



# The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you." Psalm 32:8 NLT



Does life feel like you're running the rapids—and not intentionally?

Are you wondering whether your faith can withstand the struggle?

Jesus told us in John 16:33, "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world." (NLT).

No one escapes the troubles and trials of life. Some of us have more than others. If we look at our troubles, like Peter did as he walked on the water toward Jesus, then we'll sink. But Peter knew who to call for help as he plunged into that raging sea: Jesus!

We need Jesus more than ever as we face the roiling sea of today's troubles. We want our faith to be strong and growing stronger daily.

In the following ten devotions taken from various CrossRiver books, you'll find biblical guidance to ignite your faith and help it grow stronger. Read them all at once, or savor them one day at time as you meet with God.

Because you were made for more.





#### So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom. Luke 12:32 NLT

fow can we live a life of unshakable faith in God's Kingdom without first understanding what the Kingdom of God is?

As I've read verses like Matthew 6:33, "seek first the kingdom of God," and Luke 17:21, "For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you," I wondered exactly what was God's Kingdom. If I didn't know what His Kingdom was, how could I seek it and how could I know for sure if His Kingdom was within me? And then there are verses like 2 Peter 1:3, "As His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to



life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue." This verse more than any other piqued my desire and spurred my search to understand Kingdom. God's Because for me, life was a constant struggle to survive. Even though I believed in God and was a born-again Christian, I lacked joy. I felt my life did not reflect the truth of any of these verses.

Merriam - Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines

*kingdom* as "a politically organized community or major territorial unit having a monarchical form of government headed by a king or queen."

As an American living under the rule of a republic—by the people and for the people—kingdom rule was hard for me to grasp. It would seem that during my growing years I unconsciously took in the concept of autonomy, the state of being self-governed. I don't like the idea of being ruled by anyone. It connotes dictatorship, living under a ruler who does what's best for him no matter the cost to his citizens. History is replete with kings who lived in luxury beyond our comprehension while his citizens toiled endlessly to support the king's lifestyle, but they themselves lived in hovels with barely enough to feed their family. Of such are revolutions made.



Having lived four years in Germany and visiting many places and other countries, I saw firsthand the opulence of kings' castles. The Palace of Versailles in France was particularly eye-opening. The total acreage is 2,014 acres, which includes 230 acres of gardens. By way of comparison, a football field is 1.1 acre. The palace itself contains 679,783 square feet of floorspace, roughly fourteen football fields. The Hall of Mirrors, the most famous room of the palace is just short of eighty yards in length and contains 357 mirrors. And I haven't even mentioned all the gold! No wonder the French revolted.

Heaven has an opulence all its own, and I'm so glad God doesn't make me work to furnish it!

*Merriam-Webster's* also offers this definition: "the realm in which God's will is fulfilled." That definition brings to mind Matthew 6:10, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done," and Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." That definition I can embrace.

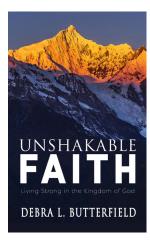
I am of the Baby Boomer Generation, raised by parents who lived through the Great Depression and who both served in the US Marine Corps during World War II. I grew up under the strict disciplinary hand of my father. My siblings and I received spankings when we disobeyed or behaved wrongly. My childhood was "do as you're told or else."

I feared my father, and the Bible told me to fear the Lord God. Consequently, I saw God in the same light as I saw my father—someone who was very strict and to be afraid of.

When I surrendered my life to God and accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, it was not the experience I had often heard from others—coming joyfully to the altar to find forgiveness for sins.

I attended the Methodist church as a child and learned the usual Bible stories taught in Sunday school— Tower of Babel, Noah's Ark, Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem, baby Jesus. I believed in God and believed Jesus died to save me, but God was not the ruler of my life. Up to that point He was someone who punished me when I did wrong. I saw all the bad things that happened in my life as coming from Him— His punishment for misbehaving. At the age of twenty-four the circumstances in my life had become unbearable. My Marine husband was at sea, serving aboard a Navy ship, and had been for months. My three-year-old was yelling from the bathroom for something he needed. I felt like I was in a wrestling match, and as I stood in the middle of the kitchen, I cried out, "Okay, God. I give up. I'll accept you as the Lord of my life."

But that is far from who God is and what His Kingdom is. God spent many years teaching me who He really is. To be honest, it took decades for me to grasp how much God loves me. I wish it hadn't taken me so long to learn.



\* \* \* \* \*

The Kingdom of God is His realm of rule. And since He created all that is, all that is, is His realm. Mankind can accept God or reject Him. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior, you are God's child. He loves you more deeply than you can fathom. He has a plan for your life, which will include troubles, but He will be with you every moment to see you through it. Step into His Kingdom and discover the abundant life He promises.

