

# Fast Friends for a Reason

The Miracle of Joy and Peace

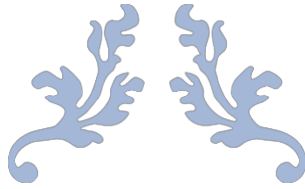
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# FAST FRIENDS FOR A REASON

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*The Miracle of Joy and Peace*



Denise Johnson  
Donna Jackson

## DEDICATION FROM DENISE

To my Anna, Lydia, Henry, Lakota, and Ax

These words are written with the prayer that you will know your Creator as well as He knows you. He loves you even more than Nona.

I love because He first loved me.

1 John 4:19



## DEDICATION FROM DONNA

To Jackson, Benjamin, Myles, Callie, Chapel, Camden, and Jessa

Each one of you has blessed me exceedingly, abundantly, more than I could ever imagine. I pray you will know God loves you, listen to the Spirit, and make Jesus your best friend.

“Seek the kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.”

Matthew 6:33



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## Our Why (David and Jonathan)

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I liked Denise Johnson the first time we met. Shirley, our mutual friend and Bible study leader, invited Denise to join our small tribe of Jesus girls, who met once a week. She walked in and sat her big smile across the table from me. Soon, I realized how similarly we think and express ourselves. Her vulnerability, though guarded at first, refreshed my spirit. She didn't mind admitting her mistakes or revealing a few hurts. She understood we all have shortcomings that can potentially make us better or bitter. She chooses to become better.

We look back at that first encounter now and marvel over how fast our friendship grew. In a way, Denise and I clicked quickly, much like David and Jonathan. In the NLT (New Living Translation), 1 Samuel 18:1 says that there was an “immediate bond between them.” The New International Version (NIV) chose the words “one in spirit.” The English Standard Version (ESV) and King James Version (KJV) state, “Jonathan was knit to the soul of David.” Yet, my favorite translation of this verse is in the Christian Standard Bible (CSB). *“Jonathan was bound to David in close friendship.”*

Denise and I had plenty of painful reasons from the past to keep one another at arm's length, but God quickly leveled the walls between

us. We didn't know God's reason for allowing us to become fast friends, but now we do.

The second Sunday of February 2024 began much like any other Sunday. Denise's husband pastored Christ Redeemer Church, which meets near the shore of Lake Guntersville. Between Sunday school and worship, Denise told him, "I'm not feeling well. I think I'll go on home." Soon, Denise was in considerable pain. Doctors first suspected kidney stones or a mean infection. Tests were ordered, and Denise's first whispers from the Spirit on this new journey fell softly in her ears. "This is not stones; it's a mass. And it's big."

In the four months that followed, Denise had her kidney removed and another surgery to remove the mass that metastasized to her head. She is in Stage IV of renal cell carcinoma, which, barring a miracle, will eventually take her life. However, her story, this story, is not a sad tale. It is one of great peace and even joy amid the struggle.

So naturally, the topic of miracles moved in and found a home in my thoughts. I've witnessed a few divine interventions that were nothing short of miraculous. I've seen bodies healed when all was lost. For the past few months, I've cried out to God for a miracle for Denise. I'm still crying out. Will God use His miracle-working hands to pull out all the cancer? I don't know, but I keep praying that He will. I still believe in the power of God's hand. I still believe He works miracles. Yet, I've come to realize that I may have overlooked a miracle greater than physical healing. Yes, we want physical healing; we want our loved ones' suffering to end. We wonder why those so in love with God



become afflicted. We are left to wonder how and if something of great value can be gained, something of great significance with long-term benefits.

In the Old Testament, miracles were performed to prove God's power and sovereignty. God's love motivated awe-inspiring, nature-defying miracles that encouraged His wayward children to move closer to Him, convinced He was the One True God. This wasn't intended to boost God's ego; it was the conduit for His blessings to fall on them.

God's greatest blessing was, and still is, Jesus – the One who paid for our sins once and for all. Many sincere God-fearing Jews throughout the New Testament believed in God, but they had a hard time believing Jesus was the Messiah they had been praying for. To convince them, Jesus performed many miracles. These miracles fulfilled the prophecy that He would bring Good News to the poor, proclaim liberty for the prisoners, open the eyes of the blind, and set the captives free. Simply put, Jesus' miracles proved He was who He said He was and could do what He said He could do.

Though Jesus no longer walks the earth in human form, His Spirit is still in the miracle-working business. Some receive supernatural physical healing, which strengthens the faith of believers and moves us to offer thanks and praise. However, unbelievers refuse to label this kind of healing as a miracle. Instead, they see it as the result of medicine, skilled doctors, or merely a coincidence.

Then again, others receive a miracle much greater and more remarkable than physical healing. They receive a supernatural download of joy and peace while in the throes of suffering. This kind of miraculous intervention can only come from the Holy Spirit. It can strengthen believers' faith, but more importantly, it offers a reason for unbelievers to believe. Even the most diehard skeptic has a hard time explaining away peace in the pain and joy while on this kind of journey. Does this peace and joy take away the physical pain and emotional sadness? Not at all. But it does provide a purpose that far outweighs our momentary troubles and can overshadow suffering.

Denise's passion for sharing her many experiences with the love of God, the grace of Jesus, and her friendship with the Holy Spirit has been stoked into a roaring fire. We all want her complete physical healing, but she's determined to further the kingdom by genuinely displaying a joyful, peaceful life bathed in absolute trust. Yes, she and her family and friends pray for more time, but we also pray for even greater influence. Isn't that what we should all pray for? Shouldn't we all live unexplainably peaceful and joyous lives no matter our circumstances so that others might want what we have? Denise's faith is changing me. I can only imagine what it does for those looking in from outside of faith.

More than anything, Denise and I share a common passion for telling all who will listen, especially our grandchildren, about God's wonderful works. *"We will not hide these truths from our children; we*

*will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders.” (Psalm 78:4 NLT)*

Throughout the following pages, our hope is that:

- God’s goodness, love, and faithfulness will be revealed
- Each of us intentionally deepens our friendships by enriching our relationship with Jesus
- We leave a legacy of peace and joy to our families and friends
- We cause others to intensely yearn to live in God’s presence for all eternity.

We pray our stories will inspire you to want more and more of the God who loves you.

*“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with [us] all.”*

(2 Corinthians 13:14NLT)

# I. Common Denominators (John and Jesus)

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Because God, through His Son, saved both of us in our early years, Denise and I share a deep love for God and praise Jesus for setting us free. He walked with us through a variety of turbulent storms, and we learned the benefit of crying out to Him in prayer. We've both suffered bouts of depression, which motivated us to slide closer to Jesus. His Spirit works hard to teach us how to become more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, gentle, faithful, and self-controlled. However, since we're trying to be honest here, we must admit that we can both get a tad ... well ... feisty. Those who mess with our family, our friends, and, especially, our Jesus will have a skirmish on their hands. If Jesus walked the earth with us, He might eventually label us The Daughters of Thunder.

