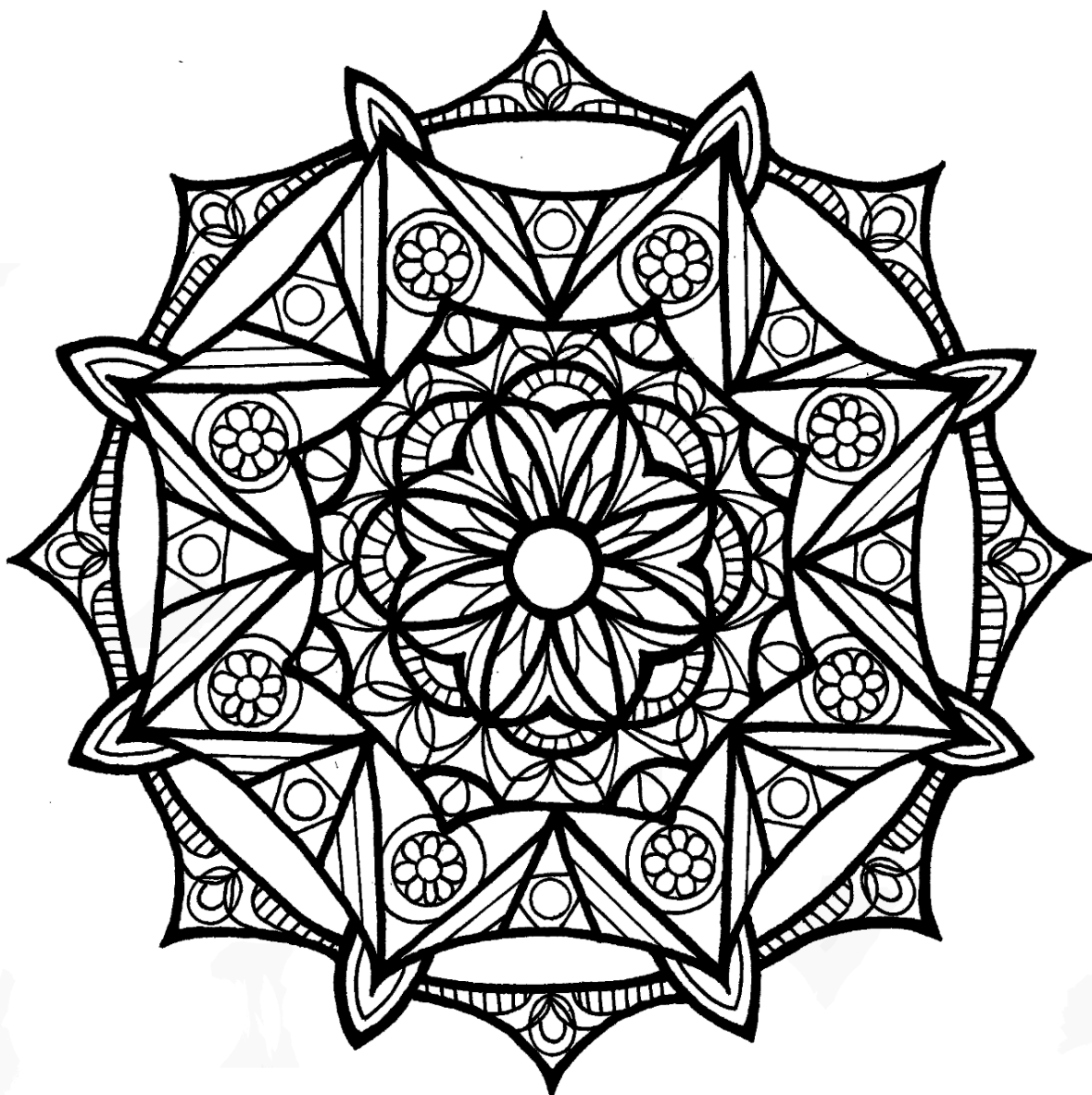
* "Up from the Grave He Arose" by Robert Lowry

****Verses 3 & 4 of “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” by Charles Wesley**

*****Verse 6 of “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” by Charles Wesley**

Lisa-Joy's Artwork

Lisa-Joy invites you to her Facebook page <http://www.facebook.com/lisajoyart> to see her illustrations, letter art, and coloring book page designs. She begins each work by hand thereby creating its clean, optimistic style. Contact Lisa-Joy at lisajoyart@gmail.com. A free download of this coloring page is available at www.PaulaMoldenhauer.com/gifts.



