Reflective Renewal:

Grace at the Crossroads

Revised Edition



by

Rivertree Christian Ministries

Copyright © 2026 by Lorrie C. Reed
First edition, copyright @2013

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: QUEST FOR ABUNDANT LIFE 1
CHAPTER 2: RECEIVING YOUR SIGHT 3
CHAPTER 3: THE REST OF THE STORY 5
CHAPTER 4: PRAISE AS COMMUNICATION 7
CHAPTER 5: RHYTHMS OF OUR LIVES 9
CHAPTER 6: SLIPPING INTO DARKNESS 10
CHAPTER 7: BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD 12
CHAPTER 8: THE HOUSE OF THE LORD 14
CHAPTER 9: WHEN TOMORROW COMES 16
CHAPTER 10: ONE IN THE SPIRIT 18
CHAPTER 11: IT FELT LIKE LOVE 20
CHAPTER 12: SHELTER FROM THE STORM 22
CHAPTER 13: NEW AND IMPROVED 23
CHAPTER 14: MAKING INFORMED CHOICES 25
CHAPTER 15: WAITING ON THE LORD 26
CHAPTER 16: HOPE DOES NOT DISAPPOINT 28
CHAPTER 17: GRACE IS SUFFICIENT 29
CHAPTER 18: JUST SAY YES 31
CHAPTER 19: RISE UP AND WALK! 32
CHAPTER 20: THE POWER OF LOVE 33
CHAPTER 21: DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH 35
CHAPTER 22: THINK ON THESE THINGS 37
CHAPTER 23: THE FAMILY RESEMBLANCE 39
CHAPTER 24: THE WINNING TEAM 40
CHAPTER 25: ONE SHINING MOMENT 42
CHAPTER 26: RADICAL LOVE 43
CHAPTER 27: SANCTUARY 44
CHAPTER 28: WOMAN WITH THE ISSUE OF BLOOD 45
CHAPTER 29: WOMEN AT THE CROSS 47
CHAPTER 30: PORTRAIT OF THE BENT WOMAN 49
ABOUT THE BOOK 50
ABOUT THE AUTHOR 51

Introduction

Reflective Renewal: Grace at the Crossroads explores how to find balance and maintain equilibrium in daily life through Scripture reading, prayer, and critical reflection. This collection presents theological reflections on life and liberty in a challenging world. The book's unifying premise is that regular devotional time helps us restore and maintain well-being while bringing us closer to God. As we learn to reflect theologically, we become acutely aware of God's grace working all around us. Therefore, we have hope and peace.

As with most other things in life, there is no one right way to reflect theologically on an issue or concern. This framework for devotional engagement begins with prayer, directs attention to the focus scripture, provides a contemporary context, and then critically applies the biblical message to modern issues and concerns. I pray you will find peace as you reflect on God's grace at life's crossroads. I wrote this book to honor the memory of my mother, Juanita Fields Montgomery Gordon (1930-2003), and to support the Juanita Fields Foundation, Inc., a public benefit, nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation organized and operated for educational and charitable purposes. The Foundation no longer exists, but my mother's memory remains with me.

Chapter 1: Quest for Abundant Life

Chapter 1 focuses on John 10:10 as the key scripture. This reflection explores the notion of abundant life in today's world of scarcity. It urges the reader to listen for the Shepherd's voice, which will never lead them astray.

Prayer

Merciful and loving God, I ask that you open my spiritual ears to hear the voice of the Shepherd and follow him. Thank you for the promise of abundant life through Jesus, who lives in me through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Amen.

Focus Scripture: John 10:10 (NRSV)

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Context

In the first three gospels, Jesus often used familiar, common, down-to-earth objects to teach spiritual lessons. The images of a shepherd, sheep, sheep pen, and a gate would have been very familiar to the disciples and the audience of that day. A sheepfold is an enclosure where shepherds put their sheep for the night. The pen was usually made of rocks piled high to form four walls. Because the pen had no roof, they put barbed branches on the walls to keep predators out. A porter usually took charge of the sheepfold while the shepherd slept at home. When the shepherd returned to the sheepfold in the morning, he gathered his sheep and led them out to pasture.

Some accounts I have read say the shepherd would lie across the doorway, using his body as a gate to keep out wolves, lions, and other predators. This gate was the only passageway leading in and out of the pen. So, the sheep had no choice but to pass through the gate to reach their destination. Anyone who did not pass through the gate was said to be a thief or a robber.

Something else was peculiar about this sheepfold. It was like a big common, community pen. Everybody's sheep were mixed with everybody else's, and back then no marks or brands distinguished one sheep from another. To gather his sheep, the shepherd had to call each one by name. Sounds like a strange thing to do, doesn't it? But at least one source says Near Middle Eastern shepherds at the time knew their sheep's names because sheep were like family pets and had names like "Long Ears" and "White Nose."[4] Like any good household companion, the sheep recognized the voice of the shepherd and followed him. The shepherd would then lead the sheep out, walking ahead and talking to them so they could hear his voice.

Faith Connection

This passage has made me examine the concepts of pasture and abundant life through new lenses. A pasture is a place with living plants used to nourish a flock. The imagery of nourishment often points to Jesus. In these accounts, Jesus gives hungry people something tangible to satisfy their need to be fed. This feeding happens not only physically but also spiritually, as Jesus reveals himself as the bread of life, the only sustenance we need.

Abundance is another term I needed to explore. Abundance means that something is very plentiful, more than sufficient, or in rich supply. Abundance is not necessarily a quantitative concept like economic wealth or possession of material goods. Instead, it can also be qualitative, referring to richness in physical well-being or the sufficiency of inner peace. In Jesus' day, Christians did not enjoy abundance. Instead, they experienced, regularly, physical persecution and religious uncertainty. They were the masses that were seeking victory over poverty, freedom from disease, acceptance by a hostile government, and simple justice in everyday matters. Jesus preached hope and promised to lead them to abundant, eternal life. In many cases, the masses heard his voice, and they followed him.

This concept of "abundance" applies just as much today. It means the assurance that comes when Jesus attends to life's fragility and vulnerability. Abundance means comfort for the body and nourishment for the spirit, even amid tremendous odds. In a modern context, sheep sometimes wander into valleys of oppression and misfortune. Sometimes they experience sad memories and lonely nights. Sometimes the sheep are victimized by crime, violence, apathy, and cynicism that plague our modern world. And often, the sheep are distracted by unfulfilled dreams and broken promises. The thief comes to steal their joy, kill their peace, and destroy their hope—so they sometimes get confused, stressed out, and cannot find their way back to the pasture. But Jesus is showing us the way, even today—his Word is true and sure and everlasting. If we, the modern-day sheep, listen to his voice and follow him, he will lead us to pasture; feed us with the Bread of Life; guide us; and preserve us by his Spirit, which assures a life of abundance in a world of great scarcity. Believers have been conditioned to hear Jesus' voice speaking through the Word. They trust that voice and follow it.

Chapter 2: Receiving Your Sight

Luke 18:40-43 is the focus scripture for this chapter. This chapter explores new insight and a commitment to social responsibility. Does receiving one's sight prompt a radical change in one's perspective about social issues?

Prayer

Gracious God, I thank you for new vision. Help me to put my faith into action as I live and move and breathe by your grace. Give me strength and courage to stand up for you in this fickle world. In your Holy Name I pray, Amen.

Focus Scripture: Luke 18:40-43 (NLT)

When Jesus heard him, he stopped and ordered that the man be brought to him. As the man came near, Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord," he said, "I want to see!" And Jesus said, "All right, receive your sight! Your faith has healed you." Instantly the man could see, and he followed Jesus, praising God. And all who saw it praised God, too.

Context

Back in the 1980s, there was a movement afoot called "multicultural education." The movement aimed to broaden people's perspectives on culture so they would understand that there was more than one right way to view the world. One tool workshop presenters used was a picture of a woman. From one point of view, you saw an older lady with a large nose and a wrinkled face. Workshop participants were asked to keep looking at the picture to see if they could glimpse anything else. As they kept staring at the picture, some of them had an "aha!" moment. They reported seeing the visage of a much younger woman who was wearing a stylish hat. Her face was turned to the side, silhouetted. Those who watched as the old woman transformed into a young woman had "received new sight," so to speak. But the funny thing about their new perspective was that once the switch was made, they could never look at the picture again without seeing both women. I wonder if this is what happened to the blind man after he "received his sight" on the road to Jericho (Rivertree Educational Ministries, Inc., 2013).

Faith Connection

In Luke's story, Jesus is making his way from Galilee to Jericho, a city not too far from Jerusalem. Along the way, a blind beggar is sitting on the side of the road. Because he was blind, he couldn't earn a living, so he resorted to begging. Poor, disabled, and needy, he was a member of the lowest class in the society of his day. As he sat there, the blind man heard the crowd's roar grow louder and more fervent. Curious about the commotion, the blind man asked what was happening. The crowd told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by. Although the man was blind and had to rely on the crowd to interpret the scene for him, he didn't have to ask who Jesus was. He had probably heard many rumors about this man from Galilee. Jesus' reputation had preceded him. Jesus was known for healing the sick, casting out demons, feeding the hungry, making the lame walk, and giving sight to the blind. This Jesus was a healer; that bit of knowledge was all the blind man needed to spring into action.

He began to call out loudly. “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me!” When the crowd tried to dissuade him, he shouted even louder: “Mercy,” he cried out. Jesus approached when he heard the man’s cry. Jesus stopped and told his followers, “Call him over,” and asked them to bring the man to him. They exchanged a few words: Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied, “Lord, I just want to see.”

The blind man had faith. He believed Jesus could heal him; Jesus would free him from his wretchedness and relieve his distress. With new sight, the blind man could have new life and new possibilities. So the blind man persisted, and his persistence paid off. Jesus simply spoke the words:

“Receive your sight.” Jesus said. “Your faith has healed you.” The text tells us that after the healing, the blind man followed Jesus and became one of Jesus’ disciples.

After receiving his sight and spending time on the road with Jesus, I wonder whether the man could perceive the world with greater compassion. I wonder if he could see reality through the eyes of justice. I wonder if he could look at his neighbors through the lens of love. I wonder.

Chapter 3: The Rest of the Story

The focus scripture for this chapter is Luke 24:30-31. This chapter addresses what happens when we don't have a complete picture of an event and must fill in the gaps. What are the sources of our evidence? Are we able to witness with authority?

