

HIS DAILY

inspiration

A 15 DAY DEVOTIONAL FOR INSPIRATION AND GROWTH



CHRISTINA ATHENA GIRMA

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inspiration

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Christina A Girma is the writer of the blog Inspired By Him. She founded Inspired by Him as a source of inspiration for readers to draw from in the hopes that it will touch their hearts and inspire them on their own personal journeys. Her own journey began five years ago. For many years writing has become the outlet to pour out her heart and share her documented experiences with people from all around the world. Today, through Inspired By Him, she documents every experience, lesson, challenge and growth, that has made her into the woman she is today.

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DAY 1: UNDERSTANDING SEASONS OF SPIRITUAL DESERTS

“To Him who lead His people through the desert, His love endures forever” -Psalm 136:16

The desert is not a pleasant place to be. From the Atacama Desert in Chile, to the sand dunes in the Rub’al Khali of Saudi Arabia, we find nothing but hostile living conditions, barely any trace of life, and rarely any resources for survival. The extreme weather conditions, coupled with severe lack of water prevents any sort of vegetation. So, what could possibly be the purpose of a desert? Interestingly enough, geographical deserts aren’t much different from spiritual deserts.

In the midst of spiritual deserts we feel alone, forsaken, and helpless. Although we may mentally be aware that God is there, spiritually we have no sense of God’s manifest presence. Our spiritual life goes through dryness, and every sense of life we once felt gets drained out. However, it’s very important that we are aware of when we are going through such seasons so that we understand what happens in that process.

Believe it or not such seasons in our spiritual walk serve a great purpose; one that I’d like to discuss with you today. To gain a good understanding of this, who else better to use as an example than our favorite Israelites; a nation whom we’ve learned so much from. Pay close attention to how their story unfolds. God hears the cries of the Israelites in Egypt, and finally sends Moses (Exodus 3) to lead them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land (Canaan).

This land is one of great promises, and a land in which God had already previously promised to Abraham that his descendants would one day possess and call their own (Genesis 17:8). Now in contrast to that, Egypt was a foreign land- not the place to call “home”. It was a land in which they were mistreated, enslaved, and tortured. Through Moses however, God finally brings them out of Egypt and they begin their journey to their new land - which should have not taken them longer than 11 days to complete (Deuteronomy 1:2). Yet, due to their constant disobedience, lack of faith, and rebellion, an 11 day journey turned into 40 years of wandering the dessert.

Here is the first thing to understand. The desert is a temporary place, unless you choose to unpack and permanently settle there. It’s not a destination, but a divine detour in which you go through to reach the destination that God has prepared for you. However, the duration of the time you spend in that desert is up to you. For example, for the Israelites it was a place where their faith had to be tested before stepping into that promise that God had for them. In other words, their ticket out of that desert was the result of their faith ... and for some of us today that can be a high price to pay. As a result, most us tend to wander and never leave. We get caught up in the desert between the land that enslaved us to sin, fear, failure, past regrets, etc. and the land in which greater promises wait for us. But you see, God’s desire for us is not the desert, it’s the Promised Land; that’s where our home is found.

I want to quickly note that whether it be the desert, Egypt, or the Promised Land, they are all spiritual representations of the places we might be in our Spiritual journey today. The first representation of the Promised Land we see is that it’s not a temporary land, but something given for *“everlasting possession”* (Genesis 17:8). What God has set aside for you to have is not circumstantial, temporary, or limited to this life. Instead, what He has prepared for you is eternal, which is a reflection of who He is. Meanwhile, Egypt represents a place of bondage and captivity.

A place we need to be rescued from. For many of us today that could be a place of sinful struggle, emotional damage, regret, bitterness, accusations from our past, internal scars inflicted by those whom we may once have trusted or loved, and much more.

Secondly, it's important to understand that the desert serves the purpose of stripping us down of the very things that have held us captive, and prevent us from seeing the promise of God. The Israelites when leaving Egypt, had a lot of baggage that needed to be emptied out. They needed to be brought back to reality. There was decades of Egyptian religious influences, and most likely even lifestyle choices they had adapted to as their own while living there. As a result, there was a mindset that needed to be restructured and faith that needed to be rebuilt - in other words, a spiritual detox was necessary before entering the new land to call 'home'. They couldn't bring Egyptian customs, traditions, or influences into the place that God had set apart for them. They had to be stripped away from everything they were used to so that they could understand the magnitude of what God was preparing them for. They had to get their ways of thinking in line with God's, and that often is an unpleasant journey for most of us.

A lot of us today struggle with this. We are ready to leave behind what we have been enslaved to, but we are not ready to put behind our old ways of thinking, our old ways of viewing God, or the poor character we have developed while we were enslaved. We want to experience the great promise of God while still giving permission to whatever is enslaving us to dictate our lives. We want God to bring us into the Promised Land while hanging on to the very things that God is trying to strip away from us in order to get into the Promised Land.

The scripture in Romans 12:2 which is a commonly quoted verse reminds us that we “*must be transformed by the renewing of our mind*” before we can even begin to understand God's perfect will for us. Why? Because what we know in our minds to be true is exactly what forms an undeniable conviction in our hearts of that truth – and that conviction eventually becomes an action. The mind when influenced by anything other than the Spirit of God, it becomes an instrument of evil. An instrument that does not yield to, obey, or understand God's plan. However, when it's transformed by the Spirit of God, it is then able to identify and respond to the will of God. It was for this reason that a lot of what the Israelites had become and adapted to, had to be stripped away in that desert. It is also for this very reason that today we find ourselves in seasons where we're walking through our own spiritual deserts.

Thirdly, we should all find comfort during such season of our walk in the truth that the desert is only a symbol for new beginnings, a place of transition. There is somewhere new that God is leading you into which requires you to cross through the desert first. The Israelites had to cross the desert before entering Canaan but they never had to settle in it, and that should be a comforting thought for those of us facing that season right now.

Lastly, I want to conclude by pointing out something special. The Israelites cried out to God for rescue, and God could have simply rescued them out of Egypt and then taken a step back saying “my job is done, go find a new land.” But you see, for God, rescuing them just wasn't enough. He also wanted to bless them with a new land to call their own so that they would never face that type of captivity, bondage, or slavery again. Although some of you reading this may be in that place where you are in desperate need of a rescue, remember that God is already seeing past your present circumstances; He's already seeing past the temporary desert that you're crossing. He's not determined to just to set you free. He's determined to lead you through that desert, renew you, and finally bless you with something that has been specifically set apart for you.

DAY 2: PRODUCING SPIRITUAL FRUIT

“I am the true vine [...] I am the true vine and you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” - John 15:1, 5

There are three significant truths about what Jesus says in the verse above. Firstly, He begins by saying *“I am”*. The first and most important truth we need to understand is that each time He makes this proclamation of *“I am”*, He is pointing out His divine purpose and identity. For example, in the previous chapter, John 14:6, He says *“I am the way, the truth, and the life”*. In John 18:6, He tells the soldiers that came to arrest Him *“I am He”*, which causes them to fall to the ground. These are examples in which we see Him revealing who He is and what authority has been given to Him. The word *“I am”* in Greek translates to an intense way of saying *“I myself, and only I am”*. Every time Jesus spoke of this truth not only was He showing us who He was, but He was making sure we got a glimpse of His power and purpose.

The second truth he reveals is that He is the vine, and we are the branches. Notice however in verse 1, He uses the word *“true vine”*. In most instances, the word *“true”* in the scripture is used to describe something eternal, divine, and heavenly. This goes back to what I mentioned in the beginning about Jesus revealing His identity. To understand the depth of this verse it's important to look at why Jesus uses the example of a vine and branches. A vine (Jesus) represents a few things. First, it represents a permanent union with the branches (us), and secondly it represents a sense of belonging. Branches (us) can only belong entirely to a vine if they are to have any growth. A vine is responsible for sustaining the branches and providing nourishment so that they may bear fruit. The purpose of a branch is to remain attached the vine and to bear fruit. There is nothing else it can accomplish aside from that, in fact it's useless if it cannot bear fruit and therefore is cut off. In other words, Jesus is clearly indicating that if we are to bear fruit then we are to remain in Him, as branches remain connected to the vine.

