

A New Constitution

How Islamic extremist rule could open doors for Egypt's church

Though only a third of eligible voters cast ballots, 64 percent of Egyptians approved a new constitution last December that includes provisions against torture and detention without trial, a stronger parliament and a presidential limit of two four-year terms. However, many Christians protested provisions in the document, walking out of the assembly that proposed it after raising concerns that President Mohammed Morsi's rule would bring more persecution.

Todd Nettleton, director of media development for Voice of the Martyrs, says although many Christians are worried what the future holds, ministry representatives are seeing more Christians reach out amid upheaval, and that such outreach could lead to growth like that seen in Iran, where the ascent of Islamic rulers in 1981 led to the development of one of the world's fastest-growing churches.

"The people of Egypt are marching and saying, 'Wait a minute. We didn't want the Muslim Brotherhood to take over; we don't want a Sharia country. What's going on here?'" Nettleton says. "That may lead to some opportunities for the church and some opportunities for the gospel as people see with more clarity the true face of Islam."

Two years ago, Shaddy Soliman, an Orlando-area pastor, warned about the dangers that would accompany the rise of Islamic extremists in Egypt and now fears they are coming to pass. He says the greatest conflict in Egypt today is between fundamentalist Muslims and those who advocate democracy.

"You see the Muslim Brotherhood and others who are assassinating other Muslim leaders who are good Egyptians and are looking for human rights," Soliman says. "Now we are seeing the fulfillment of prophecy [Is. 19:2], where Muslims

are turning on Muslims.”

Out of Egypt

Despite increasing persecution, an Islamic-leaning government and economic hardship, Christians in Egypt are seeing a move of God shape the nation beneath the surface.

The Middle-Eastern land known for its rich cultural heritage and its key role in Christian history teeters on the brink of disaster, with raging political unrest threatening to derail President Mohammed Morsi’s government in Egypt.

“It seems that President Morsi has simply put Egypt on the edge of a volcano that may erupt at any moment,” a Christian leader there says of the Islamic leader. “The rapid developments taking place in Egypt nowadays bring an image to mind—a man standing in the middle of a blowing sandstorm.”

Eight months after an uprising ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011, more than two dozen Coptic Christians were martyred and 200 injured when they protested the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt.

More chaos followed, sparking additional repression, economic instability and the departure of tens of thousands of Christians from Egypt. Today, attacks on Christ’s followers in that nation are particularly pronounced in rural areas, according to one church leader.

“Islamic extremism is the main persecution dynamic in Egypt,” says a researcher for Open Doors. “With the Muslim Brotherhood in control of the country’s legislative and executive power, Islam is becoming more visible.”

Yet amid such dire headlines, stories of a great awakening continue to emerge that bring smiles to the faces of countless believers in the gospel worldwide.

Signs of Renewal

A prime example is Kasr El Dohara Church, Egypt's largest evangelical congregation, located in Cairo. With the U.S. Embassy next door, worshippers sometimes find tear gas canisters lobbed into their midst as daily battles take place outside between Islamic protesters and police. Yet over the past three years, attendance at Kasr El Dohara has swelled from 700 to crowds that regularly overflow the capacity of the 2,500-seat sanctuary. Church leaders set up closed-circuit TV broadcasts of the church's five-times-a-week services to accommodate the throngs.

"The numbers of people are multiplying," says church spokesman Fazil Khalil, an assistant to senior pastor Sameh Maurice. "They are coming from every side and every background—people we are not accustomed to seeing, people seeking God."

And more than attendance is on the upswing. Khalil, other Egyptians and those who maintain outreaches to Egypt report a rise in prayer movements, interdenominational unity and a belief that God is about to visit Egypt in dramatic fashion.

"Historically, we know that every time there is political chaos and uncertainty anywhere in the world, we always see the church experiencing true revival," says Shaddy Soliman, pastor of Every Nation Church in Lake Mary, Fla. Soliman regularly returns to his native country, with his most recent visit taking place last July, when Morsi was sworn into office as Egypt's first democratically elected leader.

Soliman says that Muslims who once feared ostracism for visiting churches but who now worship openly with Christians and watch televised services are among the signs of such an awakening in Egypt. "I'm not saying they're not risking a lot

to do this, but I am saying this is a new era," he says. "It's greater than ever before, simply because this is the generation of Ishmael. These are the people the Bible talks about, who will receive the message that lasts."