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for sending me the Holy Spirit to help me fill in the gaps. Help me discern in the face of uncertainty. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Luke 24:30-31 (NLT)

As they sat down to eat, [Jesus] took the bread and blessed it. Then he broke it and gave it to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

Context

With its complex layers and many dimensions, life is comprised of more than meets the eye. This became clear to me in 2007 on the day the shootings took place at Northern Illinois University. I followed the story as it unfolded and as people tried to make sense of what had happened. The Eyewitness News team was on the scene, interviewing passersby. Reporters tried to gather evidence to support theories about what had happened and why. One thing that struck me through it all was how different the eyewitnesses' stories were. As I listened, I thought, "Were these people seeing the same thing?" Could the differences in their accounts be attributed to their "filling in the gaps"?

Psychologists have long recognized that gap-filling and reliance on assumptions are necessary for people to function effectively in society. For example, we assume certain things will happen so our lives feel ordered and predictable. For example, when static interferes with a TV or radio broadcast, we may not hear every word, but we fill in the gaps and still grasp the gist of the message.

Perhaps some of you remember Paul Harvey, a radio news commentator who had a very popular ABC radio show in the 1970s and 1980s called "The Rest of the Story." The show's premise was that much of what we hear over the airwaves or read in the newspapers is incomplete. Paul Harvey was like a roving reporter, adding information to complete the picture—little details, forgotten fragments, or obscure facts that bring the story to life.

Faith Connection

Today's reflection addresses faulty memories, to some extent. Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, two witnesses were traveling to a village called Emmaus. Perhaps they had witnessed the event firsthand. Or maybe they heard the news secondhand. The scripture is not clear on this point. But it is clear that Jesus filled in the gaps for the travelers that day, and they left with a strong desire to go out and tell someone what they had discerned!

I imagine that as the two witnesses walked and talked, they tried to connect the pieces and logically account for the mind-boggling details of Jesus Christ's recent life, death, and resurrection. I can imagine that just as the two witnesses were at the height of their perplexity, a stranger approached and walked along with them. Now this stranger was Jesus, but the witnesses didn't recognize him. Although their eyes saw Jesus, their spirits did not yet know him. To them, Jesus was just another stranger, because they did not yet understand the significance of his presence. As they continued walking, Jesus asked what

they were discussing. The witnesses were amazed that this stranger was unaware of the extraordinary events that had occurred only days before. They told Jesus their version of the story, as they understood it at that time. But their version only scratched the surface, even as it attempted to fill in the gaps with the sketchy information they had.

On the road to Emmaus that day, Jesus may have served a role similar to Paul Harvey's. The witnesses had part of the information, but certainly not all of it. Jesus helped them reorganize their data and see the available information in a different light. In fact, Jesus gave the witnesses a whole different dimension to consider. Jesus told them the “Rest of the Story.” I can imagine Jesus saying: “Here’s the big picture and here’s the evidence I have to back it up. But there are some other things you will just have to take on faith. It will all be revealed in time. Be patient.” Oh, what a grand conversation that must have been!

Chapter 4 Praise as Communication

The focus scripture for this chapter is Psalm 150:6. It reminds us to praise the Lord in all things. The chapter discusses three prominent figures who praised God with the musical talents He gave them.

Prayer

Thank you, God, for revealing to me the many ways I can praise you with the gifts you have given me. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 150:6 (NLT)

Let everything that breathes sing praises to the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Context

As I stood in my kitchen listening to the news on the radio, I heard a variety of grim reports. All were depressing, all sad. The only thought I could think was "Have mercy, God." When the news was over, a song began to play. The lyrics went something like this: *"There's a day we all face that depletes our strength, and our hearts can hold no more weight. When the source of our faith is not sure anymore, nothing left to do or to say . . . Have no fear. God's in control! God has the last say so!"* I broke out in a smile, and my spirit soared. God, indeed, has the last word.

I believe that God touches us in indescribable ways through music. We communicate back to God through music and through prayer. And often, it is through music that God answers us and delivers us from our afflictions. That morning in my kitchen a song blessed me. In return for such a wonderful gift, I believe we should praise God through our grief, praise God through our gladness, and praise God through our gratitude.

Faith Connection

Thomas A. Dorsey understood this when he wrote "Precious Lord," a song in which he praised God through his grief. Throughout his early years, Dorsey felt torn between the sacred and the secular. Filled with wanderlust, young Dorsey left Georgia as part of the Great Migration. When he settled in Chicago, his schedule was hectic and his lifestyle unhealthy. At age 21, he suffered a nervous breakdown. After a spiritual transformation, however, Dorsey recovered a few years later and turned his attention exclusively to sacred music. Then another tragedy struck.

One evening while he was playing at a revival in St. Louis, he received a telegram informing him that his wife had died in childbirth and that their child had died soon after. Consumed by grief, the young artist stopped writing for a while, reporting that he felt he had been abandoned by God. A friend visited Dorsey one night and arranged for him to be left alone in a music room with a piano. The grieving musician spent some time in the solitude of that room. And after a while, Dorsey recalled feeling at peace: And I quote: "I felt as though I could reach out and touch God. I found myself playing a melody, one I'd never heard or played before, and words [from "Precious Lord"] came into my head—they just seemed to fall into place."

Today, Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord" has been called "the greatest gospel song of all time." For so many people, including myself, the song expresses a profound message of hope and faith. You remember how it goes, don't you?

Precious Lord, take my hand, Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord, Lead me home.

We should praise God not only through our grief, but also in times of gladness. Ludwig von Beethoven and Henry Van Dyke could attest to this. Beethoven (1815–1827) lived a troubled personal life and began losing his hearing around age 28. He was often depressed and from time to time contemplated suicide. Many people who appreciate Beethoven's music say they hear echoes of his life in his music's movements. His was a life of struggle followed by triumph. Beethoven's 9th Symphony is considered to be one of the composer's greatest accomplishments.

Later, Beethoven's music was combined with lyrics written by poet and preacher Henry J. Van Dyke (1852–1933). The resulting hymn was entitled "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" and was first published in the Presbyterian Hymnal in 1911. Again, this hymn expresses trust, joy, and hope. You know the words, don't you?

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day!

We have seen so far that we should praise God through our grief and through our gladness, but we should also praise God through our gratitude. Horatio Spafford (1828–1888) understood this when he wrote "It Is Well with My Soul," a song born of his reaction to a personal tragedy. His four daughters were killed in a collision with another ship at sea. Spafford's wife, alone, survived. Deeply touched by God's mercy, Spafford said, "It is well with my soul."

When peace, like a river, attended my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well; it is well, with my soul.

Chapter 5: Rhythms of Our Lives

Ecclesiastes 3:1 provides the scriptural text for this chapter. The chapter urges us to consider the movements and rhythms of life and how God, the master composer of life's symphonies, reconciles all things.

Prayer

Almighty God, you are the Author of all Seasons and the Composer of this symphony called life. You orchestrate the rhythms of time by your Spirit and bring my life's movements to full, rich resolution. Thank you! Amen.

Focus Scripture: Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NLT)

For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven.

Context

Not too long ago I attended the home-going service of a family friend. The service celebrated a man who was over 90 and had lived a fruitful life. When people were asked to speak, one of his daughters recalled that her dad said he was satisfied with his life and had no regrets. Now this man had been a prominent figure in a number of circles throughout his long life. He had been in a position to make weighty decisions. He had seen both joys and sorrows. He was human, so he had made more than a few mistakes in his life. Yet at the end of his days, he reported that he had no regrets. How does one do that? How does one live a full life and have no regrets at the end of it? I think today's scripture might hold the thread of an answer.

Faith Connection

I believe we live our lives in movements, similar to those orchestrated in a symphony. There's a little concordance, a little dissonance, some major chords, and some minor ones. There is both harmony and disharmony with variations in rhythm and movement to make the music happy, sad, or soul-stirring. To everything there is music and a rhythm for every purpose under heaven—a time to love, a time to hate, a time to mourn, and a time to heal. When the end of the song has been reached, if it has been masterfully composed, everything is resolved, and we have no regrets, for the whole experience has been greater than the sum of its parts.

The composition representing life is so rich and complex, so intricate and so full, the whole is truly greater than the sum of its various rhythms and movements. And when all is said and done, in spite of or maybe even because of all that has happened in my life, I will be able to reach the end of that great symphony that was composed by God, the Masterful Maker of the Music, and say with confidence I have no regrets. Praise God! All has been resolved. And I have no regrets.

Chapter 6: Slipping into Darkness

Psalm 139:11-12 underpins this theological reflection on Alzheimer's disease. The chapter describes how Alzheimer's disease attacked the author's father-in-law in his later years and robbed him of those qualities that defined who he had been for most of his life. The author uses the focus scripture as a guide for theological reflection on the disease.

Prayer

Faithful God, I thank you for being acquainted with all my ways and for loving me in spite of them. Even in the midst of my challenges, when I feel totally in darkness, the light of your sustaining love surrounds me and comforts me. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 139:11-12 (NLT)

I could ask the darkness to hide me, and the light around me to become night, but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you, the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are the same to you.

Context

In remembrance of James T. Reed, Jr. (1928-2010)

What can I say about James T. Reed, Jr., my father-in-law? He was an enigma, a complex man, infuriating yet endearing all at the same time. On the outside he wore this harsh exterior. But if you looked below the surface, you could see a sensitive, vulnerable soul who hoped with all his heart that when he reached out to others they would reach back to him. During his lifetime, he worked his way from the bottom up in an effort to show the world that he was good enough. He was a man of determination who resolved early in life to walk tall, to live free, and to rise above the circumstances of his birth. He spent a great deal of time and energy demonstrating to others that he could stride alongside the best o them regardless of their race or social status or politics. In many ways he was indomitable.

Then Alzheimer's disease attacked my father-in-law in his later years. My husband, daughter, granddaughter, and I used to go to visit him in the nursing home every week. At first, he was able to communicate, maintaining the ability to engage in conversation and to share his spirit, his presence, his wants, and his needs. As the disease progressed he lost the ability to attend to our presence except through non-verbal means such as eye contact and purposive body language.

