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ACTIVATED

Activated Basic Course 4 • Relationship with God

FOLLOW ME

Answering the call

A Love Story

Chosen by God

Heroes of the Faith

Imperfections and all

The Joyful Heart

A life of gratitude



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ACTIVATED BASIC COURSE 4 • RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

FOLLOW ME

As Jesus traveled throughout Palestine sharing His message of God's forgiveness and love, "Follow me" was an invitation He often extended. Take for example this passage in Matthew's Gospel:

One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers—Simon, also called Peter, and Andrew—throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" And they left their nets at once and followed him.

A little farther up the shore he saw two other brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, repairing their nets. And he called them to come, too. They immediately followed him, leaving the boat and their father behind ([Matthew 4:18–22 NLT](#)).

Jesus continued to call men and women to His side throughout His ministry, and even after His resurrection, "He said to [Peter], 'Follow me'" ([John 21:19](#)).

What does it mean to follow Jesus? It starts with our relationship with Jesus and His words. If we abide in His words and let them influence our thought patterns, we will be transformed by the renewing of our minds ([Romans 12:2](#)).

While Christians today can't follow Jesus physically like the disciples did, the Bible makes it clear that following Him includes applying His teaching to our lives. As Jesus put it: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" ([John 8:31–32 NIV](#)).

We pray that this issue of the Activated Basic Course will guide you to grow, strengthen, and deepen your relationship with God.

For more information on *Activated*, visit our website or write to us.

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We can choose to be children of God, yet live very distant from God in our hearts. On the other hand, we can choose to have the closest partnership with Him, in which we know what He thinks, believes, and acts and what is important to Him. In this place of intimacy, we also discover just how close He wants to be with us.

—Theresa Dedmon

A LOVE STORY

BY RONAN KEANE

IN THE BIBLE, God often uses metaphors or word pictures to describe our relationship with Him; for example, a shepherd and sheep (John 10:7–15), a father and child (2 Corinthians 6:18), a vine and branches (John 15:1–5)—and a bride and groom (Isaiah 62:5).

Although the Bible contains 66 books, commentators have often noted that it is really one book with a consistent theme. It is a love story. Like every love story, this one has a beginning, some ups and downs, and a dramatic conclusion.

This love story truly starts “in the beginning” when God created the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. He fashioned them exactly as He wanted, breathed the breath of life into them, and then admired His handiwork: “This is very good!”

Unfortunately, the first man and woman chose to reject God’s offer of an eternal, perfect, intimate relationship with Him and instead chose to wander away into the pursuit of self and sin. Without God, humans who were created to enjoy intimacy with Him instead experienced loneliness, confusion, and pain. Throughout

the millennia, we have tried all sorts of things to recover the feeling of fulfillment that this lost intimacy provided, but nothing was able to satisfy.

In the end, although we were the ones who turned our backs on God, it was He who initiated reconciliation. In His love, He knew that there was only one solution. Despite the cost, He chose to willingly send His own Son to lead the way back to Him.

What does that mean for us? It means Christianity is not simply a religion, or rules or rituals. Christianity is a relationship—and not just any relationship, but one that the Bible likens to a marriage, where there is meant to be intimacy, transparency, open communication, and shared hopes and desires. The Bible tells us, “For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is His name” (Isaiah 54:5), and that we are “married to Him who was raised from the dead [Jesus], that we should bear fruit to God” (Romans 7:4 NKJV).

RONAN KEANE SERVED AS THE EXECUTIVE EDITOR FOR *ACTIVATED* FROM 2013–2023. ■

SEEKING FIRST HIS KINGDOM



WHEN JESUS WAS PREPARING HIS DISCIPLES FOR HIS IMMINENT DEATH, He reassured them with these words: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). When you invite Jesus into your life, He comes into your heart spiritually and takes up residence in your heart. Such love! No wonder the Apostle John wrote that “we love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19 NKJV).

But sadly, for some Christians over time the relationship becomes a routine formality. They forget how much the Lord has done for them, and that first wonderful love they had for Him gradually fades. They neglect to make their relationship with God and His kingdom their first priority, as Jesus taught His followers to do (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus taught His followers how important it was to honor God first and foremost in their lives. He knows that we won't be committed, strong and fruitful Christians if we are not placing Him at the center of our lives.