The third truth is that disconnected from Him we produce nothing. When we neglect our spiritual walk, dismiss the word of God, or withhold areas of our lives from the Holy Spirit we then begin to deprive ourselves of the nourishment we need in order to grow. You see, it's not important that we just bear fruit, but it's necessary that the fruit we bear is eternal. In Matthew 7:16-17 Jesus says, *“You will know them by their fruits [...]”* What you bear must be a reflection of who sustains your growth and life, and that can only be done by staying intimately connected to Jesus. Essentially our fruit reflects the vine which we are connected to, OR in some instances what we may not be connected to.

What we produce must be so rich that it does not only last eternally, but it also invites others around us to want to be connected to the same vine we are connected to. The only way we can bear anything eternal is by remaining in Him who IS eternal. It doesn't matter if you are someone in full time ministry, or someone with a secular profession. Whatever we are doing with our lives disconnected from Him is meaningless and fruitless. Whether it's in our ministries, our jobs, our schools, our goals and dreams, etc., although we may feel as though we we're acting “right”, walking “right”, or talking “right” the reality is that apart from Jesus we are experiencing no real power; and without real power, there is no real fruit.

As followers of Christ, it's absolutely important that we are aware of what we are producing through our works, through our thoughts and through our actions. Remaining in Christ is not simply proclaiming you remain Him and then carrying on with your life as you please. There is work behind that. There is obedience that is required, there are sacrifices to be made, and a standard that has to be met. There needs to be an acknowledgement of His presence and authority, as well as the recognition that He is the only sustaining source. Without these, what kind of fruits do we bare?

DAY 3: HIS RELENTLESS PURSUIT

“Your goodness and love chase after me every day of my life”

-Psalm 23:6

The dictionary defines the word pursuit as “to follow in order to overtake”, or to “win over”. In other words, when something is being pursued it’s for the purpose of being overtaken or won over.

Today, our understanding of pursuit has been slightly altered. We often pursue things or people out of the need for attention, out of loneliness, out of desperation, or we often pursue things or people without real purpose or intent. Although there is absolute truth in the fact that a person is at his best when in constant pursuit of God -- the truth is, the only reason a person is at his best when in pursuit of God is because our pursuit of Him is a response to the pursuit He has initiated from the beginning of time.

There is a distinct pattern of pursuit that we see take place all the way from the beginning in the Garden of Eden (book of Genesis). This is where we see God’s relentless pursuit of man begin. He first desires to create man in His image for the purpose of close fellowship, and for His pleasure. In Revelation 4:11 it says *“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”* Then in Colossians 1:16 we see a very similar point being made again as it says, *“All things were created by him and for him.”* From these two references we can take away two clear points: 1. We were created by His will and 2. We were created for Him. Being created for His pleasure does not translate to being created to entertain God. Rather, God is the ultimate creative creator therefore He delights in creating, and it brings Him even a greater sense of pleasure to have other beings in which He can have a genuine relationship with.

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages that God gave to mankind by creating us in His likeness is that it allows us to know God, to love God, and to build a relationship with Him in a way that no other form of creation ever could. The simple fact that we share traits with Him that no other form of life does is the very first proof that we were created with the purpose of fellowshiping with Him. He relates to us in the sense that He is able speak, hear, sense, feel, see, and touch – and He has made us in His likeness so that we can use those same traits to fellowship with Him in like manner. There was so much of Him that He desired to share and reveal. And this intense desire driven by a fierce love drove Him to create man.

With all of this in mind, God proceeded to create the first man –Adam. And the journey of God’s pursuit after man’s heart began in that moment. In fact His pursuit is what we will be focusing on in today’s devotional. One thing that’s evident is that despite God’s relentless pursuit of man, we see man running away from God.

In the book of Genesis, once Adam commits the first sin ever known by eating from the forbidden tree, he tries to hide from God. Yet we see God walking in the garden and calling out to Adam “But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). While Adam hid in shame from what he had done, God is still seen pursuing him. Adam’s sin wasn’t any kind of sin. It was a sin that ruined the perfect plan that God had for man. Yet, His pursuit never stopped. Further into Genesis we see the story of Hagar who was a maid to Sarah that ran off into the wilderness due to conflicts she was having with Sarah. We see God finding Hagar by a fountain of water to which

she responds to by saying A 15 day devotional for inspiration and growth. *“You are the God who sees me.”* (Genesis 16:13). Later, we see God pursue Moses to which He encounters Him for the first time through the burning bush (Exodus 3). He later pursues Gideon to reveal a great task for him regarding the people of Israel (Judges 6) and He continued on by pursuing Elijah while in the cave (1 Kings 19). In fact, some of these men were awakened to the reality that God was pursuing them when they least deserved to be pursued by Him. For instance Saul was pursued and encountered by God on the road to Damascus to persecute those who believed in the Lord (Acts 9).

Eventually God’s pursuit after the heart of man becomes so relentless that He gives His only son for the whole world (John 3:16). He willingly does this so that His creation can finally be awakened to the reality of His pursuit -- a pursuit that’s been driven by a furious love. Let’s make that personal for a second - the bible is a story of God’s relentless pursuit of you. To give you a better perspective of this truth, let’s focus on one particular story.

In the scripture, the book of Hosea discusses the story of Hosea who was prophet of God. God used Hosea to bring to life a consistent picture seen throughout the Old Testament. God’s chosen people were the Israelite’s, and throughout the Old Testament we see Him in constant pursuit of their hearts out of His great love for them. We see Him do so by delivering them from their oppressors, by blessing them abundantly, by fighting for them and by protecting them. The only request He makes of them is to remain faithful to Him. Remaining faithful to Him meant honoring Him, obeying His word, and worshipping no other gods but Him. However, for the Israelites (and for many of us today) the request to remain faithful to God was a challenging one to fulfill.

Imagine yourself marrying someone you love deeply. The proof of love for each other stands strong on your faithfulness to one another. The moment your spouse shares with someone else what he or she shares with you, that bond of faithfulness is broken (i.e. cheating). In the same manner, God viewed Israel as His wife and had made it clear that He did not intend to share her with others - *“You shall not have other gods before Me”* (Exodus 20:3). However, Israel’s passion and repeated attraction for other idols was like the lust of an adulterer. In other words, He viewed Israel’s worship of idols as adultery against Him.

Through this, we begin to see just how much our idolatry against God, feels to Him. In the same manner that a victim of an adulterous marriage is hurt, so is God when we begin to replace Him with others. When our worship is geared towards our success, our money, our husband or wife, our children, our accomplishments, our jobs, our possessions, or anything else outside of God Himself, then that bond of faithfulness is broken, and adultery against Him is committed. Yet through all of this, His relentless pursuit of their hearts (and of ours) continued. With this in mind, God tells Hosea, a prophet, to *“take a wife of harlotry”* (Hosea 1:2). By telling Him to do so, God would now allow Hosea to feel exactly what God felt with the people of Israel (and with us today).