Sometimes upon arriving for our visit, we would ask him how he was. "Cold and hungry," he would reply. So we retrieved an extra blanket from the linen rack and went down to the snack bar to get him something to eat. That satisfied his needs for a time. Then there were those other visits when he simply didn't want to be bothered with us or anyone else. When we arrived on those days my husband would say "Hi, Daddy." My father-in-law would respond "Hi, Son." Then he would lower his head and pretend to be sleep. Daddy kept his eyes closed through the entire visit. But we saw through the ruse and insisted on being present with him in spite of his inhospitality. So we'd sit by his bedside for 30 minutes or so talking among ourselves about people he knew and events that had occurred since our last visit. Even though Daddy could not participate in the conversation – and even though he was supposed to be sleep – he gave little signals to show that he was listening. When he truly was ready for us to leave, Daddy would start fidgeting in his chair and scowling. My

husband would then nod his head to signal that is was time to go. “We have to go now. Bye, Daddy. We love you,” my husband would say. Daddy would open his eyes, look up, and respond, “Goodbye, Son,” then lower his head again and continue his pretense of sleep.

Other visits, more disturbing times, found my father-in-law retreated to a place of impenetrable reverie. Our words could not reach him there. Those visits left us feeling helpless and unsettled. I used to wonder where Daddy went during those episodes of repose, when he seemed alone within himself. It hurt to watch this once intimidating, vibrant, life-loving man decline into someone who couldn’t even remember what he’d had for breakfast. None of it made sense to me, and I hate confusion. I needed the pieces to fit together; I needed to figure it out.

Faith Connection

My reflections focused on Psalm 139. In this scripture, the psalmist speaks of God: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (vv 7-10, NIV).

I believe that during those times when my father-in-law drifted to that inner place, God was with him. This scripture reassured me that even as we sat in Daddy’s room on those silent days, God embraced my father-in-law with steadfast, everlasting love. I believe that in the throes of Alzheimer’s disease, my father-in-law was resting in a state of peacefulness with God, the Maker of Light: “even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you (v 12).”

After reflecting on Psalm 139, I am convinced that the darkness of Alzheimer’s disease is not greater than our Creator, who has searched us and known us and is acquainted with all our ways. I believe that during those dark times, God beamed his eternal light into my father-in-law's spirit. And I believe with all my heart that my father-in-law’s spirit is now at rest and peace with God, the Lord of Light.

Chapter 7: Blessed Be the Name of the Lord

Chapter 8 draws on Job 1:6-22 and reflects on a stressful period in the author's professional life. During that time, God replenished her depleted soul; in the process, she learned to trust God completely.

Prayer

Loving and faithful God, help us to remember that you are faithful. Blessed be your Holy name. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Job 1:21

"[Job] said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD'."

Context

It was my third year as principal in a moderately sized junior high school. The demographic makeup of the suburban school district had changed rapidly, with poor minorities becoming the majority of the junior high school's population. Most of the teachers, on the other hand, were of the old guard – white and middle class – who labeled the newcomers as miscreants and "bad kids." These teachers generally demeaned and cruelly treated the children they despised. I, on the other hand, saw the kids differently. Except for the hard-core social outcasts, most students were innocent, vulnerable, and in need of positive attention. If you treated them with respect, they would reciprocate. If you took the time to really listen, they would start to let you in on their frustrations. And if you loved them, they would love you back. Far from the demons many of the teachers accused them of being, they were just kids. That school year, I took on championing their cause. The battle, to say the least, was vicious.

Generally, when a champion goes to war, she has allies she can turn to. In 1993, I had a few supporters and many foes. In September, one of the central office administrators who had been one of my allies died of cancer, leaving me with no one to speak on my behalf at the district level. In October, one of the teachers I had reprimanded for her cruelty to children vowed to destroy me and engaged in the task with gusto. On November 1, my brother was removed from his respirator after spending three weeks in a coma caused by someone pushing him down a flight of stairs. On November 4, my husband's grandmother died; she had been one of the few relatives who had embraced me unconditionally after I married into the family. On November 19, my maternal great-aunt, who was selfless and pure in heart, passed away. To top things off, early in December, I developed pneumonia and was ordered to stay in bed for two weeks. As a result, I missed a great deal of school. Instead of cards and flowers wishing me well, the superintendent sent me a reprimand for excessive absenteeism.

Faith Connection

I remember telling my secretary, "I feel like Job." With no one else to turn to, I turned to God. My faith sustained me then and still does. In retrospect, my insights were comparable to, but not identical to, Job's. My experiences taught me about people, for example. I learned that many people in the district weren't worthy of my trust and that, far too often,

when I expected the worst from them, I was never disappointed. I learned that people were generally not steadfast or noble; they tended to abandon you in your hour of greatest need.

My experiences also taught me about God. During that episode in my life, God became a force that replenished my depleted soul. I learned that God hears me when I pray, and answers in God's own way and in God's own time. After watching, waiting, and reanalyzing my plight over the years, I can now see that what has happened in my life has often been part of a greater, divine plan. Finally, I learned that God is faithful. Though adversity continues to swirl like a tempest around me, God has never failed to give me comfort and hope in my darkest times. My experiences during the 1993 school year taught me to trust God completely. I have learned to find peace in God's grace, and I can say, as Job did, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away." Blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:21).

Chapter 8: The House of the Lord

The writer of Psalm 122 says, "I was glad when they said unto me let us go into the house of the Lord!" This gladness the pilgrim expressed sends a message of hope and peace to all who love the church. During times of trouble, there is refuge in the house of the Lord.

Prayer

Merciful God, I pray the church be a place of security and refuge for people in need of sanctuary. I pray that the church will extend its love and support to family and friends of the community of faith. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 122 (NLT)

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD.

Context

Psalm 122 describes a Jewish devotee's pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate one of Israel's most important festivals. These pilgrimages were always reverent and joyful occasions. At the city gates, people often offered prayers on behalf of others. In this particular psalm, the festival is over, and the pilgrim is now ready to return home. After summarizing his impressions of the city, the pilgrim offers a prayer for the church. I believe the modern-day church, as the body of Christ, also needs prayer. It needs to actively seek peace and pursue it diligently, for the people's peace depends on the church's peace.

Faith Connection

The first request in Psalm 122 is for blessings for all who love the church (v. 6). Who loves the church? They are the people who take an active interest in all that goes on there. They relish opportunities to be involved. And they value the community as a place for friendship, fellowship, hospitality, and festivity! Those who love the church also view themselves as contributing to the body of Christ and take pleasure in doing their part, no matter how small that role may be. This is just as true today as it was when the pilgrim took his journey. Verses 3-5 suggest that Jerusalem is a city where the brethren are united. Spiritually, it is a place where the tribes go up … to give thanks to the name of the Lord. Jerusalem, then, is a city where justice and unity prevail. I believe the things that bring peace within the city also bring peace within the modern-day church.

The second request in the Psalm is that the church will be a place of security and refuge (v 7). When applied to the modern-day church, this means an absence of dissension and strife. The church should be a sanctuary where people can go to find fellowship, support, and safety. The church should be a place of grace and hope, where God's people encounter God's glory. It should cherish human dignity and rejoice that we are children of God, made in God's image. Lastly, the church should be a place where people seek the heart of God, and God is pleased to enter their hearts.

The third request in the Psalm is that the peace of the church may extend to the family and friends of community members (v. 8). To embrace the community, the church should be an inviting place of fellowship. It should be a place where cooperation and generosity are commonplace, a home where people can come together in love, trust, and honesty. The church should also be a place of charity and mercy, forgiveness, refuge, healing, and

restoration for all who enter the gates. The church should be a place where people love their neighbors as themselves and where everyone seeks to love God above all else.

The fourth request in the Psalm is that the people will work together for the well-being of the church community (v. 9). The church community thrives when stumbling blocks have no place and people set aside petty differences for the greater good. Well-being comes when people reach out to others and share a common vision of what is righteous. Community well-being comes when the people of God seek the Divine One with their whole hearts and continually pursue God as the purpose of their existence. The church community is at peace when people live for God's sake (v. 9) and for the sake of their fellow human beings (v. 8). Finally, the church thrives when it embodies justice and love, things God intended for all of God's people.

Chapter 9: When Tomorrow Comes

This chapter's scriptural inspiration is Genesis 11:4-9. What happens when a natural disaster freezes the northern hemisphere and ushers in a new ice age? What happens to the monuments we have constructed to ourselves? What things do we discard? What things do we learn to value?

Prayer

Omniscient God, teach me to keep things in proper perspective as I continue my quest to know you better and love you more. Help me to keep my priorities straight. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Genesis 11:4 (NLT)

Then they said, "Come, let's build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous and keep us from being scattered all over the world."

Context

Not too long ago, I watched a rerun of "The Day after Tomorrow," a movie in which a natural disaster froze the Northern Hemisphere and ushered in a new ice age. Money lost its worth. Books provided fuel rather than knowledge. Clothing protected rather than adorned. Buildings, cars, and yachts became relics. And humankind's philosophical wisdom became obsolete. What prevailed during the disaster was timeless and intangible: compassion, loyalty, patience, humility, and self-control, among others. The movie shows that some people possessed these characteristics through the actions they took to support each other in the face of almost certain doom.

When such virtuous characteristics become part of one's spiritual makeup, they show up in the person's attitudes and behaviors. Unfortunately, today, personal virtue too often takes a back seat to ambiguity, conformity, and fear. In such worrisome times, many people drift from one questionable trend to the next, searching for hope, craving stability, and desperately seeking solid, sure points of reference. I believe the place to look for answers when "the day after tomorrow" comes is the Word of God, which reminds us to anchor in Jesus, who is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Faith Connection

The Tower of Babel story applies to modern-day life. I can just imagine the people of Babel thinking that if they could build a tower reaching all the way to heaven; they would be able to see the Divine One face to face and at last know the nature of Eternal Reality. I can also imagine how clever they felt as they attempted to solve the mystery and gain renown in the process! Their plan, however, did not appear to be God's plan, for God scattered the people of Babel and confounded their language (Gen 11:4-9).

When I first read the story long ago, I thought that God was punishing the people of Babel for their pride as they pooled their collective knowledge and discussed in "one language and the same words" (v 4) the blueprints for building "a city and a tower with its top in the heavens" (v 4). After the people admitted their intent was to make a name for themselves, God acknowledged that, with one language, nothing they proposed would be impossible for them to accomplish (v 5). So God confused their language and scattered them over the face of the earth (v 9).