Another sign of renewal is a pair of gatherings that happened last October in the desert 60 miles north of Cairo. The first, aimed at teens and young adults, attracted more than 10,000 for three days of prayer, preaching and worship.

The second, a four-day rally called Count It Right, attracted 45,000, with an estimated 25,000 coming to Christ and 8,000 requesting follow-up visits from churches. Another 5,000 attended a parallel one-day festival in the Coptic Orthodox Cave Church, located in Cairo's massive garbage dump.

Rather than being hidden from the potential backlash of extremists, Count It Right occurred in plain sight. More than 2 million people watched more than six hours of coverage broadcast to the Middle East, Australia and North America by a pair of Christian satellite channels.

Both rallies have proved fruitful, says Khalil, whose church served as the primary organizer. "We didn't have enough ushers to go around praying with the people, with all those standing to ask God for forgiveness and ask Jesus into their heart," he says. "It was a very tough time [in Cairo] because there was no security and thousands of people were running in the streets. We prayed, and everything went smoothly."

Not only was the Holy Spirit's presence notable at the rallies, but Khalil says the events prompted many who were thinking of leaving Egypt to remain so they can see how God will restore the nation.

A Central Role

Known to many as the place that gave rise to Israel's exodus to the Promised Land, Egypt occupies a central role in the

history of Christianity. Home to three-fourths of the Christians in the Middle East, it is the birthplace of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which traces its lineage to the mid-first century and the apostle Mark as its founder.

Copts represent the overwhelming number of Christians in Egypt, which is estimated at roughly 13 percent of a population of some 84 million. Though small in number, Egyptian evangelicals include members of the Assemblies of God, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Pentecostal Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy. Yet regardless of background, maintaining a witness for Christ there has proved challenging, says a parish priest who grew up in Cairo before moving to Southern California at age 14.

Father Joseph Boules, who oversees St. Mary & St. Verena Coptic Orthodox Church in Anaheim, Calif., says centuries of persecution have enabled all Christians in Egypt to learn to live with militants trying to disrupt worship services and terrorize prayer meetings. "Christians in the Western world are living in true freedom," says Boules, whose parish has recently welcomed a number of Egyptian refugees. "A lot of times people don't realize what a gem they have—their freedom and being able to practice their faith freely."

Yet persecution can stimulate spiritual growth. Boules points to the terrorist bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria shortly after midnight on New Year's Day 2011, an incident whose shockwaves reverberated worldwide. Landing a week before the Orthodox celebration of Christmas, many feared the attack would dim turnouts for those services. Instead, attendance doubled. It was an amazing show of faith, since people came not knowing if they would be the next martyrs.

"It was just another day of Copts living in Egypt where we are attacked," Boules says. "We don't react in any illegal way. We don't carry weapons or condone burning of the Quran or mosques or anything like that. We would never do that. It's against

the core of Christ's teachings about love."

Nor was that Christmas display of faith a temporary phenomenon. Later in 2011, more than 72,000 gathered at the Cave Church for an all-night prayer meeting. Soliman labels "11/11/11" as a pivotal event that marked a turnaround in the country's denominational divisions.

As evidence of the change, a Coptic priest was among the speakers at Count It Right. Bishop Tawadros, the Coptic pope appointed last November, has proven receptive to evangelicals and Catholics. "Before that, there was a lot of division between church leaders," says Soliman, who led an Arabic-speaking church prior to planting an inter-ethnic congregation three years ago. "They didn't cooperate or visit each other's churches. Today we see the exact opposite. The charismatic movement there is uniting Orthodox and evangelical."

The Internet and modern communications are also playing a role in the spiritual groundswell. Once isolated from the rest of the world, today millions of Egyptians can access the Bible online or watch networks like Alkarma TV, a California-based operation that reaches all of Egypt via satellite and boasts thousands that have accepted Christ and have called to request Bibles and other literature.

Unity in Prayer

Some believers in Egypt prefer to keep a low profile, like Ammon Shakir*, whose church suffered a gas bomb attack earlier this year. But that hasn't deterred Shakir from being faithful to the prayer movement he has helped lead—a movement whose origin he traces to small gatherings in the 1990s and early 2000s that eventually spread to five cities.