The New Testament paints a picture of two brawny brothers referred to by Jesus as the Sons of Thunder. James and John were the dutiful sons of a successful fisherman. Many commentators believe their father, Zebedee, was wealthy and prominent in their community. These two young fishermen left the security of their boats and nets to follow Jesus on a mission of uncertainty. They witnessed numerous miracles, listened to His teaching, and became convinced that He was the Messiah they had prayed for.

Toward the end of Jesus' ministry, disciples were sent ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for Jesus' arrival. When the less-than-gracious villagers did not welcome Jesus, indignation rose in James and John. They asked Jesus, "*Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?*" (Luke 9:54) Maybe you know that feeling too. You want a holy fire to light up a few people who have hurt you or those you love. You allow your unholy passion to override your godly self-control. Your tongue unfurls before you can roll it back in. But then, you remember all you've been forgiven of and the love God has for not only you but also for those who handed out your hurt.

For some of us, it has taken more than a minute to understand and accept God's overwhelming love. For me, it happened on the beach in 2018. (Denise and I are convinced the beach is Jesus' favorite place to hang out. We hear His Spirit better there with waves crashing in the background. We are truly solar-powered.) After about five months of depression, my sweet husband suddenly had me pack my things for a beach trip. For three days, I sat staring at the ocean. No music. No books. I was merely sitting and sleeping. Then, you can call it a dream, a vision, or anything you like, but I saw Jesus sitting on the sand in front of me. He turned toward me, smiled, and said, "You know I love you, right?" I replied, "I do, but do you know how much I love you?" I felt I had not proven my love very well. He got up, walked toward me, and sat down beside me. Then, He quietly whispered what I needed to hear, "You just need to rest." I gladly obeyed. Replaying that moment over and over in my mind helps me see that I am valuable enough for Him to come to me, sit with me, reassure me of His love, and rekindle my desire to remain in His presence.

For Denise, her reassurance of God’s love came just weeks before cancer came calling. God’s timing is always right on time. Below is a portion of her testimony she shared with her church family:

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*The first of this year, I began an organized plan to read the Bible through in a year. It is a chronological reading of the Bible. I was most excited to do this. Every day provides lessons about my beautiful Creator. The reading for January 18, 2024, was from Genesis 16, the story of an Egyptian slave, Hagar. Abram had been told that he would father a son and would become the father of many nations. Abram’s wife Sarai, however, could not conceive. She doubted the promise given to Abram, so she gave her slave Hagar to Abram to conceive a son. Jealousy reared its ugly head in Sarai, and the despised Hagar was forced to run away. While Hagar and her son were alone in the wilderness, an angel of the Lord came to her and encouraged her to return to Abram and Sarai. Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her Jehovah El Roi (the God who sees me).*

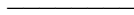
*“He sees me.” As I read those words, they completely washed over me. Then, God spoke to me. He said, “I see you.”*

*I have prayed prayers of praise. Praise for every sunset, every sunrise, every crashing ocean wave, and the forgiveness of my sin. Those prayers are easy. I have prayed prayers of confession whenever I felt like I had blown it. I have prayed prayers of petition, lifting friends I barely knew or didn’t know at all. I have lifted my child, my husband,*

*and my grandchild, begging God for healing. But I've never fully realized He sees me!*

*I'm the youngest of four children. My job was to be small, unseen, unheard, and invisible. I did my job well. But God said, "I see you."*

*I realize now that He has been preparing me for this health journey. I've never thought about being the focus of my relationship with Him. I thought I was invisible. My job was to take care of and petition for everyone else. But He saw me. For the first time, I completely understood how much He loves me. Just because."*



The apostle John, that Son of Thunder, wrote his gospel to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. He hoped to persuade readers, then and now, to believe God loves them, Jesus' grace can sustain them, and the Holy Spirit will lead them. John wrote so much about loving others because he had experienced so much love from Jesus. Because He had experienced love, he could give love.

Loving God and loving others topped Jesus' list of commandments. Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."* (John 14:15) At first glance, you might picture a stern-faced Jesus wagging His finger like a mean schoolteacher. But, look a little longer. Jesus' meaning here conveys a willingness to obey that beats within a heart of true love. Those in love with Jesus don't

love others because they religiously have to; they do it because they genuinely want to! Love like that joins our hands with John's to loudly proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

John didn't write his Jesus story until he was much older than when the other gospel writers wrote theirs. Later, he wrote three letters and the book of Revelation. John is the self-proclaimed "disciple whom Jesus loved." Perhaps it took him a while to truly internalize God's love for him. Once he did, he was never the same.

Isn't that how transformation works? We begin following Jesus with edges as rough as those of a young fisherman filled with bravado and determined to make a mark on the world. We observe the works of God's hand, listen to His words, and converse with Him daily. Yet inwardly, we still can't believe we will ever merit sitting at His right hand. But, as the years slowly roll, we begin to feel His hand gently pulling us closer and closer. If you've never felt His hand, believe in Him and wait for it.

Two weeks after Denise's first surgery, sleep ran the other way. Instead of deep sleep, she restlessly drifted in and out. Historically, her dreams evaporate like brief showers on hot asphalt the moment she wakes up. However, this time was different. She dreamed of two gifts beautifully wrapped as though they had been purchased in a fancy boutique. Her hands untied the ribbons and sifted through the paper finery to reveal a white stone carved with the words "Your Cancer." After opening both of them, she woke up. At first, she remembered both gifts. However, wide eyes faded the memory of the second gift. As she



tried to recall it, she heard that voice inside her say, “You’ll know when it’s time.”

It’s not too farfetched to believe that God can miraculously transform trials like Denise’s into precious gifts that overwhelm us with joy and peace. It’s not too unbelievable to think that He will use simple things, like dreams, to demonstrate His presence and give us a new perspective. Inexpressible joy and confounding peace cause us to revel and flourish in His presence, where we gladly lean on Him. There, we *know* we are loved. And loved people love people.

Just as John leaned on Jesus at their last meal together, Denise and I continue to benefit from leaning on Jesus. We want to be the same loyal friend to others as John was to Jesus. He was the only disciple who never left Him - even when times were grossly uncertain. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring, but we know these are common denominators for all of us: God comes to us when we’re undone, He loves us no matter what, He is patient with our process, and He is the God who sees us - Jehovah El Roi.

## II. Breakfast Chicks (Female Followers)

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It's hard to imagine Jesus wanting or needing anything. He was, and is, the Son of God who walked on water, cured diseases, cast out demons, opened blind eyes, healed the paralyzed, and raised the dead. Jesus' Spirit-filled divine nature allowed Him to perform jaw-dropping supernatural feats. Yet, His human nature experienced the exact wants and needs that are familiar to us all. Consequently, it's not hard to believe that He needed friends as much as we do.

We were created to commune first with God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit to learn how to better commune with one another. When we develop a deep friendship with Jesus, the most relatable of the three, we find a role model for making and sustaining friendships. We no longer selfishly view friends as mere helpers for our messy lives. Instead, we see them as partners we gladly serve, laugh with, shed tears with, and cry out to God for.