After further study and reflection on Babel, I have come to believe that God was probably not punishing the people for their inventiveness. In my opinion, God did not deem their actions prideful. Rather, I think that God may have looked down in amusement as the people redoubled their efforts to reach the heavens where they would have immediate and unrestricted access to God, which may or may not have been part of God's eternal plan. I imagine God's intent for the people at Babel was not for them to finish the project in record time and under budget. Instead, I think God wanted the people to concentrate their thoughts and efforts to work in relationship with each other to discover the Sovereign God and God's intent for the world. So God laid on their hearts an unquenchable thirst and an indefatigable industriousness. Furthermore, God introduced diversity into the process, forcing the people to grapple together with hard issues. And the more they grappled, the more God was glorified. The instrument of glorification was not the common language or collective wisdom the people had amassed, but the insights they gained into the nature of God and therefore the nature of people who are made in God's image.

Chapter 10: One in the Spirit

This chapter focuses on John 17:1-11. What kind of education does God require to equip His people to impact poverty, hunger, or injustice in this world? How we teach this generation will affect the generations to come.

Prayer

Sustaining God, I ask that you rekindle your love in my spirit and let it burn brightly so that others may know I am a Christian by that love. Amen.

Focus Scripture: John 17:9-11 (NLT)

My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you. All who are mine belong to you, and you have given them to me, so they bring me glory. Now I am departing from the world; they are staying in this world, but I am coming to you. Holy Father, you have given me your name; now protect them by the power of your name so that they will be united just as we are.

Context

What does it mean to have unity? In today's scripture, Jesus prayed to God for unity: "so that they may be one, as we are one". Does *unity* here mean that the disciples are to be the *first?* Does it mean the disciples are to be *one and the same?* Or does it mean the disciples are to be *like one another*? This matter, of course, is open to further interpretation. But no matter how we translate the word, we are not talking about a casual, fleeting relationship; we are talking about an abiding unity essential to continuing the mission of Jesus, who will soon depart from the world.

How do we measure up as modern-day disciples? I submit to you that we fall short in countless ways, some of which have an impact on our children – our precious children – who are now in the process of killing each other in record numbers. What if our vision were unified? Many examples come to mind; I will relate only one.

Some years ago, I worked in a school district that was rapidly changing in terms of its racial, economic, and social diversity. In part, this demographic shift could be attributed to large-scale gentrification in the nearby city's urban communities. Developers demolished properties that once housed low-income residents to make room for six-figure condos and townhomes for the rich. Former residents of those low-income housing projects were then displaced. Consequently, some of them fled to the suburbs in search of decent places to live. Many did so by using Section 8 federal vouchers, which alone carried a potential stigma. What if everyone had been united in the spirit of faith?

When these displaced people arrived in their new communities, they were not welcomed with open arms. In fact, many felt like exiles and found it hard to sing the Lord's songs in a strange land. These low-income newcomers faced the usual things that divide the oppressors from the oppressed. Not only that; these groups were not really talking to each other about their similarities and differences, their hopes and dreams, and with communication at an impasse, mistrust dominated. In the process, the rich were pitted against the poor, white against other races, and the language majority against the language minority. Children, once again, were affected as this mistrust carried over into the school system. I saw some of these children sink into hopelessness, anger, and even despair that manifested in cynicism, apathy, and sometimes violence. And where there was no hope,

the children languished. What if people in these receiving communities had been united in spirit?

Faith Connection

In one of Jesus' last earthly prayers, Jesus specifically asked God to protect the *unity* of his followers and guard them against division. They were told to go into the world and be witnesses. They were also told that the world would be hostile to their message. And unfortunately, the world is still hostile to the message. Nothing has changed. We still have so much work to do here, but without unity, we are unlikely to accomplish it. We need to embrace unity if we profess to be the church universal. And unity is possible only to the extent that we are one with each other.

Chapter 11: It Felt Like Love

Philippians 3:10-14 inspires this reflection. It describes the author's experience as she sat on the sidelines at the halfway point of the Chicago Marathon and watched participants pass by. The love and support were almost tangible.

Prayer

Loving God, I pray that you show me how to reach back and extend love and compassion to my brothers and sisters who need support and encouragement. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Philippians 3:10-11 (NLT)

I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

Context

Back in October a few years ago, I sat on the sidelines at the halfway point of the Chicago Marathon and watched as participants passed by. They came in all shapes, colors, sizes, ages, and dispositions. Some sprang forward with more than a little pep left in their step after almost 13 miles of constant movement. Others ambled along at a more casual pace. Still others struggled, concentrating hard to put one foot in front of the other. Despite this diversity, all the participants shared something in common. That something, I believe, was determination.

Committed to staying in the race, they moved forward at their own paces, striving to reach personal goals they had set. My daughter took part in this race. She had committed to persevere at least to the halfway point, since this was her first marathon. She trained for the race in the months leading up to October to build her energy and stamina. She also wanted to be fitter in her daily life. So, she bought a membership to a nearby health club, worked out on the treadmill, and rode her bike regularly. After every workout, she texted me: "Whoo hoo, hizo, hizo!" (To this day, I still don't know what that means!) Still, I always tried to text her back. Later, she told me she appreciated my support for her daily accomplishments. That encouragement helped her persevere.

Being on the sidelines on race day made me feel like I had a part in each runner's accomplishments. It occurred to me that my role in this scenario was important. I was a sideliner, a well-wisher, the one who rang the bells, blew the whistles, and shouted cheers to motivate the runners. I was there to support them. In a spirit of unity and solidarity, my mere presence encouraged them to "keep on keeping on." I shared in their joy. That chilly Sunday morning reminded me of a pep rally on a microcosmic level.

No doubt, the people who passed the halfway mark that day shared commonalities and mutual goals, but also differences. Even though no one was scheduled to speak that day, no one sat on a dais or stood in front of a mic to pontificate about the finer points of loving one's neighbors, the message still came across clearly. It was all very nonverbal and very visceral. And it was totally uplifting. The whole scene made me think more deeply about God. I wonder if the message would have come across as strongly if someone had tried to express it in words.

Faith Connection

One theologian has pointed out: “God reveals himself in many ways.” Another has suggested that, as humans, we should de-emphasize our differences and focus on our commonalities and shared goals. On the day of the marathon, language did not get in the way of our seeing the image of God in those who passed by. I saw my brothers and sisters through spiritual, not cultural, lenses. In those moments, I understood that none of us can grasp the whole of God alone, for the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. Without language as a barrier, I could support the runners and let their realities enter my own consciousness. The experience enriched my understanding of God. And it felt like love.

Chapter 12: Shelter from the Storm

This reflection draws on Mark 4: 39-41**.** What do you do when storms and adversity threaten to capsize your life? When Jesus is on board your vessel, the winds and the waves have no power to hurt you.

Prayer

Faithful God, I thank you for being the keeper of my soul. When everything around me is confusing or chaotic, thank you for calming the storm and giving me peace. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Mark 4: 39-41 (NLT)

When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Silence! Be still!" Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. Then he asked them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" The disciples were absolutely terrified. "Who is this man?" they asked each other. "Even the wind and waves obey him!"

Context

A few years ago, during one of our routine Monday morning meetings at my chaplaincy intern field study site, the interns were asked to share stories of our faith journeys with all the lay mentors and senior chaplains. In round-robin fashion, we took turns telling what had brought us to this juncture in our lives. As each intern spoke, many of the lay mentors took copious notes. Others sat on the edges of their chairs as if doing so would help them capture every nuance of the experience. Some of the mentors even asked questions of each speaker, apparently to get greater clarity on something that had been said. The whole process made me feel somewhat uneasy.

Over the months of my internship, however, I moved through a growth process that involved peeling off my bewilderment layer by layer, identifying what weighed me down, examining its impact on my life, praying for guidance, releasing the residue to the Master, and moving on. With each new revelation came a new release. With each release, I felt myself growing stronger. In the process, I experienced a peace that is hard to explain.

Faith Connection

From all of this, I have drawn many conclusions: For example, God gives peace to those who trust him. God enables those who trust him. When you trust God, He will direct your path, protect you, and use you to inspire others to trust him. To tell it the way my grandmother used to tell it, "I once was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I see." The more I tell this story, the sharper my vision becomes, and the more at peace I feel!

Chapter 13: New and Improved

This reflection is based on Isaiah 65:17-25. Have you ever gotten a little excited when you heard that something was "new and improved"? The truth is that nothing is really new under the sun, because only God can create something out of nothing.

Prayer

Loving God, I stand in awe of your marvelous creation. Thank you for stepping in repeatedly, cleaning up my messes, and for the grace to create new heavens and a new earth on my behalf! Amen.

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 65:17; 20-25 (NLT)

Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth, and no one will even think about the old ones anymore. ... No longer will babies die when only a few days old. No longer will adults die before they have lived a full life. No longer will people be considered old at one hundred! Only the cursed will die that young!

Context

Today's text brought to mind a movie I saw in 1996 called "Multiplicity," starring Michael Keaton and Andie McDowell. Michael Keaton played Doug Kinney, a devoted husband, father, and construction worker. Like so many people, Doug had too much to do and not enough time to do it all. He barely kept up with his job and soon realized he had little time to enjoy his family or savor his life. In fact, he rushed through existence at a frenzied pace. And he was miserable in the process.

Just as he was about to go off the deep end, Doug met a geneticist who offered him a solution: the ability to clone himself, to have himself made over in his own image! Doug jumped at the chance and, before long, created a clone to share the workload. The plan went along just fine for a while. But soon Doug decided that if one clone were good, more than one would be better. So he produced clone number two and clone number three. He ended up reproducing four clones in all, each displaying different aspects of Doug's initially faulty personality, each a little quirkier than the one that preceded it, each a clone-of-a-clone. Corrupted, weakened, and defective, clone number four had capacities clearly inferior to his predecessors. Needless to say, over time, Doug's life became extremely complicated and troublesome. Although he eventually stumbled on a workable solution to the problem he had created, he could not eliminate its underlying cause. Once these clones came into existence, there was no way to undo the process and make them disappear. So, Doug and the clones lived in tension with the mess they had made.

Faith Connection

In Isaiah's day, the land was in general strife (v. 25). Likewise, in our time, we don't have to look far to see strife hovering all around. Who is to blame? We can't blame God for what is wrong in this world. For God did not make the world as it is today; no, what God created was deemed "very good." Rather, the world has become this way because of the human choices we have made over time.