Hosea does what God commands Him to do, and marries a prostitute named Gomer. Now, here is very interesting part that the Israelites, and also we can relate to today. When Gomer married Hosea she did not give up her career as a prostitute. In other words, Hosea didn’t pursue a woman who had left her history of prostitution in the past, or a woman who he was able to restore to virtue through love and kindness. He pursued and married a woman who was still living a life of prostitution. He pursued a woman of many imperfections and flaws. I am certain he believed that she would remain devoted to him, and in the bible we see that their first few years of marriage as their love blossomed, she did remain faithful. Unfortunately, later on we see her fall back into the old lifestyle that she seemed to have left behind. Yet Hosea’s pursuit of Gomer despite of her many flaws never ceased, in the same manner God’s pursuit of us never does. Like many of us today, God is not waiting to pursue us once we have reached a place perfection. He is not looking for, or wait-

ing for us to be perfect before we are worthy of His pursuit. Rather, our response to His pursuit is what begins our transformation to becoming like Him. He pursues for us relentlessly and with such passion while we are the furthest away from Him. Perhaps this may be something we never fully grasp or understand but this truth is forever unchanging –that in our darkest time, is when He is pursuing for us the most.

Here are a couple of reminders to keep in mind. 1. God's pursuit of us is based on His nature. He pursues you NOT because of who you are, but in spite of who you are. His pursuit of you is birthed out of His nature of loving you, and out of His initial plan of wanting to be in a relationship with you. His pursuit of you is not on your response to His nature. This is why it will never matter who you are, what you have done, or where you have or where you have been. Throughout the scripture, God's constant invitation is to come to Him as we are. There is nothing you can do to stop this invitation or His pursuit over your life. It began in that Garden with Adam, and it will continue all throughout eternity.

2. Our response does not change His pursuit. If God has been pursuing man since Adam, then He's certainly not going to stop at you. Much like the prostitute Gomer, we are people of many flaws. We are unfaithful, stubborn, and restless. Think about this for a second - if we responded to people's pursuit of us, in the same manner most of us respond to God's pursuit of us, then we would die lonely. Yet understand this, nothing in your power will ever stop Him from pursuing you. Whether you choose to love Him, or remain faithful to Him, or not; He will always be chasing after you.

As I conclude, I will leave you with these last thoughts. Man has always been running from God because of his sin, while God has always been running after man because of His love. The pursuit of God is driven by His greatest desire to love which is not attached to, or based on our character or response. Even though we run after our own pursuits which are usually in the opposite direction from Him; His quest for us will always remain relentless.

DAY 4: ALWAYS PRESENT

“... And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

A few weeks ago I was in New York for a short trip. One night, on my way back to where I was staying, my phone battery died. Since it was late and I was alone in an unfamiliar place, I decided to stop by the Starbucks for a few minutes to charge my phone in case of an emergency. I found one empty seat right beside a group of people having a serious conversation and decided to sit there while waiting on my phone to charge. As I began listening to what they were talking about I realized that they were discussing matters related to God.

Shocked and excited to see this, my attention shifted to them so much that they noticed me, and invited me to join in on their conversation. The next two hours were nothing but the most refreshing two hours I've ever spent with strangers. Since the Starbucks was closing we were forced to leave and end our discussion outside. As we were saying our goodbyes it was only fitting that we'd bring this beautiful encounter to an end with a word of prayer.

Right before we began praying, one of the gentleman said “I don't believe in coincidences. There is a reason why our paths crossed in the way they did. Perhaps this is a great reminder to us all that no matter where we go, God will always find ways to remind us that His presence is there.” As I carried on the rest of my way, I kept thinking about what that man had said. It was truly beautiful and refreshing to be reminded that no matter where we go, and what we do, God will find unexpected ways to remind us that He is always there. My experience that night became the highlight of my trip, and perhaps one of the most unforgettable encounters of my life.

Sometimes we get caught up in life. We get caught up in chasing after our dreams, satisfying our own needs, and working hard to achieve our own goals (which are all good things to do) but in the process of doing so, we slowly forget about His presence – the very presence that enables us to do all that we are able to do. No matter how strong, determined, or capable we are of making things happen, we need to understand that it's *“In Him we live and move and exist”* (Acts 17:28).

Let's get a little deeper about God's presence. Our world today hardly acknowledges God, let alone His presence around us. Even for those of faith, sometimes the concept that God is always present is a hard one to grasp. For many of us the proof of His presence has always been there, sadly enough, we've made a constant decision to miss the opportunities to see it. While we are all waiting for something big and magical to happen, we fail to realize that love, grace, peace, and joy are all evidence of His presence. A bit silly that we expect for greater evidence of His presence when we first can't acknowledge what's already evident right before us.

An author by the name of Louise Brown Wilson wrote a book titled “Inner Tenderings“. In her book she discusses acknowledging God's presence by using the example of a barber and his shop that she would always see in passing. Rain or shine, this barber would always sit in a chair outside of his shop in case any business came. She continues by saying the following “God is like the barber. He is always present whether we stop by or not; whether we talk to Him or not. God is present all the time. We have turned it around backwards. We should always be present, so when God stops by we will see God. We will be there to talk with Him. 1. Acknowledging His presence requires a heart that is willing to feel it.

Imagine being married to a someone who caters to you and always looks out for your best interest. Always showering you with acts of kindness that represent the love they have for you. Always there supporting you through every dream you pursue and protecting you from harm. None of which your spouse does for you could be appreciated, unless you make the choice to acknowledge what they have done for you, and the lengths they have gone to make you happy. In other words, you can't appreciate something good unless you acknowledge and realize that it's good.

The same concept applies to God's presence. Just because you are choosing to not acknowledge Him, it does not mean He's not there - it simply means that you haven't acknowledged and understood the goodness of His presence. Acknowledging His presence is a choice we must first make in our hearts – a choice that requires faith.

2. His presence doesn't leave us the same way it found us. Once your heart acknowledges His presence, it allows for His presence to work within you. In other words, acknowledging His presence doesn't just reveal to us who He is, but it opens the door for Him to mold us into being like Him. There are many things in our lives, and in our world that need healing, and transformation. The only way that change and transformation can begin is when we allow for His presence to work. If friends, and other influences have the power to change us, then imagine the power that the presence of God would have over our lives, if we only allowed it too.

Lastly, remain consistent. God is unchanging. He's there, always has been and always will be. He has eternity, and He's certainly not going anywhere. If anything has changed in your ability to see Him, or feel Him then you need to re-evaluate your heart and the state that it's in.

You see, trying to be mindful of God's presence, while still living in the flesh is not easy. We are always faced with different challenges that often pull us away, or distract us. It's our job to do things conducive to keeping God's presence in mind. It's our responsibility (not our church's, not our friend's, not our family's) to remain consistent in our initiative to seek the Lord – after all, if He's truly wanted then He's truly found (Deuteronomy 4:29).

“There's a reason they call God a presence- because God is right here, right now.”

- Elizabeth Gilbert

DAY 5: WHY ME?

In almost all cases, the first question we ask when we are facing struggles or when we hurt is “why me?”. We all feel as though we have been abandoned by God, and left to fend for ourselves. We can’t seem to understand or accept the fact that sometimes it’s through the pain, and from the hurt, that good things are birthed. It’s from the most unpleasant experiences that the most valuable lessons are learned. It’s in the most weakest places of life that your strength is perfected. It’s in such “hurts” that you are made tougher, and stronger. Take a look at the life of Jacob. If there is one thing we can take away from his life, it’s that it was one filled with never ending struggles. From the moment he stole his brother Esau’s birthright (who he kept running away from out of fear for his life), to the way he was treated by his father in law, there wasn’t much “good” in his life. When fleeing his family wasn’t enough, Jacob later meets the real struggle of all struggles when faced to wrestle with God.

Imagine being continually burned out by struggles of life. Having no more energy, yet being faced with the challenge of wrestling God. Although Jacob had probably been so sick and tired of all he had already been facing, he continued to wrestle until he couldn’t anymore. In fact, the bible tells us that he wrestled with God until the socket of his hip was touched causing him to limp.