Being without friends is a travesty that can easily be avoided with some intentionality. Thankfully, God sets the lonely in families (Psalm 68:6). Not only do we have genetic families, but we also get to enjoy another kind of blood kin—those who become brothers and sisters by the blood of Christ. Jesus spent His time on earth with this kind of blood kin who, in turn, brought others to Him. He began with

12 rough and rowdy guys who believed He was the Messiah they had been praying for.

As word spread, Jesus gained some female followers who brought practical support and keen intuition. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Mary, Salome, and many other women supported Jesus financially and emotionally. In a world often belittling and ignoring women, Jesus made sure they were included, honored, and valued. He still does that!

Denise and I are blessed to be a part of a small group we call the Breakfast Chicks. We meet every Tuesday morning at Chick-fil-A around what they call “The Gathering Table.” Our primary purpose is to build each other up with Scripture, prayer, and bragging about our God. Each of us understands the importance of having a community of like-minded believers who encourage us on our journey through life and spur us on to good works. We serve one another, laugh with one another, shed tears for one another, and cry out to God for one another. We are blood kin of the best kind.

As Denise prepared to start the two-year experimental trial to fight her cancer, God sent a reassuring reminder that she was loved not only by Him but by many others. He divinely placed a comforting series of circumstances on a tee and swung for the fence. Sometimes, it doesn't feel too good when God swings, but the home run is always worth it.

The doctor's appointment had been made. Everything was set. Her first treatment would begin on Thursday. Then, she would spend

time at the beach with her extended family the following week. Having a plan is so satisfying and reassuring ... until it falls apart. After checking her appointments in the doctor portal, she noticed they had been changed. Everything had to be shifted, meaning she wouldn't begin the trial until she returned from the beach. Treatment for her condition wasn't something she wanted to delay. She let frustration get the best of her since she had been through so much already. Both hands flew up in surrender. "I give up!" At this point, the weary warrior questioned everything. *"Was this going to be worth it? What if it didn't work? What if ...? What if...? What if ...?"*

God graciously arranged a divine appointment with her friend Debbie, who asked a simple yet profound question. "What was the last thing you heard God say?"

"He said to wait," she replied. "But I don't know what that means!"

She and I also talked while she was in the middle of her confusion. For once, I just listened. I knew that whenever I didn't know which end was up, it always helped to have a friend who would merely listen. I could usually find my next course of action by talking it out. Denise finally decided to call the doctor. She had to "wait" for him to call her back, but she knew he could help her decide what to do.

When the doctor finally called, he reassured her that she should go to the beach and enjoy her time with her family. The trial could "wait" until she returned. God had given her friend the perfect question to ask, and he had also given Denise her answer before she even knew

the question. She only had to “wait.” God is not only an on-time God but the sweetest before-time God!

Many times, God will send us little nudges regarding a friend that seem trivial. We can choose to act on them or ignore them. Acting on them may seem insignificant until we see the results of our follow-through. Ignoring them causes us to miss the blessings attached to the nudge.

Years ago, Denise benefited from a nudged friend. Just before Sunday morning service began, she took her usual seat in the front row. On this particular morning, her little black purse sat next to her. The outside was classically conservative, but the inside lining revealed the personality of the Denise I’ve come to love.

A sweet couple Denise had not yet met came late for church and took the two empty seats beside her. As they settled in, the lady spied Denise’s wide-open purse, which displayed a dazzling hot pink lining. She leaned closer to Denise with a big smile, stroked the pink lining, and whispered, “I like you. We’re going to be friends.” Denise and Ros did indeed become good friends. Even though they now live states apart, they know they can always pick up right where they left off. They don’t have to talk every day, but as they often tell one another, “I’m always in your back pocket.” They are blood kin of the best kind.

Recently, Ros paid attention to the Spirit’s nudge, prompting her to send Denise a boxful of the most delightful things at just the right time. It appeared on the Johnson’s doorstep after her struggle to “wait.” As Denise pulled out gift after gift of her favorite girlie things, happy

tears began to flow. Isn't it just like God to always show up on a hard day? He had given her friend the nudge to send the gifts before Denise needed the extra encouragement. He is not only an on-time God but the sweetest before-time God!

The morning the experimental drug trial was to begin at UAB Hospital, Denise and her husband sat at a table outside a cozy doughnut shop. Since space was limited, the tables were very close together. Next to them sat two young ladies in their early twenties enjoying their carbs and coffee. After engaging them in polite conversation for a few minutes, they said, "We're going to pray. Is that okay?" They agreed wholeheartedly.

After the prayer, they asked them for recommendations for restaurants within walking distance since they would be there for a while. The two girls looked at each other and smiled. They worked with a public relations firm representing many restaurants in the area and eagerly offered a list of the best places to eat.

Eventually, one of them asked what had brought the displaced duo to Birmingham. Denise explained the treatment she was about to begin and why she needed it. By this time, another young friend walked up to join the conversation. After hearing about Denise's condition, the three young ladies asked if they could pray for her. Their compassion and willingness touched Denise's heart. Having been given the go-ahead, the three young prayer warriors laid their hands on Denise and offered powerful prayers for healing, strength, and peace. These were not rote, memorized prayers like those sometimes prayed in sterile church services. No, these were paint-peeling prayers as mighty as

King David's, prayers of intervention as humble as Hezekiah's, and prayers of faith as bold as Paul and Silas. These three young hearts didn't merely know *about* God; they *knew* God as a Father and a friend. They understood their God-given purpose. It wasn't to make restaurants famous but to make God's love famous. Denise didn't know these three female Jesus followers before that day, but she soon recognized them as blood kin of the best kind.

Someone might dare claim that the bond of friendship between sisters in Christ is the same as any other friendship. Sadly, those who believe this never recognize the blessings supernaturally arranged by God, who sees the beginning and the end. Every astonishing account of divine intervention stacks on top of another until the bedrock of friendship becomes unshakable.

Each of our Breakfast Chick friends was led to become part of our group, bringing unique insight and inspiration. God's providence and love are often demonstrated through friends who ask the right questions at the right time, let you talk about your troubles, or send a box full of encouragement.

Discounting these moments makes the doubter seem like Elisha's servant. When a vast army surrounded him and the prophet, the servant trembled. However, faithful Elisha merely prayed for God to open his eyes so he could see what Elisha saw - the hillside around them filled with horses and chariots of fire. Elisha told him, "*Don't be afraid! For there are more on our side than with them.*" (2 Kings 6:16)

Denise often tells me she stays overwhelmed by the number of people who have shown their love for her. As Denise's struggle began, the women of her church stormed the gates of hell on her behalf. The small group gathered quickly, laid hands on her, and surrounded her with prayer. They unknowingly set God's evangelistic purpose for this struggle into motion. This isn't a struggle for Denise alone but for all who know her. It's a battle that supernaturally strengthens our faith, moves us to become more intentional in our relationships, opens our eyes to the working of God's hand, and encourages us to share the Good News. Such a display of peace and purpose in the storm also allows those teetering on unbelief to steady themselves on the side of faith.