In many cases, we have decided we could improve on God's good work. We have resolved to make copies of copies of copies of morality and reproductions of reproductions of reproductions of the truth until we have lost sight of the original goodness that God had

initially created and intended for his chosen people. As a result, we have fashioned, with our own hands, a world in trouble, a world that needs salvation, and a world that cries out to be made new and improved. Upon realizing our folly, we have cried out to God. Because God desires relationship with us and loves us with everlasting love, he is willing to step in and fix the messes we have created through our choices.

Chapter 14: Making Informed Choices

Deuteronomy 6:5-9 inspired this reflection. So often these days, we hear stories of children getting caught up in acts of violence and self-degradation. Their ability to make informed choices is impaired by a lack of knowledge of the longer range and the bigger picture.

Prayer

Life-giving God, I thank you for your mercy that spans eternity. Help me share the love story with the next generation so they can keep passing it on. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:5-9 (NLT)

And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Context

Rather than teaching young people to think critically about humanity's problems, America's educational system now asks students to memorize discrete, decontextualized bits of minutiae that they must regurgitate on standardized tests or face penalties in social and economic ways. In that regard, our current educational system promotes knowledge without truth, facts without depth, and trivia that will not impact poverty, hunger, or injustice in this world. What impact will this narrow-minded education have on the serious moral issues that challenge our world? History has given us some clues and has shown us that what and how we teach this generation of children will affect children for generations to come. The problem won't go away if we ignore it.

Faith Connection

These days, when I read the Bible, I search for answers to life's dilemmas in the stories and historical accounts. I have learned to extract the "moral of the story" from biblical accounts and apply these principles to my daily walk. It has occurred to me frequently that if our children possessed this same yearning for truth, this same zeal, this same skill of thinking critically about moral issues, they would be able to make more informed choices about how to govern their lives and live in the liberty that God has ordained for all of his adopted children who share the Spirit of Truth.

Chapter 15: Waiting on the Lord

This reflection was inspired by Isaiah 40:28-31. Do you ever get weary and wonder when a difficult period in your life will change for the better? The key to getting through the rough times is learning how to wait on the Lord.

Prayer

Holy God, I thank you for helping me to see the larger picture when I am in the midst of adversity. Give me the strength and courage I need to wait on you. While I wait, grant me your peace. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Isaiah 40:28-31 (NLT)

But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

Context

After reading this scripture from Isaiah, I am reminded of the importance of waiting. My thoughts take me back to 1963 when Birmingham, Alabama, stood as an exemplar of racial intolerance in this nation. At the time, Birmingham was a place where Black children could not attend certain schools, play in certain parks, drink cool water from certain fountains, or eat in certain restaurants. Nor could they be born or die in certain hospitals. Although very much a part of humanity, Black people in America at that time were dehumanized and rendered socially separate by Jim Crow laws, hatred, ignorance, and mistrust. Yet, despite gross injustice, they held onto hope, prayed for change, and waited on the Lord to intervene.

The people of Birmingham in 1963 must have prayed for time and patience. Just when they thought their prayers were not being heard, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stepped in, a prophet who showed patience in the face of adversity during the Civil Rights Movement and believed that, in time, suffering would end. Dr. King exercised his conviction that a successful desegregation campaign in Birmingham would bring about a new era of hope for God's people who happened to be Black in America. It was Saturday, April 6, 1963, the beginning of a period of protest marches in downtown Birmingham. As marchers pressed their way toward City Hall, they were beaten, kicked, and mauled. Each day, they were arrested and taken to jail. But day after day, they returned in greater numbers than the day before, determined to march for justice and wait on the Lord.

On April 10, the courts prohibited the demonstrators from marching. But as Dr. King considered the injunction, he prayerfully discerned that the court order was unjust and decided to disobey it. As a consequence, Dr. King and his long-time friend Rev. Ralph Abernathy were arrested along with a group of other demonstrators. Dr. King was placed in solitary confinement. Under the persistent gaze of media cameras, this captured the attention of then-President John F. Kennedy, who eventually sent advisors to Birmingham. Following his nationally televised speech about the crisis, President Kennedy deployed 3,000 federal troops to Birmingham. After about six weeks of protests, rioting, and arrests, the violence briefly ceased. Although the protest had resulted in an unstable peace, it had disturbed the conscience of the entire nation. Waiting on the Lord – we all know how Dr. King's story ended. But in many very real ways, the struggle continues to this day. Along with the struggle, however, hope continues, for we still hold fast to the ideal that we shall overcome someday if we wait on the Lord.

Faith Connection

In today's society, waiting patiently is difficult. This is partly because in this age of technology, we are taught to value instant gratification. Our language includes such terms as *nanosecond* to denote an infinitesimal unit of time. Through this instantaneous lens, especially in adversity, we refuse to suffer long and grow impatient when our pain endures beyond a moment. Our worldly conditioning constantly prompts us to ask: "When will my misery end?" I imagine the people in Birmingham asked that question from time to time. But they held out hope because of their deep-seated faith in God.

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded that waiting is necessary. For example, the Bible tells us that patience is a virtue (Gal 5:22, Ps 37:7, Ecc 7:8, Lam 3:26, Eph 4:2). We are also reminded that God works in his own time and in his own way. 2 Peter 3:8 says: "…one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." Waiting on the Lord – what does it mean to wait? Successful waiting involves calmly bearing pains and trials without undue complaint. Successful waiting means standing firm in the face of opposition, difficulty, or adversity. Successful waiting requires patience. Successful waiting engenders hope. Amid the world's adversities, the prophet Isaiah invites us to trust rather than doubt, to hope rather than despair, and to have courage rather than fear. He invites us to be strong and to believe God is in control. He invites us to exercise patience in humanity's struggle for social equality. How long, Lord, must we wait? I don't have an answer to this question. But I trust that God, in his own way and time, will renew our strength.

Chapter 16: Hope Does Not Disappoint

This reflection is based on Romans 5:3-5. Many of us struggle through life. What are we to do? How can we endure? This scripture offers a solution.

Prayer

Merciful God, by your grace, you have shaped and molded me into an instrument you can use for your glory. And my hope is stronger than ever because you have poured your love into my heart. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Romans 5:3-5 (NLT)

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

Context

Resilience is an amazing thing, especially for people who have experienced trauma in their lives. For them, daily survival rests on the hope that each day they will grow stronger and eventually reach wholeness or reconciliation. Because this outcome feels certain, they choose to keep living with the expectation that peace lies at the end of the journey. Rom 5:1-5 speaks to this human need.

Faith Connection

Paul's letter tells the believers in Rome that the tribulations they face are only temporary. Consequently, the Roman believers should be willing to endure suffering for a while because they know a reward awaits them when the battle is over. In fact, Paul suggests that as they wait, they will gain valuable assets: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (5:3). According to this passage, believers whose hearts have been filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit have reason to hope. As far as they are concerned, God has promised it and it is a done deal. This hope, then, is the source of their peace.

Chapter 17: Grace is Sufficient

The focus of this devotional is 2 Corinthians 12:8-10. Sometimes I look back and wonder how I got over the tribulations in my life. The Spirit of the Lord has definitely been at work. I am what I am because of God's grace.

Prayer

Gracious God, sometimes I'm not sure which way to turn. But I know you've paved the road and laid it out before me. Help me to follow where you lead me. Thank you for your grace. Amen.

Focus Scripture: 2 Corinthians 12: 8-10 (NLT)

Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Context

I spent months thinking about my field placement, so excited about the prospect of learning to minister to God's people through a chaplaincy internship. I had no prior experience in ministry. In fact, before I was called and entered seminary, I had never planned a worship service or done anything more "ministerial" than leading the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of a pre-meeting devotional. I was a pure novice in this area.

The prior spring, I'd had a chance to visit the field studies site, meet some of the people I would be working with, and get the lay of the land, so to speak. That pre-visit boosted my confidence! By the time fall semester arrived, I still felt undaunted by the task that stretched before me, I felt in charge of the matter and was raring to go. No problem I thought; I was in control.

Then came the day I was to report officially to my site and begin my stint as a chaplain intern. The group went through the agenda that first day. I felt I had a handle on everything. Feeling confident, I ticked off each agenda point and mentally rehearsed several questions I intended to ask. When it was my turn, I raised my hand: "How should we dress?" I enquired. "We wear the collar here," was the reply. No problem, I whispered. Later that week, I called the Field Studies supervisor to ask where I might buy one. She told me. I went there. I picked it out and decided to try it on before I spent my money.

Plastic bags, pins, tissue paper, and cardboard made it hard to remove the garment from the factory packaging. Finally, after much commotion, I put on the collar and stood in front of the mirror. My reflection startled me at first, as a kind of reverence washed over me. Only then did it strike me: God had really called me, had singled me out, and had given me something to do. All kinds of questions filled my head. Do I know enough? Am I patient enough, strong enough, compassionate enough? Just exactly what lies at the end of this tunnel? Doubts rose up and stopped me cold as I stared at my reflection. Then I closed my eyes and whispered a prayer: "Dear God am I worthy enough to do your will?"

Faith Connection

Immediately I recalled the scripture in 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10. In that instant, I realized that no matter how well I had fleshed out the details of this new and very strange journey I had embarked on, I was definitely *not* in control. I was entering a realm that was completely unfamiliar to me. In my past, I had always been confident, and qualified and sure. Yet now I felt only uncertain, weak, and vulnerable. I reflected on Paul. He was just a human with weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Yet he served Christ faithfully. These limitations – his "thorn in the flesh" – kept him from basking in pride and arrogance.

I realized that this also applies to my situation. God's power is made perfect in my moments of weakness. God is strong when I am weak, and I can rely on God to lead me, support me, fill me, and use me for the ministry to which I have been called. So, I am willing to accept that I am not in control. What I can say is that when I am lacking in physical and spiritual strength, when my mind is devoid of pithy prose and brilliant ideas, when I just don't know how to get from Point A to Point B in service to God's people, I can surrender to the power of God, for when I am weak He is strong. God's grace is sufficient for me.

Chapter 18: Just Say Yes

This chapter's scriptural focus is Luke 1:26-38. Have you ever been placed in a situation where you were called on to trust someone or something? What does it mean to trust?

Prayer

Beckoning God, I thank you for singling me out and giving me something to do in your Kingdom. I surrender my will to your good, acceptable, and perfect will. I pray that you will fill me and use me for your glory. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Luke 1:26-38 (NLT)

[The angel said:] "For nothing is impossible with God." Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

Context

This scripture relates the story of Mary, a young girl from a small town near the Sea of Galilee. We're also told that Mary was a virgin, betrothed but not yet married. According to Jewish tradition in Biblical times, young women were usually betrothed at age twelve to twelve-and-a-half, a full year before the marriage ceremony. That would make Mary around the age of 12 or 13.