Those efforts steadily accelerated until they encompassed thousands of Christians and key spiritual leaders in 2011, prompting weekly prayer meetings. Today there are ongoing gatherings hundreds of miles from Cairo, and Shakir says the

support of the Coptic pope fosters this unity. Shakir also says God recently told him that He will take His people out of bondage so the entire nation will know His identity.

“With the crisis happening in Cairo, the light is growing stronger and stronger,” Shakir says. “There is a real move among churches, and thousands are praying. In all the cities, you see children—8, 9, 10 years old—crying for revival. The move of the Holy Spirit and the prophetic movement is taking place. We expect this year will be a year of harvest.”

Still, amid this spiritual excitement, an intercessory missionary says that Christians in Egypt need the prayers and encouragement of fellow believers in America. David Armstrong* says regular visits can help inspire Egyptians and relieve their weariness, steadying their peaceful demeanor, which he says is key to reaching the increasingly divided Muslim population.

“We have to pray for the unity found in Ephesians 3:14-21, that they will grow in love in the midst of great difficulty,” he says. “There’s a real sense of danger. They need peace and protection.”

Jerry Dykstra, media relations director for Open Doors, saw the difference this personal touch can make during a visit in February 2012, when he arrived in Cairo a few days after rioting took place in the distant city of Port Said, which touched off an uproar in the capital city as well.

Upon Dykstra’s arrival, a ministry operative told him, “You don’t know what it means to come at a time like this, that you would come to pray with us and come to tell the world the story of what’s happening in this region, whether it’s Egypt, Syria or wherever.”

“Somebody being there physically to hear their story was important to them,” Dykstra says. “Two years after the Arab Spring, it looks like it’s turning into Arab Winter.

Christians were hoping this would be good news, but what we're seeing [with] the election of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood taking over control is very discouraging for them.

"They are in desperate need of our encouragement. They are in desperate need of our prayers. They mentioned they are being persecuted at a higher level since the election of Morsi. Churches are burning, and Coptics and Christians are not getting jobs they're qualified for."

Still, Soliman says such oppression has a positive side. "People are crying, but they are crying out to God in absolute desperation," he says. "Their hope in government, or democracy, or the West is all failing them. They see that there is no way except through God."

** Name changed to protect person's identity.*

*A freelance writer in Huntington, W. Va., **Ken Walker** has been a regular contributor to Charisma for nearly 20 years and also edits books for Charisma House.*

Sameh Maurice, senior pastor of Egypt's largest evangelical church, describes three facets of God's move in Egypt at

The Spiritual Warrior's Guide to Defeating Jezebel

Jennifer LeClaire
(Chosen)

The devil's worldly, deceptive delusions have slithered into the church in the form of a seducing spirit, blindsiding its victims. Prophetic author and Charisma News Managing Editor Jennifer LeClaire boldly unmask and unarm the Jezebel spirit in her latest book, [*The Spiritual Warrior's Guide to Defeating the Jezebel Spirit: How to Overcome the Spirit of Control, Idolatry and Immorality.*](#)

When You're Asked to Lead a Church Service

Had an interesting interview today with a pastor who had received my name as a referral to fill in at the pulpit while he's on vacation. Now, I speak to a lot of groups—mostly at libraries, schools or women's church luncheons. But you can bet I pretty much choked up a gizzard over a Sunday morning sanctuary invitation.

My first question to this very kind and gentle man of the cloth was, "Do you realize I'm a woman?" Apparently his denomination has no problem with that issue. He'd heard I'm a Christian humorist, and he felt his congregation could use a little levity with their dutiful dose of religion.

Second question: "Do you realize that I'm not a preacher?" I assured him that to consider me a preacher was demeaning to his profession. "I'm an encourager, a fellow sojourner in this Christian walk, perhaps even a lay minister, since I consider all followers of Jesus ministers to their fellow man, but I would never in a million years be called a preacher.

"In my opinion, preaching is an honored calling for special servants of God. I have nothing but respect for true

preachers, and my little feet wouldn't begin to fill those large shoes."

We settled on "sharing." Now, that I can do. That I love to do; my preferred delivery is through the written word, but I've found that sometimes it's got to be verbal. People need to see the joy of the Lord in action face to face, not eye to paper. Something dynamic is lost in the translation if it's just read about and not felt.

So although Billy Graham I'll never be, I can be something akin to a Rhonda Rhea, a Martha Bolton or a Chonda Pierce. Or best yet, a Debbie Coty—God's favorite choice for me.