In other words, he didn’t give up, but God saw His persistence and finally put all of his struggles to rest – it was in that moment that his struggles, his past and everything he was running from was finally brought to an end. The transition of ‘Jacob to Israel’ did not happen while he was sleeping, or while he was frolicking through the sun enjoying his day. It was birthed out of struggle, out of exhaustion, out of pain. The bible tells us in Genesis 32:28 *“Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”* In other words, he proved to be more powerful and victorious than he thought, but he did so through his pain. His blessings did not come out of a place of comfort, but they were birthed out of a place of discomfort. Keep in mind that only after he faced his struggles was he able to receive his greater blessings.

You may ask, how does this relate to you and I. We all ask this repeatedly, “God, how could you say you love me, but let me go through this?” But do you know what His response will be to you?” I let you go through it BECAUSE I love you”. We forget that God doesn’t just use the “happy days” to bring something new, and of greater worth into our lives. God uses even the ugliest, the weakest, the most vulnerable state of our being, our struggle, our pain, to bless us in an immeasurable way. The other important point to keep in mind is that Jacob did not face God outside of his already existing struggles – he faced Him while he was going through everything else. God will allow certain situations, and certain “burns” not to harm you but to allow your growth, your strength, your leadership, your abilities, your identity, your worth, your trust in Him to be perfected.

I hope this story has inspired you to look at your pain, and your struggles as the beginning to your transition. Remind yourself that you have not, and will not ever go through something that someone else has not already faced and conquered. There are never new battles, only new soldiers.

DAY 6: NO TITLE

I decided not to give a title for this one. I wanted you to read it, see how it applies in your life, and title it as you see fit for yourself. For some of you this post might be a reminder, for others a wake up call, and for the rest perhaps just another post. However it applies to you, I leave that decision in your hands. Before getting into the core of what I wanted to share with you this week, I wanted to start off by sharing a short story. At the beginning of the summer, a group of friends and I decided to take a short trip to New York. One of the days there, our group split up and a few of us decided to check out a different part of town, while others went to do some sightseeing. Our group decided to go to Manhattan, and about 30 minutes into our train ride we started to realize we were heading to Queens instead. The problem was that since we were in a group together we all got so comfortable that we stopped paying attention to any of the signs that indicated we were going the wrong way. In fact, we got so comfortable that we didn't realize we were heading the wrong way until the train peaked out and we saw Manhattan from a distance on the opposite side. Once we realized our error, we had to back track our steps which took even longer, but a couple of hours later we made it. Although we laughed it off that experience had me thinking that night.

Sometimes, the ride we're on gets so comfortable that we forget why we got on it, and stop paying attention to where we're going. How many of us set out to do something in our lives but get distracted by the noise and company around us? How many times do we leave our comfort place for the sake of pursuing greatness but settle for the ordinary?

The road to greatness, to success, to growth, and to anything that is designed to make you into a better person will not be an easy one – in fact it's the hardest road you'll ever be on. There are many times in life that we will rise up for such pursuit and half way through it we just get lost and either give up, or we get too comfortable and settle. There needs to be focus, there needs to be discipline, and there needs to be consistency with our pursuits for results to be seen in our lives. I say this because too often I see many with great ambition, and huge potential that lack the discipline, and focus needed to achieve the great things they were created to achieve. We don't want to sacrifice, we don't want to be challenged, we don't want to let go of the very things that we know are holding us back, we don't want to form habits that will help us stay consistent, and we tend to reject discipline; yet somehow, we hope to accomplish great things. The change that you want to see in the world around you, must first begin within yourself, or else too much ambition without focus and without discipline, becomes nothing more but talk without substance.

We talk about how awesome God is, and often spend countless hours preaching Jesus to others, but we can't seem to be consistent with Him ourselves. We talk about how we want to be a positive influence, and impact the world around us, yet we don't want the discipline that comes with being that positive influence. We desire for the great things that God has for us, but we don't want to be obedient and focused. We are so distracted by what others are or aren't doing. We are distracted by the different direction others want to see us take in life; we are distracted by imitating the lifestyle of others around us, than striving to imitate the God that has called us to imitate Him.

We have all of this background noise made up of expectations and desires from others, that most times we struggle reaching that greatness that God has called us to live. Just like that train ride, we get so comfortable in the ride that we miss all the signs which indicate we're going the wrong way. Because we choose to focus on what does not matter, we fail to see the potential and opportunity we have been given to be influential, to be world changers, to impact, and to inspire.

The greatest things that we could ever accomplish and the greatest people we could ever be, will not come from an ordinary place of comfort. It will not happen while we're too busy settling for whatever we can. It will not happen while we underestimate ourselves, or doubt our abilities. It will not happen while we're caught up living for the simple (and very temporary) pleasures of this world; it will not happen while we're distracted by the noise around us, and the company we're surrounded by. It will not happen while we "go with the flow" and tag along someone else's path. The only way we will stand firm and be the brightest light this dark world has ever seen; the only way we will fulfill the very purpose we were created to fulfill is when we first remain focused and grounded in Him. I say that with great emphasis, because so many of us are often left confused, or discouraged, and tend to give up easily due to the frustration caused from mixing in different voices, influences, and different sources of inspiration, to nurture a God given talent, gift, or ability.

With that being said, I am not going to conclude this note by simply telling you to put God first. In addition to being focused on Him, you have to be an individual that understands and believes you have the potential to be great, but for that potential to flourish you must take responsibility. The desire for change, can't remain just a desire. You must form habits that will help you remain consistent. With each waking day, you have to remind yourself who you are and where you're going. You can't wake up every morning with new desires for greatness, but keep old habits – that just doesn't work. At the start of this note, I said that the road to greatness is the hardness one you'll ever be on – and now I want to conclude with reminding you that again. It will never be easy when you push yourself to be the best you can be. It will be rough, exhausting and challenging but do you know what the Psalmist did? he cried out to Him, *"But in my distress I cried out to the LORD; yes, I prayed to my God for help. He heard me from his sanctuary; my cry to him reached his ears."* (Psalms 18:6). CRY OUT out to Him for the seed of discipline and consistency in your life. Instead of giving up cry out to Him for a heart that is focused, and reliant on His guidance. Cry out to Him so that He can help you stay focused and alert. Cry out to Him for the strength you need to be a person of action, and not just of dreams and empty words.

DAY 7: COST OF GRACE

I wanted to take the time out to discuss with you something that has been on my heart for quite some time. We hear about it every time we are being preached at; we constantly either quote it, or hear others quoting “where sin abounds, grace abounds more” etc. but lately I am beginning to wonder if we really understand what grace is – more importantly – if we understand it’s value. When you read this post, put aside everything you have heard and examine your own self ... hopefully it speaks to you accordingly.

For those reading who are unfamiliar with the term grace, it’s best known as the “unmerited favor of God” or simply put, the kindness/goodness of God shown to mankind even when undeserved. Sounds good right? God’s kindness being shown to us without a cost – who can say “no” to that? Yet it’s this extreme kindness that I fear we have greatly misunderstood, and greatly misused. A German theologian by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book titled *The Cost of Discipleship* which was published in 1937. In his book he discusses the overall idea of what the calling to discipleship, and faithfulness to the teachings of Christ means to different individuals today. He continues to further explain his thoughts by introducing the term Cheap Grace versus Costly Grace - and today, that’s what I want to discuss with you.

