

Prepare for Battle

The days in which we are living are some of the most exciting in history. But they are not without peril. The kingdom of God suffers violence (see Matt. 11:12), yet these are still times of hope and peace for those who know who they are in Christ. In order to survive the onslaught of the enemy against us, we had better learn to become women who are mighty in spirit.

Perhaps my best example of such a woman is my mom, Gaynell Chavis Jacobs. Unassuming and unpretentious, Mom was baptized with the power of the Holy Spirit and raised 12 children to know, love and serve the Lord. She was an extraordinary prayer warrior, and when she would lay hands on the sick, they would be healed.

We all have this potential because Jesus declared: "Great works shall you do because I go to my Father" (see John 14:12). The Spirit of Christ will enable you to walk into a room and have every demon of hell walk out. He will empower you to speak God's Word in a way that will change the atmosphere and the situation.

We are going to need this power. I believe we are in for the fight of our lives until Jesus comes back. There will be times when, despite our being Spirit-filled, we will encounter assaults from hell that are designed to stop us from doing what God has called us to do.

The devil is not after you because of who you are but because he knows what God has put in you and what God can do through you. In the natural, the giants will always appear bigger than you are, but in the supernatural, you can see through the eyes of the Spirit, just as Caleb did when he declared, "We are well able to conquer [the land]" (Num. 13:30, The Living Bible).

I'm sure there are many strategies for becoming mighty in

spirit. But during the course of my life, I've found six practices to be very effective in overcoming the power of the enemy and walking in victory.

BE CONFIDENT IN YOUR CALLING In Galatians 1:15-16 Paul wrote: "Even before I was born God had chosen me to be His, and called me—what kindness and grace—to reveal His Son within me so that I could go to the Gentiles and show them the Good News about Jesus. When all this happened to me I didn't go at once and talk it over with anyone else."

When you are confident in your calling, you don't have to seek anyone's permission or approval. You know you are called because of the witness of the Holy Spirit inside you, but Satan will try to make you doubt that your calling is real.

I can recall an incident that happened to me when I first went out as a soloist in full-time ministry. During a service, a young girl, who was possessed by demonic spirits, lunged toward me, screaming obscenities and totally disrupting the meeting.

I could have given in to fear and intimidation, but I chose to put the enemy under my feet, and the girl was completely delivered and set free. Today, deliverance is still a vital part of my ministry.

God never told us that we were going to float along on this journey to become all that He destined for us and never have another problem. But He did promise us this: " 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you' " (Is. 43:2, NKJV). You must decide now that you're going all the way.

HAVE STRENGTH IN ADVERSITY When I left home to pursue God's call on my life, I knew it was not going to be easy. I'd made up my mind to follow hard after the Lord, but I remember a very discouraging time in my life while I was in college.

I had just lost my mom. My father had already passed away. Trying to go on with my life while dealing with my intense grief was very difficult. Finally, I decided to abandon my plans and go back home.

On the day I was preparing to leave I suddenly thought, Maybe I should go to church one more time and say goodbye to my friends and my pastor. At the close of the Wednesday night service, my pastor called me onto the stage and said to me: "God says to tell you, 'You are not your own, you have been bought with a price. I have chosen you and appointed you to go to the nations of the earth, so you can't do what you want to do. My strength is made perfect in your weaknesses, for when you are weak, then I am strong.' "

Without anyone touching me, I was slain in the spirit. Hours later, when I got up, I had a new confidence, a greater boldness and a determination to go on that hell could not touch.

Jesus said: " 'You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you' " (John 15:16).

You, too, are not your own. Be strong and don't abandon your calling.

DEVELOP GODLY CHARACTER When David wrote, "Assign me Godliness and Integrity as my bodyguards" (Ps. 25:21, The Living Bible), he must have understood that, ultimately, if your character is ungodly, it doesn't matter how sweetly you sing or how people respond to your ministry. It is a grave mistake to put all your energies into your "kingdom work" and leave little or no time for intimacy with the Lord. You can begin to live to be seen by others and forget that character is who you are when no one is looking.

Isaiah said: "Be clean! You who bear the vessels of the Lord" (52:11, NKJV). There are times when I can't do what I want to do. Paul says we must make faithfulness our goal. "Consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be faithful" (1 Cor. 4:1-2).

Leave a good example for those who will come behind you, unlike King Saul, who was anointed but lost his kingdom and his life. King David was anointed, also, yet he fell into a trap due to his unruly passions.

You must be painstakingly conscientious about everything—attitude, lifestyle, personal worship and gifts. The enemy of your destiny has already been defeated, so don't allow yourself to be sidetracked by his devices.

PRACTICE VIOLENT FAITH I believe that sometimes we come up against things in our lives when simply believing won't be enough. I can remember a time when I was very sick with bronchitis, which, according to my doctor, had turned into pneumonia. At this point in my walk with the Lord, I was determined to go to the next level of faith, so I rejected my doctor's recommendation of hospitalization and returned home.

For three weeks I was isolated from my husband, Jamie, and our two girls. I was believing for a miracle and expecting an angel to walk into my upstairs bedroom and lay his hands on me. Instead, as I lay in bed, I heard the Lord saying: "Get up out of this bed, go downstairs and command this junk to get out of your house and out of your body."

I got up, realizing now that this was an attack from the devil to take me out. I opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch in the dead of winter. I was desperate. I had a word from the Lord, and I needed a miracle!

I lifted my voice and said: "In the name of Jesus, bronchitis, pneumonia and everything associated with it, get out of my

cannot stay, and you will not stay. On the authority of God's Word and through the name of Jesus, you will leave right now!"

Immediately I felt an overwhelming breath flow through my body. That kind of attack has not been back at my house. All you need is one word to see God do the miraculous.

Violent faith combines determination with spiritual aggressiveness and raw, if you will, guts. Violent faith is Abraham standing on top of a mountain, preparing to sacrifice his promise (Isaac) to God (see Gen 22).

It's Esther going into the king's chamber for the sake of her people, saying, " 'If I perish, I perish!' " (v. 4:16). And it's Peter taking the crippled man by the hand, saying, " 'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk,' " then jerking the man to his feet (Acts 3:6, NKJV).

Violent faith will cause you to do things in the supernatural that make no sense in the natural. As you practice it, your prayer life and hunger for God will increase, and there will be a determination forged in you that nothing can shake.

BE PERSISTENT IN PRAYER The apostle Paul gave us a formula for getting our prayers answered and tearing down the enemy's strongholds. He wrote these powerful words: "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18, NKJV).

Jesus said: " 'Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened to you' " (Matt. 7:7, NLT).

Don't give up. Pray again. You may be feeling right now that you have tried, cried, prayed and fasted without results. With as much compassion as I can write this, I would tell you that what moves God more than anything is faith, violent faith!

Taking back what is yours from the forces of darkness takes courage and is not for those who are passive or faint of heart. It is for the person who would say: "This is it, I am drawing the blood line today. It will never be the same again."

You can exercise this kind of faith, too. You can choose to say, "I know what the outcome of this thing is going to be, so I am going to lift my head up and rejoice, because right now the Father God is working it all out."

PRAISE GOD One thing I have learned and am still learning is that you don't praise God when the answer comes, you praise God until the answer comes. Something happens when you lift your hands and your voice to praise God in the midst of all hell surrounding you.

When Saul was pursuing David to kill him, David chose to say: "I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth" (Ps. 34:1, NKJV).

The devil wants to rob you of your worship and praise. He wants to shut your mouth because if he can get your praise and worship, then he has your joy and strength. He knows the Word declares, " 'The joy of the Lord is your strength' " (Neh. 8:10).

Begin to rejoice in God. See yourself mighty in spirit and walking in victory. What you can see with spirit eyes in the supernatural, you can believe to come forth in the natural.

You have the authority to speak to that spirit of sickness in your body, that rebellion in your teenager, the adultery that is looming over your marriage, and that spirit of destruction that is targeting your dreams. You have to see that hateful teenager dancing in the Spirit and that husband walking in truth. See yourself prosperous, healed and delivered. See it!

Now, here's what I see: mighty women of godly character with confidence in their callings. I see them standing strong, anointed, violent in their faith and persistent in prayer. And, as I see those hands lifted high in worship, I hear a shout going through the heavens.

