

# Press Into This Comforting Truth When You Feel Lonely

Confession: My 30-year high school reunion was this week, and I did not go.

Horrible person? Vote in.

I saw the names of classmates come up on the reunion Facebook page, but I just kept thinking that after 30 years, I don't know any of these people.

They don't know me.

A group of them went past me, on a float in the Fourth of July parade in my hometown, and I still had this feeling, "They don't know me. They don't know how I've dripped sweat over Spanish curriculum for the last four years or how grief still hits that my dad is gone. And I don't know the joys and sorrows of their lives." It felt overwhelming to jump into the group and try to re-establish meaningful connections in just a few days.

(Is my introvert showing?)

So I stayed in my mom's house, with my husband and kids and brother and sister-in-law and nieces and aunts and uncles who know me.

As I was making the seven-layer dip for the evening of July Fourth, I knew to leave tomatoes off one sliver for my aunt, who thinks they are gross. No one had to tell me this. I knew my sister-in-law would avoid the noise of fireworks at all costs. I knew my brother would bring jalapeños. I know these people.

Just last week, I came across this verse and wrote it on a notecard to commit to memory: "But the man who loves God is

known by God” (1 Cor. 8:3, NIV).

Being known by someone is the core of comfort.

When you know your people, it means you know exactly how much creamer your husband likes in his coffee.

You know the look on your daughter’s face when she feels car sick.

You know your mom will be teary every time the color guard passes by.

You know your aunt will be the first one putting suds in the sink after a family gathering.

When we love God, He knows us like this. He reads our expressions and anticipates what we will need. He sees our weak hearts and annoying habits. He knows where we will shine and where we will fail. This is a wonderful, intimate, love-saturated kind of knowing.

I know my website theme says “Know God,” but maybe today, you just need to receive the soothing truth that God knows you.

*Author and blogger Christy Fitzwater is a pastor’s wife and Spanish teacher in Montana.*

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## **3 Intriguing Truths You Don’t Often Hear About God’s Love**

While I was studying *agape* love, I saw something new. ... something I’d never seen before.

*Agape* love is a funny thing.

When we study what the Bible says about God's love, we see that God commands us to love with His love, but that love is a kind of love that can only come from Him. With that same love that He gives us, we love Him by keeping His commands, one of which is to love others the way He loved us.

Are you confused yet?

### **1. Love is a command.**

*Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." "This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:37-40).*

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).*

We can sum up all of the Ten Commandments like this:

The first four are "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

The other six are "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Do you love yourself?

This can be so hard! I don't know about you, but often do not love myself very much. I see in myself so many shortcomings and idiosyncrasies that I sometimes even hate myself!

Then Jesus gave a new command when He said to love one another as He loved us. Not as we love ourselves, but as He loved us.

That is a new and greater form of love.

## **2. Agape love is given by God.**

I don't know about you, but it isn't very easy to love as Jesus loved us. He loves us the way we are. ... and He loved us when we hated Him, when we didn't want anything to do with Him.

He showed us the greatest form of love when He gave His life for us, without calculating what it meant for Him, without considering whether or not we'd actually be grateful for His sacrifice.

But what really amazes me is the command that we love Him with the kind of love that only comes from Him.

We can't love God until we receive His love with which we must love Him!

Just let that blow your mind for a second: "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

## **3. We love God by keeping His commands.**

How do we love God?

This is something that really confused me for a long time, because I often didn't feel love for God. Often I didn't feel like reading the Bible or spending time with Him in I doubted whether I actually loved Him at all.

But if we look at my definition of love in a human sense, then any time I don't feel ooey-goey feelings for my husband, it means I don't love him anymore.

Hmmm. ... I think our feelings don't really define love very well!

Then I found a verse in which Jesus tells us the kind of love He wants from us:

*"If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15).*

This is something so amazing! When we compare Christianity with every other religion, we see that the followers of other religions agonize over how to fulfill the vague and often shifting desires of their gods, hoping they somehow succeed.

But Almighty God, the one, true God, didn't just tell us exactly how to please Him, He gives us the tools to please Him so that we can keep His commands!

He gave us the command so we would know how to do His will.

But, He knew that in our own strength it is impossible to do His will.

So He gave us what we need to fulfill His will!

*Grace and peace be multiplied to you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. 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 own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:2-3).*

This is why, my dear sister, love is a fruit of the Spirit.

This love cannot grow in us without the Holy Spirit!

Without the Holy Spirit we can only give human love:

love based on feelings,

love with strings attached,

love that manipulates,

love with hidden motives,

love that isn't really love!

God's love—perfect love, pure love, *agape* love, comes only from the Holy Spirit and grows in us because He lives in us and bears fruit in our life.