God has proven Himself to be an on-time, perfect-timing God. But, even better than that, we have witnessed Him perpetually being a before-time God. Thank you, God, for blazing the trail before us, staying close beside us, and helping us sweep away the mistakes trailing behind us. *“O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, Lord. You go before me and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!”* (Psalm 139:1-6 NLT)



### III. Stage IV Living (Paul and the Philippians)

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“Why Do Christian Women Struggle with Friendships?” I came across that intriguing title while scanning internet articles about friendship. The author, Jeff Noble, humbly admitted that, for obvious reasons, he had no personal experience with such a topic. However, his position as pastor of Northstar Church in Blacksburg, Virginia, provided him with valuable insight. He concluded that these five common factors hinder women’s ability to develop long-lasting friendships:

1. Women generally dislike confrontation.
2. Deep friendships require vulnerability.
3. Several acquaintances are more manageable than one or two deep friendships.
4. Most women are too busy; close friendships require time.
5. The fear of being hurt or rejected breeds insecurity.

I wholeheartedly agree with this list. Troubled friendships can wreck a woman's emotions as much as troubled marriages, children, and finances.

Many faith-based organizations offer seminars and retreats to help prevent or repair family and money issues, but rarely do you find ones for strengthening friendships. That's why I asked Denise to share what she wants her three granddaughters to know about female friendships. Perhaps it's no coincidence that she also came up with five things:

1. There is only One truly worthy of Best Friend status. Even if others reject or fail you, Jesus never will.
2. Friendship is deep. It's a soul thing. That's why it hurts so bad when a friend disappoints you.
3. A friend is someone who loves you enough to speak truth to you. A friend will always make you a better human.
4. A friend will still love you no matter what.
5. Friendship is a gift. Treasure it.

Shortly after Denise's diagnosis sank in, I let fear get the best of me. I had grown up moving from town to town with my father's job. We moved 33 times, and I attended 12 schools in 12 years. Whenever I began to feel comfortable with a new friend, I would come home from school to find my mother packing boxes. The fear of having to leave friends behind smothered my confidence. Eventually, I let go of my desire to have a forever friend.

I am happy to say that after living in the same house for three decades, I have developed a few close personal friendships. It didn't take long to consider Denise a close friend. But isn't it just like the evil one to reach back in time and pull up old fears to mess with your confidence? When Denise told me her prognosis, I did what my younger self used to do - I ran. Thankfully, my emotions had aged along with my smiling eyes, and I slammed on the brakes. I realized I needed to apologize to Denise for running the other way when she needed me most. Why is saying "I'm sorry" such a hard thing?

I tearfully went to her and told her I needed to apologize. She had no idea what I was about to say—she's not one to keep a record of wrongs. Before I said another word, she looked me in the eyes and said, "Whatever it is, I forgive you." There were a lot more tears after that. I told her what I had done, and she graciously forgave me. She showed me the grace of Jesus that day. Perhaps forgiveness is the most necessary ingredient of friendship.

The apostle Paul knew a great deal about forgiveness. On the road to Damascus, Jesus's grace met him in a bright light. His zeal for upholding religious laws soon transformed into zeal for freedom in Christ.

Paul also understood the urgency of Stage IV living. His thank-you letter to the Philippians was penned in a Roman prison awaiting trial before Nero. His letter presents the perfect seminar on friendship. He began by thanking the Philippians for their support and continuing to preach the gospel. He didn't hesitate to tell them how much they meant to him. He wrote, "*God knows how much I love you and long*

*for you with the tender compassion of Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 1:8 NLT) Who wouldn't want to hear words like that from a friend?

Paul assured them that the Holy Spirit sent help as they prayed on his behalf. In return, he prayed for their love to overflow and that they keep growing in knowledge and understanding. Paul knew the fervent prayers of righteous friends were highly effective.

Good friends encourage us to press on when circumstances turn us every which way but loose. They quickly tell us when we get things right and lovingly explain what we get wrong. Paul inspired his friends in Philippi to fight together for the faith, stand unified in spirit and purpose, and not be intimidated by their enemies. He reminded them to be humble, to look out for one another, not to complain, and most of all, to rejoice. Paul knew his time was short. He longed to be with Jesus but understood he still had more encouragement to offer and Good News to share.

When Denise and I began this project, we felt a sense of urgency. We both wanted to be candid in sharing our stories for others to read. As Denise put it, “I want to do some good.” Maybe the most memorable good she does is helping others understand that God can use everything for good. It may not be for our good but for someone coming behind us. Even sitting in a Roman prison, Paul watched God use his story. He wrote this for the Philippians, *“I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have*

*gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear."*  
(Philippians 1:12-14 NLT)

Lord, we thank you for being our very best friend - the One who never leaves or forsakes us. Thank You for letting us pour out our hearts at Your feet, knowing You will stroke our ruffled emotions back into place. Thank you for the gift of friendship. Help Christian women learn to seek it out and treasure it. Please help us celebrate our weaknesses. We know that when we are weak, we are positioned to more clearly sense the mighty power of the Holy Spirit within us. Hang a banner in our minds that says, "*The Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.*" (1 John 4:4) Give us confidence and a sense of urgency to share Your Good News. Help fear flee and faith take its place. We trust You, God, to take what the evil one meant for harm and use it for the good of many others. We ask all these things not for us but for Your name's glory. In Jesus' name, Amen!

## IV. Our Ebenezers (Jesus and Peter)

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After my friend Kim finished reading Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth's book *Choosing Gratitude*, she told me the story of Dr. Helen Roseveare. Helen, a medical missionary to the Congo, was captured by guerrilla soldiers and subsequently endured all the evil you might imagine. On the first night of her capture, Helen felt all alone and thought God had abandoned her. She asked the question all of us have asked at one time or another, "Why, God? Why?" Yet, her spirit heard God asking His own question, "Can you thank Me?" She understood that He didn't mean for her to thank Him for the evil thrown at her. But, eventually, in the still of the night, she heard a second question, "Can you thank Me for trusting you with this experience, even if I never tell you why?"

I relayed that story and those two questions to our Breakfast Chicks small group. I knew Denise could share valuable insight into that second question, and she did not disappoint. She fully understands where the emphasis of that question should be placed. "Can you thank Me for trusting YOU with this experience, even if I never tell you why?" As Jesus' followers, we verbalize our trust in God quite easily. Yet, we don't think much about God trusting US with difficult circumstances. Could it be that God prepares us *in advance* to stand firm in the face of our mightiest of storms? Could it be that God can

use the evil thrown at us for not only our good but for the good of many others?

Denise says God used an abundance of things to strengthen her for her cancer journey. When her son suffered a horrible accident that should have killed him, she witnessed God using that event to pull him closer to Himself. Her husband has had several bouts with cancer that should have taken his life. But she felt God using those times to plunge her deeper into God's presence.

Yet again, a year and a half before her cancer journey began, God used a Lean into Jesus women's conference to convict her of her need to fully surrender some things she had been holding much too tightly. After finally laying those things at the feet of Jesus, she realized how often she had superficially surrendered them, only to pick them up again. Hearing the word cancer would have crumbled her old self. But she readily admits her cancer has not jerked a single self-centered tear because she knows God can and will use her trial for good, and she's excited about that. Denise already sees how God has arranged many divine appointments and circumstances to strengthen her for this battle. She can look back at the timeline of her life and see it dotted with Ebenezers.