I see the devil fleeing in terror because you and I are rising up now, and we know that "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty in God for pulling down [Satan's] strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). We are women, mighty in spirit, who are strong in the strength of our Lord. And in His power, we are victorious!

Read a companion devotional.

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Take Control of Stress

Not every perceived threat is real. Find out how to gain control over things that needlessly stress you out.

We have a stress epidemic in our nation.

The majority of Americans very likely have excessive stress in their lives, and reports of stress seem to indicate that the percentage of Americans each year who feel under "a great deal of stress" is rising.

It's common to hear people say, "I'm stressed out!" But what does that mean? In my opinion, stress is the pressures of life

and how one perceives, believes, reacts and copes with these pressures.

All forms of stress produce a very well-documented physical reaction in the body. The actual definition from Webster's is "a physical, chemical or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation."

The body's stress response involves more than 1,400 known physical and chemical reactions involving more than 30 different hormones and neurotransmitters. Excessive release of "stress hormones" damages cells, tissues and organs.

For most people, the daily stress hassles are the most damaging to the body. Internalizing stress creates something of a steady drip, drip, drip of stress hormones into the person's tissues, including the brain. The little stressors add up over time and can do far more damage than an occasional negative event that might produce a more massive stress reaction.

The potential sources of stress are endless and everywhere. Anything that could rob us of our peace and joy and eventually compromise our health can be considered a source of stress. Naturally, some events or situations are more stressful than others. The death of a family member has a more serious impact than being hungry, for example. But all forms of stress can take a toll.

Nevertheless, there is an important principle related to stress that can help you minimize the effect of it on your body, and that principle is this: What you perceive to be stressful to you is.

Your perceptions determine what you label as stressful or not stressful. There's no such thing as an event that is automatically stressful—unless you are the victim of a physical attack. Stress is largely a matter of what you think about external stimuli.

In other words, a high percentage of stress is individualized. What you see as stressful may not be stressful to another person.

Do you become anxious when you are asked to address an important client during a business presentation? Do you stress out at the thought of an upcoming performance review with a supervisor you can't seem to please? Do you feel stressed as you pull onto the freeway every morning?

Perception is everything when it comes to stress.

The reason this is good news is that it leads to another important principle related to stress: You can choose to control the stress level of your life.

How does a person do this? First, I recommend that you become informed about stress. Hosea 4:6 says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." This verse does not point to a shortage of love, faith or hope. It points to a lack of knowledge! There are certain things we each must come to know about the causes of stress and then take action related to what we learn.

Second, you need to make a decision about what you are going to do in response to the information you gain. Just before he died, Moses reminded the Israelites of the need to choose carefully what they would do when they entered the land of promise. He said:

"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (Deut. 30:19).

Choosing life means choosing God's way over our way; it means choosing a relationship with Him and obedience to Him over our own self-centered desires.

Most factors related to stress are subject to your choice. You can choose to discover why you are stressed out, and you can choose not to be stressed out. Given a number of options about treatment, you can choose which options are of greatest benefit to you. Make this choice today: "I will come to grips with the stress level of my life!" And plan to start right now.

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7 Ways to Fight Midlife Pain

As **baby boomers** enter **middle age** and beyond, many of them struggle with mild to intense physical agony caused by **bone degeneration**. Whether this degeneration is due to swelling of the tissues that line the **joints**, **muscle strain**, or **fatigue**, the joints, muscles, bones and tendons break down too soon for 1 out of every 4 American midlifers.

The **joint problems** they experience can initiate changes in both body and mind that ultimately affect the spirit. Joint problems cause **mental stress** as well, which increases the release of adrenaline. Ultimately, excess adrenaline leads to exhaustion.

Then **depression** sets in because serotonin levels drop when the action of "feel good" brain chemicals is hindered. Sleep is disrupted by the pain, tension and exhaustion, further inhibiting the body's ability to release natural mood elevators known as endorphins.

In an effort to break the cycle of pain so they can carry on with their daily responsibilities, midlifers often use over-the-counter or prescription medications. They spend billions of dollars on NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen and Cyclooxygenase-2 (COX2) inhibitors.

Boomers are usually too busy, too stressed, and too tired to actively take care of their muscles and joints. They believe they have to live with this “inevitable” part of midlife. A friend recently told me that these days his back goes out more than he does!

Can midlifers find relief from the pain and suffering that affects their bodies and minds—without taking medications that have negative side effects?

Absolutely! But they must become active participants in their own recovery through the use of natural therapies.

Some nutritional approaches are highly effective. In fact, there is hope that natural substances will someday revolutionize the treatment and management of arthritic disease. They may even help the body rebuild functioning joints.

- **Willow bark** is rich in salicin and salicylates that metabolize into salicylic acid. Salicylic acid, the base of aspirin, was first prepared from willow bark in the late 1930s. Willow bark has fewer side effects than aspirin and has a long tradition of use in Europe. It has an anti-inflammatory effect.
- **Fish oil** helps regulate inflammation. Omega-3 oils (EPA and DHA) and flaxseed oil suppress inflammation especially well in rheumatoid arthritis (RA) patients. Publications from around the world now confirm that omega-3 oils are effective in relieving morning stiffness and the tender joints associated with RA. In

some instances omega-3 oil actually eliminated the need for NSAIDs. Further, fish oil and low-dose aspirin taken together have been found to have better effects on inflammation than either substance alone.

- **Chondroitin sulfate** is a major component of cartilage that reduces pain while increasing range of motion with long-term use.
- **Glucosamine** alone or in combination with chondroitin sulfate is becoming the treatment of choice for osteoarthritis (OA). It has the ability to repair and improve joint function in addition to providing pain relief. Most important of all, it offers no dangerous side effects.
- **Vitamin E** is a powerful antioxidant that has been reported to diminish pain. Free-radical damage is a factor in the development of OA and RA patients.
- **GLA (gamma-linoleic acid)** is a fatty acid that has been used to suppress chronic inflammation. Dietary sources include black walnut seed oil, evening primrose oil and borage oil.
- **Nettle leaf** has a long history of use as a safe remedy for arthritis in Germany. It is a natural COX2 inhibitor, which means it suppresses the pro-inflammatory enzyme known as Cyclooxygenase-2.
- **Ginger root** (not to be confused with wild ginger, which can be hazardous) is a powerful herb that possesses anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. It has been used for thousands of years in China for rheumatism, stomach distress and nausea.

Natural therapies can be effective for the midlife pain that comes with arthritis. They should be tried first, in my opinion, because they can provide relief from pain and inflammation without the negative side effects common to NSAIDs.

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The #1 Anti-Depressant: God's Word

God has a potent, supernatural prescription for depression—His Word! Hebrews 4:12 says, “The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (NKJV). The Word will not only diagnose our condition, it will also prescribe a potent treatment program that drives depression out of our lives and sets us free! God's Word is the ultimate antidepressant.

God's plan for dealing with depression is very different from the world's plan. The world wants us to reopen our wounds and recall every injustice from the past. The Word tells us to focus on the Healer.

When depression tries to come upon you, determine to look at Jesus—not at your distress. When you focus on God and His Word, the cause of your depression becomes irrelevant. God's answer is the same: “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

Depression has many causes—in both the spiritual and the natural realms. Spiritually speaking, generational curses in a bloodline can predispose members of certain families to suffer from depression. In the physical realm, medical treatments,

chemical or hormonal imbalances, fatigue, and just plain stress can be the culprits. Additionally, unresolved emotional issues or abuse can bring overwhelming sadness, anger and the inability to function normally.

The bottom line is: Depression is a supernatural spirit of destruction straight from the devil, and as such, needs to be treated like an enemy. We must take a strong stand against it and refuse to give it any power in our lives.

Depression stems from an underlying root of unbelief—unbelief in God’s care, goodness, faithfulness, presence in your life or ability to get you out of seemingly “impossible” situations.

Unbelief is more than simply harmful to you; it is sin. In Mark 16:14, Jesus rebuked the disciples’ “unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe.” We cannot afford to make excuses or convince ourselves we have a right to be depressed. Instead, we need to take the supernatural prescription God has provided.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

The saints of old had to do the same thing. The Bible indicates in 1 Kings 18 and 19 that Elijah was at the pinnacle of his “career” as God’s prophet. Yet, at the end of chapter 19, he has plummeted from his highest high to his lowest low, sinking into a deep, suicidal depression.