Debora M. Coty is the author of 10 books and is a newspaper columnist, orthopedic occupational therapist and tennis addict. Follow Debora on Twitter @deboracoty.

God's Call to a Task You Enjoy Doing

I'm always worried God will make me do stuff I hate. Like when I used to go to my grandma's house and she kept trying to get me to eat tomatoes. One time she even attempted to win me over by sprinkling tomato slices with sugar, but I still hated them!

My preacher husband has been talking to us from the letter of James, how if we love Jesus we should *do* stuff for people—see their need and help them.

But does God task us with what is yuck?

Last week I had a friend who was caring for family members who were having a hard time. I said, "What can I do to help you?" She said, "Well, laundry? The dryer just went out."

Laundry? I love doing laundry. No joke.

So I did baskets full of laundry for my friend, and I informed her that a person is truly a friend once she has folded your underwear. (Although here I must stop to say that a certain member of her family threatened me—with finger pointed in my face—that she would most definitely sue me if anything about her undies ended up on my blog. So I'm *not* going to say anything about those.)

Then a few days ago, another dear friend texted me: Could she use our dryer because hers went out. (And this is a family of seven, so *emergency!*)

More laundry? Hurray! Folding laundry is like this relaxing, therapeutic activity of orderliness to me.

Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Now, I'm thinking those good works aren't generally going to be the sugar-sprinkled tomato kind. (Take a bite, gag, drink a bunch of water, take another bite.)

You know how I love to match clean socks and stack them all nice and neat? Well, it seems God likes to match people to works, like when two people who desperately need laundry done call the sister who is a *weirdo* and actually finds doing laundry fun.

So maybe we should wake up excited every day, knowing God has pre-planned good stuff for us to do, most of which will be a perfect fit for who we are and the skills and gifts we have to offer. (Although sometimes God does stretch us to do things we

don't enjoy.)

And when the friend on the other end hears the joy of, "I would love to do your laundry!" then she knows there is a marvelous God.

What good work would cause you to answer an eager yes?

Christy Fitzwater is a blogger, pastor's wife and mom of two teenagers. She resides in Montana. Visit for more information about her ministry.

Answering God's Call to Lead in a Church

Way back when I was young and nimble-minded, I wrote a college paper on why women should not speak, teach or preach to men in church. Doctrinally, it was a wide-load philosophy built entirely on the spindly shoulders of 1 Timothy 2:12. Emotionally, it was fueled by a determined resistance to the growing tide of feminism, which seemed to be crushing femininity as it rolled through my generation.

I'll also add that I wrote the paper during a frantic, caffeine-fueled all-nighter that probably included more accidental dozing than actual studying. My point is: I didn't do the work to prove my point, and I didn't really feel I needed to because I wanted to be a lawyer and not a pastor. I didn't need a theological construct to become an attorney, so I threw together a reactionary position paper using poorly developed hermeneutics and a fair number of impressively

astute words. (Sometimes that's all you need to land a B+.)

Today I am a pastor on staff at a large, respected church. In fact, I am a teaching pastor charged with oversight of the scope and sequence of our churchwide discipleship continuum. Our lead pastor directs the planning of our corporate messages, but I am a voice at the table and from the platform, regularly teaching both the men and women during our four weekend services.

So what happened between paragraph one and paragraph two? Twenty years and so much learning happened. Some of the learning was experiential and some was intentional, but all of it has been both beautifully freeing and incredibly frustrating. (My husband, by the way, wrote his college paper on why women *should* be pastors, so he spent a lot of years waiting for me to catch up and demonstrated an annoying lack of angst about the whole issue.)

It started innocently enough, with one little character study on Peter. I remember goose bumps popping as the deeper truths of Peter's life jumped off the page and into my heart. I also remember discovering the works of old, dead theologians and weeping in the library as the timeless truth of their devotion to the Word of God pulsed through thick sentences, condensed and compacted by a lifetime of learning. I filled notebooks with brilliant quotes and bullet-pointed application and Greek and Hebrew etymology.

Finally, on a quiet Saturday, I placed a new legal pad on the table in front of me and, without knowing why, wrote out a sermon. I gathered my learning like soft yarn, weaving and crafting it into something I hoped would be a warm blanket for somebody somewhere, someday. It was not a small or safe decision. In fact, my heart raced as I did it, almost like sneaking into the men's restroom and hoping not to get caught—and even as I write that, I know how ridiculous it probably sounds to you, dear reader.