Perhaps the most comforting thought after realizing we have failed or sinned is knowing that we have a merciful God who is always ready to forgive. We know that His love for us surpasses any weakness, any flaw, and any struggle we may have – but at what point are we taking advantage of His goodness? Lately, I’ve spent a lot of time talking to many Christians and observing the frightening mentality we have developed towards grace. As disappointing as it is, I often hear many say “I know I’m not living right but that’s ok because God’s grace is still sufficient” – PAUSE!! Is sufficient grace there for you so that you may continue to live in sin? Paul asks the same question in the book of Romans by saying: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? [...] Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” He then answers this question with a very clear response: “By no means!” Grace may be sufficient but nobody ever said it was cheap. It’s not an excuse for us to use so that we may continue to justify our sinful lifestyle choices. Yes, I say choices because every individual is faced with the choice of obedience or disobedience. For as long as you have free will, you are constantly exercising the choices you have. Sufficient grace came to you at someone’s expense, an expense that you never had to pay ... and if you understand the cost that had to be paid, then you will realize that grace was never cheap – rather, very costly. Perhaps it’s the value we have placed on grace that has resulted in the abuse of it. Our lack of understanding in the cost that we never had to pay may be why we’ve put a cheap cost on grace. Cheap grace doesn’t come with discipline, it doesn’t come with the conviction of wanting to change. Cheap grace doesn’t value Christ, or the sacrifice of the cross. Cheap grace tells you that if you sin, it’s ok because as long as you’re forgiven you can relax and go back to doing the same old thing – it doesn’t push towards a life of repentance and consistency. Whereas costly grace convicts you of your ways, and challenges you to follow Christ with your life. It reminds you of the price paid on the cross. Costly grace compels you to submit to the yoke of Christ. Costly grace compels you to submit to the yoke of Christ. Costly grace reminds you that it’s not there to promote a lifestyle of sin, but it’s there to help strengthen a lifestyle of righteousness.

So I want to ask you this: What’s the cost of grace to you? Do not misunderstand this post as one written to judge, or condemn you. As a matter of fact, I’m also speaking to myself as I share with you.

However, I want you to look at your walk with God and re-evaluate the value that you have placed on what He has given you freely. The problem with so many of us who have done this “church life” for a while is that sometimes we get a little too comfortable with this “Christian life” that we’re attempting to live. Truth is, your call to follow Him was never meant to be a life of comfort – you were never meant to get comfortable and “chill”. If you are striving to live a life of righteousness, of obedience, of sacrifice, of discipline then it will constantly be a journey of discomfort because you are going against the desires of your flesh to please the desires of the Spirit. It’s a dangerous zone to be in when we feel like we know it all too well, and somehow find ourselves abusing the tools that have been given to us to assist us along the way.

So, let’s stop wasting time. Let’s stop going back and rolling around in that same mud we were once desperate to get cleansed from. We are a people that know much, and therefore much is expected of us. Let’s not constantly go backwards when there is so much more for us ahead. Christ was tortured and crucified on the cross once before so that you may reap the continued benefits of sufficient grace. When you choose to abuse that benefit, you’re choosing to torture and crucify Him all over again – every single time.

DAY 8: INSPIRED BY HIM

One morning as I arrived to work, two gentlemen walked in behind me and waited for the elevator with me. As we got in the elevator, one of them asked the other “how are you today?” then the other gentleman responded saying “not good, I’m still on this earth”. Standing in that elevator and hearing his response shocked me, but saddened me even more. I wanted to say something, but all I could do was walk out of the elevator thinking to myself “how did he get here?” This week, I wanted to use this short experience of this man to discuss something that also happens to be the title of this blog site.

At what point does life lose its flavor and become bitter? For those reading this who are in a similar place as that man in the elevator, what step(s) have you missed along the way that has sucked out the genuine joy of life out of you? I’m not asking these questions because I have all the answers you need, or because I’m able to solve your problems. Rather, I am only here to share something that will refresh your mind and allow you to understand the importance of the role of God in the way we live life. This is not a post advertising religion, or selling Christianity as a last minute resort to “try out”. Hear me out, and perhaps you might realize what it is that you have been missing all along. In the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 2:17-26 the author says *“So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?”*

For quite some time now, I believe that we slowly have become a people in which we have separated the different areas in our lives apart from the source. We have somehow found this extreme confidence in what we can do for ourselves and have flashed the “I’m independent” card to God. We have slowly pushed Him further and further away from our lives. We seem to be really good with Sundays at church, but when church is over we leave God in the sanctuary and walk out. The only time we seem to care, need, or remember Him is during an intense worship set. The only time He inspires us to be like Him seems to be when someone is on a pulpit preaching passionately about Him.

We don’t seek to be inspired, or guided by the spirit of God anymore. Life is lived by our own rules, decisions are made based on our feelings, and we turn to different sources of inspiration for the different areas of our lives adding only more confusion and chaos – BUT let me ask you this: What would happen if we changed that? What would happen if we dared and allowed Him to inspire every area of our life, every single day? Imagine if He was our main source of inspiration in our relationships, our careers, our passion, our dreams and goals, our daily interactions, our churches, our thoughts, our every move, and most importantly our inspiration in the way we interact His love with the rest of the world.

Every source of accomplishment, every bit of wisdom, even the ability to work and earn a living is all meaningless if it’s without God and His inspiration. You are surviving through each day, but you’re not fully living this life – the writer in Ecclesiastes was a person just like yourself living on the same earth you live in, experiencing the same struggles of life that you face today. Yet, in the end he realized that it’s all meaningless and tasteless if it’s without God. You see, when we live life being inspired by Him, then we are imitating Him. When we imitate Him we begin to see life through His lenses. We begin to understand His heart, and learn His character.

There is no point in shaking your head in disappointment and grumbling when you look around you and see a Godless church, a Godless environment or a Godless world. The reason why we see

the absence of God in the lives of those we love, and in the world around us is because in many ways we ourselves (as a body and as individuals) have stopped drawing inspiration from Him in the way we live.

You see, without God and His inspiration life becomes a journey we hate and can't wait to get out of. When we choose to keep Him in a box we miss out on the hope and strength that comes from Him to make it through. Just as that man in the elevator instead of waking up and being hopeful of what lies ahead, we wake up regretting that we are still living. The way that this man in the elevator felt was very much similar to the way the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us he felt. So, as this week begins I want to challenge you to return to that place where He is your main source of inspiration. Let Him inspire you to live the way he desires you to live, to love the way He loves, to forgive the way He forgives, to be faithful the way He's faithful, to be patient the way He's patient.

Let Him inspire your daily life and see the difference that your life will make in others around you, beginning with yourself.

DAY 9: A PROMISE

I would like to discuss something that is very important to all of us. Although it might sound very simple, I want you to really think about each word you read. In the end, carefully ask yourself this question: “What do God’s promises mean to me?”

Before we get into it, I hope you understand the significance of a promise. A promise is a declaration – it’s the assurance of something. When someone gives you their word, that word is to be trusted by you, and fulfilled by the one who made the promise. For example, marriage begins with the union of two people bound in their promise to love, cherish, and be faithful to each other. Secondly, although promises are verbal declarations, they are further validated when carried out into actions. If you promise to love, then your behavior, character and life must be a reflection of the promise you made to actually love. A promise that is not followed with an action loses its credibility, and gives a reflection of a poor character on the one who initially made a promise.

One of my favorite verses in the bible is found in Psalms chapter 119, verse 50 it says, *“My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life”*. From the moment I laid eyes on this verse, each time I think about it something within me can’t help but react – it causes an immediate emotional reaction within me. It becomes overwhelming to know that there is a God who has made me a promise strong enough to sustain me until this very moment. A promise that He will never back out on because He is faithful, and a promise that I never did anything to deserve. Throughout the bible there are many promises that we see God make to His people. Promises of rescue, protection, guidance, victory, comfort, and much more. In all instances we simply see Him giving His word of assurance and following that word of assurance with His actions. Although there are many references to use, I would like to focus on one particular man named Joseph.