*Rosilind Jukic, a Pacific Northwest native, is a missionary living in Croatia and married to her hero. Together they live in the country with their two active boys, where she enjoys fruity candles and a hot cup of herbal tea on a blustery fall evening. She holds an Associates of Practical Theology and is passionate about discipling and encouraging women. Her passion for writing led her to author a number of books. She is the author of A Little R & R where she encourages women to find contentment in what God created them to be. She can also be found at these other places on a regular basis. You can follow her on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Google +.*

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## **7 Meaningful Ways God Speaks That Can Help Your Marriage**

When we asked couples what they struggle with, communication was No. 1. It can feel as though you and your spouse are speaking different languages, and attempts to talk seem to only make things worse. Since we are made in God's image, looking at God's communication with us should teach us a lot about healthy communication in marriage.

God is always communicating. The Bible is basically a record of and means of God's communication with us. "God, who at various times and in diverse ways spoke long ago to the fathers through the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the world" (Heb. 1:1-2).

Imagine God trying to communicate with us. He knows everything, has all the answers, and loves us with a heart that is infinite, passionate, strong, and wise. But we

struggle to hear and understand Him. Jesus described it like this: "In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: 'By hearing, you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing, you will see and shall not perceive; for this people's heart has grown dull. Their ears have become hard of hearing, and they have closed their eyes, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts, and turn, and I should heal them'" (Matt. 13:14-15).

Talk about a closed heart! Does that sound like your spouse when you try to communicate?

And perhaps it describes you sometimes as well.

But God doesn't give up, and neither should you.

Here are some aspects of God's communication with us that can help you in communicating with your spouse.

### 1. **He goes first.**

God doesn't wait for us to be good enough or willing to listen before communicating. He makes the first move. We are decidedly unworthy, but He speaks anyway. Everything in the Bible, including Jesus coming in person, were at God's initiative. And He continues to take the initiative in communicating with us now.

So don't wait for your spouse to do it; you step up and work on communication first. You invest the time to learn the necessary skills, to discover how your spouse hears best, to broach the difficult subjects, to communicate when your spouse doesn't seem interested. You make the first move.

### 2. **He seeks our understanding instead of forcing our obedience.**

God could have forced us to obey Him, but He values our freely-given love and worship too much. Because He's God, He

doesn't have to work hard to understand us, but He does work hard at helping us understand Him in any way we as humans can.

Trying to get your way in your marriage will be a very short-lived victory. If you want a real relationship you will have to work toward understanding, not compliance. It's understanding that fosters connection and intimacy. Seek understanding first.

### **3. He lets us talk, and He listens.**

God encourages us to communicate with Him. "Come now, let us reason together" (Is. 1:18a). "Let us then come with confidence to the throne of grace" (Heb. 4:16). And He assures us that He hears us (see 1 John 5:14). It's not one-sided. He invites us to pour out everything in our hearts to Him.

Be an eager, attentive listener to your spouse. Concentrate on listening not only with your ears, but with your eyes and heart. Listen to their words and also to what's underneath the words such as their wounds, dreams, emotions, needs and more.

### **4. He is always after strengthening the relationship.**

God's communication with us is always about encouraging relationship. When He corrects us, it's with the message "I don't want you to be hurt! Come back to Me!" He promises good things to make us desire relationship with Him. He is the ultimate example of communicating from an open heart.

In communicating with your spouse, always make your goal strengthening the relationship between you. If you have something negative to say, attack the problem, not the person. Demonstrate by your words and actions that you desire the relationship to be not only preserved but deepened.

### **5. He speaks in a language we can understand.**

The few times God used His own voice to speak to humans, they cowered in fear. (see Ex. 20:18-19). So God uses our language.

He has inspired human beings to speak His message to us. His letter to us—the Bible—is a collection of stories, poems and letters. He became one with us in the person of Jesus, showing us what He is like in a demonstration we'd have to be blind to miss. Still we often don't "get it," but He keeps speaking our language.

Make an effort to listen to yourself with your spouse's ears. Pay attention to what they are hearing, not just what you are saying. Invest in framing and delivering your words in the way your spouse can best hear and understand.

#### **6. He risks Himself in communicating with us.**

How many times have human beings misunderstood what God is saying? God risks His reputation by communicating with us. And His biggest communication of all—coming Himself in the person of Jesus—was riskiest of all when we as humans rejected Him and crucified Him.

Communicating with your spouse makes you vulnerable. You might be—probably will be—misunderstood, rejected or hurt either occasionally or frequently. But the consequences of not communicating are too great, and the potential benefits of understanding and intimacy too valuable. So just do it, even if it's hard, frustrating, scary and risky.

#### **7. He never gives up.**

God doesn't close His heart to us when we misunderstand Him, get angry or walk away. He respects our choices and communicates again and again. He keeps on seeking to find ways to help us respond to Him. He never gives up.

Don't close your heart to your spouse. Even if you must protect it at times, keep it open. Keep communicating, seeking to understand. Keep seeking to win your spouse's heart. Keep searching for how your spouse can best hear you.