Elijah began to look at his circumstances and feel very sorry for himself. This opened the door to destruction and caused him to cry out to God, “I’ve had away my life. I’ve got to die sometime, and it might as well be now” (1 Kin. 19:4, The Living Bible).

Elijah focused on the past and on the unfair treatment he had received from Jezebel. He forgot about the amazing things God had done in his life and now found himself hiding in a cave, alone and depressed.

I love God's response to Elijah: "Then He said, 'Go out, and stand on the mountain before the Lord.' And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore into the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kin. 19:11-12, NKJV).

God came to Elijah and spoke in a still, small voice—the voice of the Spirit. When depression comes to your door, don't open it! Listen to what God says to your spirit.

As He did for Elijah, God will give you a truth that will take you through despair. Freedom occurs as you listen to His quiet voice. "'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free'" (John 8:32). When you find yourself physically and emotionally exhausted, His gentle Spirit will remind you of His faithfulness—past, present and future.

King David struggled with depression throughout his life. Sometimes it was self-induced, brought on by his own sin. On one such occasion, he said, "For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity" (Ps. 31:10).

At other times David's despair was the result of his enemies' treatment of him. This was the case in 1 Samuel 30.

Before David became king of Israel, he and his 600 men were on the run from both King Saul and the Amalekites. They took up residency at a place called Ziklag (which means "overwhelming despair").

Once, after David and his men had been away, they returned to discover that the Amalekites had attacked the city, set fire to it, and taken their wives and children captive. "Now David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him,

because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God" (1 Sam. 30:6).

This was one of the worst days of David's life. All seemed lost. There was no one around who could help him or lift him up out of the horrible pit he was in.

That's what depression does. It isolates us from others and steals our joy. David cried out, "I am desolate and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have enlarged; bring me out of my distresses!" (Ps. 25:16-17) Yet, in the midst of his despair, David took God's prescription for his depressed state and "encouraged himself."

How did he do this? Listen to Psalm 25:5-6: "On You I wait all the day. Remember, O Lord, Your tender mercies and Your lovingkindnesses, for they are from of old."

As David spoke of God's faithfulness to him, he was literally speaking his deliverance from the depression and oppression threatening to destroy him. In Psalm 32:3 he wrote, "When I kept silent, my bones grew old." David knew the importance of speaking the Word in order to walk in victory.

How can you "strengthen yourself in the Lord" when depressing thoughts and circumstances rise against you? Read the Word and say what it says. Refuse to speak negatively. Instead, agree with the Word.

What does the Word say about you? That you are more than a you can do all things through you always triumph through all things will work together for your so much more! (See Rom. 8:37; Phil. 4:13; 1 Cor. 15:57; Rom. 8:28). Revelation 12:11 confirms that we overcome "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [our] testimony."

It was the Word of God that spoke to David's heart! It was the spiritual "secret weapon" that set him free from the

overwhelming circumstances of Ziklag. If you read the rest of 1 Samuel 30, you'll see that David gained a mighty victory—he rescued his wives and children, and recovered all the spoil that had been taken!

Jeremiah is another Old Testament prophet who dealt with depressing thoughts and situations. For 37 years, he preached to the unrepentant Israelites. They had turned away from God to worshiping idols, and Jeremiah was called to confront them. His heart was broken for Israel's sins and the judgment of God that was coming upon the people (see Jer. 8:21-9:1).

Yet Jeremiah used the supernatural weapon of the Word to resist depression: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jer. 15:16). He was set free from the depression and filled with joy.

How did Jeremiah get his joy? He ate God's Word! When we are attacked by depression, we need to take our "faith pills." We need to "eat" God's Word—to read it, meditate on it and speak it.

If circumstances pile up, simply "eat" more Word. Unlike a traditional prescription, there are no adverse side effects from the Word and you can take it as often as needed!

The truth will not only set you free from depression, despair and hopelessness; it will give you joy in their place. Jesus said, "'These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full'" (John 15:11). He promises us a double portion of joy—His and ours!

What is the source of your joy? Circumstances? Money? Health? Your spouse? Your job? No, the Word is to be the source of our joy, and God's supernatural double-portion joy will defeat depression every time!

YOUR WORD PRESCRIPTION

Depression is of a supernatural origin. Therefore it's going to take the supernatural—a greater truth and stronger anointing—to gain the victory and keep depression out of your life. Here are some important steps to take.

Repent. If you've allowed unbelief into your heart, causing you to become depressed, the first thing you must do is repent. Accept God's forgiveness and ask Him to give you faith in place of your unbelief. Then you can claim with the psalmist: "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and You forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5).

Speak your deliverance by speaking God's Word. You must refuse to speak the negative, doubt-filled lies the enemy tries to get you to agree with, and instead agree with God's Word—out loud.

Accept the Word above your circumstances. As you look to Jesus and the Word, not your troubles and trials, you'll find the victory you need. The Bible tells us He is our Deliverer. As the psalmist declared: "He sent from above, He took me; He drew me out of many waters. He delivered me from my strong enemy, from those who hated me, for they were too strong for me. They confronted me in the day of my calamity, but the Lord was my support" (Ps. 18:16-18).

Make a choice to rejoice. As you "eat" the Word, God will replace your depression and despair with peace and joy. Make Psalm 103:2 your daily confession: "I will bless the Lord and not forget the glorious things He does for me" (The Living Bible).

A FINAL PRESCRIPTION Have you ever noticed that depression and anxiety often come at night? God in His mercy has given us a nighttime prescription in Psalm 4:4,7-8: "Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety" (NKJV).

You can go to bed and have sweet dreams; you can lay your head down and not be depressed.

What about when you wake up? Have you ever faced discouragement in the morning? God has written a prescription for that too! Psalm 5 is your morning dose of the Word: "Give heed to the voice of my cry, my King and my God, for to You I will pray. My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up" (Ps. 5:2-3).

Morning, noon and night, you can take your supernatural antidepressant. As you focus on God's Word, listen to the Spirit's voice and allow Jesus to give you a double portion of joy, you can walk in victory over every spirit of depression that tries to disable you or sidetrack your life! God's prescription for joy will keep you depression-free!

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The Untapped Power of Righteousness in Christ

When we focus our hearts on righteousness, we leave little room for the works of iniquity to be found in our lives. Righteousness is a spiritual force that if yielded to will cause our motivations, thoughts and intentions to be pure, just as Jesus is pure.

Our personal righteousness in Christ is a powerful weapon, and yet so often we reduce its inherent power and authority. But righteousness is who we are in conjunction with what we are empowered to do through the grace of God.

God has given us a flawless standard, seen only in the face of Jesus Christ. When we see Jesus, we see the sum total of perfect righteousness, the same measure that is offered to all those who receive His provision.

Enjoy the Friendship of Christ

The sweetest bliss of rational beings comes from friendship. Nothing can take its place. Without it, all things else leave in us an aching void. We must both love and be loved, or be wretched.

Friendship implies two or more persons, and love on both sides. There may be love without friendship, but there can be no friendship without love. There must be reciprocity of affection.

Hence, whatever may be the love of Christ toward us, unless we also love Him, there is no friendship between Him and us. The sun of righteousness shines upon us, but we walk blinded in darkness; He diffuses warmth, but we do not feel it; He graciously deigns to bless us, but we still go unblessed.

But when we through grace open our hearts to Him, give back the generous flame, and thus become partakers of His love, then are we cordially embraced in His glorious and eternal friendship. Its distinguishing characteristics are included in

the following particulars.

The friendship of Christ is purely spontaneous. It springs up unsolicited from the depths of His generous heart, as the crystal water gushes up from its fountain. It is not the affection of consanguinity, nor the result of early intimacy; much less does Christ love us, because we first loved Him.

It is exactly the other way! We love Him because He first loved us. Nor did He see anything lovely in us to engage His affection. He found our hearts selfish, cold, dead in sin. He loved us while we were yet enemies.

And why did He thus love us? The only answer is, because of the pure, spontaneous benevolence of His heart. God is love, and Christ is God manifest in the flesh.