As you read these devotions, I pray you will discover God, His mercy, and His grace, and marvel at what living in His Kingdom truly means.

Taken from <u>Unshakable Faith: Living Strong in the Kingdom of God</u> Bible study by Debra L. Butterfield.





"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Hebrews 4:16 NIV

I had a dollar for every time I have gotten the comment, "You've got your hands full," I could probably take our family to Disney World.

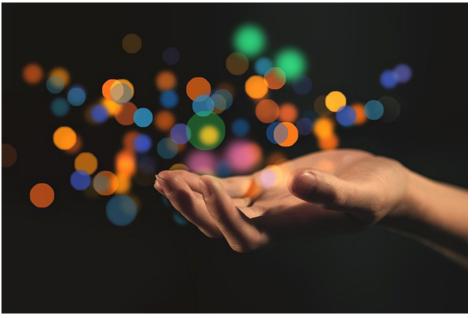
It's possible I've gotten this comment so much that it has almost become my life motto (if that's even possible) second to my other life motto, "better late than never." Because, seriously, better late than never, right? I'm pretty sure that's even biblical.

Yesterday, I got the hands-full comment from an elderly woman observing us as we strolled around a neighborhood lake: me, an empty double stroller, three tow-headed boys running up ahead and two little girls toddling behind. Today, it was from a dad in the back section of Chick-fil-A by the play area.

Same kids, same empty double stroller.

Yes, I've got my hands full, I know. I have five children and two hands. By mathematics alone, my hands are full. I own it. I say yes and smile and carry on as if the entire Chick-fil-A isn't watching, part in wonder, and part in disbelief.

But it isn't easy. Full hands can get heavy. Full hands can feel more than full. They can feel overloaded, overdone, and overwhelmed. It's like comedian Jim Gaffigan said about hav-



ing four kids. "Just imagine you're drowning—and then someone hands you a baby." I can't think of a better way to describe it.

Drowning. Yes. Life isn't just full; it's like the curbside trash can after Memorial Day weekend: overflowing. One afternoon a few months ago, I sat in the yellow glider in my girls' room while they pulled torn board books off the shelves and grabbed toys from burlap baskets. I was tired, like usual, and they were happily playing.

They had recently discovered a glass jar on the top shelf filled with little wooden blocks friends had given me at the girls' baby shower. My friends had written sweet little notes in pink and magenta, scribbled



designs, and drawn the letters H and R on them (for my girls' names). They were cute blocks and more for decoration than use, hence the glass jar in a nursery.

But they loved pulling these blocks out of this glass jar, and so sometimes I let them. They would stick their plump little hands in, pull them out, and stuff them back in.

That day was a day I let them. They were entertained. For some reason, they began bringing the blocks over to me. I cupped my hands and they started filling them with blocks. With two times the trips, it didn't take long for my hands to become full. With each new load of two or three more blocks, I didn't think I was going to be able to hold any more.

"Uh-oh, my hands are full," I'd say in my exaggerated playful voice. But that didn't deter them. They smiled and kept on bringing the blocks. And so, not wanting to disappoint, I kept trying to hold them. And the amazing thing was I could.

Just when I thought the last block was about to topple, I'd flatten my hands just a little and the blocks would settle in and make room for more. And more. Each time, I'd spread wide my hands and room would be made. I was truly amazed at this anomaly.

I can't count how many times in my motherhood journey I have screamed inside my head, "I can't handle this! No, not the stomach flu while my husband is gone! No, not another sleepless night! No, not lice on Christmas!" (Yep, it happened, and we survived.) My insides are shouting, "There's too much whining, too much bickering, and way more needs than the capacity I have to meet them."

Sometimes I feel like I am a washing machine on a "jumbo wash" cycle and people keep trying to throw more clothes in. "It doesn't fit; I don't have room!" I want to yell.

That's the life of a mother. Maybe that's life in general. Things or people happen that are beyond our control, and what options do we have but to carry on or surrender? Mothers must carry on. But how?

As I sat in my yellow glider that afternoon, God showed me that even when I was sure I couldn't handle any more blocks, I'd stretch out my hands and I would.

By God's magnificent grace, we can handle much much more than we think. And it isn't because we are so strong, or wonderful, or holy, or wise. It's because He is. And when we open wide our hearts, flatten out our expectations, agendas, and perfection, we can say with peace that surpasses understanding, "Okay, Lord, I can't handle this. But you can."

The key is in the letting go, the flattening. In letting Him take over and take the burden.

That day I realized full hands were first open ones. And when we stretch those hands full of blocks or



diapers, keys, groceries, and shoes a little wider, with His all-sufficient love and power, we can hold more than we ever thought possible.