If you would like to read in detail, Joseph’s story begins in Genesis chapter 37. In a family of 12, Joseph was the youngest son to his father Jacob. Being the youngest son, his father loved and favored him the most. This favoritism began causing jealousy in the hearts of his older brothers and would eventually lead them to do the unspeakable. One night, Joseph had a dream. He told his brothers that in his dream they had all been in the harvest field tying up the corn, when all of a sudden he saw their sheaves of corn bow down to his. Another night, he had a different dream in which he saw the sun and moon, and eleven stars all bowing down to him as if he were a king. Naturally, this only increased the jealousy of his brothers against him which led them to conspire against him and sell him off to a merchant without their father’s knowledge. Eventually Joseph ends up in Egypt where he is sold as a slave to a rich man named Potiphar. To make matters worse, Potiphar’s wife lusts after Joseph and tries to pursue him. When he rejects her she makes false accusations against him, and gets him sent to prison for years.

Now keep in mind, this man’s life seems only to have gotten worse after seeing these dreams. In fact, the dreams he saw years before, now seem to be completely irrelevant to where his life is at and where it seems to be heading. Perhaps what seems even more heartbreaking in all of this, is that he has done nothing wrong. You see, sometimes we hear or see the promises that God made us, and because He is faithful to keep His word He won’t fall short of bringing it to completion... but the question is, do we trust His promises enough to hang onto Him no matter what? What do God’s promises mean to you? Joseph’s story only begins to change when years later, the Pharaoh is troubled by a dream he keeps having. After many tried to interpret the dream and failed, one of Pharaoh’s servants who used to be in jail with Joseph remembered that Joseph had the ability to interpret dreams and that he was still in jail. Pharaoh then requests for him to come out of prison and asks for his dream to be interpreted. When all that Joseph had interpreted about Pharaoh’s

dream came to pass, Joseph was then released and made Governor of Egypt. Meanwhile, back in the land of Canaan where Joseph's brothers and father lived there was a famine. Their father sends them to Egypt to buy corn from the Governor, not realizing that the Governor they would have to bow down to in respect was the little brother they sold off years ago. Isn't it interesting that Joseph had to go from being "daddy's favorite boy" – to being a slave – to being a prisoner – and then to being a Governor before the promise of God was fulfilled in his life?

He had to hit the lowest and most miserable place in his life, before he could see the days of these promises being fulfilled. Of course, I am not saying that you will always have to hit rock bottom before you see good things coming your way but think about all the traumatic experiences he went through. He watched in fear and probably even cried as his own brothers sold him off to a merchant. Then he became a slave against his will, and at last got sent to jail without having committed a crime. Think about what must have been going through his mind as life seemed to be spiraling out of control. Think about what he must have been thinking during all the dark nights he spent alone in prison for years. What did God's promise mean to Joseph?

For most of us today it doesn't take long before we toss out God's promises and completely forget what He has already set out to do in our lives. For a moment, let's forget years in prison or slavery – If we were 'Joseph' we would have probably given up on whatever God had promised us the minute we sensed our brothers getting jealous. We would have gotten sensitive and emotional, or upset, and walked away in that instance. And that itself is the issue with so many of us. We have no problem receiving the promise of God, or even asking God to hurry up and fulfill it. However, as soon as the journey of fulfilling that promise begins we want to crawl under a rock. We need to understand that it's not the promise of God that we lack in our lives, instead it's the trust to see God's promises being fulfilled, so I ask again - what do God's promises mean to you?

Look at the Israelites, God made them a promise to bring them out of the land of Egypt which He did. He promised them that He would defend them against Pharaoh's armies, and He did. He promised to provide them with food, protection, shelter, victory, and He did. Yet their rebellious, stubborn, doubtful and impatient ways delayed some of those promises from being fulfilled because they constantly lacked the trust they needed, to see these promises complete. Keep in mind unlike Joseph, the Israelites were in constant communication with God through Moses. They knew when God was angry with them, they knew when He was pleased with them, they saw God perform wonders and miracles right before their eyes. Yet, after all of that we see how lightly they regarded God's promise and how quickly they would fall back in doubting God and His word. Whereas Joseph, he had no one to encourage him. The only hope he had were the two dreams he saw as a young boy, and the trust in God that no matter what happened to him, God would still remain faithful.

There are a few things we always ought to keep in mind. First off, when God makes a promise it's an assurance that whatever it is, it will happen. As we have mentioned earlier He is faithful to keep His word, and His word will always be followed by an action – nothing He says will ever go in vain. Secondly, we need to remind ourselves that with His promise also comes hope. Hope is there to remind you, and to help you hang on during the journey of fulfillment. It's there to help produce endurance for the journey towards seeing God's promises being fulfilled.

Joseph endured many challenges, and traumatic experiences before he saw the promise of God being fulfilled. At any time he could have thrown his hands up in the air and walked away, and I'm sure we could have all justified that but he didn't. He remained still and held onto the hope that came with that promise because that's how valuable and meaningful God's promise meant to him. If there is one thing Joseph fully understood despite the many challenges he faced was that, God

was going to remain faithful and keep His word.

To conclude I will leave you with this reminder. When the promise of God begins to work in your life, you will face trials. You will face challenges and go through situations that will often try to pull you down and keep you away from seeing the promise of God being fulfilled in your life. Sometimes, such challenges and trials will be permitted by God not to discourage you, but to allow for your character to be built, and for your endurance to grow stronger. Remember, it's not what you go through but your attitude and character while going through the challenges that will determine your ability of seeing God's promises fulfilled in your life. Hang on to the hope found in His word and remember that He (God) who started it, will get you through it and complete it.

“God is not human, that He should lie, not a human being, that He should change His mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?” - Numbers 23:19

DAY 10: THE POWER OF WORDS

“The tongue has the power of life and death ...” - Proverbs 18:21

We always hear people talk about the importance of having a positive attitude. It is believed that the more of a positive behavior, and character we have, the more of a positive outcome we'll have in different areas of our life. Not sure how many of us actually believe this, but there is a significant amount of truth in this. Let's talk about it.

A few years ago I spent a short time volunteering for this organization that worked with street kids. These kids were coming from deeply troubled homes, or no homes at all, and in most cases they were involved in crimes or had recently gotten out of correctional facilities etc. They were kids fueled with a lot of anger, and a rough attitude. Although my duties did not directly involve me with the kids, I spent enough time in the environment watching the way in which professional mentors motivated and influenced their lives. Every mentor was instructed to begin their meeting by saying that “the first step towards a change, is a verbal declaration”. In other words, their message was that you had to speak life into the change you wanted to see. Before these kids could start using the professional help, and resources they had available, they first had to verbally declare the change they wanted to take place in their lives.

It's quite interesting to see how much power we possess in the words that we speak, yet the sad reality is that we often either dismiss the power that we have, or we abuse it. Think about it, how often do we use our words to speak life into situations that are hopeless? How often do we use our words to encourage and build ourselves as well as one another, as opposed to destroy ourselves, and each other? How often do the words we speak bless those around us? We easily bypass the damage that we can cause with our words, or the restoration of life that we can bring through our words in our lives, and in the lives of those around us. The choice on whether or not we are going to use our words to build or destroy is left up to us .. *“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up”* – Ephesians 4:29.

What you speak is not only a reflection of your character, but most importantly of your heart *“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart”* (Matthew 15:18). Words are powerful tools, that cannot be taken back – they can only proceed to either make, or break their target. Do we understand this? The way you speak and what you speak about your life, your circumstances and situations, others around you, even yourself, is exactly what you will see. You will either bring life into something, or completely take the life out of something through the words you speak.

As this week begins, I urge you to remember the power that you have. Don't be quick to speak negativity over your life or over those who are in your life. When things around you are falling apart, start building them back up with your words and positive attitude. Remember, your tongue has the power of life and death.

DAY 11: SURVIVING QUICKSAND

A few nights ago I was watching a documentary on some of the natural dangers faced in certain parts of the world today. One of those dangers was quicksand. In fact, there was a time in the world when it was considered to be the most dangerous and life threatening trap to step into. To give you an idea, quicksand is basically wet sand that easily yields to pressure and sucks anything that rests or falls on it. As dangerous and life threatening as it seems it most certainly can be survived – in fact laws of physics make it nearly impossible for a person to sink more than waist deep (unless they are really trying to die). It will be challenging and time consuming to get out, but nonetheless a person will not get sucked in completely to point of death. However, there are a few points needed in order to survive.