What practical steps can we take to not only put Jesus first in our lives, but also to keep Him in that place? It starts with our daily walk with Him. We can commit our day, our time, and our lives to the Lord in prayer and ask Him to guide us in His will. This prayer principle holds true in our everyday work as well. When faced with pressing deadlines, the temptation is often to crowd the Lord out of our lives and concentrate solely on our work. But relegating our relationship with the Lord to a place of lesser priority is not the solution.

Great Christians are great not only because of their service to God, but because of their close relationship



Only one life, 'twill soon be past.
Only what's done for Christ will last.
—C. T. Studd (1860 – 1931)

and fellowship with Him. The more they grow in their faith and walk with the Lord, the more like Him they become. Unfortunately, a common mistake we can make as Christians is to become so engrossed in the work of the Lord that we neglect the Lord of the work! Jesus says, “He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 NKJV).

We cannot do the Master's work without the Master's power, and to receive His power, we must spend time with the Master. Sometimes we get so busy serving Him that we forget to love Him! God appreciates the service we offer Him and He needs it, but He wants our attention and adoration and intimate communication too.

To neglect your fellowship with the King of kings can be disastrous to your spiritual life and walk with the Lord. Placing Jesus first in our lives not only involves His work in sharing the gospel with others, but also putting His Word first in our lives. In fact, the Bible says that Jesus *is* the Word. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1,14). God's Word is food for the soul and it's essential to our spiritual growth.

We also put Jesus first in our lives through prayer. We can do so by taking prayer time every morning to start

the day off right. When you wake up, before talking to anybody, talk to Jesus first. Commit your day to Him, cast all your cares on Him and ask Him to direct your path that day.

Take the time to read His Word in the Bible and seek His guidance to strengthen your faith for the day. We all need a daily dose of God's Word and prayer to be prepared for whatever we may face in a day. On the one hand, Jesus says, “Without Me you can do nothing,” but on the other hand, the Bible says, “I can do *all things* through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13 NKJV). That strength starts by seeking God through prayer and the reading of His Word.

Do you have Jesus and His Word and prayer in the proper perspective in your life? Do you give them first place? Or do other things crowd God and His Word into second or third place? In every area of our lives, we are called to put God in first place and to commit all things to Him in prayer and worship (Philippians 4:6–7). The Bible tells us to: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; *for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

Jesus said, “Do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ Your heavenly Father knows that you need these things.” And He went on to say: “But *seek first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:31–33). To “seek first” means to put God and His kingdom first and foremost in our lives, above everything else.

You'll never lose by seeking first the kingdom of God! ■

COMMUNICATING WITH GOD IN PRAYER

BY PETER AMSTERDAM

PRAYER IS A KEY COMPONENT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, as it is our main means of communication with Him. It is in prayer that we are able to converse with our Creator.

As Christians, we have been given the incredible privilege of coming into the presence of God as His children, due to the salvation granted through Jesus. We can speak with Him, praise, worship, and adore Him, tell Him of our love for Him, and thank Him for all He has done and continues to do for us. We can openly share what is on our hearts with Him, and express our troubles and needs. We can intercede for others in their time of need. We can bring our requests to Him and ask for His help. We can tell Him how much we appreciate the beautiful things He created, and thank Him for the multitude of blessings He pours out on each of us.

When we're weak and weary, we can speak to Him about it. When we've done wrong and have sinned, we can confess, and ask for and receive His forgiveness. We can speak with Him when we're joyful or sad, in good health or poor health, whether we're rich or poor, for we have a relationship with the One who not only created us, but who loves us deeply and wants to be involved in every aspect of our lives.

Prayer is our means of inviting God to participate in our daily lives, of asking Him to be directly and intimately involved with the things that are important to us. When we come before Him in prayer, we are asking Him to take an active part in our lives or in the lives of those we are praying for. Prayer conveys the reality of our overall situation, that we need Him and desire His presence in our lives. Communicating with God in prayer

is a means of drawing closer to Him, of deepening our relationship.