Communicating with your spouse like God communicates with us does not happen naturally. It takes intentional effort and God's work in your heart and in your relationship. This would be one of the most important things to pray about—that God open your heart and your spouse's heart, and that He fill you with the grace to communicate with your spouse in the same ways He communicates with us.

*Reprinted with permission from Dr. Carol Ministries. Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley is an author, speaker, minister and OB-GYN.*

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## **This Is Why You Can't Find Your Passion for Prayer**

I admire people who are passionate. When you and I are passionate about something, we give it our all. We're enthusiastic, bold and persuasive.

However, one area we don't often associate with passion is prayer. Seminars or books on the principles of prayer may fail to help because the topic doesn't awaken our excitement. After years of struggling with "saying my prayers" while longing to be passionate about it, I finally began identifying the enemies of passionate prayer in my life.

### **Look at Me**

Prayer is often described as talking with God. However, it can be difficult to become passionate about conversing with someone we cannot see. Communication experts confirm our need to sense we're being listened to when we speak. Moms tell children, "Look at me when I'm talking to you." Wives appeal to husbands to put down the newspaper, television remote or

smartphone when having a conversation.

My own prayer life suffered because I wondered if God really listened. Did I believe Him when He said, “The LORD hears when I call to him” (Ps. 4:3b). Belief and trust are rooted in relationship. God has shown Himself faithful and trustworthy throughout my relationship with Him. I had no reason not to believe Him, yet the times of waiting for answers to prayer took their toll.

And those who never established a personal relationship with Jesus Christ will find it almost impossible to be passionate about talking with Him. There’s a huge difference between knowing *about* God and knowing Him personally through His Son. Attending church every week helps us know about God but does not guarantee we will be in a relationship with Him.

Even those who do have a personal relationship with the Lord may feel discouraged in prayer because they’re not as close to Him as they would like to be. When I first came to know the Lord, I was told prayer would help me develop a closer relationship with Him. But I struggled in my prayer life because I didn’t feel close to Him. How could I get close to God if I didn’t pray? How could I pray if I didn’t feel close to God?

### **Do I Have To?**

For some Christians, prayer has been about the “have-to.” Good Christians have to pray. God expects us to pray, other Christians expect it, and we expect it.

One of the quickest ways to kill my passion for something is to tell me I have to do it. Prayer became a chore and a transaction: If I wanted God to answer my requests, He required me to spend time with Him.

This led to another passion-killer in my prayer life—a focus on getting things from God. I spent my time and energy on what

God could do for me—not just answers to requests for health, wealth and happiness, but even requests for my own spiritual growth. I wanted to be more holy, to develop the character traits of “love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). I wanted to be a good wife, a good witness, a good teacher, a good writer.

Although these requests sound spiritual, they were all about *me*. Of course, God wants me to be a good wife or a good teacher, filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit as I serve Him. But first, He wants me to just *be* . . . to be in His presence, to worship Him for who He is and to seek His heart before I seek His hand.

### **Eggshells or Enthusiasm?**

When we’re passionate about something, it shows. Ever listen to sports fans at a football game? Their passion is rarely expressed in constrained whispers.

Yet for years I entered the throne room of God as if I were walking on eggshells. I convinced myself it was a sign of respect. Of course, our heavenly Father is worthy of reverence and awe as we approach Him. Yet few parents want their children to tiptoe around them for fear of what they might say or do. We want our children and grandchildren to respect us, yes, but also to love us unreservedly. We want them to know our love for them goes far beyond anything they could ever ask or imagine.

Approaching God timidly might seem like a good thing, but His Word tells us otherwise. “Let us then come with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16), and “we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (Heb. 10:19).

Knowing Jesus is interceding for us (Heb. 7:25) gives us confidence to approach our heavenly Father. If we enter the

presence of God based on our relationship with Jesus Christ, then to come with anything less than confident boldness is to not take God at His Word.

### **Whittling Away at Passion**

Other things can also quench our passion for prayer—including emotions such as:

#### **Discouragement**

When God doesn't answer my prayers the way I want, I can become discouraged. But discouragement in prayer is another way of saying that I don't believe God really knows best. Looking back, however, I've lost count of the number of times I've asked God for things I'm now grateful He's answered with a resounding "no."

The more I read God's Word and grow in intimacy with Him, the more I've come to trust His sovereign will. The accompanying assurance that my heavenly Father does, indeed, know best, is a strong antidote for discouragement.

#### **Guilt**

Guilt has also been a passion-killer in my prayer life. Guilt over failing to spend enough time with the Lord. Guilt over failing to spend consistent time with Him. And guilt over breaking my promises to do better.

So I stopped making elaborate promises to double and triple my quiet time. Instead of attempting radical overnight increases in my daily quiet time (and failing), I lengthened my quiet time in five-minute increments over a period of several weeks. Instead of trying to wake up two hours earlier the next morning, I set my alarm clock for 15 minutes earlier, increasing it by an additional 15 minutes each week until my quiet time developed into a protected time with my heavenly Father. Slow and steady changes resulted in successes that

renewed my passion for the time I spend with the Lord.