About the Author



Author, speaker, and mom of four, Paula Moldenhauer encourages others to live free to flourish. She shares this message when speaking at women's events, and it permeates her written work. Paula has published over 300 times in non-fiction markets, writing articles, devotionals, and curriculum. Her four-book devotional book series, *Soul Scents*, catalogs her journey of learning to live in the Son's embrace. Her first published novella, *You're a Charmer Mr. Grinch*, was a finalist in the ACFW Carol Awards, and she now has six published works of fiction. For a full list of Paula's books,

opportunity to get her newsletter and other free downloads, or to engage her to speak at your next women's event, visit her website: www.paulamoldenhauer.com.

Paula and her husband, Jerry, are in the revolving-door stage of empty nesting. They enjoy long walks and the good conversations of a less busy household, and they celebrate the gift of chaos when their home is once again full of their growing family. They have four precious adult children, two amazing children-in-law, and are delighted with the girlfriends who now populate family gatherings. Family is their heartbeat. Paula loves peppermint ice cream, going barefoot, and adventuring with friends. The opportunity to worship God in her part-time job as a staff singer for Soli Dei choir is a delight.

To book Paula to speak at your next event, contact her at paula@paulamoldenhauer.com.

To be notified of free gifts and to receive Paula's inspirational newsletter, sign-up on her website: www.paulamoldenhauer.com.

Visit Paula's [author page on Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/Paula-Moldenhauer) to see updated listings of her books or keep up through her [author/speaker page on Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/paulamoldenhauer).

Titles by Paula

Soul Scents Collection

Books in the [*Soul Scents*](#) collection are available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) in both print and electronic formats:



[*Soul Scents: Awaken*](#), book one in the series, invites readers to awaken to a more intimate, peaceful relationship with God.



Become more deeply rooted in your identity in Christ by journeying with Paula through [*Soul Scents: Rooted*](#). The second book in the collection, it includes topics such as worthiness, spiritual battle, and destiny.



Book three, [*Soul Scents: Bloom*](#), invites readers to bloom in sunshine and storm. It explores how God's Spirit carries us through struggle, offering the love, strength, and wisdom we need in times of trial and how He rejoices with us in the joyous seasons.



In the fourth book, Paula invites readers to take the [*Soul Scents: Flourish*](#) journey and brave deeper healing, letting go of shame and learning to live as vibrant daughters of the King!



[*Soul Scents: Flourish Selections for Advent*](#) is excerpted from [*Soul scents: Flourish*](#). It offers devotional reading for the four weeks of advent and includes content for reflection during the lighting of the Advent candles. A free pdf version is available on [Paula's website](#).



[*Soul Scents: Selections for Easter*](#) is adapted from the [*Soul Scents*](#) collection. It offers five weeks of devotional reading and contemplation questions for the time between Ash Wednesday and Easter. A free pdf version is available on [Paula's website](#).

Also by Paula

Novellas in the *Tinseled Tidings* series are available for Kindle from Amazon.com:



[*You're a Charmer, Mr. Grinch*](#)

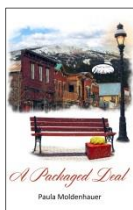
[*The Joy Scrooge*](#)

[*Fruitcake Fallout*](#)

and in print from Amazon.com as:

[*Tinseled Tidings \(Vol. 1\)*](#)

These full-length novels are available in print and Kindle formats from Amazon.com:

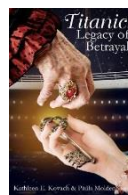


[*A Packaged Deal*](#)

Book 1 in the *Towering Pines* series

and

[*Titanic: Legacy of Betrayal*](#)



Paula's historical novella,
[*At Home with Daffodils*](#), included in the
inspirational romance collection
[*A Bouquet of Brides*](#), released January
2018 from Barbour Publishing



[*Soul Scents: Awaken, Rooted, Bloom, and Flourish*](#), a [four-book devotional series](#), are available through [Amazon.com](#) in print and Kindle formats. [*Soul Scents: Flourish Selections for Advent*](#) and [*Soul Scents: Selections for Easter*](#) are available for Kindle and the PDFs are free on Paula's website: www.paulamoldenhauer.com/gifts.