The thing is, I knew I was opening my heart to this bold new idea that maybe—just maybe—God wanted to use my desire to argue a case somewhere other than a courtroom. This was very frightening because I still had the matter of my own theology to deal with, and also: Have you checked the want ads for female teaching positions in the church recently? Yeah. Dismal.

So, as I wrote out the points of that sermon on that brilliant Saturday, I was distinctly aware of two really big, really opposing issues brewing just beneath my legal pad: 1) Nothing in life could make me more happy or fulfilled than studying and teaching eternal truth, and 2) The chances of anyone ever letting me do this were slim to none.

In spite of the contrary nature of my calling, I pressed on. I kept writing messages, even though I couldn't imagine ever having the chance to share them with anyone. And I dug deep into the issue of women in ministry leadership in the Bible.

I took a hard look at the prohibitions of Paul and weighed them next to the rest of his words about women, men and submission. I researched women like Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Huldah and Ruth. I even (fearfully) waded into the waters of Proverbs 31. And finally, I looked at the life of Jesus and His profound, revolutionary acceptance of women. I emerged from that study no longer wobbling, no longer wondering, but certain that women are qualified to lead, teach, preach, write, pastor, prophesy and pray out loud. Even in America.

My theology developed at the same time I did. We landed at a Foursquare church, where our lead pastor had not a single shred of hesitation about using a qualified woman in the pulpit. Some pastors talk a good game about permitting women to exercise their God-given gifts but never actually give them the chance to take a swing at the ball.

My pastor gave me the opportunity to fly, to fail and to grow

as a communicator. Even though a handful of men stayed home or walked out when they found out I was speaking, he didn't budge an inch from his determination to give women a voice in our community of faith. He consistently pointed out in meetings that for every man who stayed away when I spoke, plenty others invited their friends.

After 10 years on staff, few people question it any more. When they do, our standard response is to give them the research done by our denomination on women in ministry leadership and to remind them, "If you don't agree with women teaching in church, you'll have no problem finding a church in our city where they'll never step foot on the stage." This is a subject on which smart, godly people disagree, and that's OK. There's a church for every mindset.

Because of the male leaders in my life who have encouraged, strengthened and enabled the gifts of women to grow and be exercised in our church, I see these positive developments:

Female voices are welcomed at all leadership tables in our church. Please, can we be honest and say that women and men have innately different views on many things, including money, children, sex, work and marriage, and both viewpoints are valuable for creating a strong, beautiful community?

Though I am currently the only woman on the teaching team, I know that a woman's unique take on life is represented in all the decisions our church is making. The female perspective doesn't dominate the conversation, but I don't believe anyone's opinion dominates. We live in joyful—mostly joyful—submission to one another.

Young women see and believe there is room for them and their gifts in the church. They are not just dreaming of which strong leader they can marry, they're also dreaming of what they can become and how their unique gifts might nourish the house of God.

Young men see that women are more than bodies and beauty. That awareness will serve them well when they date and choose a wife and work a job alongside women.

I've occasionally spoken at other churches where they've asked if it was OK to introduce me as something other than a pastor. I have no problem with this. Titles mean very little to me, and I don't want something so trivial to alienate a listener.

Recently, however, I wrote a book, and it was a lot of work. When my publisher asked for a bio, I wrestled with it for days. What if that one word triggered a doctrinal bias that prevented people from reading a message of hope and life when they most needed it? I thought and prayed and wished for the day when entire organizations weren't required to keep the lines so firmly drawn between men and women.

I dreamed of the glory of the garden and those days before the fall and the curse disrupted the beautiful, free flow of community and comradeship enjoyed by Adam and Eve. I prayed and wished and dreamed, and then I wrote what I know to be true: *Bo Stern is a teaching pastor at Westside Church.* And that's my journey.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly released Beautiful Battlegrounds (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. She is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

Let's Face Our Giants

Not gonna lie—it's been a tough season on our battlefield. The fight has not been as much with our ALS battle but with a host of other issues, like all three cars needing big repairs in the past month, several expensive items to replace, an unexpected tax bill and an odd assortment of stress-inducers too varied and tedious to mention.

None of these things would be enough to sink a ship individually, but all piled together they have created quite a force, and I have been fighting the feeling that we are surrounded on all sides.