“I delight to do thy will,” He says, “Yea, thy law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8, KJV). It is hence a pure spontaneity of His heart to lift up the fallen, heal the broken, pardon the guilty, save the lost and gather them all into the fold of His grace. There is no other love like this.

The friendship of Christ is wholly unselfish. Human friendships are, to a great extent, bought and sold for value received. But no mercenary motive stains the luster of Christ’s friendship. He is infinitely above all need of any favors from us, and it is equally above our power to make any adequate returns for His favors.

Because He has felt from eternity in His divine nature an unceasing love toward us, it has been with the knowledge that for this we could never repay Him and that all His reward must be in His own bosom. Behold, what manner of love is this!

The friendship of Christ is surpassingly self-sacrificing. It cost Him an amazing price. What love must that be, that made Him willing to dishonor the glories of His Godhead, take upon Him the guilt and sorrows of humanity, endure the scorn and

malice of wicked men and devils, and finally die the shameful and agonizing death of the cross, all to save us from our sins!

It is common to estimate friendship by the sacrifice it makes for its object. If we thus estimate the friendship of Christ, it transcends all thought. Indeed, it often seems to us more like romance than reality, and it is only as we think of Him in His divine nature that we can accept the record of His sacrifice for us as literally true. Yet here is no romance nor bold figure, but a stupendous fact, into which the angels desire to look.

The friendship of Christ is unchanging. He often rebukes and chastens us, but He loves us still. We sometimes forget Him, but He never forgets us. We turn away from Him, but He never turns away from us. We grow cold in our affection, but His affection for us is ever the same bright flame.

We have our days of sunshine, when we seem to walk in high places, regaling amid the sweets and flowers of paradise; and our days of darkness, when we seem to dwell in the lowest depths and eat ashes for bread; but through all these changes, the love of Christ toward us is the same deep, pure, vivid affection. Like the sun in the heavens, which rides high above all the clouds and storms of Earth, such is our glorious Savior's love.

The friendship of Christ, though always essentially the same, is most realized by us when most needed. The world is full of sunny-day friendships. They are often reversed by the reverses of fortune.

"The friends that in our sunshine live, / When winter comes, are flown; / And he who has but tears to give / Must weep those tears alone."

Precisely otherwise is the friendship of Christ. In our days of affliction, when lover and friend have gone from us to the

land of darkness, He embraces us with His tenderest affection and is to us then verily "the chiefest among ten thousand" and "altogether lovely" (Song 5:10, 16).

In our losses, reverses of fortune and desolation of earthly hopes, He shows us the exceeding riches of His grace. When former friends forsake us, He is to us the "friend that sticketh closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24). When our sins are felt pressing upon us as a heavy burden, He kindly says to us, "Come unto Me ... and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Where sin abounds, His grace much more abounds.

When we are languishing on the bed of death, and all earth-born hopes are dying out of our hearts, He plucks the thorn from our pillow, dispels all fear, and enables us to sing, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me" (Ps. 23:4).

Finally, the friendship of Christ is all-sufficient. He can do for us all we need, and no other friend can. The loving parent often yearns in vain toward his suffering child. The fond father would rescue his penitent son from the hands of civil justice, and the judge would fain spare the relenting criminal, but justice forbids.

And not unlike these are the feelings of God himself, when He is called, as the righteous Guardian of the universe, to execute justice upon the wicked. "How shall I give thee up?" He exclaims; "My repentings are kindled together" (Hos. 11:8).

It is, then, no irreverence and no limitation of divine power to say that, irrespective of Christ, God cannot in justice pardon and save the repenting sinner. But Christ, by His sufferings and death for us, has removed all obstacles to our forgiveness. The law is not in His way; justice is satisfied and even smiles upon Him, when He lifts the repenting sinner from the depths of his guilt, clothes him with His own righteousness, and puts the song of salvation on his joyful

lips.

No other being in the universe can do this. Hence the Scriptures declare, "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

And thus does Jesus Christ stand preeminently forth, among all on Earth and all in heaven, as the Friend we all need. To have the witness of the Spirit that Christ loves us and that we love Him, to realize the blessedness of the life that is hid with Christ in God, by the conscious "peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Phil. 4:7) is the very richest of heaven's boons.

We make progress in the hidden life to the degree that we learn to live upon the friendship of Christ. We are encouraged to bring all our wants to Him and to expect sympathy and full supply from the fact that He has himself personally felt them.

Are we bereaved? So was He. Are we poor? So was He. Are our efforts to do good thwarted by the unbelief and opposition of men? So were His. Are we spoken against? So was He. Are we tempted by the adversary? So was He. Are we sometimes grieved by the unfaithfulness of professing Christians? So was He. His deepest wounds were inflicted in the house of His friends.

There is no trial to which He is a stranger, no sorrow He has not felt. We should then feel the assurance of His sympathy, succor and support at all times. To trust Him in prosperity requires only a little faith; it is walking mostly by sight.

But to rest finally in His friendship—to feel that He is all our salvation and all our desire, when all things seem to be against us—this is the faith that carried the martyrs to glory.

I would then earnestly invoke the reader to make it his first object to secure and to cultivate the friendship of Christ. Part with all for this, like the merchant "when he had found

one pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:46).

Let there be no delay; do it now. What Christ demands of you as the terms of His friendship is that you trust in Him alone for salvation, renouncing every sin, and henceforth prize His friendship above everything else. This is reasonable and right, and it must be done, or you will perish in your sins.

If you will not accept Christ as the Friend you need to save and bless you, if you will not love and trust Him, I know not to whom you can go. Though an angel from heaven preach any other, let him be accursed.

There is no other; you need no other. Then concentrate at once on Him all your desires and expectations, all your faith and hope; and, from this time, let it be your highest aim to enjoy His friendship and promote His glory.

Read a companion devotional.

Hubbard Winslow, D.D. (1799-1864) was a Congregational minister and the author of several books. He served as pastor of the Bowdoin Street Church in Boston, Mass., from 1832-1844.

Find Freedom in The Spirit

It is God's greatest desire that, as believers, you and I progressively learn how to be led by His Spirit. However, there is a powerful enemy that stands in the way: our emotions. Satan is the most powerful enemy we face externally, but internally, it's our emotions that give us some of the biggest problems.

Emotions are strong, complex internal responses that result in bodily changes. They are sometimes helpful and at other times

hurtful. They come in positives and negatives. They are not evil, but they also are not holy.

Emotions can make you laugh one hour and cry the next. Not wanting them doesn't stop them from coming, and wanting them doesn't make them come. They are apt to quit on us when we need them most and flare up when we wish they would go away.

The truth is, we are always going to have emotions, and it's not a sin to have them. It's when we follow them that we often get into trouble.

But I believe through the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I can learn how to recognize our feelings and realize where they are trying to take us. Then by His grace, we can learn how to manage our emotions instead of letting them manage us.

UNDERSTANDING OUR EMOTIONS Emotions, or feelings, are part of our soulish realm. We are a spirit, we have a soul, and we live in a body. Our soul is the intangible area between our spirit—the place where God lives—and our physical body. It is made up of our mind, will and emotions—it tells us what we think, what we want and how we feel. Of these three areas of the soul, it's our feelings that get stirred up the fastest and can lead us into temptation the quickest.

Once our emotions get stirred up, they can quickly deceive our mind. After this happens, the voice of our conscience, which operates out of our spirit, is denied its normal standard of judgment. In other words, our God-given inner voice of insight and understanding becomes drowned out by the cries of our emotions.

In this unstable state, we don't know God's will for our lives. We become confused about what we should and shouldn't do. As a result, we commit to things that God doesn't want us to commit to, we quit doing things that God wants us to remain a part of, and we say things that damage our relationships.

When we follow our feelings instead of following God's Spirit, we are living the life of the flesh, and it keeps us out of God's will. Romans 8:8 says that "those who are living the life of the flesh [catering to the appetites and impulses of their carnal nature] cannot please or satisfy God, or be acceptable to Him" (The Amplified Bible). This doesn't mean that God doesn't love us. What it does mean is that He is not satisfied with nor will He accept fleshly behavior.