Much like quicksand, there will be problems in life that will try to suck you under but it's important that in those situations, you stay calm. This always sounds easier said than done, but you have to understand that the more you struggle the deeper you will sink. Learn to control your spirit and most importantly, learn to trust that God is in control. In 2 Samuel 22:31 it says *“He is a shield to all who trust in Him.”* When you are too busy struggling and panicking to save yourself, it will be hard to keep yourself floating, and even that much harder to see the hand that stretches over you to pull you out. Remember, in all circumstances, problems, and through every obstacle you face, God remains consistent – He will always have the power to calm your storms, question is: will you let Him? Secondly, get rid of any extra weight that may pull you in deeper. This is really important. It's bad enough that you are trying to keep your own head above, but additional weight such as doubt, fear, (complaining) grumbling etc. will only pull you down even further. In Isaiah 41:10 it says *“So do not fear, for I am with you do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”* Do you understand what this is? This is a promise that has been made to you long before you even faced your quicksand. Therefore, you ought to rest on the knowledge and promise that's already been made. Your faith in Him, will enable you to see His power over you.

The last few words I'd like to leave you with are these: Don't be so concerned on how to avoid the quicksand, that you forget to take notes on the survival tips you will need to get through the quicksand. It's not about avoiding traps, or problems in life that matter – it's learning how to get through them that matter the most. That's where your strength, and your testimony will come from – that's where your endurance and resilience will be tested. A calm spirit with faith will always allow you to get through.

DAY 12: FIX YOUR GAZE

“Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.” – Proverbs 4:25

This week I found myself constantly thinking about the story of Lot and his family. For those of you who are unfamiliar with who Lot was, I'll give a brief explanation. His story begins in the book of Genesis, chapter 19. He and his wife along with their two daughters lived in a city called Sodom. Now, at the time this city was full of wickedness and sin that was extremely grievous to God, therefore He had decided to destroy the city. However, Lot and his family were the only ones that found favor in God's eyes and were provided with means to escape the wrath.

Here is the specific point I wanted to focus on. Before the great destruction began, as Lot and his family were being led out of the city the angels of the Lord specifically instructed Lot saying, *“don't look back”*. However, as the destruction begins and they are journeying ahead to a place of safety, Lot's wife decides to look back and see what was happening to the city. Unfortunately, her curiosity and decision to look back cost her life, as the bible tells us that *“Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt”* (Genesis 19:26). Isn't it sad that she ends up dying from the same thing she was given an opportunity to escape from? Quite a sad way to go.

We may not literally turn into pillars of salt but how many times have we decided to look back at our past, our mistakes, our worthless treasure, our regrets, our old sorrows, past pain; instead of looking ahead to the great promises, new beginnings, and blessings that are yet to be received by us? You always hear these sayings about “never looking back”, or “leave the past in the past”, but think about that. What do you have behind you that's worth so much more than what is new, and ahead of you? Whatever you have behind you is no longer of any worth to you. It's behind you and out of your sight because it serves you no purpose. It's not worth looking at, or thinking about anymore. It doesn't nourish your growth, and it doesn't strengthen your character.

It's a mystery to me, and perhaps to you too as to why Lot's wife would choose to look back knowing the great destruction that was taking place. Perhaps a part of her thought “all that hard work I put into that house and now it's burning up”, or she might have thought, “my precious possessions and belongings I worked hard for”, or it could have simply been curiosity. Yet, whatever forced her to look back is an indication that she valued what she was losing more, than what she was about to gain. Instead of looking straight ahead to what she would have inherited in place of her loss, she decided to look back and lose her life along with what she had already lost. Her choice to hold on to her past resulted only in her untimely death. In a sense, that is what we do to ourselves every time we struggle to let go of our past, and to all that is already been put behind us.

When you look back, you lose focus of your direction ahead. You can't keep moving forward if you're too busy looking back, or holding on to what you have already left behind. One day a few years ago I was swimming in a pool, and the other half of the pool was closed off for a group of swimmers that were being trained. Right before they dived into the water, their coach said “before you jump in the water, look ahead of you and see where you are going.” Although it didn't really click at first, he later on explained by saying that when you look ahead you are able to

stay focused because you are moving closer to the destination that you saw before you got into the water.

I believe the same applies to our lives. The verse in Proverbs I chose to use for this post specifically instructs us to fix our gaze to what's directly ahead of us. There is far more that's of great value ahead, than there is behind. Your greatest days are yet to come. If we are moving forward and striving to grow, and be better, and wiser, and stronger. then we can't run towards all of that with our heads turned backwards, and our hands full of what we should be letting go. Therefore, as this week begins I challenge you to look at your life and ask yourself these questions. What is it that you are still struggling to let go? What do you keep turning back for? What's in the past, that you can't leave in the past? Most importantly, what are you doing or holding on to, that's preventing you from seeing the great blessings that God has prepared ahead of you?

"... Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me" - Philippians 3:13-14

DAY 13: SCARS

Scars are not beautiful – at least, so we’re told. No one likes to see them, and almost everyone puts in the effort to hide them. They remind us of our pain and suffering, our trials and tribulations, and they serve as a reminder of an unpleasant time that we hope we could forget. We have been convinced that their appearance takes away from our beauty and the “perfect” image we try to portray. So naturally we respond to that belief by doing whatever it takes to hide them. Sadly enough, in doing so we completely miss the greater story our scars tell.

The truth is, every scar is there for a reason. Every scar is there to remind you not only of what you have been through, but the strength you had to overcome that difficult time. It’s not a symbol of defeat, rather of victory and endurance. Past the pain, and past the suffering, there is a mark to remind you that you have conquered and have been healed – there is no longer an open wound. The very scar you carry serves as a reminder that you were built for greatness and that you have a greater purpose which could not have been stopped.

In 2 Corinthians 11:24-25, Paul specifically describes the suffering he endured by saying *“from the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep”*. Can you imagine how ugly the scars on Paul’s body must have looked? Yet despite their physical appearance, his scars were able to tell a story no one else could deny. His scars spoke in volumes of his strength, endurance and commitment to the purpose God had for him. Most importantly, his scars were proof that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord. Isn’t it amazing to know that only God would take our scars and turn them into badges of honor?

Another perfect example are the scars of Jesus. In John 20:19, the bible tells us that Jesus showed his scars to His disciples, *“Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”* When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.” We can’t help but wonder why He would show His scars. As matter of fact, why would He even have scars? We would think that being risen from the dead would mean a wholesome body free of scars, right? Wrong. His scars were proof of His victory over death. In fact, His scars were no longer just scars; instead they were now marks that proved his finished work, and that work had a cost. If the risen Christ has scars that speak of His endurance and victory, then what’s the story of your scars? What do the lines, and marks of your journey say? Common wisdom calls scars ugly, but in light of God’s purpose they are beautiful trophies of victory.

There may be trials and fires that you are passing through in your life right now. There may be situations in different areas of your life that are inflicting pain and suffering, and perhaps you are not understanding why you are going through it. Remember Job? he didn’t understand either. In fact, he lost more than any woman or man could ever lose in a lifetime. Despite the pain of losing everything he cherished, despite the physical pain he suffered, despite the wrong counsel of his wife, and friends – he endured through it all. A man stripped of everything he ever had, including his health yet he endured. His emotional and physical scars would only serve as a reminder that he didn’t just survive, but he lived to see the greater blessings and purpose God had for his life.