## **Pride**

Pride is yet another passion-killer for me. For years, I avoided praying in public, not wanting to do it until I could do it “right.” Pride squelched my passion for prayer because I was concerned about how others perceived the way I prayed.

God reminded me prayer is directed to an audience of One. The only person I’m speaking to is Him. But even with the Lord as my only listener, I still tried to pray as I had heard others pray. Consumed with getting it right, I wondered if I was using the proper words. Were they in the right order? Was my tone religious enough? I had a mental image of God looking down from heaven shaking His head in disappointment, ready to criticize me for not sounding holy enough.

But God doesn’t listen to our prayers with an evaluation checklist. He isn’t armed with a rolled-up newspaper, ready to rap us on the nose if our prayers don’t sound religious enough. God is looking at our hearts’ passion as we speak to Him.

Passionate prayer is a vital component of our relationship with the one, true, living God. Evangelist and teacher Oswald Chambers once described prayer as “getting into perfect communion with God.” Now that’s something we can all get passionate about!

*© 2001-2017 Revive Our Hearts. Reprinted with permission from Revive Our Hearts. **Ava Pennington** is a writer, speaker, Bible teacher and the author of Daily Reflections on the Names of God: A Devotional. Ava has written for numerous magazines, including Focus on the Family’s Clubhouse and Christianity Today’s Today’s Christian Woman. She is also published in 23 Chicken Soup for the Soul books. Ava is a passionate speaker and engages audiences with relevant, enjoyable presentations. When not writing and speaking, Ava loves*

*playing with her boxer puppies, Duke and Daisy.*

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# **My Loved One Just Died—Is She in Heaven?**

One of the most difficult things a Christian can face when grieving is knowing whether or not their loved went to heaven.

No one wants to consider the alternative to heaven.

No one wants that alternative for their loved one.

Most, if not all, of us have faced a loved one's death without being fully certain of their salvation, which leads to an even greater depth of grief, not knowing for certain where they are.

While many people would want to comfort us, telling us that our loved one was a good person and "surely God wouldn't send a good person to hell," for those of us who understand that good works are not a basis for eternity in heaven, this is small comfort.

**Here are three things to remember when you're not certain your loved one is in heaven:**

**1. God is a God of mercy.**

Yes, God is a just God, and those who defiantly refuse God's gift of salvation will go to hell. However, God is also a God of mercy. This contrast is the perfect nature of God: He is both just and merciful. If need be, God will reveal Himself in human form if that is what it will take for a person to surrender himself to Him.

## **2. God doesn't want any to perish.**

No one is born predestined to destruction and hell. No one. The Bible says that it is God's will that none perish, and God will go to great lengths to call a person to salvation.

Does this mean that every person will be saved? No. Because God has chosen to limit Himself to human will. This is the astounding thing about God. He is all-powerful and could make us surrender to Him, but He chooses to limit that power to our will. Therefore, we can choose to circumvent His will; we can choose not to surrender to Him.

But God will reach out until a person's final breath to call them to salvation.

## **3. We can't know what went on in the final hours of their life.**

While a person may not be fully conscious, or conscious at all, in the final moments of their life, until the last beat of their heart, God is calling them.

And mental consciousness is not required for salvation.

While a person may no longer have their mental capacities, their spirit is still responsive, and God is reaching out.

This is why Jesus warned us so strongly against judging others. We cannot possibly know where a person has gone once they've died, and to assume we know what took place between God and them in those final seconds, in those final heartbeats, is to be incredibly presumptuous.

God is a God of mercy and grace, and He will do everything necessary to call a person to salvation until their final breath.

While we may never know for certain whether or not our loved one is in heaven, we can make a choice to trust in God's mercy

and grace, in His love and justice.

Without the merciful and loving nature of God, full of grace and justice, none of us would have any hope in this world.

And this truth is the ultimate comfort for us all. {eoa}

*Rosilind Jukic, a Pacific Northwest native, is a missionary living in Croatia and married to her hero. Together they live in the country with their two active boys, where she enjoys fruity candles and a hot cup of herbal tea on a blustery fall evening. She holds an associates of practical theology and is passionate about discipling and encouraging women. Her passion for writing led her to author a number of books. She is the author of A Little R & R where she encourages women to find contentment in what God created them to be. She can also be found at these other places on a regular basis. You can follow her on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Google +.*

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## **Mom, Are You Hindering the Holy Spirit's Work in Your Teenager?**

Sometimes I gasp when reading Facebook posts. That happened last night as I read a post by my friend, Valerie, about her parenting journey and her 15-year-old daughter's choice.

Learning about the eight great ways kids are smart and other principles of honoring children has encouraged Valerie. I love teaching her—as I do so many of you—because she is open. I hope her words here speak to you. Yes, you!