TEACHINGS FROM THE GOSPELS ABOUT PRAYER

Throughout all four Gospels, when Jesus prayed, He constantly prayed to His Father, and He taught His disciples to do the same. Through faith in Jesus, we have become children of God (John 1:12). When we pray, we are coming before our Father. We are able to have an intimate connection with Him, as we would with our earthly father.

Besides praying to the Father in Jesus' name, as Jesus instructed His disciples to do, in the Gospels we learn that prayers should be offered to Jesus as well. "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13-14).

When Jesus taught about prayer through the parables, He made comparisons to situations such as the friend who borrowed the loaves at midnight (Luke 11:5-8), or the unjust judge who eventually answered the woman's plea (Luke 18:1-8). Through these story examples, He made the point that if the friend or the unjust judge would answer the petitions made to them, how much more would our Father in heaven answer our petitions? He demonstrates that we can have confidence that our prayers will always be heard by our generous, loving Father (Matthew 7:9-11).

In the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, Jesus speaks of humility and confession in prayer (Luke 18:10-14). Jesus taught that pompous and pretentious prayers which draw attention to oneself are to be avoided; rather prayers should spring from sincerity of heart and motive (Matthew 6:5-6). By His example we learn to

pray in solitude (Luke 6:12), to pray in thanksgiving (John 6:11), to pray when faced with decisions, and to intercede in prayer for others (John 17:6-9).

Prayer plays a vital role in our spiritual lives, our connection with God, our inner growth, and our effectiveness as Christians. Jesus' example of prayer, of getting away from the busyness of His life, taking time alone in prayer, interceding for others and praying effective prayers, marks the trail for those who long to walk in His footsteps.

Prayer isn't meant to be a one-way conversation, with us speaking and expecting God to do all the listening. In times of prayer, we should also open ourselves up to hear what God wants to say to us, through the Bible, through what godly teachers or preachers say or write, or through getting quiet before Him and opening our hearts to hear His voice speak to us personally.

God can speak to us in many ways: through impressions He gives, thoughts He puts in our minds, through Bible verses or the voice of His Spirit speaking to our hearts. Prayer is communication, and communication is a two-way street. So besides asking God to hear what we are saying to Him, we should also be giving Him the opportunity to speak to us.

Prayer is our means of communicating with God, of coming into and remaining in His presence. As we climb onto our heavenly Father's lap, as His children, we can ask Him anything, we can trust Him with everything. We can feel His love for us, His assurance, His care.

PETER AMSTERDAM AND HIS WIFE, MARIA FONTAINE, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■





THE MODEL PRAYER: OUR FATHER

BY RONAN KEANE

THE BIBLE RECORDS MANY INSTANCES OF JESUS PRAYING. Sometimes He prayed all night (Luke 6:12). Other times He got up before dawn to pray alone (Mark 1:35). On occasion He prayed in front of His followers as an example to them (John 11:41–42).

He prayed for His disciples and for all of us who would come to know Him throughout the ages (John 17:21–22). He offered prayers of praise and thanksgiving to His Father (Luke 10:21). He also prayed in times of anguish and personal difficulty (Luke 22:41–44).

One day, Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, so He taught them this simple prayer that has been a model for countless Christians since.

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
As we forgive our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
But deliver us from the evil one.
For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory
forever. Amen.

—*Matthew 6:9–13 NKJV* ■

PRIORITIES

BY MARIA FONTAINE

IF TODAY WAS YOUR LAST DAY OF LIFE AND YOU KNEW IT, how much time would you spend on things that are insignificant in the scope of eternity? Your minutes would be extremely valuable, and you would choose to spend them on the things that were most important to you.

You would want to love those dearest to you, and to make sure they know how much they mean to you. If you have ever come face to face with death or been with a loved one through a life-threatening illness and seen their priorities realign, you have likely experienced this firsthand. Everything becomes abundantly clear in those moments. You realize that love is what truly matters—loving God with all your mind, heart, and soul, and loving others (Matthew 22:37–39).