Battle seasons like this always push me to my knees. There in the comfort of face-in-the-carpet nearness to God, I ask the hard questions: Is this an attack? Is there repentance needed in my life? Are we uncovered? Is there an area of delayed obedience? It's not that I believe God sends problems to those who don't get everything right. I just want to live in a way that is lined up with His principles.

So many times King David begged God to show him His way. That's what I want. I want to walk in *His* way, knowing His way leads to life. Other paths may seem attractive, but they lead to something less-than-life.

After asking the questions and waiting for answers, here is where I landed on the "why" for this current season of life: These are our Amalekites. My Bible heroes were trained to greatness by honest-to-goodness enemies. Sweaty Philistines. The fiery furnace. Roaring lions. Nero's sword. They faced famine and peril on every side and came out shining like gold. Refined. Strengthened. Beautiful.

I live in an era of relative peace, comfort and freedom. This can create a false sense of my own goodness, intelligence and power. I can be totally certain I'm trusting God with

everything, but it's the prospect of losing something dear to me that reveals the truth of my trust.

You would think that facing a giant like ALS would put all the other battles in perspective. You would imagine that a silly car repair would have very little power to steal my peace or purpose. But I'm finding that all these giants seem to work on a different part of my faith.

Financial giants reveal some holes in my armor that need filling and fixing. I can look back over the past few weeks and see the issues that have impacted me the most, and I can clearly see the areas where I need more strength, more discipline, more trust.

So, I'm thankful my home is not surrounded by flame-throwing Philistines. But I'm suiting up to face the enemies that *are* at the door with faith and five stones. They cannot kill me. They can, however, make me stronger than I was before I met 'em.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released *Beautiful Battliefields* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her *Goliath* came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore.

How to Help a Friend Not Quit

I recently received an email from a friend with three words that kept me going at a time when I wanted to give up writing. Amazing, the power of three words coming to me at just the right time.

I have been learning recently that we are not to seek the approval of others, as we serve Christ, yet the Bible clearly instructs us to encourage one another. Isn't it an interesting paradox that we are not to grope for approval but we do require encouragement? I have concluded, then, that there must be a powerful, God-mandated, appropriate method of encouragement.

In pondering this, I landed in the letter to the Hebrews: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:23-24, NIV)

This word *spur* refers to motion. It is our job to nudge and push and scoot each other toward love and good deeds.

Have you ever thought about how many times a pastor feels weary and is close to giving up? Do you know frazzled mothers sometimes daydream of walking out of the house and leaving the unceasing demands of children? How often does a wife want to quit trying to love that man?

We live on the edge of quitting every day. I often hear exhausted, frustrated, discouraged people say, "I'm done!" But as followers of Christ, we are not allowed to be done. We have a long list of reasons not to quit.

We must keep moving. So let's ask ourselves two questions: How can we encourage our sisters and brothers in Christ in a way that does not feed their people-pleasing nature and take them to a prideful place? And what can we say or do (or maybe

stopping saying or stop doing) that will encourage our sisters and brothers to keep moving toward love and good deeds?

- What can I say to my pastor (aka husband) that will make him eager to preach again next week?
- What can I do for the housewife that will make her think, “OK, I can keep going through the monotony of cleaning toilets for another day.”
- What can I say to my grieving friend that will help her step toward the love of Christ?

The writer of Hebrews says, “Let us consider ... ” Think about it hard.

Who do you know who is about ready to throw in the towel? Maybe you know that person better than anybody. What’s the one act of love you could do that God could use to set that person in motion again? Maybe you need to give a gentle push. Or maybe you need to bend your knees and put your shoulder into it.

Your greatest deed this day could be offering someone the gift of forward motion.

What about you, dear friend? Do you feel like giving up today?

Please don’t.

Hold on to the hope you profess to have in Christ just a bit longer. Remember God is faithful.

Loving the people in your life and doing the tasks God has put in front of you—will you just stick with it for one more day?

Christy Fitzwater is a blogger, pastor’s wife and mom of two teenagers. She resides in Montana. Visit for more information about her ministry.

Find Freedom From Pleasing People

I sat on the couch yesterday morning, my Bible in one hand and a hot cup of coffee in the other. (Always these two things go together.) And I told God of this black hole I have inside of me that pulls for approval.

I feel like I should just walk around with a T-shirt that says, "Am I OK? Will someone please tell me if I'm OK?"