As a little girl, I had no idea what an Ebenezer was. Maybe you've struggled with that too. Remember the old hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing?" Robert Robinson, a 22-year-old Baptist minister, wrote it in the 1700s. I've always loved every word of that song, but now I have a new appreciation for "Here I raise my Ebenezer;

hither by thy help I've come.” (If you know it, you are singing that in your head right now.)

The term Ebenezer comes from the mouth of Samuel in 1 Samuel 7:12. The pesky Philistines had finally given up the Ark of the Covenant they had stolen from the Israelites. Instead of taking it to the Tabernacle as they should have, the Israelites took it to Abinadab's house in Kiriath-jearim. It remained there for twenty years, and the Israelites slowly began to feel that the Lord had abandoned them. *“Then Samuel said to all the people of Israel, ‘If you want to return to the Lord with all your hearts, get rid of your foreign gods and your images of Ashtoreth. Turn your hearts to the Lord and obey him alone; then he will rescue you from the Philistines.’”* (1 Samuel 7:3 NLT) In other words, surrender what you've held much too tightly.

Samuel gathered the penitent Israelites for a time of prayer and fasting. Realizing the Israelites had gathered in one place caused the Philistines to drool at the thought of a quick conquest. Naturally, they believed they could surround them, attack, and conquer, but God intervened with His booming, thunderous voice. The Philistines were thrown into confusion and defeated. Mind you, the Lord did the hard part, but the Israelites still had to fight with the strength of the Lord to win the battle. So Samuel erected a large stone he named Ebenezer, which meant “the stone of help.” He said, *“Up to this point the Lord has helped us!”* (1 Samuel 7:12b NLT) This tangible reminder of God's protection and provision would bolster their faith when life became chaotic.



What are your Ebenezers? Have you considered your life's timeline and recognized how God has led, carried, and taught you? Up to this point, the Lord has helped us all. Yet complete surrender isn't easy because we don't see the beginning and the end as God does. Megan, our youngest Breakfast Chick, reminded us of that when she shared a quote she once heard from a pastor, "God gives us the answers we would *want* if we knew what God knows." One more time, in case that didn't cause you to pause and ponder, "God gives us the answers we would *want* if we knew what God knows." I love Denise's thinking when she says, "Who would want a God we could understand?"

God used her husband's bout with cancer to raise an Ebenezer for Denise. As they prepared for his surgery, Denise knew she would need extra cell phone minutes added to her plan so she could call family and friends after the surgery. (Yes, this was before unlimited minutes were a thing.) In the middle of last-minute errands, Denise received a call from their new insurance company. The voice on the other end calmly said, " You have no insurance yet. You *do* have a cancer policy, but it doesn't take effect for a year, and it's only been six months. However, if the hospital goes ahead with the surgery, you might be able to prove that you didn't know he had cancer when you took out the policy."

When fear and helplessness wash over us in a series of crashing waves, it's hard to find the surface to catch a breath of air. At times like these, it's good to have friends. Denise went to the church and found Joe, their long-time friend and ministry partner. As the water from those crashing waves poured from her eyes, she spilled her frustration into

Joe's lap. (I know Joe, and I can imagine the calmness of his reply) "Denise, it's okay. Stop crying. I'm taking this. It's going to be okay. This is mine."

Denise left the church feeling somewhat better and headed to the car wash. They would be taking her car to the hospital, and since her husband liked a clean car, she wanted it clean. She needed quarters to start the process, so she put a \$10 bill in the change machine. It spit it back out, so she put it in again. It spit it out again - and again. That feistiness we share rose from her toes. Frustrated to no end, she poured out wet emotion again, but this time, she poured it out to God, "Lord, I just need one thing! One thing!" Then, in a voice as calm as Joe's, Denise's spirit heard, "This machine does not take \$10s, Denise; it takes \$5s." Fortunately, she had a \$5.

Once the surgery began, a substantial number of friends showed up. A nurse came to the waiting room, gathered the large group, and escorted them to a nearby classroom, where they received royal treatment. Denise confessed that she thought they had gotten them mixed up with a celebrity. An abundance of drinks and snacks were laid out for them. The nurse told Denise she would come out and give them updates every 20 minutes. She even gave Denise her personal cell phone number in case she had questions. Another hospital employee found Denise and told her they only owed a \$20 copay. After Denise told me this story, she added, "I still don't know what Joe did, but it worked!" God used Joe to provide an Ebenezer for Denise that would forever remind her of His love. God wanted her to know that she could

have rock-solid confidence in His power because He had *been with them up to this point*. She was His child, and He loved her.

Christians can always exude confidence and joy when they genuinely believe they are God's chosen people, His royal priesthood, His holy nation, and His very own possession on which He continually showers His love! Revisiting our Ebenezers swells our gratitude. Our willingness to express gratitude in every situation is the best measurement of our faith. A strong faith allows others to see the goodness of God that brought us out of the darkness into His marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

The apostle Peter needed an Ebenezer to increase his faith and help him find freedom from his guilt. The scene in John 21 demonstrates God's ability to simultaneously see the beginning and the end. Jesus had been crucified and resurrected and had shown Himself to the disciples several times. Yet, because Jesus' ministry didn't have the political outcome Peter anticipated, he floundered in his calling and purpose. So, Peter did what many of us do when we are confused; we return to something familiar. For Peter, his familiar was fishing. He and six disciple buddies loaded a boat and fished throughout the night. At daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach waiting. (We told you Jesus likes to hang out at the beach!) He called out to the weary fishermen, "Have you caught anything?" They shouted back, "No!" So, He gave them a command they should have remembered, "Cast your net on the other side." They obeyed and caught a boatload of fish. That's when the lightbulb flashed over John's head, "It's the Lord!" The big catch was the miracle, but Jesus had something far better in store for Peter.

Jesus, able to see the beginning and the end, had waited for the disciples because He knew they were coming. He didn't bake them a cake, but he did make breakfast over a charcoal fire. Jesus knew Peter had betrayed Him over a similar fire, but He loved him anyway. He knew Peter could not become who he was made to be until he let go of his guilt. So, Jesus set up a divine appointment for him. After breakfast, Jesus asked three times if he loved Him. He didn't ask if he was sorry for betraying Him. He didn't demand an apology or a promise never to do that again. Peter's three confessions of deep, abiding love covered his three betrayals. Peter would later write, "*Above all, have fervent and unfailing love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.*" (1 Peter 4:8) He knew that full well. Finally, Jesus recommissioned Peter with the words, "Follow Me."

In a previous post-resurrection appearance, Jesus breathed on the disciples, and they *received* the Holy Spirit. Now, Peter was *filled* with the Holy Spirit's power and went on to help the Jews in Acts 2 receive the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Later, he helped Samaritan believers receive it in Acts 8 and then Gentiles in Acts 10. (I wonder if Peter remembered his conversation with Jesus every time he stood beside a charcoal fire. Did he sometimes picture the smoke choking a rooster whenever he heard crowing? Did inhaling that smokey charcoal aroma fill him with gratitude again and again?)