It is imperative that we learn how to walk in the Spirit. When we "walk and live [habitually] in the [Holy] Spirit [responsive to and controlled and guided by the Spirit]; then [we] will certainly not gratify the cravings and desires of the flesh (of human nature without God)" (Gal. 5:16).

How do we learn to walk in the Spirit? I believe one of the best ways is to understand the differences between the natural man, the carnal man and the spiritual man.

THE NATURAL MAN AND THE CARNAL MAN In 1 Corinthians 2 and 3, the apostle Paul talks about two types of people that are led by their fleshly desires—the natural man and the carnal man. The natural man is the person who is not saved—his spirit is dead and totally devoid of God's Spirit. He "does not accept or welcome or admit into his heart the gifts and teachings and revelations of the Spirit of God, for they are folly (meaningless nonsense) to him; and he is incapable of knowing them (of progressively recognizing, understanding, and becoming better acquainted with them) because they are spiritually discerned and estimated and appreciated" (1 Cor. 2:14).

Since God is a Spirit and the things about Him are spiritually discerned, the natural man cannot understand anything about God. Why? Because his spirit is dead in sin (see Eph. 2:1).

The carnal man, on the other hand, has experienced new birth in Christ. But although his spirit has been made alive through

his faith in Jesus, his life is dominated by the desires of the flesh—the combined cravings of his body and soul. He does what he wants and is aimlessly led around by his feelings.

The carnal man is a people-pleaser who cares more about what people think than about obeying God. This was the case with many of the Corinthians. It is also the way many Christians are living today.

Look at what Paul says: “For you are still [unspiritual, having the nature] of the flesh [under the control of ordinary impulses]. For as long as [there are] envying and jealousy and wrangling and factions among you, are you not unspiritual and of the flesh, behaving yourselves after a human standard and like mere (unchanged) men?” (1 Cor. 3:3). In other words, Paul is saying that these carnal Christians were immature and operating out of their emotions—whatever they felt like saying and whatever they felt like doing, they did.

Carnal Christians are easy to identify. They are usually in strife, discontent, easily offended and lacking peace.

For many years of my early walk with God I had very little peace with myself or others, even though I was a Spirit-filled Christian. If I didn't get my way, I would argue, pout, throw a fit, have a pity party or not talk to people for weeks at a time. Basically, I acted like a child.

At the time, I had no idea my behavior was wrong or that I was being led by my fleshly desires. I went to church regularly and heard Bible doctrine, but I wasn't hearing any practical teaching on how to get along with others and exercise self-control over my emotions.

When I finally got fed up with not having peace in my life, I made a decision to do whatever I needed to do to get it. I went to God and asked Him what was wrong, and He responded, “Joyce, you're shallow. You need to begin living on a deeper

level.”

Over time, God made it clear to me that the deeper level I needed to live on was the level of the Spirit. In order for us to truly enjoy the abundant life Jesus died to give us, we need to stop living by what we want, think, and feel and start following the promptings of His Spirit. This is the level that the spiritual man lives on.

THE SPIRITUAL MAN The spiritual man is the mature Christian who follows diligently after the desires of the Spirit. He is not someone who just prays the sinner’s prayer and then never feeds his spirit with the Word. Nor is he someone who keeps God in a “box” and lets Him out only on Sunday mornings.

The spiritual man has a full-time commitment to follow Christ, and he lets the Lord into every area of his life. He walks in integrity, humility and peace. He knows how to get along with others. His life displays the fruit of the Spirit, and he enjoys the favor of God.

First Corinthians 2:15 says, “But the spiritual man tries all things [he examines, investigates, inquires into, questions, and discerns all things], yet is himself to be put on trial and judged by no one [he can read the meaning of everything, but no one can properly discern or appraise or get an insight into him].” What Paul is saying here is that the spiritual man doesn’t live his life on a whim—impulsively following his fleshly desires for what he wants, thinks and feels. Instead he lives by discernment.

What is the difference between feelings and discernment? Feelings are of the flesh—they are shallow and constantly subject to change. Discernment, on the other hand, is a knowing in the spirit—something that comes from deep inside and is given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus lived His life by discernment. Isaiah 11:2-3 says, “And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon shall make Him of quick

understanding, and His delight shall be in the reverential and obedient fear of the Lord. And He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, neither decide by the hearing of His ears.” So Jesus’ discernment was not based on the superficial senses of His flesh—it was the result of a knowing deep within His spirit. And this same gift of discernment is available to you and me.

How does it work? Before the spiritual man does anything, he quickly checks with his spirit to see if the thing he is about to do is OK. If he has peace, he proceeds. But if he is uncomfortable, confused or frustrated, he remains still. For instance, there have been times when I had a strong desire to give a word of correction to one of our employees. But before I opened my mouth, I checked with my spirit to confirm that it was what God wanted. If I felt a peace and a release to do it, I did it.

There have also been situations when I’ve been at the mall getting ready to purchase something, but before I could get to the checkout counter, I sensed an irritation, frustration and pressure in my spirit. In this case, my spirit was not bearing witness with the Holy Spirit that what I wanted to do was of God. So I didn’t buy anything.

You see, every time you and I choose to listen to and follow the Holy Spirit’s promptings, our spirits grow stronger, and a little bit more of our flesh dies. As a result, more and more of God’s power is released in our lives to operate in the fruit of the Spirit. By yielding to the Holy Spirit rather than being controlled by our emotions, we honor God and put ourselves in a position to be radically blessed.

Developing discernment and being led by the Spirit is not something that happens overnight—it is a learning process that takes time. Little by little, one experience after another, God tries, or tests, our hearts, emotions and thinking (see Ps. 7:9, The Amplified Bible).

How does He do it? He allows us to go through difficult situations that stir up our emotions. In this way, you and I are able to see for ourselves how emotionally unstable we can become and how desperately we need His help.

Psalm 94:12-13 says, "Blessed (happy, fortunate, to be envied) is the man whom You discipline and instruct, O Lord, and teach out of Your law, that You may give him power to keep himself calm in the days of adversity." This Scripture lets us know that God allows things in our lives to affect us emotionally so that we can learn how not to be led by our feelings. His ultimate goal is to get us to the point that, no matter what is going on, we remain calm.

Who's going to keep us calm? We are going to keep ourselves calm. How? By the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

All God wants us to do is to get in the habit of running to Him for grace (supernatural inner strength) to exercise self-control over our emotions. Hebrews 4:16 says, "Let us then fearlessly and confidently and boldly draw near to the throne of grace (the throne of God's unmerited favor to us sinners), that we may receive mercy [for our failures] and find grace to help in good time for every need [appropriate help and well-timed help, coming just when we need it]."

I encourage you to stop bowing down to your feelings—stop depending on and placing more value on how you feel than on the Word of God. Exalt the Word over your feelings—believe what the Bible says.

Instead of saying, "I don't feel as if God loves me," "I don't feel as if I'm forgiven," or "I don't feel as if I have a future," say, "God does love me, and nothing can separate me from His love. He has heard my confession of sin, and He has forgiven me and cleansed me. And God has a positive plan for my future because His Word says so" (see Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8:38-39; 1 John 1:9).

Every time feelings come up to try and steal your righteousness, peace, and joy, find out what the Word of God says, and then open your mouth and speak the Word. Eventually the truth will override and change your feelings.

Read a companion devotional.

Joyce Meyer has been teaching the Word of God since 1976.

Finding Life After Death

Those who mourn can learn to handle loss in a healthy way and embrace the future with hope.

The loss of a spouse changes a woman's life forever. Instead of being the center of another's universe, the survivor is suddenly alone.

Haunting questions soon surface: "Who am I, since I am no longer Bob's wife or Mrs. so and so?" "Who is going to take care of me?" Younger women left to rear children alone may ask, "How will I make it without Jim's financial and emotional support?"

Research studies have revealed that the death of a partner is the greatest stressor of all losses. Grief, the normal emotional response to loss, produces the utmost stress following the death of one's spouse.

The degree or intensity of grief varies with the age of both the deceased and the survivor, the number of years they were married, and whether or not the relationship was meaningful or troubled at the time of separation. The longer the couple's

time together, the more intense the survivor's grief, and an unfinished troubled relationship makes the loss especially difficult for the surviving spouse.