*From Valerie:*

To my young mom friends: God has blessed me with three very different young women. We all “get” each other at times, but we all think very differently. We argue differently, we praise differently, we study differently, we have different hobbies, different likes, different dislikes.

It has taken me a long time to realize my kids don’t have to do it my way. In fact, their ways teach them faster, teach them more deeply, grow them better.

A few months ago, Kaleigh came to us and asked if she could turn her linen closet into a prayer closet. To be honest, I didn’t know how much she would be in there, but she spends hours each week in there—journaling, drawing, worshipping.

Last week, she asked if she could paint on the walls in her prayer closet. This goes against everything I am. “We don’t want to make a mess.” “You might spill paint on the floor.” “Do people really just paint on the walls, like with total freedom and without fear of failure?” (My own issues.)

Well, after three hours, she had created a beautiful painting that includes a Scripture verse. She intends to paint over it one day, when she feels she needs a new picture—and start over.

Mom friends—I’m almost at the end of my “raising” times, and I am just finding the freedom to let them be who God made them to be. It’s exhilarating, inspiring and freeing. {eoa}

*Reprinted with permission from Dr. Kathy Koch’s blog. **Dr. Kathy Koch** (cook), the Founder and President of Celebrate Kids, Inc., based in Fort Worth, Texas, has influenced thousands of parents, teachers and children in 30 countries through keynote messages, seminars, chapels and other events.*

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# Exuding Gratitude When Life Gives You a Flat Tire

He called on his way home from fishing, but I could tell there was something wrong.

“Well, I’ve got a flat tire,” he said.

“Oh no. Where are you?” I asked.

“Would you believe I’m just a few blocks away from our tire store? Why couldn’t the tire have blown just two minutes later? I’ve got a problem. When we bought the new rims this year, I didn’t realize my tire iron wouldn’t fit anymore.”

Then we played that fun marriage game where the guy tries to describe to the girl what tool he needs from the garage.

After figuring out what he wanted, I drove the equipment to him, only to find out none of what I brought worked. I was frustrated. *Lord, really? Why couldn’t you have gotten Matt a few more blocks down the road?*

So I drove to Les Schwab and played another game of “try to explain what you need to the car guy behind the counter.” That resulted in me calling Matt and handing the phone to the guy.

I am such a girl.

Would you believe the man loaned me the tool we needed? “How soon can you get this back to me?” he said. I told him five minutes. By then it was 5:40 and close to closing time. I lied—it was 5:50 when I returned it. I told the Les Schwab man he was my hero.

At home that evening, Matt looked at me and said, “Can you imagine what would have happened if that tire had blown while I was out fishing? An hour away from home, in the boonies, with no cell service and no fitting tire iron? How good was it of God to have me lose the tire just a few blocks away from the tire store.”

Well, yes. How good it was. I voiced my agreement.

And how nice of that guy to let me walk out of his store with the tool I needed. He took a risk that I was telling the truth and would return it.

Paul says: “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:18).

Once again, I have been schooled to hunt for the good in every circumstance, instead of defaulting to griping.

And you? In what hard situation do you need to practice thankfulness today? {eoa}

*Adapted from Christy Fitzwater's blog. Christy Fitzwater is a pastor's wife, Spanish teacher, author and speaker in Montana.*

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## **This Is a Sure Sign You're Missing God**

“Now to him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond than all that we ask or imagine, according to the power that works in us” (Eph. 3:20).

I have recently been reminded that every so often, Christian leaders and pastors have a very sobering choice to make. It

seems for me that about every three to five years, I am faced with this decision. This choice is one that determines our level of effectiveness, the growth of our faith, our level of obedience and ultimately our level of satisfaction in this life.

Through the cycles of life, leadership and ministry, every one of us has to choose, on a regular basis, between stepping out further on the difficult path of faith or settling down on the well-worn seat of mediocrity.

At some point, we are all familiar with both decisions. Somewhere in the genesis of our ministry or at the beginning of a new assignment, we have felt our passion and excitement merge with the necessary energy to be bold and courageous. We find the strength to pray and believe that God will do something bigger than our own abilities. At other times, following difficulty, failure or disappointment, we suffer from lack of vision and decide to back off, let up and settle down.

Lest the distinction between these two decisions be misunderstood, let me make clear I am not talking about becoming a sleepless workaholic, one who ignores, for the sake of work, the greatest priorities in life. Every leader must first rest, spend time in the Word, pray and lovingly serve their family. What I am talking about is not exclusively an action; it actually has more to do with vision than it does with cluttering our calendars. It's more about faith than function. For some of us, stepping out may first mean stepping "back" and realigning our priorities around those found in Scripture.