Jesus, able to see the beginning and the end, gave Peter a foreshadowing of the suffering he would endure. God trusted him with the trials he would endure. Peter trusted God and praised Him for the privilege of being called by his name! (1 Peter 4:16) We should follow

Peter's example and diligently thank God for giving us our Ebenezers and for trusting *us* with *our* experiences even if He never tells us why.

“Come Thou Fount of every blessing,<sup>[1][SEP]</sup>  
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace,<sup>[1][SEP]</sup>  
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,<sup>[1][SEP]</sup>  
Call for songs of loudest praise.<sup>[1][SEP]</sup>  
Teach me some melodious sonnet,<sup>[1][SEP]</sup>  
Sung by flaming tongues above.<sup>[1][SEP]</sup>  
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,  
Mount of God's redeeming love.”

(Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing by Robert Robinson)

## V. Focused on Home (Jesus and the Galilean Wedding)

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Denise and I grew up in the hell, fire, and brimstone age of preaching. We didn't hear much about heaven, but we knew hell was NOT a destination we wanted a ticket for. Those vivid descriptions of hell scared us into trying to be good - and we never thought we were good enough. Church life seemed to be more about discipline than enjoying His presence and the process of becoming like Jesus.

Later, as a parent and school teacher, I watched a few veteran parents and teachers catch more proverbial flies with honey. When they could get kids excited about learning, discipline issues lessened. Finding joy in life and learning always yielded more significant results than constantly reminding them of their punishment. Great trouble often visited those who didn't sit still, raise their hands before speaking, keep their hands to themselves, or keep a laundry list of other rules. However, allowing them the freedom to move, freely ask questions, have hands-on experiences, and even make a few mistakes made rigid rules unnecessary. They reveled in the process of learning.

The same is true for those who have an intimate relationship with God. Children of God know the consequences of sin but also understand how much better life is after obeying and experiencing the forgiveness and love Jesus provides. It's easy to return love to someone

who has loved you incredibly well. Knowing you're loved makes you want to do your best to please the other person. Not because you have to but because you want to! Best of all, God gives us a glimmer of an eternity in His presence when we enter the pages of Scripture. We know that heaven will be better than anything we can imagine. So why do so many Christians focus their lives on merely staying out of hell when they can become exuberant about heaven?

Once lost people understand the consequences of their sins, they need to witness a flock of grateful Christians who enjoy life here but can't wait to load the bus for heaven. If you talk to Denise about heaven, that's precisely what you'll hear. She gets so animated when talking about heaven that I pray harder for Jesus' return. She wants to see the jar God used to capture her tears. (Psalm 56:8) She is satisfied and comforted knowing God remembers her sorrows and promises to compensate her profoundly when Jesus returns. (Matthew 19:29) She can't wait to see Jesus face to face. Neither can I!

Perhaps Denise's mindset about heaven nudged her to watch the documentary "Before the Wrath." Her passionate description of it when telling the Breakfast Chicks about it almost caused her to jump out of her seat. She presented such a compelling synopsis that we were all motivated to watch it. She and I agreed that retelling what we learned about the Galilean wedding should be how we finished this project. We hope you are as enlightened and thrilled as we are about learning something new. If this isn't new for you, take it in through Denise's eyes now that you've gotten to know her, and you'll be blessed again.

Like every good communicator, Jesus used stories or parables to put skin on the bones of profound truths. Since the disciples were all Galileans and two-thirds of the gospels took place in Galilee, it's helpful to understand its unique culture. The Galilean wedding provides valuable insight into the Second Coming of Jesus.

Jesus' ministry began when he changed water to wine at a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. That event placed a massive dot on the timeline of Jesus' life. Even though many lessons have been taught about the details of Jesus' first miracle, I'd like to take you back through the events that led up to the wedding. The disciples would have understood Jesus' teachings about His return much quicker than us because they readily understood His analogies about the bride (the church) and the groom (Jesus).

Let's begin with the betrothal. Everyone was invited to the betrothal at the city gate. The father of the groom read to the bride a contract or covenant he had written detailing the expectations of the wedding. Those attending the ceremony were legal witnesses. Gifts were exchanged between the bride and the groom, with the most extravagant gift given to the bride. A monetary dowry was given to the bride's father. Some cultures viewed the dowry as the groom's family purchasing the bride and making her the groom's property. However, it was much different for the Galileans. They viewed the dowry as an insurance policy if something happened to the groom, and the bride had to return to her father.

Next, the groom tenderly offered the bride a cup of wine - the "cup of joy." In Galilee, the bride was given a CHOICE, something



other cultures did not do. She could reject the groom by rejecting the wine or show her acceptance by drinking it. Once the wine was accepted, the groom would say, “You are now consecrated to me by the Laws of Moses, and I will not drink of this cup again until I drink it with you in my father’s house.” Perhaps those words sound familiar to you. At the Last Supper, before Jesus was crucified, He *“took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them and said, ‘Each of you drink from it, for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many. Mark my words—I will not drink wine again until the day I drink it new with you in my Father’s Kingdom.’”* (Matthew 26:27-28 NLT)

Since the wedding did not happen immediately, the betrothal period could last a year or more. The groom spent that time gathering supplies to build a room onto his father’s house. He eagerly prepared for the day that he would bring his radiant bride to live with him there. So naturally, Jesus’ disciples understood His analogy when He told them, *“There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.”* (John 14:2-3 NLT)

While the groom was busy building and preparing a room, the bride busied herself buying extra-special pieces of cloth for her and the bridesmaids’ dresses. This cloth collection could take months since she had to wait for traveling merchants to visit her village. While waiting for her groom, the bride was to remain vigilant, pure, and always ready

because no one knew the day or the hour the wedding would take place. Only the father of the groom knew. No other culture had surprise weddings like the Galileans. Could it be God wanted it that way? We know Jesus will surprise us when He returns. While teaching on the Mount of Olives, He said, *“No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.”* (Matthew 24:36 NLT)

During this preparation time, the father would oversee the son’s work. As the groom furnished the room with items he had collected and determined the menu for the wedding feast, the father said, “I’ll tell you when it’s time.” This betrothal period was all about the preparations being made, not about the day and time. We should be as eager and diligent in our preparations as well.

As the preparations ended, the bride, groom, and wedding party would sleep in their bridal clothes like minutemen. Only the people anticipating the wedding would be ready and waiting. I can only imagine the excitement growing in the groom as he awaited permission to get his bride. Like a little child during the week of Christmas, he would no doubt ask his father, “Is it time yet? Is it time?” Paul reminds us *“that the day of the Lord’s return will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.”* (1 Thessalonians 5:2 NLT) Finally, the father would go to his son in the middle of the night with a smile, touch his shoulder to rouse him from sleep, and declare, “It’s time! Go get your bride!”