In good times and challenging times, the joy and eternal hope that Jesus offers are light years beyond anything that the world can offer. Fulfillment, peace, love, satisfaction, knowledge, truth—there is nothing in the world that can compete with Him in those areas. The Bible says, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15–17).

It takes discipline of mind and body to learn to treasure the eternal things of God above the fleeting pleasures that the world has to offer. Nothing this temporal life offers can truly satisfy the deepest cravings of the soul. Only Jesus can truly satisfy. He is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

MARIA FONTAINE AND HER HUSBAND, PETER AMSTERDAM, ARE DIRECTORS OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL, A CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF FAITH. ■

PRAYER POINTERS

PRAISE AND THANK THE LORD BEFORE PRESENTING REQUESTS TO HIM.

Psalm 95:2: Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

Psalm 100:4: Enter His gates with thanksgiving, and His courts with praise! Give thanks to Him; bless His name.

Philippians 4:6: Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

BRING YOUR EVERY NEED TO GOD IN PRAYER.

Matthew 7:7–8: Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

Matthew 21:22: And whatever things you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.

John 16:24: Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

PRAY IN FAITH.

Mark 11:24: Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.

Romans 4:21 NKJV: And being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.

Hebrews 11:6: And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.

PRAY IN JESUS' NAME.

John 14:13–14: Whatever you ask in My name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in My name, I will do it.

John 16:23: Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.

John 15:16: You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

PRAY ACCORDING TO HIS WILL.

Psalm 143:10 NKJV: Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; Your Spirit is good. Lead me in the land of uprightness.

Matthew 6:10: Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

1 John 5:14–15: And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. ■



GOD'S DELAYS ARE NOT DENIALS

EACH OF US HAS EXPERIENCED DISAPPOINTMENT WHEN THINGS DIDN'T WORK OUT THE WAY WE WANTED THEM TO, and if we had prayed for that outcome that didn't happen, we were doubly disappointed—first because we didn't receive what we had asked for, and second because it seemed that God had failed us.

Even when there are obvious, logical reasons why something didn't go the way that we had hoped and prayed it would, we are tempted to wonder why God didn't make it happen anyway. After all, if He's God, He can do anything, and if He loves us as much as the Bible says He does, why didn't we receive the answer to our prayer? At times like that, it's easy to hold it against God for not answering prayer the way we had hoped He would.

The first thing to bear in mind is that God never fails to do what's best for everyone involved, and He never goes back on the promises He has given in the Bible. We, on the other hand, can and do fail sometimes. Also, because He's given us free will, God is often limited in how He can answer our prayers by the choices we or others make.

God always answers our prayers, but not always right away or in the way we expect Him to. Sometimes He says yes, sometimes He says no, and sometimes He says wait. There are a number of factors that affect the process,

including you and your situation, God and His will, and the situations of others involved.

When the conditions are right for the result that God knows is best, He will answer according to His perfect will and plan. So never doubt for a moment that God is going to answer. Trust Him and thank Him for the answer—even if you don't see it immediately!



The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.—*Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Danish author and philosopher*



I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.—*C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), British author and lay theologian*