Am I a good mom? Am I a good writer? Am I a good person? Am I a good friend? Am I a good daughter? Am I a good teacher? Am I a good Christ-follower?

Am I?

But this question will not be satisfied. If someone says, "Good job!" about my writing, I wonder why only that one person said good job. Why didn't more people say it? Did the rest hate what I wrote? Three children can tell me I'm a good teacher, but the silence of the others leaves me wondering. Even if I get approval from someone, it still is not enough to quench the need.

My son wants to know if his guitar playing is good. My husband is anxious to hear what I thought of his sermon. My friend wants to know that I approve of her. Everyone asks this question. *Did I do OK? Am I OK?*

Am I?

I took this question to the Lord and pretty much refused to get up from the couch until I had an answer: *Where should I look for the approval that I need so badly?*

I prayed and flipped through the book of Luke, reasoning through the Scriptures for the better part of an hour, and God revealed to me one answer: Approval happened when I believed in the cross and resurrection. There was nothing, not one thing, God could approve of when He looked at my life. Then Jesus cloaked me with His righteousness, and this is when God approved of me and allowed me into His kingdom.

Approval has already happened.

Approval has already happened. (I repeated this to myself on the couch, so I thought you should think about it twice too.)

“We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom. 5:11, NIV). Once we were not acceptable and approved by God.

Now we are.

We rejoice!

We are already accepted. Already loved. Already held tight in the loving hands of the Father. Already called “good enough.”

Already.

So when we feel that groping need for approval, we need to shift from seeking fulfillment from people and instead practice remembering the declaration of approval on our behalf at the cross of Christ.

This is a radical shift in thinking, is it not?

Christy Fitzwater is a blogger, pastor's wife and mom of two teenagers. She resides in Montana. Visit for more information about her ministry.

5 Things Your Friends in Crisis Wish You Knew

Let me start by saying I certainly do not speak for everyone in crisis. There are a million different kinds of people and a million different kinds of battle. I've tried to stick to things I've heard many times from many people, but this list reflects my two years in the trenches more than anything else.

1. Sometimes your life is hard to look at. I will try to attend your daughter's wedding, and I will be so happy for her. But I will look away when her father walks her down the aisle, and I will leave before the daddy-daughter dance. These things are too much for me.

I'm not mad; I'm just swimming through some deep-water feelings about the future. I don't need hugs or help; I just need a little room to breathe, and none of it is your fault. This is my heartache.

For some, it's seeing an anniversary celebration on Facebook or flirtatious banter between a husband and wife. For others, it's witnessing the baby milestone while imagining how old their own would be. Different things are difficult for different people. Just know that while we love you, sometimes your world is hard to look at.

We know you have problems, too, and we're not jealous of your life—we're jealous for the life we used to have before our battle broke out or the life we're wishing for that hasn't quite started yet.

Action point for armies: Don't stop inviting us into your lives, but give us grace when we need to look away for a bit.

2. How much we feel like talking about our battle can vary wildly. Some days are very difficult and so I will answer questions abruptly in order to save us both from my messy emotional breakdown. Some days it's very cathartic to talk about it. So, how can you as my friend, know which day it is? You can't.

And this is when it's hard to be you (and I'm sorry). But what you can do is ask, "How are things with Steve?" followed immediately by, "I understand if you'd rather not talk about it." Perfect. You've shown me you care and also given me an easy exit should I choose to use it.

And let me add: Even when I don't feel I can give a detailed answer, it really does matter to me that people ask. (So thank you, sweet friends, for the question. And thank you for understanding when I can't linger over the answer.)

3. We're secretly afraid you'll grow weary and disappear. We don't fear it because we doubt your character. We fear it because we would probably choose to leave our battlefield, too, if given the option.

Through tears, I type this: I can't imagine what I would do if I lost my friends as well. I just can't imagine. I know so many people who run out of steam in supporting a friend and then they're embarrassed to step back into the battle again. Don't be embarrassed. Just give a call and say, "I miss you. Can I bring over some mac and cheese?"

4. We still want to fight for you, too. Don't stop telling us what you're going through. Don't stop asking us to pray. It gives me comfort to know I'm not the only one in a fierce fight, and it gives me courage to know that I still have something to offer the world outside my war.

5. We love you. And we'd be lost without your friendship. Even when we lack the strength to say it or show it, please just know it.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of the newly-released *Beautiful Battliefields* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Ore. Follow her on Twitter @BoStern or visit her website.