This is my favorite part! The groom quickly grabbed the shofar (trumpet) to wake the bride and the village. Only those who were anticipating and prepared could join the procession. Two men with a

wooden litter (stretcher) would arrive at the bride's house and set the litter on the ground. Then, they would invite the bride to take a seat. Once she settled in, they would lift her off the ground and carry her to her groom. The bride met the groom in the air! *"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever."* (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 NLT) What excites me most about this is the picture of grace it provides. The bride is prepared and ready but does no work to get to the groom. She is lifted and carried to the Father's house! Jesus is returning for us because He loves us and wants to be with us forever. Picturing Him as an anxious groom at the Father's right hand, just waiting for the word to come get us, thrills my soul. I imagine him eagerly asking, "Father, is it time yet? Is it time?"

When Jesus returns, we will enjoy a grand wedding feast - the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. John the Revelator said so. *"Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself. She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear. For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God's holy people. And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.' And he added, 'These are true words that come from God.'"* (Revelation 19:7-9 NLT) The Galilean groom invited everyone prepared for the wedding to the feast. Once they were all gathered, the doors were closed. No one else got in, and no one left.

So, all of this naturally raises three big questions for all of us:

- Have we chosen to drink the cup of joy Jesus tenderly offers?
- Are we prepared for Jesus to return and take us to the Father's house?
- Will we feast at the table Jesus has prepared for us?

Perhaps you remember the old hymn "Come to the Feast:"

"All things are ready; come to the feast!

Leave ev'ry care and worldly strife;

Come feast upon the love of God and drink everlasting life.

Hear the invitation, 'Come, whosoever will.'

Praise God for full salvation for whosoever will."

Shortly after receiving her diagnosis, Denise remembers sitting on the sand near the beach's shoreline. She wasn't upset; she was merely processing and talking everything over with God. As waves gently rolled forward and back, lapping her feet, she took in the sunshine, the sounds of the birds, the smell of the ocean, and the warmth of the sand. Suddenly, a more significant wave rolled in and quickly washed away the layer of sand beneath her. After years of listening to the Spirit within her, she clearly recognized His voice. Offering comfort like none other, she heard Him whisper, "I tell the waves where to stop. I've got this." And she knew He did.

Later, she returned to the beach, thinking about her grandchildren. She understood that one of her primary purposes in life was to paint for them a picture of God's faithfulness, Jesus' grace, and

the Spirit's power. She passionately prayed that they would fall in love with God, even if she weren't around to teach them. As she pictured those five precious faces, she noticed a small bird picking critters out of the sand. God used that picture to reassure her. Then, still tuned in to the frequency of that still, small voice within, she heard, "Just like that little bird, I have plucked them, and they are mine." She believed Him, and her grandmother-heart rested.

What fun it is to think about Heaven! My soul is thrilled imagining Jesus' anticipation of returning for all who have chosen to drink His cup of joy. What joy there is in knowing that we have a reserved seat at the table with Jesus and will be dining in the presence of God Almighty. Thank you, God, for wanting to be with us!

Then, to think of being reunited with those who have gone before us fills our hearts with added anticipation. Paul told the Philippians, "*Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.*" (Philippians 4:4-5 NLT) He went on to remind them and us, "*And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.*" (Philippians 4:8 NLT) What better way to do that than to fix our eyes on things above?

We're ready for the feast!

## Our Lasting Hope

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There's an old story (probably a preacher story) about a Hungarian man who went to the local Rabbi in his town, griping and complaining about his living conditions. "I can't stand it anymore! Life has become unbearable—nine of us living in one room!" The rabbi listened to the complaint and told the man to take his goat into his house and return in seven days.

Reluctantly, the man brought the dirty goat in to live with them. Soon, the goat smelled up the whole place. After seven days, the man returned with even more complaints. The rabbi then instructed him to go home, remove the goat, wait another seven days, and return.

At the end of the week, the man arrived at the rabbi's door with a smile and a bounce in his step. The rabbi asked, "How were things this week?"

"Things were wonderful! Now that we're rid of that goat, we are enjoying life again - all nine of us!"

The moral of the story is that no matter how bad things seem, they can always be worse. We all have things we can complain about: the price of gas and groceries, rising taxes, the weather, jobs, politics, and ... our health. The old saying is true: we don't know what we've got until it's gone.

Sometimes, it takes a few goats to help us see that we have much to be thankful for. Do you have a goat you're complaining about right now? It stinks, doesn't it? Even if that goat never leaves, we have a goat-free life ahead of us. All the dirt of this world will be gone, and the fragrance of Christ will envelop us. Living as though we believe that makes for a wonderful life.

At first, I believed Denise and I were destined to become fast friends because our time together here on earth might be cut short. However, I've learned we became fast friends because I needed Denise's example. Her recent journey has taught me to:

- Not take life for granted,
- Be intentional in my relationships,
- Live a life of joy and peace that intrigues others,
- Stay positive; don't complain,
- Listen better,
- Revel in my relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit,
- Keep my eyes on eternal things, and
- Tell others what I've seen God do!

Meditating on our blessings reminds us of His love, willingness, and power to work on our behalf. Psalm 136 offers the perfect example of this. (Read it now if you like. I'll wait.) Notice that the psalmist begins by giving thanks to the God of gods and the Lord of lords. Next,

he thanks Him for the wonders of creation, for delivering the Hebrews out of Egypt, and for providing the power to take possession of the Promised Land. Finally, the psalmist personalizes the song. God had remembered them, saved them, and provided for them. Between every reason to be thankful came the line, *“His faithful love endures forever.”* The psalmist repeated that line TWENTY-SIX times to remind himself and those singing along that God’s children can rest being *“convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love.”* (Romans 8:38 NLT)

Aren’t we glad God still speaks to our hearts through songs? There is one out now called *I Witnessed It* by Passion, Melodie Malone, and Jenn Johnson that has become a favorite. You can listen to it on YouTube or iTunes. Its flow reminds me of Psalm 136 as it testifies to God’s faithfulness in the past and the confidence we can have in Him now - no matter what:

*“In every high and every low, You never left me without hope.*

*You were good, and You're good right now.*

*I've witnessed Your faithfulness. I've seen You breathe life within,*

*so I'll pour out my praise again.*

*You're worthy, God. You're worthy of all of it.*

*Your promises never fail. I've got stories I'll live to tell,*



*so I'll pour out my praise again.*

*You're worthy, God. You're worthy of all of it."*

The song begins slowly, but as the music modulates to a higher key, the tempo picks up, displaying increased passion. I've witnessed Denise's passion for God rise. As I'm sure you've noticed, she can tell story after story of God's goodness, strength, constancy, love, healing, and saving. In true Psalm 136 fashion, the song continues:

*You're good ...                      and I've witnessed it*

*You're strong ...                      and I've witnessed it*

*You're constant ...                      I've witnessed it*

*And I'm confident I'll see it again and again!*

*You love ...                      and I've witnessed it*

*You heal ...                      and I've witnessed it*

*You save ...                      and I've witnessed it*

*And I'm confident I'll see it again and again!*

Denise can tell you firsthand that nothing testifies to God's love like watching His hand move. Keeping our eyes fixed on God's blessings rather than the evil one's curses raises our passion for sharing the Good News to a crescendo! Speaking of crescendos, "*I'll Witness It*" ends like Psalm 136. It gets passionately personal!