Whether the death was expected (anticipated) or unexpected (acute) also affects the intensity of the grief response. Unexpected and violent deaths produce a more intense grief than expected and nonviolent deaths.

The grief journey is a painful journey, precipitating nights of weeping and joyless mornings, and days when many travelers wonder if they will ever feel hopeful again. It is a highway bulging with "potholes" of darkness, hopelessness and despair. But there is a path that leads to healing for those who embark on this journey.

What is it? How do grieving spouses move from nights of weeping to mornings of joy (see Ps. 30:5) and into days filled with hope? The book of Ruth provides the perfect example of a "redemptive grief journey." In it we read about two widows—Naomi, an older widow, and Ruth, a young widow.

THE GRIEF RESPONSE Naomi had it all. She was beautiful, as her name implies. She married a handsome and prosperous man, and they had two adorable sons. When famine stole into Bethlehem, Naomi's husband, Elimelech, loaded the wagons and moved his family to Moab. There he could protect them from hunger and continue providing them with a comfortable lifestyle. Soon after settling in Moab, Elimelech died, and Naomi suddenly became a single mom with two sons to raise.

The Scriptures do not refer to Naomi's grief following her husband's death. Perhaps Naomi played the role of a "steel magnolia," refusing to become vulnerable to grief's demands for payment. Or maybe she believed she had to be strong for the boys, Mahlon and Chilion. She could have buried herself in the role of sole provider—refusing to stop long enough to feel and express her grief.

Whether she loses a spouse through death or divorce, a single mother has scant time to grieve. Even so, grief's motto is "pay now or pay later."

As they came of age the two sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Then tragedy visited Naomi again. Both sons died. The historic author sums up Naomi's plight with, "and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband" (Ruth 1:5, NIV).

Being "left without" is a vibrant description of loss. Naomi was first left without her husband and then without her two sons, all within a 10-year period (see v. 4), and grief was demanding satisfaction. The reality of her aloneness turned her thoughts toward her former home, bringing into focus the faces of friends and relatives, a community of believers in the true God, and feelings of safety, security, love and belonging—all the things needed by a grieving widow (see vv. 6-8).

Naomi was wise in allowing her heart to guide her through her grief. "With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would bring them back to the land of Judah" (v. 7). What a beautiful metaphor of leaving the past and moving toward the future!

Although neither Naomi nor Ruth were aware of it, they were being led by the Spirit toward their destiny in God's plan of redemption when they left Moab and journeyed toward Bethlehem. The Holy Spirit can lead us in many ways: through life situations such as loss or illness, emotions, the Word, prayer, discernment and prophecies.

Ruth's is one of many biblical stories that reveals how God uses circumstances to press us toward His redemptive purposes through our losses (see Rom. 5:3-4; 8:28). As a result of losing their husbands, both Naomi and Ruth played a significant role in God's redemptive plan for humankind.

Grief began to have its way with Naomi when she packed her belongings and headed home. Reality had replaced denial by the time she reminded her daughters-in-law that her sons—their husbands—were dead (see Ruth 1:8).

Acknowledging that the loss has really happened is essential to healthy grieving. When a spouse dies many hesitate to use the word “dead,” but acceptance of one’s loss requires that the surviving spouse refer to the deceased as having died rather than “having gone away” or “being in heaven” or “having passed.”

The reality is that death brings permanent separation in this life. This reality must be accepted for grief to receive its dues. The knowledge that our loved one is in heaven and that we will be reunited with him enables us to grieve in hope rather than without hope. This hope does not give us permission to deny grief its natural process, but it does ease the pain of acceptance (see 1 Thess. 4:13-14).

Through the eyes of her grief, Naomi perceived her future to be pretty bleak. Hopelessness often accompanies grieving. She said, “I am too old to have another husband” (Ruth 1:12).

We have no reason to believe that Naomi was an old lady, but grief can cause one to feel older than her years and take away all hope of things getting better. It can also take away a woman’s hope that another relationship is possible.

Hopelessness is the primary symptom of depression, a normal emotional response to significant loss. Other symptoms are fatigue, loss of appetite, loss of interest in pleasures formerly enjoyed, insomnia, feelings of worthlessness, diminished concentration. If a mourner remains intensely depressed for more than a few weeks or begins having recurring suicidal thoughts, she should seek professional help, since counseling and medication are usually needed for recovery.

Then Naomi's grief spews out in anger, bitterness, doubt and suspicion toward the God she loved and served. "No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me! The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me" (vv. 13,20).

Do I hear a gasp? Who of you will dare admit that you are angry with God for taking your husband and leaving you all alone, that you have questioned His motives or doubted His love for you because He has refused to tell you why?

God already knows your thoughts. Why not get honest with the all-knowing One, confessing your anger and disappointment so the two of you can be friends while you travel through the wilderness of grief? Don't hesitate to bare your soul to Jesus, who knows how you feel.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16).

The Lord Jesus revealed His humanness and grief at Lazarus' grave. He was so touched by Mary's and Martha's grief that He raised their brother from the dead. The prophet Isaiah referred to Him as a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Is. 53:3, KJV).

THE PATH TO HEALING Naomi instinctively followed good grief guidelines. The first was to talk about her pain. She became vulnerable and honest with her family and friends regarding her thoughts and emotions. They formed her support group, and she felt safe with them.

Every grieving widow needs empathic people who will listen while she cries and talks, faithfully pray for her, refrain from judging when she spills her true feelings and thoughts,

and resist advising her about appropriate and inappropriate grief, allowing her to grieve in her own way.

If I had been her therapist, I would have asked Naomi also to journal her feelings and thoughts. Getting these out in the open by recording them keeps us from burying or repressing our pain. The openness can protect us from a “denied or delayed grief” that frequently emerges disguised in physical or psychosomatic symptoms or illnesses.

Journaling also serves to map our grief journey. Mourners become encouraged when they recognize their progress and tend to develop a more positive attitude, which helps to alleviate depression.

Naomi clung to her memories of the good times with her husband and sons when she said, “I went away full” (Ruth 1:20, NIV). Death cannot take away our memories. Sooner or later, we must let go of our lost loved ones and reconnect with them through our memories.

Instead of trying to forget the good times, we should remember them often. Photograph albums are great for this. And talking about the deceased during gatherings of friends and family can resurrect the fun and laughter of former days and help mourners discover a new connection with their loved ones.

Those who are “left” should dismiss any guilt feelings about having fun times with family and friends. Survivor’s guilt can cause spouses to feel as if it isn’t fair to their departed loved ones to laugh and anticipate an exciting new life. But to experience healing in your grief journey, you must give yourself permission to let go of the way things were and embrace your new life without your partner.

Naomi arrived in Bethlehem “as the barley harvest was beginning” (Ruth 1:22). This description is a beautiful metaphor of a new beginning, since barley is harvested in the

spring. After receiving a celebrity's welcome (1:19) and baring her grieving soul (1:20), she appeared to settle into a "new normal" only to be roused into action by her faithful daughter-in-law (see Ruth 2-3).

While gleaning in Boaz's barley fields, Ruth found favor with this man of standing. When Ruth told Naomi about it, she replied, with hope glimmering, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers"(Ruth 2:20).

With Naomi's help, Boaz ultimately redeemed both Ruth and Naomi from their pitiful plight as widows (see 4:9-10). Ruth's redemption included a beautiful love story. Boaz, smitten with Ruth at first sight, arranged to buy his kinsman's land and wife. Ruth's first son, Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David, placed Ruth right at the core of the lineage of Jesus Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer.

When we are in deep distress because of the loss of a spouse, we long for answers to the haunting question of "why." Faith leads us to believe God when our circumstances cry out that He means us harm (see Jer. 29:11).

Naomi did not know that the loss of her husband and sons would give her an integral role in God's redemptive purposes. She did not know that while working out a plan for her and Ruth's survival she was also putting pieces of our redemption into place.

Healthy grieving requires both a present and a future perspective. Eventually, we must accept the present reality of our loss, understand that grief is the normal emotional response, give ourselves permission to go with its flow and believe that God will redeem us through our pain (see Rom. 5:3-5; 8:28).

At the same time, we fix our gaze toward the future and a reunion with our loved ones. In eternity our Kinsman-Redeemer will wipe every tear from our eyes, and "There will be no more

death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). As we look toward another time and another place, grief will give way to hope, and although life will never be the same, it can still be good.