Taken from <u>Hands Full: Thirty days of encouragement for busy moms</u> by Brooke Ellen Frick.





"Then the Lord said to him, 'Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there." — Genesis 15:13



ave you ever prayed for something over and over again? Has one thing been on your prayer list for not just days, but also years? Maybe it's for a husband or for a child. Maybe it's for the restoration of a relationship or for a job. Whatever it is, it might be causing you to look into the sky and ask God something like this:

When, God? When are you going to move? Haven't I waited long enough?

Maybe you've asked, as the psalmist did in Psalm 10:1, "Why, LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (NIV).

I imagine the Israelites prayed similar words many times as they suffered in Egypt. In a later devotional, we're going to look in depth at the life of Joseph. His story, though, begins here. At the end of his life, after going through more than any one person should ever endure, God finally redeemed all the years Joseph lost. He freed him from prison, restored the relationships in his family, and made Joseph famous throughout the land of Egypt.

Years passed, though, and eventually Joseph died and the people forgot all about the things he did for Egypt and the surrounding nations. Here's what the text says, "Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. 'Look,' he said to his people, 'the Israelites have become far too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country" (Exodus 1:8-10).

This new king feared the Israelites so much he forced them into servitude. Worse yet, he ordered the midwives to kill all the Hebrew boys when they were born. These were the conditions the Lord predicted in Genesis 15, our text for today.

There is one thing you need to understand about this servitude. We shouldn't simply imagine difficult

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labor, though it was certainly that. Instead, as the text says, we should imagine oppressive and ruthless conditions (Exodus 1:13-14). The Egyptians made the Israelites' lives "bitter with harsh labor." One commentary I read even said the Egyptians were "specialists at making a slave's life miserable."

When I think of a specialist, I picture someone in the medical field: a heart specialist, cancer specialist, or specialist of pediatric medicine. What I don't think of is someone who specializes in torture, cruelty, and fear.

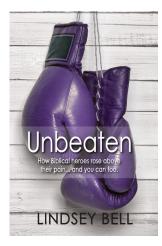
To make matters worse, this torture went on for decades. Scratch that. It went on for centuries. Four hundred years, to be exact. God allowed the Israelites to remain in servitude to the Egyptians for 400 years. That is 400 years of prayers, 400 years of wondering if and when God would come to their rescue, and 400 years of doubting whether He still cared about His people.

That, my friends, is a long time to wait for God to answer a prayer. Many of the Israelites died without His answer. Quite possibly, they died wondering if He heard their cries of distress and wondering why — if He heard them — He failed to do anything about it.

It might be tempting to think God didn't care about their suffering, just as it might be tempting to think He doesn't care about ours. The truth is, God does care. He cared then, and He cares now.

In Exodus 3, when God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, here is what He said. "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7).

If God were in your room right now, sitting beside you as you read this book, I think He might say the same thing to you: "I have seen your misery, I have heard you crying out, and I am concerned about you." God might not have answered your prayer yet, or He might not have answered it in a way you wanted Him to, but know this: He does care about what's going on in your life. He is not now—and never will be—oblivious to your suffering.



Taken from <u>Unbeaten: How biblical heroes rose above their pain...and you can too</u> by Lindsey Bell.





"Don't call me Naomi,' she told them. 'Call me Mara, because of the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almight has brought misfortuen upon me." —Ruth 1:20–21 NIV

few years ago, we had a miserable winter. I'm accustomed to the Midwest's cold winter months. I'm also used to a little bit of snow. An inch or two every couple of weeks isn't abnormal. But this particular winter was something unlike anything I had ever experienced. Some areas around my hometown received nearly two feet of snow. My children and I didn't leave our home for over a week. The local news anchors even referred to this storm as "The Snowpocalypse."

The snow was beautiful...at first. But anyone with young children can tell you enough is enough. By the third day, I despised the snow. My kids and I were antsy to leave the house, but the bitter winds made it unthinkable to play outside. Plus, the snow wasn't pretty anymore. What used to be white was now brown and coated with dirt. The sun could not melt it quickly enough.

Eventually, though, when the snow did melt and the earth began to warm with the approaching spring, I noticed something. The flowers were brighter than I had ever seen before. The colors, magnificent. The scents, heavenly.

Since then, I've learned about vernalization, the process by which cold weather promotes flowering.

In essence, it's the miserable snow that makes the flowers so beautiful. If not for the months of winter and cold weather, those flowers wouldn't have been as pretty.

Isn't that often the case with us too? It's the long, hard, painful seasons that come before the blessings. It's the nastiness of winter that reminds us of the beauty of spring.