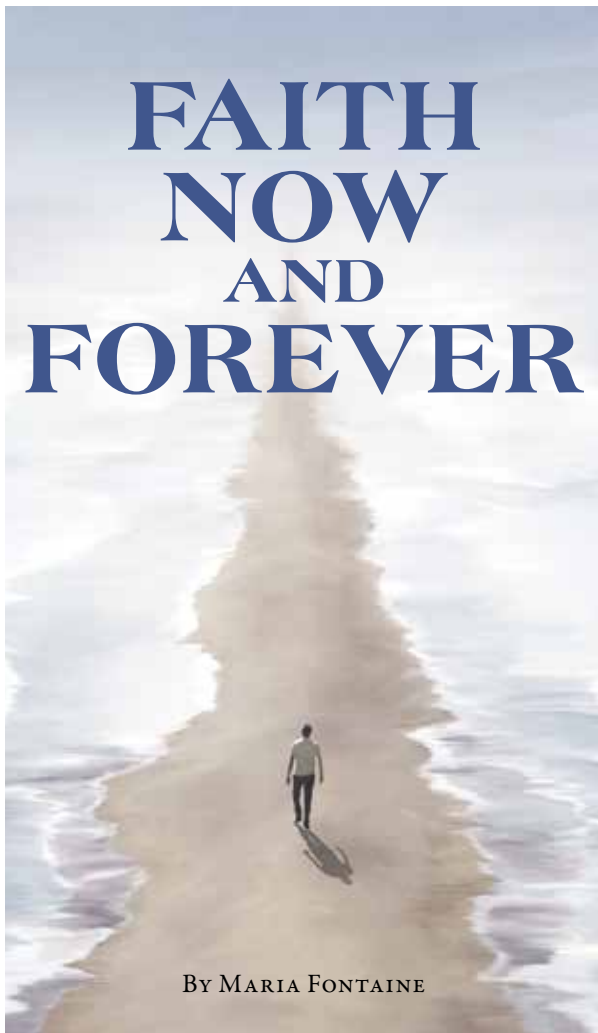


We think of prayer as a preparation for work, or a calm after having done work, whereas prayer is the essential work.—*Oswald Chambers (1874–1917), Scottish evangelist and author*



Before we can pray, "Lord, Thy Kingdom come," we must be willing to pray, "My kingdom go."—*Alan Redpath (1907–1989), British evangelist and author* ■

FAITH NOW AND FOREVER



BY MARIA FONTAINE

WE CAN GO THROUGH LIFE AND MISS SOME OF THE THINGS THAT GOD IS TRYING TO TEACH US IF WE DON'T INTENTIONALLY SEEK TO LEARN FROM GOD. Some things are obvious, but others aren't, and we can miss the point if we don't ask Him or don't open our eyes to what He's trying to show us through our experiences.

As we commit things to God and pray about them beforehand, He can guide us and give us His wisdom, which He has promised to give generously to those who ask in faith (James 1:5). But it's just as important to pray afterwards about the outcome, especially when things didn't go the way we expected or wanted them to. If we take time to think and pray about it, He can help us learn from every experience.

The way Jesus works in our lives and the way He chooses to do things is often past our comprehension. We have to remind ourselves constantly that He knows best, that He does all things well, and that His priorities are often different and much more long-term and “big picture” than ours.

Even with all of His awesome promises—promises like, “Whatever you ask the Father in My name, He [will] give you” (John 15:16), “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7), and “If you have faith, nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20)—we have to remember that we're not the ones with the bird's-eye view of the past, present, future, and master plan for eternity. Ultimately it is God's will that must be done. God is in control, and He knows best.

We can take comfort in the fact that every Christian of all time has had to learn to place their trust in God and His wonderful ways when things didn't turn out as they had hoped. Remember that Jesus wants to be your personal Shepherd (Psalm 23). When you feel alone, when you need a shoulder to cry on, someone to understand, a word of sympathy and encouragement, He is always available.

You can go to Him and receive His guidance, encouragement, and peace. As He speaks to your heart through His “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12 NKJV) and through His written Word, you'll understand Him better, and you'll realize more than ever what a close and caring friend He is.



God wants to have a personal relationship with each of us, and He wants it to be the deepest, most meaningful, most fulfilling and rewarding, most natural part of our lives. He wants to add a wonderful new dimension to our lives and all that we do—the dimension of His loving presence.—*Julie Vasquez* ■

HEROES OF THE FAITH: WARTS AND ALL



BY PHILLIP LYNCH

ONE THING THAT SEEMS TO BE UNIQUE TO THE BIBLE IS HOW THE “HEROES OF FAITH”—with the exception of Jesus, of course—were far from perfect men and women. As the saying goes, they were portrayed “warts and all.” I love history, and if you read a lot of ancient histories or literature, you get used to heroes being lionized. Their faults, if they had any, seem to have been redacted. But not so with the heroes of the Bible. Personally, I think the warts-and-all approach gives so much more credibility to the Bible.

I get particular encouragement from reading about Jesus’ closest

disciples while He was on earth. Let’s start with Peter. Traditionally regarded as the chief of the apostles, Peter has the dubious distinction of having denied that he even knew Jesus on the very night that He needed him most as He was being tried and sentenced to death. And not just once but three times. “But he began to curse and swear, ‘I do not know this man you are talking about!’” (Mark 14:71 NASB). Cursing and swearing too? That doesn’t sound very saintly.