HEALTHY GRIEF RESPONSES

Following are some responses to grief that mourners and researchers have found helpful for persons experiencing significant loss:

Give shock and denial appropriate time. Mourners must not allow others to pressure them into moving out of this stage too quickly.

Believe the loss has really happened. Accepting the loss calls on the bereaved to own and deal with their pain.

Allow yourself to experience the pain of loss. Early and full grieving is recommended. Talk and weep with those who will not pass judgment about your feelings, thoughts and behaviors during the mourning process.

Keep a diary of your feelings and thoughts related to the loss.

Practice spiritual disciplines when able. Pray alone and with others. Read the Word. Attend worship services as soon after loss as possible.

Forgive self and deceased. Survivors must forgive the deceased for real or perceived offenses or abuse. If they were the perpetrators of offenses, abuse or neglect, survivors must seek and receive God’s forgiveness and then forgive themselves.

Gradually adjust to environments associated with the lost relationship.

Let go of the relationship as it was. Build a new relationship

with the deceased through memories. Memory “trips” and photo albums can help.

Let go of life as it was with the deceased. Life changes significantly with the death of a spouse, child or parent. Reality requires that mourners recognize that life as they knew it with their loved one will never be the same again.

Embrace new life without the deceased. Once mourners intentionally let go of the past with the deceased, it becomes easier to embrace the future without them. Survivors must give themselves permission to move on without the deceased.

Integrate the experience into your life by allowing God to use it for His glory and to change you in the process. The loss of a loved one brings pain and change. We can emerge from the experience bitter or better. God’s purposes for us in trials of any kind are to (1) strengthen our faith in Him; (2) make us more like His Son; (3) allow life to become more meaningful; and (4) give us a greater appreciation of the hope we have in Christ (see Rom 5:3-4). Mourners can emerge from a winter of grief into the glorious spring of a hope-filled life.

Mourners must take care of themselves throughout the grief process. Solicit the help and support of others. Eat well. Seek needed medical and professional help. Get proper sleep and exercise. Avoid making big decisions too early.

Mourners must eventually join the human race again. Remain or get actively involved with others.

Embrace the hope we have in Christ. Remember: “Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Ps 30:5, NIV).

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the host of Time for Hope, a faith-based, mental-health talk show, and the author of Get Off Your Own Back (Destiny Image).

Possess Your Spiritual Inheritance

According to the Scriptures, only two of the Israelites who left Egypt went into the Promised Land. Among the 12 men Moses chose to spy out the land, 10 came back and gave a negative report about the giants who lived there, causing the people's hearts to melt in fear. But Joshua and Caleb declared the beauty of the land and that God would make the giants defenseless before them (Num. 14:9).

Because of the Israelites' unbelief, God let them wander in the desert until they died. Their children inherited the Promised Land they were meant to enter.

However, Caleb followed the Lord fully and, along with Joshua, inherited the Promised Land. His was a winning battle strategy—complete abandonment to God (Josh. 14:9-14).

Caleb's physical strength had not abated during the 40 years in the wilderness. God was with him and drove out the enemy, giving him his inheritance in Hebron, which had been the stronghold of the strongest giants in the land, the Anakim.

Inheriting your promised land also will require a winning strategy. It will mean following the Lord wholly and yielding to the Holy Spirit at every point at which your will, your thoughts and your desires differ from His divine purpose for your life.

The Holy Spirit comes to dwell in your spirit, filling you with the life of God and expressing that divine life through your soul—your mind, emotions and will. When God's will becomes your will, His thoughts your thoughts and His desires your desires, you can say with the apostle Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Who Is Possessing Your Land?

In Joshua 12, there is a list of 31 kings the Israelites defeated after they entered the Promised Land. As they overcame these enemies of God, their lands were distributed among the tribes of Israel.

In a similar way, the old nature that clings to us seems to have as many "kings" as those who ruled in the land of Canaan. Our self-life does not die easily.

In his book *Thirty-One Kings: Or Victory Over Self* (Christian Publications), A.B. Simpson assigned a "face" of self for each one of the kings listed in Joshua 12 who was defeated by the Israelites. I am sure his list is not exhaustive. But I challenge you to ask the Holy Spirit to show you which of these kings are living in your "land": self-indulgence, self-seeking, self-complacency, self-glorying, self-confidence, self-consciousness, self-will, self-importance, self-depreciation, self-vindication, sensitiveness or touchiness, self-seeing, introspection, self-love, self-affections, selfish motives, selfish desires and selfish choices.

Add to this list the kings of selfish pleasures, selfish possessions, selfish fears and cares, selfish sorrows, selfish sacrifices and self-denial, selfish virtues and morality, self-righteousness, selfish sanctity, selfish charities, selfish Christian works, selfish prayers, selfish hopes and

selfish life.

God promised the children of Israel a land flowing with milk and honey at the same time He told them about their enemies (Ex. 3:8). He promised to give them a wonderful land in which to live and to drive out their enemies before them (Ex. 33:2).

For New Testament believers, the promised land is not a physical territory; it is a spiritual one. The promised land Jesus came to give us is characterized by freedom from the enemies in our self-life that war against our souls, robbing us of peace and prosperity.

Self-love is at the root of every form of the self-life. It is a heart centered upon itself, wherein every affection and power of our being is turned inward and self-ward.

Our life must be held not as a selfish possession but as a sacred trust. The apostle Paul understood this when he said, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

All God's promises can be yours as part of your promised land. But you must choose to overcome the enemies that try to keep you from inheriting it.

We Conquer Through Surrender

God is faithful to exchange your sinful nature for His divine nature as you determine to bring the aspects of your self-life to the cross. In his book, A.B. Simpson wrote, "We must surrender ourselves so utterly that we can never own ourselves again. We must hand over self and all its rights in an eternal covenant, and give God the absolute right to own us, control us and possess us forever."

Christ has made it possible for you to lose your self-life entirely and enter into the freedom of eternal life as you

become a partaker of His divine nature. The apostle Peter declared triumphantly, "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by His glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

Possessing your spiritual inheritance involves the ability to live a holy life and receive impartation of the divine nature as you continually give yourself to God and come to truly know Him. He makes it possible for you to become a partaker of the divine nature, delivering you from the corruption of this generation.

As you study His Word and humbly seek Him, you will begin to think as He thinks; you will exchange your worldly thoughts for His kingdom thoughts. The Holy Spirit will cause the written Word to come alive to you. And Christ, who is the Word, will become your life. You will realize the reality of what the apostle Paul wrote: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

In my book *Placed in His Glory*, I wrote, "The work of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the glory of Jesus in us. As long as we are in control, He can't be.

"The 'I' nature wants to rule, having my way and exercising my rights, never allowing the Holy Spirit to do what He came to do. If we take our 'I' to the cross, we can exchange it there for the I AM.

"Then the Holy Spirit moves into every area of our personality, and the veil of flesh begins to fall away. We begin to realize that we don't think as we used to think.

"The truth will dawn on us: 'These aren't my thoughts.' Then

we understand Paul's injunction to 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus'" (Phil. 2:5).

The Holy Spirit begins to replace Adam's carnal mind with the mind of Christ so we can think as our Daddy thinks. Then He changes our rebellious wills as well.

As we keep surrendering to the Holy Spirit, He begins to take the Father's will and make it our will. As we yield to the Holy Spirit's work within us, we begin to walk with God and do the will of God.

Perhaps you will never fully grasp the wonder of redemption. But you can rejoice in it and experience the reality of the life of Christ in you—your promised land—as you abandon yourself to the Holy Spirit within you.

He has come to change you into the image of Christ, to cause this "treasure in earthen vessels" to shine forth, "that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7). And He made your victory possible (Col. 2:13-15).

Christ did it all for us. Why should we be defeated by enemies who seem too strong for us—anger, self-pity or pride? We must be very courageous to put off the old man and put on the new, as Paul admonished us: "Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and ... put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24).

Begin to declare victory. The righteous King has come. Receive His perfect love and banish the kings of self forever.

Read a companion devotional.