One may take the comfortable road of settling down and end up with more "to do" than if had they "stepped out" in bold faith for God. We limit God when we only see the tasks of life that we perform as His plan. The work of God is not so much about what I can do as it is believing and trusting Him for the

supernatural work only He can perform. This is experienced through faithful commitment to the Word of God and prayer. One is settling down by merely marking off a list, being comfortable with weekly accomplishments. Year after year going through the motions of ministry without ever really risking anything for God's kingdom. This road is paved with safety, comfort, passivity, predictability and only performing the maintenance tasks of life and ministry. The other is hearing God's voice through His Word and prayer and stepping out into an uncomfortable, risky, aggressive, spontaneous, sometimes controversial yet transformational path. This path is marked by a sincere belief that God wants to do something powerful in this world for the sake of the gospel and His glory.

The allurement of settling down has caused many to fall short of the best God has for them. The ministry becomes a casual routine distracted by a myriad of good, safe, predictable things. The excitement is more about a fulfilling hobby or a relaxing pleasure than the unseen, unfulfilled work of God in their life and ministry. Prayer is scarce, spiritual burdens are light, and sermons are little more than a last-minute, inspired download.

I am reminded of Moses, whose life started with such great promise. However, somewhere in the middle of his life, after failure and disappointment, he found himself settling down into the safe, comfortable, and obscure ministry of "keeping sheep" in anonymity (see Ex. 3:1). His youthful zeal was gone as he labored day after day chasing his father-in-law's flock. In hindsight, we see the providential hand of God in Moses' life on the back side of the desert. Yet he had decided that this was where he would spend the remainder of his days. When God spoke miraculously to him through a burning bush, Moses received the call with fear and doubt. He no longer believed God was capable of engaging him in a mighty work. And yet we know that the plan of God for Moses was the transformational work of leading the people out of bondage.

At the heart of this for me is the question, "What am I willing to believe God for today in my life, my family and His kingdom in this world?" I have been blessed to watch God do some really great things in the churches I have pastored. And yet it seems with each new blessing and experience of God's grace comes the temptation to "settle down." Isn't this enough? Can't we just be content, Lord? Must we step out again? What about my comfort? What if we fail? These questions and a thousand more are the arrows of the enemy to stifle our faith and chase us to a place of comfortable repose.

After years of ministry and preaching, after a decade or two of shepherding "our father's flock," how easy it is to "hide" in those safe places. How common it is to be afraid to believe again for something transformational for the sake of the gospel. Like Moses, we question our own ability and even the potential of God through us. Let us be reminded that God has given each of us a "burning bush." The Word of God burns with truth and grace, and the communication we have with God each day at that bush will once again set us on fire to do a mighty work for God in this world.

By grace, let's resist the temptation to take the easier way. Let's commit ourselves to the most important things. Let's believe again for the impossible, dream again for our church and its gospel impact in our community. Be burdened for the person it seems is the most lost. Expect God to move in our churches this weekend, anticipate the transformation that accompanies the work of the Holy Spirit. Be it bold or subtle, let's make today about stepping out, not settling down.

"Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God."  
—William Carey

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# Why Changing Your Mind Is the Only Way to Truly Change Your Life

Sometimes it's not life that causes us to feel negative and pessimistic but our perspective on what is happening in our life. We can't always control our circumstances but we can always control our thoughts about them. How we choose to think determines how we feel which in turn determines how we live our life overall.

So what might happen if we asked God to help us change our perspective about the current troubles we are facing so we can in turn change our attitude? Although it might be difficult to endure our problems with a smile and optimistic outlook, doing so with great faith results in more positive actions and helps us become stronger, optimistic, and joyful.

As promised in today's Proverbs 31 devotion, "**Three Easy Steps to Transforming Your Mind and Your Life,**" I want to introduce you to a few women who have implemented my three-step strategy shared in the devotion for transforming your thought patterns and who have experienced a significant change for the better in their hearts, minds and lives.

If it can happen for them, it can happen for you too!

## Meet Lori

Lori shared with me the battle that went on in her mind for years, and how she used to live with overwhelming fear. As a little girl, she was afraid of her babysitters, teachers, meeting new friends and speaking up in class. As she grew up,

her fears morphed into a paralyzing stronghold that affected her entire life. She feared meeting new people, living with roommates in college and even dating. Eventually, Lori's fears caused her to retreat into her own shell, becoming very shy and withdrawn in an attempt to feel safe, and at times being afraid to leave her home at all. Just before her college graduation, she was raped, and all the accompanying shame, guilt, anxiety and newly heightened fear began to hold her hostage in her own body. She was a prisoner to the thoughts in her head, and they had a strong hold on her life as a whole.

Her negative thoughts influenced her feelings, which affected her life, which negatively affected her happiness.

But thankfully, Lori eventually grew tired of being imprisoned by fear, and one day she made the hard yet life-changing choice to do something about it. She reached up to God and asked Him to help her change her thought patterns and take control of her life. She began doing Bible studies to help her become more confident in who she was and to learn to understand the spiritual weapons at her disposal as a child of God. She began to recognize the mental and emotional prison her strongholds were keeping her in, and gradually learned how to break free from them by reading and memorizing God's Word, spending time in prayer and journaling. She surrendered her fears to God and refused to live a lonely life full of worries and negative thinking. One little step of faith at a time, she overcame the stronghold of fear in her mind and embraced a life with less fear and more joy. Her decision to take control of her thoughts equipped her to take control of her life and her happiness.