We can probably assume that Mary was familiar with Hebrew scripture and Jewish tradition. Mary's genealogy suggests that she was familiar with God's Old Testament track record of keeping God's promises to God's chosen people. Specifically, God had already established a well-documented history concerning miraculous births through God's past interventions with the Hebrew people. Since Mary was likely familiar with Hebrew scripture, she was also likely familiar with God's faithfulness. This formed the basis of her trust.

Faith Connection

Gabriel had just informed Mary that she would conceive and give birth to a son, whom she would name Jesus. Mary could have asked the angel Gabriel an endless string of questions at this point. But because she knew about God's track record and about God's faithfulness in the past, she asked only one. In verse 34: *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"* I believe Mary's question arose out of her faith, not out of her doubt. Based on what we know about her background, her question implies that she understood well the *theology* of what she is being asked to do. Her question to the messenger Gabriel, therefore, concerned only the *biology* of what was to occur. Mary needed only a little clarification, which Gabriel provided. He also reassured Mary that nothing is impossible for God.

I wonder if Mary doubted just a little. We will never know, for with childlike innocence, born of a hope nurtured for 42 generations, Mary surrendered her will to God's. Even though she didn't have all the details and without thinking through the consequences of her decision, Mary said "yes" to God's plan for her life. In doing so, she showed extraordinary trust and faith.

Chapter 19: Rise Up and Walk!

This devotional was inspired by Acts 3:1-10. As a former educator, I always believed that I could make a difference in children's lives. Of course, I could not give them silver or gold, but God had granted me the capacity to give them something much more valuable.

Prayer

Almighty God, you have opened my eyes and my heart so I can recognize the needs of my brothers and sisters in the spirit. I have no silver or gold to give them. But you have given me the ability to help them rise up and walk. And I thank you for the privilege. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Acts 3:5-6 (NLT)

The lame man looked at them eagerly, expecting some money. But Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!"

Context

Public schools have become extremely complicated in recent times. The problems are complex and rooted in our schools' failure to grapple with issues that thwart justice in our children's lives. Making children over in the image of "Ozzie and Harriet's kids" is not the answer. Too often these days Ozzie is nowhere to be found, and Harriet is at her second job. Perhaps a better approach is to build heart-to-heart and mind-to-mind connections with these children. Yet, to address their needs in the context of their social reality, we must alter our perspectives, perceptions, and approaches to meet them where they are and equip them with tools to move forward from there. Otherwise, we will lose this entire generation of children.

Faith Connection

Theologically, this raises many questions: How empowering would it be if all of God's children were healthy, whole, and capable of pulling their own weight? The economic reality is that, in most cases, we as compassionate people cannot give our children silver or gold. But God has granted us the capacity to give them something much more valuable. How much richer would life be if we helped our children by equipping them to rise up and walk?

Chapter 20: The Power of Love

This chapter's focus scripture is 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. All we need is love; at least that's what the songwriters, poets, and movie producers would have us believe. And you know what? I tend to agree with them to a certain extent.

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for showing me that love is a better way. Amen.

Focus Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT)

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud [5] or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

Context

All we need is love; at least that's what songwriters, poets, movie producers, and others want us to believe. And you know what? I tend to agree with them to a certain extent. What is it about love that makes it so powerful, to the point of being a better way of life? The biblical evidence is compelling, and recent scholarly studies reinforce it. As we engage in loving others, we continue to grow and benefit psychologically from the acts of charity we extend. This feeling has been referred to as a "helper's high" or the "Mother Teresa effect." In other words, charitable acts can lead to positive feelings. Some scholars have noted that people's brain chemistry actually changes after they do something charitable. Specifically, giving has been shown to produce endorphins and reduce stress hormones in a way similar to exercise. As a fringe benefit, some studies show that happier, less stressed people tend to be more productive and more likely to succeed.

In addition, recent scholars have noted that doing good deeds has healing power. They contend that when we care for others, we are actually caring for ourselves. These authors report that helping others regularly gives people immediate physical sensations, including warmth, increased energy, and a sense of euphoria. Not only that, when we give of ourselves, especially if we start young, but we also reap other benefits. Mortality is delayed. Depression is reduced. Well-being is increased. Additional research studies have shown that helping others can result in health benefits to those with chronic illness, including HIV, multiple sclerosis, and heart problems. Is this a better way?

Faith Connection

In his first letter to the Church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul also emphasized the importance of love. This love Paul speaks of is seen in our benevolent attitudes and actions toward our fellow human beings. Moreover, the kind of love Paul preaches grows out of sincere, fervent devotion to God. When people possess this kind of love, their individual gifts take a back seat. What shines through is not the forcefulness of prophecies, speaking in tongues, or great knowledge and wisdom. What shines through is compassion expressed and mercy shown to another person who was also created in the image of God.

Love is that unifying vision unifying vision for life in God's kingdom here on earth. It can be expressed through acts of charity, philanthropy, and generosity extended to those in need of a helping hand. Such love is one of the noblest expressions of the human spirit; it

can promote goodness and generosity even in the midst of the most intolerable situations. Furthermore, as Paul demonstrated in Corinth, engaging in acts of love can help to build communities that sustain well-being and peace for all its members, no matter what their gifts. The scripture teaches us that even though our gifts may eventually diminish, love will last forever – *And now abide faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love*. And love is a more excellent way!

Chapter 21: Diamonds in the Rough

This chapter uses 2 Corinthians 4:1-12 as its focus. Have you ever really considered the diamond? These dazzling gemstones were once mere rocks buried in the bowels of the earth. Under pressure and over time these stones developed into something precious and beautiful.

Prayer

Creator God, you have placed in me a great treasure to sustain me and to keep me strong. For this, I give you all the glory. Amen.

Focus Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 (NIV)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Context

You only need to take a brief glance at my friend to see that she is exceptional in many ways. Though she is only in her twenties, her yes have seen more than they should have seen. Yet they glisten and exude her inner peace. Even so, upon closer inspection, you can see traces of the pain she has endured in her relatively brief existence. You can tell that, at one time, she was hard pressed, but not crushed. In that respect, she is like a diamond in the rough. She exudes inner joy and contentment, her spirit shining from within.

Have you ever really considered the diamond? These gemstones were once mere rocks buried in the bowels of the earth. Under pressure and over time, these stones developed into something precious and beautiful. My friend has certainly undergone her share of pressure. And her heart has been broken more times than she cares to count. I'm not talking about hurt feelings and petty bruises. She has been abandoned. She has been abused. She has been threatened. She has seen death up close and personal. Very few people have experienced the devastating losses she has suffered. But she doesn't complain. As Scripture says, she has been perplexed but not in despair. She has been persecuted but not abandoned. She has been struck down, but she is not destroyed. Make no mistake about it. She has endured trouble but she has not lost heart. Instead, she has turned to God and uses her experiences to encourage others.

Faith Connection

Her inner life continues to grow and mature day by day. I think part of this maturity comes from her daily study of the Word of God. Faithfully, she engages in devotional reflection every morning. Her adoration of Jesus shines through in her powerful prayers, which surely reach the heart of God and inspire those privileged to hear them. She governs her life by the standards Jesus set. She is God's humble servant, and she is not ashamed, though few know it.

Her inner life mirrors the development of a diamond. Residing deep within the broken, earthen recesses of her human soul is a nascent jewel. From faith to faith and glory to glory, she strives to separate herself from her past. Refined and polished by life's pressures, her inner treasure emits rays of brilliance that illuminate the surrounding darkness. Her life's trajectory reminds me of verse 6 of today's scripture: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine

out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

I look at her often and say to myself: If she has the "knowledge of the glory of God," then she has a precious gift indeed! I want what she has!

Chapter 22: Think on These Things

This chapter focuses on Philippians 4:6-8. Have you ever had one of those days when you find yourself in a state of anxiety because things are simply not going according to your plan? Scripture tells us not to worry about things we can't resolve. Instead, we should eliminate negativity from our thoughts and vocabulary whenever possible.

Prayer

Loving God, I thank you for strength and life and shelter and protection. When things aren't going as well as I think they should, I pray that you help me not dwell on the negative but focus on the noble things in life. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Philippians 4:8 (NLT)

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing: Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Context

When I think about my childhood, Cousin Gladys fills my memories, along with my formative years at Mt. Sinai Baptist Church. She was director of the young people's ministry at church. She shepherded the Sunshine Band, the Red Circle, Summer Bible School, and many other programs involving children in their tender years. Over the years, she shared so much of herself with others. In many ways, she was key in instilling in us a love for being in church and a keen awareness of who God is. She helped us focus on the noble things in life.

As with all good role models, her actions spoke volumes of her inner feelings. She loved God, and she adored children. Physically, she was a formidable presence. About five feet four inches tall, she had large arms, which could smother you in hugs of affection just as well as they could smack you into submission, whichever was called for at the a given time. She tolerated no mess and took no prisoners. When she smiled, everyone was happy. When she was angry, you had no choice but to pay attention. When she was sad, you wanted to cry with her. And she knew just about everything, it seemed, about God and the Bible.

She had her hand in everything we did as children. That's because the church was the center of our world back then. She taught us our speeches at Easter and Christmas. She directed the plays in which we performed. And when trips were organized to the National Baptist Convention, she was behind the planning. The church formed the basis of all my friendships and social activities. I used to joke that every time the church doors opened, Cousin Gladys was there to greet us.

Cousin Gladys taught us by example that when circumstances are overwhelming, we could find refuge in the secret of God's tabernacle; that we could cry out to God when we were in need; and, although we were from lowly circumstances, that God would never fail to answer us. Church was such a part of everything we knew growing up. I knew of no other way of life. These days, when I think of Cousin Gladys, I think of today's scripture that advises us not to dwell on the negative things that occur in life, but to fix our thoughts on "what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise" (v. 8).