To conclude, I will leave you with the following. You may be someone who has been hurt repeatedly, has gone through many unpleasant circumstances in life and as a result developed many scars. However, your scars are not there to remind you of your failures, they are there to remind you of the great grace, mercy and provision of God over your life. They are there to remind you that you have been healed and delivered so that you may continue walking boldly into the purpose you have been built for. They are there to prove that you have been hand picked for the hardest battles that come with the greatest of victories.

DAY 14: THE CHOSEN ONE

In a world full of 7 billion people, it's often very easy to forget your significance or importance. It's easy to live a quiet life, and go unnoticed. In fact, by the standards of our world this holds even greater truth if you are someone who doesn't come from a well known family, or a wealthy background. Your family, environment, and background in addition to other contributing factors will most likely determine your class, and your class will determine the type of recognition you get. Ain't that pretty much how our world works?

But, what if I told you that you were the chosen one? What if I told you that you are not just 'a random nobody' existing among the 7 billion? What if I told you that you were a unique individual, uniquely designed, whose existence was purposely orchestrated for a reason that surpassed your greatest imagination? I wanted to share something with you today to challenge the way you view yourself, and the value that you have placed on yourself. I want to do this by using a verse that has inspired me to write today's blog.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 says, *"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."* You are probably reading this verse and thinking "that's great but I don't fit in this category, I'm too messed up". When we look at ourselves in comparison to who God is, it's hard to imagine that He would want to associate with, or use anything that we have to offer – especially when what we have to offer is already deemed as weak, or despised by the standards of this world. Yet the beautiful truth is that a great God who is perfect in every way, has chosen someone like you to prove to this world otherwise.

D. L. Moody was a man that came from a low class family. Someone who the world would have not cared to know. He was a man with no educational advantages or privileges, and no family name or wealth to build a great life with. Yet he became a publisher, and an American evangelist who established the Moody Press, Moody Bible Institute, the Moody radio stations, and many more. We can even go way back to some biblical individuals whose lives were a perfect example of what we are discussing. Let's start with Moses. A man who stuttered and had no public speaking skills, yet he was chosen to lead all 600,000 Israelis out of Egypt. Can you imagine having to explain what he was led to do to all 600,000 of them? Better yet, confront Pharaoh himself? Yet, God still chose him alone to complete the task. How about Esther? A girl from a low class household, who had no family except for the uncle that was raising her. Somehow this random young girl that no one knew was chosen to be Queen of the land and deliver her people from death. Remember David? Nothing more but a young boy neglected and forgotten by his father, whose only job was to tend sheep. Yet this young and neglected boy was chosen by God to be the King of a nation. However, it doesn't stop there. Jesus Christ's genealogy included women such as Tamar who played the role of a harlot, Ruth who was a gentile, and even Rahab who was a harlot.

If these people all existed today, then by the standards of this world we wouldn't notice them, or care to know who they are. Yet such people are proof that God will use anyone regardless of

their past, or their flaws. The measure that we use to view others with is completely different from the measures God uses. His measures are different because His eyes see what man is limited from seeing, and His heart loves past a man's ability to love. What man will never see in himself and others, God will see and use it to expose to the world who He really is. You ask why? The answer is found in that verse as it continues to say: "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God". In other words, God is trying to take you to the depths of yourself so that you may see and understand that any power, talent, or ability you think you have, and all that you are is actually found in Him, and enabled by Him – not by the world, or by you.

You may be someone who has been living a really messed up life, maybe you've been told many times that you're not good enough, or don't have what it takes "to be somebody". Perhaps you don't feel good enough for those around because you haven't met their expectations, or you may be someone who is constantly beating themselves up because you don't feel you've accomplished anything big enough with your life. Whatever it may be, I want to remind you that for as long as you are created by the hands of God then you are someone of great value to this world. What you have to offer, is unlike anything the world has to give. You are the chosen one in His eyes. You are the one that He has chosen to show the world who He is. You are the chosen one that He wants to use to prove to the world that all things are by Him, through Him, and for Him.

So, why are you so focused on what the world can or can't do with you, when you have the creator of the Universe who has already chosen you for greater things than this world could ever need you for? As this week begins, I want to encourage you to lift your head up high. Walk in boldness and confidence knowing that you are 'the chosen one', the one who has treasures stored up that the world is in dying need of. You are not a random nobody, you are a special someone in the sight of the one who has created you. You are the one who He has chosen to shame the world.

DAY 15: MY BELOVED IS MINE

“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine”

- Song of Solomon 6:3

There are many beautiful aspects to our relationship with God. We know God as our savior, we know him as our Father, we know Him as our refuge and shield, we know Him as our creator and so forth. Since there are many different parts to our relationship with Him, there are various different ways in which we know Him. However, what does it look like to know Him as a lover? For some who may be confused at this, please keep reading. The foundation, and even most important aspect of our relationship with Him is His love – which leads us to an intimate relationship with Him. In fact, when He designed us He did so with the emotional and spiritual capacity to have a passionate, loving relationship with Him. Sadly enough, because many of us lack that understanding we spend energy and time exhausting that capacity we have on everyone else except for Him – hence we are often left broken, empty, unsatisfied or unfulfilled.

But today, I want us to focus on the the intensity of these words. What does it really mean to be intimately His? What can we take away from this chapter in Song of Solomon? To add depth to the content and to ensure that everyone reading understands, I will start by first giving some background context on this book. Song of Solomon is unlike any other book in the Bible, and perhaps the most neglected book. The whole book is one long poem of love. The main speakers are King Solomon and the woman he loves. The woman’s name is not mentioned but the bible refers to her as ‘the Shulamite’. At the beginning of the book they are not yet engaged due to uncertainties that the woman has. In fact she sends the man away a couple of times refusing to share her life with him. However, her uncertainties or refusal in the beginning had nothing to do with the man’s character, rather her own lack of trust and immaturity. Her words imply that she is a bit lazy, and selfish. But perhaps she may have also feared failure in the sense that she may have feared she would never be a good enough wife for someone like Solomon. In the end, this woman becomes mature and she accepts his offer of marriage. They marry and she is glad to have made the decision to share her life with him.

Like this Shulamite woman, we often hesitate our love for God. For some of us, the reasons may be the same as that woman – we may feel unworthy of the love that God is longing to share with us. In the same manner that this woman saw King Solomon and perhaps felt unworthy of his love and affection, we also view God through the lenses of our own imperfections and run away from His love and affection towards us. You may feel selfish, or too lazy to obey Him, and perhaps even fear of failing Him. But in truth, you are already chosen to be His beloved. We live in such a corrupt world, that our idea of love today has been equally tainted and manipulated from the scriptural definition of love. According to our world today, love is merely an emotion you feel – a switch that can easily be turned on and off based on our mood or how we may feel. People declare they love each other one day, and the next they are just as quick to dislike one another. Makes you wonder, if love is such a strong force then how is it that it can diminish so easily? Unless of course, we have the wrong idea of love to begin with -right?

But you see, love is not simply an emotion. It’s a choice you make everyday. When you look at yourself in comparison to God and all of His greatness, His perfect attributes and beauty,

it becomes very difficult to understand how someone like Him can “feel” like loving us. But He doesn’t just “feel” like loving us – He chooses to love us every single day while seeing all of our ugly traits, our sinful nature, and our stubborn character. God’s desire before and above anything else is for you to understand that His love for you is not conditional or based on certain expectations you first have to meet. When you understand that reality then it becomes easier to declare Him as YOUR beloved – the beloved whom you belong to. The beloved who has chosen you not because of who you are, but because of who He is. To know Him as your lover is to know Him for who He really is.

To conclude, I want to leave you with this reminder. You may never experience wonders and miracles. You may never hear a loud voice from the heavens. But if you have lived to understand even a drop of this fulfilling love then you have gained the greatest treasure yet to be discovered by the world around you. He is your beloved, and you are always His. Don’t let anyone else tell you otherwise.

inspired
by HIM