*"To the broken ...                      I'll witness it!*

*To the hurting ... I'll witness it!*  
*To the lost ... I will witness it!*  
*Yeah, I'll tell them this; I'll tell them what I've witnessed!*  
*To my family ... I'll witness it!*  
*To my city ... I'll witness it!*  
*To the nations ... I'll witness it,*  
*and I'll tell them this: I'll tell them what I've witnessed!*

None of us know what we will encounter in the future. Whatever comes her way, Denise will meet it with faith, hope, and love. She's been a friend collector for a long time and is always ready to add one more. Most of all, she is anxious to lead one more toward the saving grace of Jesus. She has received a miracle much more remarkable than physical healing. She received a supernatural download of joy and peace while in the throes of physical and emotional suffering. Jesus is who He says He is and will do what He says He can do. He's done it for Denise, and He will do it for you!

She and I sincerely pray these stories have given you fresh hope and you will pass them on to someone who needs a Friend who will never leave and will always lead us to the best places. We pray *“that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance. [We] also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead*

*and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 1:18-20 NLT)*

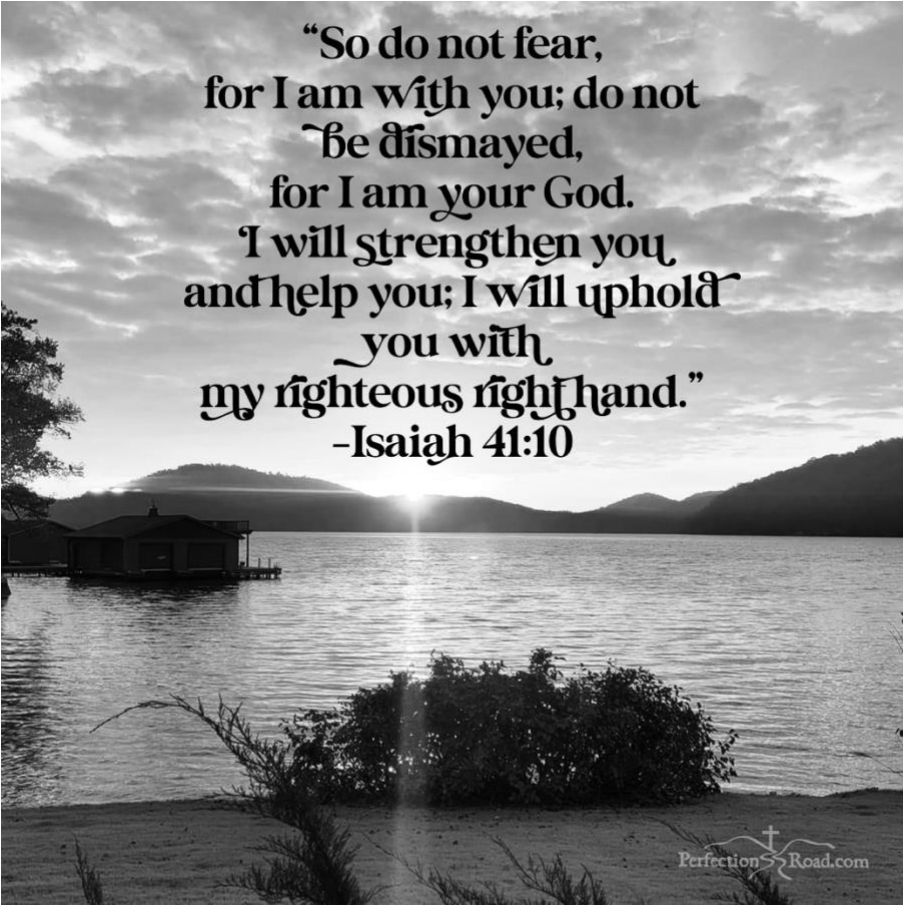
Let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and be prepared to meet Him in the air. *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9 NLT)*



*“We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders.” (Psalm 78:4)*

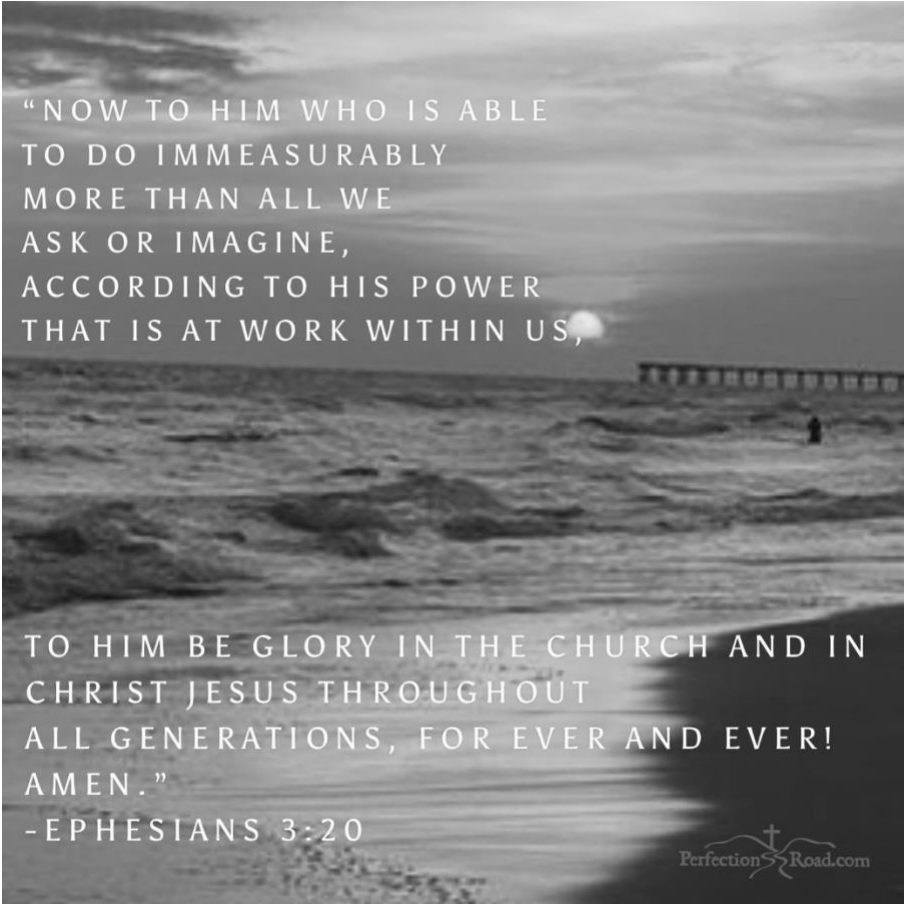






“So do not fear,  
for I am with you; do not  
be dismayed,  
for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you  
and help you; I will uphold  
you with  
my righteous right hand.”  
-Isaiah 41:10





“NOW TO HIM WHO IS ABLE  
TO DO IMMEASURABLY  
MORE THAN ALL WE  
ASK OR IMAGINE,  
ACCORDING TO HIS POWER  
THAT IS AT WORK WITHIN US,

TO HIM BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH AND IN  
CHRIST JESUS THROUGHOUT  
ALL GENERATIONS, FOR EVER AND EVER!  
AMEN.”

-EPHESIANS 3:20



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