Faith Connection

I thank God for the women who have crossed my path during my developmental years. They influenced my spiritual outlook in immeasurable ways. In this anything-goes world, where truth and morality have become moving targets, I have learned a great deal from my foremothers. Make no mistake: wisdom can be gleaned from these mothers, grandmothers, big mamas, great aunts, sisters, friends, and saints who pressed onward each day in the face of tremendous odds. I admire them because they lived noble lives, often enduring hardship with quiet dignity, hope, faith, resiliency, and strength born of struggle. Imploring the Lord for themselves and their loved ones, they whispered the name of Jesus from the depths of their souls, knowing that while they waited down here, the Holy Spirit would sustain them. In their hour of need, they turned to prayer and scripture. From their examples, I have gained wisdom about the often stark realities of living this life.

Their survival and growth through it have both encouraged me and given me peace. In turn, that peace has guarded my heart and mind as I have tried to live for Jesus Christ, as they did. I guess my foremothers could have wallowed in their misery. God knows their suffering was great. But what was the point of such self-indulgence? My foremothers taught me that life is what it is and that we should make the best of what we have. That way of thinking was seared into my memory from childhood, partly because of a woman who dedicated her life to mentoring children.

Chapter 23: The Family Resemblance

This chapter focuses on Romans 8:16-17. No matter who your biological father is, you no longer need to carry a stigma. In Christ, you have a new family. You can now cry "Abba, Father," because you are the child of the King.

Prayer

Gracious and merciful God, thank you for Jesus, your Son and my Brother. Thank you for adopting me into your family where I can be counted among your beloved. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Romans 8:16-17 (NLT)

For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

Context

When I was just a young girl, one of my teachers said that I would never be accepted by certain segments of our community because I was an outcast. And in order for my siblings and me to succeed, we would have to surpass everyone else around us. I, for one, was determined to get ahead of rejection by being the best and the brightest, the loudest and the most outrageous. I was determined to reject others before they rejected me. At the same time, I had to show everyone I could compete with the best of them on their own terms, and win every time. But I was miserable in the process.

Then I discovered my identity as a child of the King. I was entitled to cry "Abba, Father" anytime I wanted. My new identity emerged as I came to understand the significance of my baptism and my faith. I discovered that my "family resemblance" was not marked by physical traits but by the spiritual light that emanated from within. The stronger I grew spiritually, the brighter the glow was, like radiant hope shining from the inside out, kindled by the Spirit of God. Although my biological father had abandoned me, my Heavenly Father never would!

Faith Connection

After my baptism, I was transformed by spiritual rebirth and possessed a heightened ability to love and to care for my brothers and sisters in this often-troubled world. Over time, I matured in the faith, which led me to recognize the family resemblance I bore to the rest of God's adopted children. I walked a little differently and talked a little differently. I was an heir of the King and a joint heir with Christ (Romans 8: 12-17). As a member of God's beloved family, I had the capacity to be an instrument of God's peace, love, and justice in this world. Through the Spirit of God, Jesus, as my brother in the family of faith, embraced me. Through baptism and spiritual regeneration, I now bear the family resemblance.

Chapter 24: The Winning Team

This chapter focuses on John 14:20-21. Jesus told the Disciples to love his commandments, and he would send them an Advocate. What are the implications of having this third member of the Trinity on our team?

Prayer

Amazing God, I thank you for giving me winning seasons in my life by your grace. When the going gets tough, thank you for helping me remember I have a powerful team on my side. Amen.

Focus Scripture: John 14:20-21 (NLT)

When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. And because they love me, my Father will love them. And I will love them and reveal myself to each of them.

Context

I am a sports fan, and when I read this scripture, I thought of basketball. One of my favorite teams has been pretty miserable in recent years. The team has gone through a number of players, suffered from key injuries, and embarrassed itself on some occasions because it couldn't get it together. At one point, many of the players were young and inexperienced, and it took them a while to learn to trust each other. Quite simply, the team struggled to follow their coaches' advice and the playbook. In other words, each individual was out there trying to go it alone.

Faith Connection

I submit to you that finishing this game we call life with grace and dignity will require a team effort. Today's scripture indicates that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are working in us and for us to help us. In verse 20, Jesus reminds the disciples that when he goes away, he will ask the Father to send a Counselor to take his place. And on that day the disciples will realize that Jesus is in the Father, the disciples are in Jesus, and Jesus is in them. He also tells the disciples that he will be with whoever knows his commands and obeys them.

This sounded a lot like teamwork to me. It sounded to me like God's team – the G-team – that helps us win at the game of life. What does this winning team consist of? First of all, if you are to play effectively on a winning team, you need a counselor. The Scripture says the Father will give you a Counselor to be with you forever. Now this Counselor brings some powerful skills to the team. For example, the Counselor is an advocate and a comforter (John 14:26). The Counselor is a guide (John 16:13), a teacher (Luke 12:12), and a prayer intercessor (Romans 8:26). Today's text tells us that the Counselor is the Spirit of truth. Team members know who he is, for Scripture tells us the Counselor will pull us together as a unit in the body of Christ if we listen to what he has to say.

The second thing you need is a good playbook – one that has all the right commands. What exactly were these commands? God sent Jesus to coach the team and to break things down into simple terms. In the new playbook, Jesus sums up all the commandments in this

rule: Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. You see, Jesus' playbook is easy to follow.

Another key ingredient for a winning team is team spirit. When you are on a team, you are not alone. It means you are part of something greater than yourself. As a member of God's team, you are well represented. The Holy Spirit – the ultimate agent – is making sure your benefits include the presence and power of God in everyday life. Your team is under brilliant management, and you have bought into the vision. You're on fire with team spirit. Now you can play this game of life with confidence and finish the game with victory. How could you be anything less than a champion if you have the G-team on my side?

Chapter 25: One Shining Moment

Matthew 17:1-8 is the focus scripture for this chapter. The transfiguration was an eye-opening experience for Peter, James, and John. What are the implications of that one shining moment?

Prayer

Almighty God, strengthen me by your grace so that I may be changed into the likeness of Jesus, from glory to glory. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Matthew 17:2 (NLT)

As the men watched, Jesus' appearance transformed: his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

Context

Sometimes, when I drive back and forth to business meetings, I listen to a song called "I'm So Glad that Troubles Don't Last Always." The song comforts me because I know that one day Jesus will lead me up to a high mountain; we'll be by ourselves on that final journey. In the twinkling of an eye, I will have a new body. My weak and broken flesh will be gone. In only an instant, I will have a new life. All the cares of this world that once weighed me down will no longer exist. I won't be afraid, for I will behold Jesus for who he really is. His face will shine like the sun, and he will be clothed in splendor and majesty. In one shining moment I will be transformed to that image for all eternity. It will be glorious. It will be marvelous. And at the top of that high mountain, my metamorphosis will finally be complete.

Faith Connection

We all know the story. Six days after Jesus foretold his death and resurrection, and after Peter recognized Jesus as the Son of the Living God, Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a high mountain by themselves. When they arrived at their destination, Jesus was transfigured before their very eyes. Jesus' transfiguration gave the disciples a fleeting glimpse of something that is yet to come.

The word "transfigured" comes from the Greek word "metamorphosis," meaning to completely change or transform, like a cocoon becoming a butterfly or a tulip bulb becoming a glorious tulip blossom. That day on the mountain, Jesus' body was transformed from an earthly body into a heavenly body, from a human body into a resurrection body. In those few moments on the mountain, Jesus' face shone like the sun, and his clothes became radiant.

Can you imagine the scene that day, the very voice of the Almighty speaking through the cloud, symbolizing God's power and presence? The vision was so wondrous that God shrouded it in a cloud to protect the disciples from its splendor. Now, one usually thinks of clouds as being dark and ominous or even wispy and dense. But this cloud shone, surrounding and enveloping those present with dazzling brightness, almost as if the light were coming from within. Yet isn't that how the Spirit of God works – from the inside out? In that one shining moment of glory, the disciples were given insight into what was, what is, and what is yet to come. Their earthly bodies would be resurrected and transformed in heaven, and those heavenly bodies would be glorious, changed, and made like Jesus.

Chapter 26: Radical Love

Using Matthew 6:26-27 as the focus scripture, this chapter highlights God's humble servants who, above all else, seek the Kingdom of God. They leave their worries about material needs with the Master, who has promised to provide. They are, in a sense, God's lilies.

Prayer

Sustaining God, I put my hope in you both now and forevermore. I pray that you shower me with your radical love. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Matthew 6:26-27(NLT)

Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?

Context

Whenever I think about this scripture, I think about my Great Aunt Ruth. Born in Mississippi in 1908, Ruth and her husband, Steve, were among the many who migrated to the Chicago area in the 1930s and 1940s. When they first embarked on this Great Migration, they didn't know what would face them when they arrived. They stepped out on faith and trusted God to provide the rest.

Ruth was not materially wealthy, but she lacked for nothing. And what she had, she humbly shared with other people. Her lifestyle was simple; her heart was pure. Though she was meek and unassuming, her spirit was huge. She didn't worry much about making it from day to day, for she had an abiding faith that God would provide. In my opinion, she was one of God's lilies, clothed in beauty and touched by God's grace, whom she loved with all her heart.

Faith Connection

In the Matthew account, Jesus reminds his listeners that if they seek first [the Kingdom of God] and God's righteousness, God will take care of their material needs as well. Ruth indeed sought the Kingdom of God first by devoting herself to others. Near the end of her own life, Ruth spent her days tending to the needs of my brother, her great-nephew, who had lived a troubled life. When he had nowhere to go, Ruth took him in, obeying God's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. She gave him a place to sleep, food to eat, and clothes to wear. She shared everything she had with him, cherishing him as if he were her own son. I believe she prolonged his life by giving him hope. Ruth was a model of selflessness, trust, and generosity. She was one of God's lilies, clothed in God's grace. And God cared for her all the days of her life. I thank God for lilies. I thank God for Ruth.

Chapter 27: Sanctuary

This chapter discusses the magnificence of God's creation and focuses on Psalm 8. When I gaze upon the beauty of God's work, sometimes all I can say is "How majestic is your name in all the earth."

Prayer

O Lord my God, I ask nothing for myself today. I simply want to thank you for another opportunity to give you honor and sing your praise. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Psalm 8:1 (NLT)

O LORD, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth! Your glory is higher than the heavens.

Context

Before I retired from the education field, I used to commute long distances on an interstate highway to get to work. One regular trip took me from east to west, driving from Chicago to DeKalb on Interstate 88, now the Ronald Reagan Expressway. I particularly remember the aromas of early spring. Many open fields smelled of freshly mown grass or freshly cut crops. I remember the scents of lilacs and clover, the unmistakable smell of the ground thawing in early spring, the rain in the air, and the promise of new life it all brought. The colors also were vibrant. Purples and yellows and reds and greens and rich browns set against the backdrop of the blue, blue sky, sometimes dotted with clouds, sometimes not.