*The late **Fuchsia Pickett** is the author of Possess Your Promised Land, published by Charisma House, from which this article is adapted.*

The Key to a Healthy Heart

Most women I meet, if asked about their greatest health concern, would probably name breast cancer as the malady they most fear. But though breast cancer might generate a more passionate reaction than heart disease, the truth of the matter is this: More women in the United States die each year from heart disease than from all cancers combined.

One out of five women in this country has some form of cardiovascular disease. It is the leading cause of death in American women, claiming more than half a million lives annually.

And it's no longer considered an older woman's disease. Even though women typically don't show signs of heart disease until their 60s (roughly 10 years later than men), about 9,000 women each year under age 45 experience a heart attack.

In addition to the age at onset, there are other things that distinguish heart disease in women from heart disease in men. Women tend to do worse after their first heart attack. Forty-two percent of women who have a heart attack will die within the first year as compared to 24 percent of men.

Heart disease often goes unrecognized in women. The symptoms may be unusual, ignored or attributed to something less serious, such as indigestion. And many women don't experience any symptoms at all prior to having their first heart attack.

I'm not telling you all this because I want to leave you worried and apprehensive; but I do want to stir up in you a desire to modify your lifestyle so that your risk of developing heart disease is lowered.

Our lifestyles play a major role in our health and longevity. In America, 300,000 deaths each year are related to improper diet and inadequate exercise. If you add the deaths attributable to smoking, alcohol, illicit drugs and sexual indiscretion, the number becomes astonishing.

Lifestyle is such a major factor in heart disease that an estimated 80 percent of cases are linked directly to unhealthy eating and lifestyle habits. Solomon said, "Where there is no guidance, the people fall" (Prov. 11:14, NASB).

But when it comes to health, too many of us are falling, even in the face of reliable and readily available guidance. Information on health abounds and is more accessible now than at any other time in our history.

Medical research has increased the level of understanding for not only physicians and other health care providers but also the general public. Television, newspapers, magazines and the Internet provide a never-ending flow of data on health-related topics. The information is there; we're just not implementing it.

Of course, not everyone who suffers from a heart attack or finds himself in need of bypass surgery can shoulder the entire blame for his situation. Certainly there are people who have a predisposition to heart disease that is totally beyond their control.

But in spite of the fact that some of us are in a position to change our risk for disease through modifying our behavior, too many (born-again believers included) are simply not taking any tangible steps toward change.

Making Healthy Choices

So what are some ways to lower your risk? The majority of risk factors for heart disease can be positively modified through lifestyle changes. Only one risk factor—having a genetic

predisposition—is completely beyond our control.

Other risk factors include tobacco use, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, obesity and a sedentary lifestyle, all of which are influenced by the way we live.

Besides cigarette smoking and a family history of heart disease, all the risk factors listed above are impacted by our eating and exercise habits. As I mentioned before, poor diet and a lack of exercise are the cause of 300,000 deaths each year. Even if a risk factor cannot be entirely eliminated by practicing healthier habits (there are plenty of people, for instance, who diligently follow a low-salt diet but still have high blood pressure), lifestyle modification is still recommended and is highly beneficial.

Lifestyle modification may also impact a risk factor I haven't yet mentioned—an unhealthy emotional state. The scientific community continues to confirm what the Bible has taught us all along: There's a compelling link between negative emotions such as anger, anxiety and hostility and an increased risk for heart disease.

The connection between heart failure and anger is especially strong. Anger and hostility evoke physiological responses in our bodies that are potentially life-threatening.

All of us at times respond in anger to such things as criticism or frustration. But many women have a tendency to respond angrily with little or no provocation. Those who have this personality type not only are at increased risk for heart disease but also are prone to develop it at an early age.

One study conducted on people receiving heart scans showed an association between angry facial expressions and abnormalities in heart function. Another study showed the converse—that humor served to protect the heart. No wonder the Bible tells us that “a happy heart makes the face cheerful” and “a

cheerful look brings joy to the heart” (Prov. 15:13,30, NIV)!

As Spirit-filled believers, we have the power to lower our risk for heart disease. So why aren't we using it?

I've spent many years in clinical practice and in seeking insight from the Lord on matters pertaining to health. Needless to say, I've treated numerous Christian women who have been successful in taking charge of their lifestyles to improve their health.

But I've also had my share of patients who failed. From them I've learned that although there are many reasons a person may fail in this attempt, two stand out. One is that we tend to rely on our own abilities, underestimating the difficulty involved in changing our lifestyles. Another is that all too often (deep down in our “never admit” zone) we're getting a lot of satisfaction from indulging our flesh.

Anyone who has ever tried to break an old habit or develop a new one knows the task can be challenging. And implementing a “heart-healthy” lifestyle is no exception. You must change several things—what you eat, how much you eat, how often you eat, the way you prepare your food and your level of physical activity.

But even before you attempt to make changes, you must acknowledge the difficulty of the task. Sometimes when I counsel Christian women on how tough it is to change old habits, they grandly proclaim the first part of Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ” (NKJV). Sadly, they don't recognize that it's the second part of this verse—“who strengthens me”—that is so vital to our success.

Yes, we can do all things through Christ, but we must never forget it is the Lord who gives us strength. The likelihood for long-term success through sheer determination alone is not very high, but when we humble ourselves and receive power through the Holy Spirit, we can walk in victory.

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit has given us “everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3, NIV). He has equipped us to live soberly and to practice self-discipline with moderation in every aspect of our lives.

I don’t think Jesus gave us the “authority to trample on snakes and scorpions” (Luke 10:19) only to render us powerless in resisting a second serving of cheesecake. If, however, we want access to this level of authority, we must first recognize the source. Then we, like the apostle Paul, can experience God’s power “made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9) and receive the strength we need to change our lifestyles and improve our health.

Too Good to Resist

The second reason for failure is that we aren’t serious enough about subjecting our flesh. In my years of practice, I’ve had female patients with high cholesterol tell me they refuse to cut back on hamburgers, pork chops and steaks. I’ve seen women with diabetes who would rather increase their dosage of insulin than walk for half an hour each day. And I’ve watched women with high blood pressure pour on the salt for no other reason than to satisfy a craving for salty foods.

Throughout Scripture we’re admonished to keep our flesh under subjection. But the reality is this: We have become so cozy with the self-indulgent tendencies of the world that we hardly notice when they rub off on us. For many Christians, the attributes of self-control, sobriety, discipline and moderation have yielded to a mind-set that says, “If it feels good (or, for that matter, if it tastes good)—do it!”

Often when we speak of issues such as self-indulgence and yielding to the flesh, the first thing that comes to mind is sexual sin. But there’s more to lust than fornication. Giving in to the cravings of the flesh in any way, including indulging ourselves with food, is a dangerous venture.

The Bible links this form of sin to self-indulgence and gluttony, as this vivid description of Israel's rebellion shows: "Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat and kicked; filled with food, he became heavy and sleek. He abandoned the God who made him and rejected the Rock his Savior" (Deut. 32:15).

A heart-healthy diet is different from the typical American diet. It is high in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans and legumes. It requires that we cut back on foods high in saturated fat and trans-fatty acids, and instead eat more foods containing monounsaturated fats and omega-3 fatty acids.

Living in a heart-healthy way also requires us to exercise regularly and strive to maintain a healthy weight. These dramatic changes cannot be realized if we are unwilling to deny the flesh.

Finally, to have a healthy heart, it is crucial that we purge ourselves of any unhealthy emotions. We must take Paul's advice to "get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (Eph. 4:31).

His words aren't simply a formula for maintaining peaceful fellowship. They are a recipe that could save our lives.

So don't hang on to deadly emotions. Let go of bitterness, be slow to anger and be quick to forgive. Your obedience will not only be pleasing to the Lord; it will also protect your heart.

As Christian women, we must remember that God calls us to subject our flesh for our protection, not as a punishment. His grace gives us everything we need to say no to our cravings, our laziness and our negative emotions (Tit. 2:11-12). Unfortunately, not many women are compelled to do this until after their first heart attack. My prayer is that you avoid such a tragedy.

The Lord demonstrated His unfailing love for us in fulfilling

the promise to “give [us] a new heart and put a new spirit in [us]” (Ezek. 36:26). Let’s honor Him by taking care of our whole persons—body, soul and spirit—including our hearts.

Read a companion devotional.

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