John referred to himself in his Gospel as “the disciple Jesus loved” (John 21:20), but Mark records an incident that doesn’t portray John and his brother, James, in a very favorable light:

“And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him [Jesus] and said to him, ‘Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.’

And he said to them, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ And they said to him, ‘Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory’” (Mark 10:35–37). In Matthew’s account of this incident, he goes on to say: “And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers” (Matthew 20:20–24).

This wasn’t even the first time the disciples had argued about who would be at the top of the heap. “And they came to Capernaum. And when [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you discussing on the way?’ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest” (Mark 9:33–34).

And then there was Matthew the publican. Publicans were tax collectors and were universally regarded as scoundrels. The Romans had installed the publican system as



All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth ... longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

—Hebrews 11:13–16 NIV

a way to raise taxes from conquered territories. They auctioned off the tax rights of a region to the highest bidder, who then promised to turn in that amount of money to the imperial treasury on an annual basis.

In reality, these tax farmers were free to collect however much they could and keep the surplus for themselves. They could essentially decide on a whim how much they wanted as taxes. It was a ruthless and thoroughly unfair system that ground the poor into poverty. Some of the biggest names in Rome, such as Brutus and Cassius, co-conspirators in the plot to murder Caesar, were reportedly owners of such companies—although they ran them through third parties, because technically, Romans were not allowed to engage in such a sordid business.

So Matthew was part of this racket, probably working as a subcontractor. He even seems to have had a choice spot at one of the city's gates where he could collect

duties on all goods going in and out. To pious Jews, his financial dealings with Gentiles even rendered him ritually impure. Not an upstanding member of Jewish society by any stretch of the imagination.

And the rest of the disciples? Andrew, Thaddeus, Philip, and Nathanael (aka Bartholomew) barely show up in the four Gospels, but we do know that another—Simon—was formerly a member of the zealot party of violent revolutionaries pledged to overthrow the Roman occupiers and their puppet rulers. And of course, Thomas' claim to fame is that he doubted Jesus' resurrection. Not to mention Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus cast



seven devils (Luke 8:2)—yet she was the one to whom He first appeared after His resurrection.

And what about the hero of the book of Acts? Paul was a converted Pharisee who, in his own words, had previously “persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13).

But these disciples—ordinary people made extraordinary by their faith and loyalty to Jesus—are some of my heroes and heroines. They are an inspiration to me, because despite their human weaknesses and lacks, they were faithful to God's calling and did wonderful things for God and their fellow men. And by God's grace, we too can be faithful to Him and His calling for our lives.



PHILLIP LYNCH IS AN EXPAT NEW ZEALAND WRITER LIVING IN ATLANTIC CANADA. ■

I will bless the Lord at all times; his
praise shall continually be in my
mouth. Oh, magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together!

—Psalm 34:1, 3

THE JOYFUL HEART

BY MARIE ALVERO



AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, “GRATEFUL” SHOULD BE OUR DEFAULT SETTING WHEN WE CONSIDER THAT JESUS DIED TO REDEEM US FROM AN ETERNITY OF BEING SEPARATED FROM GOD.

This should put a spring in our step and cause all the not-so-great stuff to bounce off as irrelevant. But I tend to succumb to less-than-grateful reactions, because, well, traffic, mess, stress, too little of this, too much of that. You know how it goes.

Still, I know that in the big picture all the daily details matter very little, and I want to have joy in my heart. Let me share with you three areas that I have been concentrating on in order to be more positive in my reactions and outlook.

BE GRATEFUL FOR THE SMALLEST THINGS.

I’m learning to notice the smallest things that bring joy, and the list is endless: the sunrise, the sunset, a great cup of coffee, the cool morning air, the laughter of children, my husband’s strong arms, a good book, my pillow, and on and on the list goes. I’ve discovered that keeping a long string of small joys in mind can do wonders for absorbing the impact of some of the harder things life throws at me.

DON’T GET ATTACHED TO ANY PARTICULAR OUTCOME.