And there were horses. Every time I passed milepost 103, I looked left and saw four or five horses standing in the field. They always faced south for some reason. This sounds silly, but every time I passed them, I waved and said, "Hi, horses." They never answered back, of course. But their very presence represented stability and wonder.

I remember one trip in particular. The highway stretched out ahead as a flat plain while I drove along this narrow road. Above it all, the endless sky stretched in every direction, unmarred by smokestacks or high-rise buildings. That day, as I looked through the windshield, I saw the sky, so clear, pure, and endless, hanging in the eternal space all around me. I was so struck by the beauty and majesty of it all that I gasped and thanked God for the Divine portrait I beheld. But there was still more. I glanced in my rearview mirror. And there was the sun peeking over the horizon at the dawn to pay honor to the new day. The word *awesome* does not do justice to the beauty of that moment.

Faith Connection

During those long trips, I reached several conclusions. God is greater than our insecurities. God is greater than our pain. God is greater than our sorrow. God is greater than our disappointments. God is the author of time, the creator of our beginnings, and keeper of our endings. God is greater than the great! God is stronger than the strong! God is our all in all! And those things became very clear to me on the days that I drove from east to west in those mornings just before dawn. How humbled I felt in God's magnificent presence. I also felt a strong sense of receiving a blessing tailor-made for me. The only thing I can say in response is "Lord, O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Amen.

Chapter 28: Woman with the Issue of Blood

Mark 5:27-30 inspired this reflection. What extraordinary faith this woman possessed! And because of her faith, she changed her status from outcast to daughter with one touch of the hem of the Master's garment.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for you healing power through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Mark 5:27-30 (NLT)

She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe. For she thought to herself, "If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed." Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition. Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my robe?"

Context

In this story, an unnamed, suffering woman placed her faith in an extraordinary Jesus and was healed as a result. Who was this woman? Scripture tells us that she had suffered twelve years with constant bleeding and that she had seen many doctors to no avail. At least one scholar suggests that although this woman was part of the unprivileged class at the time, she may once have been wealthy because she could afford physicians. However, their unsuccessful treatment and poor health care system had left her impoverished and further debilitated. She had suffered much and had received little help. To make matters worse, her failing health had drained her of her finances, leaving her destitute.

Knowing the power of Jesus to heal, this woman made a conscious choice to pursue Jesus. She acted on her own initiative, stepped outside her prescribed boundaries, and reached out to the one she believed could make a difference. I can imagine her, working her way through the crowd, approaching Jesus from behind, and touching his garment. The scripture tells us that instantly, immediately, without hesitation or delay, the woman was healed. She could feel the healing power all in her body. Jesus felt it, too. He knew it immediately. Somebody had the unmitigated nerve to touch Jesus in faith, and the power left his body and flowed into hers. There had been a transfer of power – a spirit-to-spirit connection. It was the power to heal, the power to renew, the power to restore. Someone had reached out to touch Jesus in faith, and Jesus looked around, wanting to know who had done it.

Faith Connection

At first the woman was afraid and was reluctant to come forward. She had this nagging feeling that she had somehow overstepped her boundaries. She probably thought there would be repercussions. I imagine that the very thought of what had happened to her was so marvelous that it startled her and made her tremble and shake. Her emotions probably bumped into each other, making her insides quiver with both joy and fear. She didn't completely understand what had just happened. But she knew one thing for sure: she had been changed. And she couldn't keep it to herself. She had to tell somebody. So she told Jesus all about it. The NRSV says, "But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth" (v. 33).

Now Jesus could have responded in a number of ways. But he said to her simply: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (v 34). The NLT says: “Your suffering is over.”

Did you hear what I said? Jesus called her Daughter – she was no longer alone; she was no longer disinherited; she was no longer a “nobody” being cast aside because of her condition. Jesus said: “Daughter, your faith has made you well.”

Chapter 29: Women at the Cross

In this reflection, inspired by John 19:25, we glimpse Jesus' crucifixion through the eyes of his mother, Mary. What she must have felt on that day!

Prayer

Compassionate God, thank you for Jesus and the ultimate sacrifice he made so that I might be set free! Amen.

Focus Scripture: John 19:25 (NLT)

Standing near the cross were Jesus' mother and his mother's sister Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene.

Context

Mary the Mother of Jesus was a woman of extraordinary faith. We begin her portrait as she stands with John and with other women at the foot of the cross of Jesus and watches the spectacle of his crucifixion unfold before her very eyes (John 19:25). I wonder what she was thinking and feeling as she watched her son suffer that day. I wonder if Mary realized there would be power in his blood. But for now, she was a grieving woman who, in her role as mother, had suffered through much. Both the chief priests and the Romans had accused Jesus falsely, attributing to him sin that he had not committed. They tried him and convicted him and later sentenced him to die – not because he had sinned so egregiously. No, they sentenced him to die because of who he was. Jesus threatened them, challenged their authority by his very presence, making them feel less important than they imagined themselves to be in their own eyes. So they tortured him and spat on him and made him carry his own cross most of the way to the place where they finally murdered him. There, on the hill of skulls, they lynched him, nailed him to a tree of shame, and degraded him in front of a raucous crowd.

I imagine there was a party-like atmosphere that day at the foot of Jesus' cross. I'm reminded that Pilate made a banner to place atop the cross. The wording on the banner was accurate for all intents and purposes; nevertheless, the chief priests argued with Pilate's people over what should have been written on the sign. Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments and divided them into four parts, which they kept as souvenirs. But his coat was special. It was woven from the top without seams. Not wanting to destroy the garment, the soldiers cast lots for it. They just wouldn't leave Jesus alone. They kept troubling his body even to the point of piercing him in the side so that blood and water flowed from his wounds. Some of those who stood at the foot of the cross saw the whole affair as a cause for celebration. And Mary, his mother, had to witness all this.

Faith Connection

I can envision Mary there in the company of the other women and John. She was probably saying, "What have they done to my baby boy?" She almost certainly remembered the day she found out she was pregnant with Jesus. Remember? The angel Gabriel told her she had been chosen by God's grace to give birth to a very special child named Jesus (Luke 1:26-30). She was told that Jesus – this precious baby boy – would be great! He would be called the Son of the Highest (John 1:14). Of his kingdom there would be no end (Daniel 7:14). Gabriel had also told Mary that this child of the Holy Spirit would be called the Son of

God, “for nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37). I wonder if Mary remembered all this as she saw her precious son bleeding on a cross of woe, even though Gabriel had told her that Jesus would be great! Where were those promises now? Even in the midst of it all, I believe Mary still held onto her faith because, in the deep recesses of her soul, she believed what God had promised to deliver.

Be that as it may, Mary was only human. She was a mother. So she wept, and she waited. She waited, and she wept. She waited on Friday and probably cried herself to sleep in the midnight hour because that’s what grieving mothers do. She waited all day on Saturday, receiving family and fellowshipping with friends who came by to console her. Then, on Sunday morning, I can imagine someone knocked on the door of John’s house where she was staying. I believe that when she opened the door, a woman stood there (See Luke 24: 1-10), bubbling over with excitement.

“He got up,” the woman probably shouted. “He’s not dead!” She proclaimed. “He has risen just like he said he would!” I imagine Mary went from grieving to rejoicing, and in an instant her mourning turned into dancing. We know the rest of the story.

Chapter 30: Portrait of the Bent Woman

Luke 13:10-13 tells of a woman bent over by a spirit that had crippled her for many years. She appeared at a synagogue, and Jesus saw her need. He healed her without her even asking!

Prayer

Holy God, I thank you for Jesus who anticipates my needs and touches me with his healing hands. Amen.

Focus Scripture: Luke 13:10-13

Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

Context

Some of us can identify with this woman. She was in pain and was searching for some relief. Like the woman in the story, we – you and I – sometimes hurt so bad that we don't even know where to turn for help. We desperately try all kinds of ways and look in all kinds of places to find release from our affliction. All we know is that we want to stop hurting, so we try everything we know how to do, even some things we know we shouldn't do. But no matter what we do, peace keeps eluding us.

Finally, broken and battered, after we've tried everything else, we show up in the sanctuary, hoping to find refuge there. We believe with all our heart that Jesus will meet us there.

Faith Connection

Now scripture tells us: "When Jesus saw [the woman], he called her over." What does it mean to be called over by Jesus? Perhaps you have been on a seemingly endless personal journey to find peace. You may have hit bottom when the waters of your soul erupt into a maelstrom. Let's suppose that you have prayed until you don't know what else to say. Perhaps God is answering your prayer by calling you to the sanctuary in a way only God can. God may be constantly on your mind, the name of Jesus constantly on your lips, or you may have an unquenchable thirst to read the Bible. You have nowhere else to go, so one day you show up.

The point is this: when you finally surrender to the extraordinary power of your faith, suddenly, immediately, and without hesitation or delay, something gets reborn in you. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, something gets resurrected in your spirit. Hope is revived in your life. For all those years you were bent over, darkness was all you could see, no matter which way you turned. But when you heard Jesus say, "Woman, you are free from your ailment," you could stand up straight. Lo and behold, there was light – marvelous light and the peace for which you had been searching for so long. All you had to do was show up!

About the Book

Reflective Renewal: Grace at the Crossroads is a collection of theological reflections about life and well-being in a challenging world. The major premise of the book is that as we learn to reflect theologically, we become acutely aware of God's grace working at the crossroads of life. Therefore, we have hope and peace. When everything else is said and done, how we handle adversity is ultimately a matter of faith.

As with most other things in life, there is no one right way to reflect theologically on an issue or concern. The Reflective Renewal framework for devotional engagement begins with prayer, directs attention to a focus scripture, provides a contemporary context, and, in doing so, critically connects the message of faith to issues or concerns in contemporary life.

About the Author

Rev. Lorrie C. Reed is an author, educator, theologian, and retired pastor whose work reflects a lifelong commitment to learning, ministry, and healing. With a Ph.D. in Research Methodology and degrees in education and theology, she has published thirteen books, including the novels *Deep River Crossings* and *Witness in the Dust*. Through fiction and nonfiction, she explores healing, wholeness, and resilience across generations. Dr. Reed founded Rivertree Christian Ministries and lives in Chicago with her husband of more than five decades.