### **Meet Kimberly**

Kimberly and her husband tried and tried to conceive a child, but Kimberly just couldn't get pregnant. They even went to a fertility specialist, but after months and months and many unsuccessful treatments, her doctors told her she would never

be able to get pregnant. Kimberly was open to adoption, but her husband was not. He wanted his own biological children, and eventually the marriage ended. Not only did Kimberly feel as though she were somehow less of a woman because she could not bear a child, but the divorce left her feeling rejected and discarded.

In the months and years following, she formed a mental habit of continually telling herself she was worthless. She felt bitter, lonely and sad. The future looked bleak—hopeless. Kimberly struggled for years to push through the pain and unforgiveness, but her thoughts held her captive to negativity and wreaked havoc on her self-esteem and confidence. But as she continued to walk in faith, she invited God to help her transform her mind and renew her thoughts on a daily basis, and He did exactly that.

Over time, God opened her eyes to see that He was giving her opportunities to work with children. He showed her that she played a vital role in helping rear her nieces and nephews. She realized that although she couldn't bear children of her own, she could still pour into the lives of little ones in many different ways. As God transformed her thoughts, Kimberly began to believe that neither her infertility nor the rejection of her ex-husband defined her value as a person, a woman or a treasured child of God. She became determined to think positively about herself and her future. She asked God to help her forgive those who had hurt her, and she began reading His Word, leaning on her faith and seeking after God with all her heart to find the healing and acceptance she longed for. Kimberly intentionally chose to change her thought life from negative to positive, and as a result, she experienced God's peace, joy and blessings.

Her changed thoughts changed her feelings, which changed her life in a brand-new, positive way. Eventually she remarried a godly man who loves her unconditionally. He loves her for who she is, not what she can give him. But please take note of

this important fact: Kimberly's life didn't change because her relationship status changed. It changed because her thoughts changed. Toxic thinking will always stand in the way of God's greatest blessings. In order for Kimberly's life to be transformed, her heart and mind had to undergo a radical transformation first.

## **Meet Abbey**

As a young first-time mom, Abbey found herself struggling with a negative body image. Although she adored her precious new baby boy, the shape and size of her body had completely changed because of pregnancy and childbirth. For months after her son's birth, she felt overwhelmed with negative thoughts and frustrations. It took having a meltdown in a department store dressing room to open her eyes to see that thinking negatively about her body image had become a stronghold and was robbing her of peace and joy in this new season of motherhood. Abbey immediately turned to God in prayer, and He bathed each of her sad, negative thoughts with comforting truths from His Word.

Abbey continued to ask God to transform her thinking about her body image, and her perspective about her postpartum body began to change. She learned to accept that the change in shape and appearance that women's bodies go through during and after pregnancy presents them with a unique opportunity to delight in their function rather than despair over their form. She realized that while her stomach wasn't as firm as it was once, it served as proof of God's answers to her and her husband's prayers for a child. Her hips were wider but formed perfectly according to God's design to give birth. Her face seemed fuller, yet it was no less capable of communicating her joy, delight, empathy and emotion to the little eyes it held captive.

The intentional practice of capturing her negative thoughts and replacing them with truths from God's Word transformed her

thinking entirely, freed her from negativity, and enabled her to focus on the joy and blessing of her little one rather than critical thoughts about herself.

## **Meet Diane**

For two years, Diane lived with a man who was an emotionally and physically abusive alcoholic. She finally escaped from the relationship and went to live in a shelter for abused women, but the abuse had rendered her a broken, battered mess, inside and out. Her physical wounds healed, but the wounds from the verbal and emotional abuse lingered, leaving her feeling hurt, resentful, and worthless.

Diane struggled with strong feelings of hatred toward this man who had broken her heart and her spirit. As a result, she became bitter toward all men, even her own brothers. She was afraid to get close to or trust anyone, even God. But after six weeks of intense counseling with godly mentors and teachers in the shelter, Diane moved in with loving family members and slowly began to heal, as God helped her put the pieces of her heart and her life back together. She began reading God's Word and spending a lot of time in prayer. She had been attending church for several months when she heard a powerful sermon about forgiveness that stirred her soul. She practically ran to the altar when the message was over, asking the pastor to pray that her heart would soften toward her abuser and that God would give her the strength and ability to truly forgive. Although it didn't happen instantaneously, Diane's heart did soften over time.

She began to look forward to each new day instead of dreading it. She was excited to be with new friends, learned to trust people again, and allowed herself to believe there were good Christian men in this world. One of those men helped her embrace her value in Christ, and Diane is now happily married to him!

When she forgave the unforgivable, she broke free of the bondage of hatred and stopped the poison of negativity that had been coursing through her veins. When she made the decision to let go of her negative strongholds and anchor her heart on God instead, His peace took up residence in her heart and happiness filled her days.