This is a hard one! There are times when I’ve had very strong feelings about what I believed the outcome should be, but there were things at play that I couldn’t control. It’s often hard for me to say, “Either way I’ll be grateful,” because who wants to be grateful for a bad diagnosis or a rejected job application? But I’ve learned that my gratitude is not meant to be based on the outcome, but rather based on the fact that God is good. Always. Even when His goodness is beyond my comprehension.

REMEMBER GOD’S GOODNESS.

For all my worrying, for all the tight spots, for all the difficult journeys, haven’t I come through okay? None of the hard things have altogether ruined me. I’ve never reached a place where God’s love couldn’t find me. Like Paul says: “Endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope” (Romans 5:4 NLT). When I pause to remember God’s goodness, my heart is flooded with that truth and my outlook can again become grateful.

MARIE ALVERO IS A FORMER MISSIONARY TO AFRICA AND MEXICO. SHE CURRENTLY LIVES A HAPPY, BUSY LIFE WITH HER HUSBAND AND CHILDREN IN CENTRAL TEXAS, USA. ■

COMMUNION THROUGH WORSHIP

BY MARIA FONTAINE

WHEN WE DWELL ON THE GOODNESS OF GOD, His goodness surrounds us and pervades our thoughts and attitudes. When we think faith-filled thoughts and speak faith-filled words, we align ourselves more closely with God and His will and purpose for us. When we praise and worship God, we draw closer to Him.

Through communion with God, we gain understanding and perspective of His hand in our lives. Worship puts us on His wavelength. Praise invigorates our faith; it encourages us to see beyond our present circumstances and to focus instead on the fulfillment of God's promises in answer to our prayers. Gratefulness turns times of trouble into times of triumph. Praise reminds us that with God, all things are possible (Mark 10:27).

The more you praise God and express your love for Him, the more reasons you will find to praise Him. The more you worship God, the more naturally your words or praise to Him will flow. We can praise our heavenly Father for all the wonderful things He has done for us in the past and will do for us in the future. The Bible says, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord" (Psalm 150:6).

Jesus, plant within us that desire to pursue You and our relationship with You. Help us to persevere in our relationship with You. Help us not to get so wrapped up in our work and the things of everyday life that we neglect the most important thing—our relationship with You.

May we be ever nearer to You. ■



PRAYER FOR THE DAY A COMMUNION PRAYER

O Lord, my God, my inseparable companion—nothing can sever my branch from Your vine (John 15:5). Whether or not I feel You near, You are always with me. Thank You that You're not a faraway God. You are by me, within me, surrounding me, and upholding me.

Help me to be continually aware of Your presence. It's so wonderful to know that I can communicate with You!—Not just to praise You, or to ask You favors, or to hear Your whispers in my heart, but to also chat with You as with a close friend. I can ask You questions, express my feelings, and in short, I can share my life with You.

Thank You that I don't have to work for Your love. Thank You that it's a free gift and You don't base Your love for me on circumstances, conditions, and events. You loved me before I ever loved You (1 John 4:19). ■



FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

GOD'S PRESENCE

Even if you lost all the material goods of the entire world but still held on to your faith, then you would have ultimately lost nothing. If you have faith, no unscalable heights, no uncrossable rivers, no impregnable walls, and no tsunami of economic depression can pull you under or separate you from My love ([Romans 8:38–39](#)).

Faith is the currency of the unseen world. Its exchange rate isn't subject to economic fluctuations or stock market "corrections." Faith's intrinsic value is immeasurable. Faith can change your circumstances, conditions, and your outlook on life. It doesn't disappear in any recession, pandemic, natural disaster, accident, or any other calamity. Faith can lift you up and out of any crisis, debt, or loss, even those of your own doing.

You can place your faith securely in Me, because I will never let you down. Even when you face setbacks or seemingly insurmountable challenges, I can eclipse all loss and even bring good out of seeming defeat. I love you so much that I have promised that you will receive whatever you ask for—as long as it is within My will and plan—if you ask Me in faith.

If you would like to experience the inner peace and stability that only I can give, ask and you will receive so that your joy can be complete ([John 16:24](#)).