These are just a few of the stories shared in the book of real life women who now live as powerful evidence of God working miracles in their lives by changing their thought patterns, not by changing their circumstances.

*To learn more about how you can begin experiencing this transformation in your life too, purchase a copy of Unsinkable Faith: God-filled Strategies for Transforming the Way You Think, Feel and Live by **Tracie Miles**.*

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## **Rebuke Relentless Fear With These 3 Faith-Filled Keys**

Of course you worry when there's no money in the bank, no food in the house, no immediate prospect of adequate income and the only phone calls or mail you receive are creditors asking for money. God knew we would worry about material things. And His Word has a lot to say about it.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs begins with the basics: food, water, shelter, clothing and safety. Human beings cannot survive without those needs being met.

And God knows that.

I know what it's like to worry about material things. Some

years ago, I moved from one state to another. My new medical license was delayed, and for a period of six months I had no income. None. I remember what a struggle it was to go to sleep at night while worrying about bills and basic necessities—until I learned these principles.

Matthew 6 became very meaningful to me during that time. Since God knows you and I have need of these material things, we don't have to worry about them. Jesus says repeatedly, "Don't worry about it!" (see Matt. 6:32).

Jesus is not advocating denying our need for food and shelter. But giving in to worry about it is neither useful nor godly.

Here are three things to know and three things to do when you wrestle with worry about material things.

## **Things to Know**

### **1. Worry Doesn't Work.**

Your mental gymnastics won't make any difference in the outcome. Worry will only wear you out. Worry is mentally running in place; you get sweaty and tired but you're still in the same spot.

Jesus said no one, by worry, can add "one cubit to his stature" (Matt. 6:27, NKJV) or "a single hour to your life" (Matt. 6:27, NIV). I learned a long time ago I cannot stretch my vertically challenged height of under five feet by one iota. And my angst didn't add one moment to my husband's life. Worry just doesn't work.

### **2. Worry Diverts Your Energy.**

Worry takes you out of the present. It clouds your mind and your emotions. It makes you unavailable to the people who need you, stifles your creativity and productivity and distracts you from pursuing your purpose.

They say “necessity is the mother of invention.” In many ways, that’s true. But if all your mental and physical energy is diverted by worry, you won’t have what it takes to find, create or connect with the solutions that may be closer than you realize or with the people who can help you get there.

### **3. Worry Prevents God’s Best.**

Worry about the cares of this life can choke the seeds of truth God sows in your heart (see Luke 8:14). God doesn’t often add His voice to a cacophony of sound in your head. When your mind is filled with fear and anxiety, it’s very hard to hear Him speak.

God does not want you or your family to suffer. We are promised that trouble will continue until Jesus returns. Both those statements are true. But worry short-circuits the life Jesus came to give us here and now. The meaningful productive life God does want for you does not come out of worry, but from trust and obedience.

### **Things to Do**

If you don’t worry, what do you do instead?

#### **1. Focus on What You Can Do**

You have more choices than you realize, regardless of your circumstances. Some things you cannot change, but you can always choose your focus. You can place the majority of your thoughts, energies, time and more into those areas where you can make a difference.

Some things you *can* do might include seeking out regular mental/emotional/spiritual nourishment that will bring encouragement, actively seeking ways to make the resources you do have reach farther, learning to maximize the skills and abilities you have in finding or creating work that is meaningful and regularly seeking God’s input on your

circumstances.

## **2. Enlarge Your Prayers**

God asks us to bring our material needs to Him. Do that often. And also pray larger prayers. Pray for the right attitude while facing material needs, for wisdom in stewarding what you have and knowing what action steps to take, for an open mind to see any doors God opens for you, for a generous heart to help those you can and for His peace and presence in your soul.

And spend time listening. Spend time quietly in His presence. Let Him show you who He is. Hear Him assure you of His presence. Welcome His peace into your soul. Actively listen for any directions He gives you for taking action. Invite the character transformation He always offers when you face troubles.

## **3. Put Legs on Your Prayers**

God's blessings to you will involve, in part, actions that you take. If you can speak, walk, listen, write, sew, cook, type, help, build, sell, sing, code, assist, nurse, or whatever your skills are, the answer will include you using your skills in a meaningful way. And that usually involves somehow helping others or bringing value to them.

Frederick Douglas is credited with saying, "I prayed for 20 years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs." How you are to "pray with your legs" is one of the most important things to pray about and think about. What doors are you to knock on? Whom is God sending you to help? What has He put in your hand to do right now?

God doesn't promise us that everything will be alright—yet. Learning to trust Him regardless of our circumstances reminds us that there is an end to the story. And then everything *will* be alright.

*Read more in **Dr. Carol Peters-Tanksley's book Overcoming Fear and Anxiety through Spiritual Warfare.** Dr. Carol is an OB-GYN, author and ordained minister.*