That is certainly what happened with Naomi. She lost her husband and children while living in a land far from home. She had no one left except her two daughters-in-law, and even



they were foreigners. Can you blame her for growing bitter? Nearly everyone she loved was gone. Nearly everything she knew was a distant memory. Naomi asked those around her to stop calling her Naomi and to call her bitter instead.

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Though Naomi's bitterness was understandable given her circumstances, Naomi forgot about one important part of her story: God. She failed to see how He could turn anything around. In her mind, there was no hope. God had failed her, so why bother Him anymore?

Have you ever felt this way? Have you lost hope God could—or would—redeem your situation? I have. After our third miscarriage, I stopped praying for a time. Why pray if God's not listening? What I failed to see in those months was that God wasn't done with my story yet. I'll tell you more about how God redeemed our miscarriages later, but know this today. God can—and will—redeem your story. God isn't done with you yet, just as He wasn't done with Naomi.

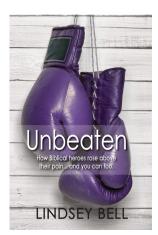
God still had some redeeming to do in Naomi's life. Even though her situation certainly appeared hopeless, God brought someone to restore some of what she had lost. Boaz married Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth and then bore them a son.

A new child and son-in-law didn't replace the ones she lost. One life can never replace another. Even so, I'm convinced this was one of the ways God brought a flower from a harsh winter. God restored Naomi's loss—and gave her joy again. He can do the same for us, because God is in the business of restoring.

Even the Israelites in the Old Testament, who caused many of their problems with their disobedience to God, were restored. I love this quote from Deuteronomy 30:3: "Then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you."

In the Old Testament, the Israelites often rebelled against God. Because of their rebellion, God allowed them to be captured by their enemies. He refused to leave them there, though. Time and time again, God came to their rescue and restored their brokenness. He redeemed their story, because our God is a God who restores. First Peter 5:10 puts it this way, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast."

Today, God can—and will—restore our lives.



Taken from <u>Unbeaten: How biblical heroes rose above their pain...and you can too</u> by Lindsey Bell.





Holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory. — Isaiah 6:3

itch black engulfed us; nervousness settled over me. Unable to see my hand directly in front of my nose, I gripped my young daughter's arm, assuring her of my presence.

Our family participated in a cave tour while on vacation in the Black Hills of South Dakota. A college-age guide led us through narrow passages to the bottom of a large cavern. Her flashlight and a few dim light fixtures lit our way. Once in the lowest opening, our guide explained the geologic formations. She then clicked off the flashlight and flipped the light switch.



A collective gasp echoed through the room. Anxious, we huddled in absolute darkness as she explained how our eyes would adjust in a few moments. However, when a thoughtless tourist in the group flashed his camera, it blinded all of us. My eyes ached from the intense light. I squinted, seeing nothing except bright spots.

The above experience illustrates our reaction when we encounter light in the midst of blackness. When we begin to understand God's holiness, we shield our eyes spiritually from the brightness. Such holiness is so pure it

is blinding in the darkness around us. God is described as the one "who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see"(1 Tim. 6:16a).

The word *holy* comes from a root word meaning "to separate." God is separated from—or exalted above—all things.<sup>1</sup> His qualities of purity and holiness set Him apart from everything He has created. His holiness is almost incomprehensible to our limited, inadequate minds. God is perfect and pure—deserving our reverence and adoration. When we learn more about God's nature as revealed in His Word, we can begin to recognize His holiness.

The prophet Isaiah witnessed God's holiness in the midst of despair. He lived during the time of King Uzziah who reigned fifty-two years as a godly and powerful king. His death was a national tragedy in the ancient world, causing fear and uncertainty for the future of the nation. It was at this point of discouragement that Isaiah saw a vision of the Lord described in Isaiah 6:1–5.



In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.

When faced with the astounding holiness of God, Isaiah saw his own ungodliness and unworthiness. He realized his despair and sin, but God didn't leave him in his hopelessness. Isaiah 6:6–7 continues:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

God initiated an act of grace by reaching out to Isaiah with forgiveness so he could stand in God's holy presence. The impact of God's grace on Isaiah changed his life. He went from fearful and discouraged to bold and courageous as he responded with a willingness to serve the holy God of the universe.

Likewise, we decide how we will respond to God's holiness. We have sinned and are unworthy of being in God's presence. In spite of our unworthiness, God beckons us to consider His holiness as Isaiah did and be moved—by a crisis if need be—to see how much we need Him.

God does not remain unapproachable, but desires personal reconnection with each one of us. He initiates the relationship by extending grace. At the crossroad where God's grace and our lives intersect we have a choice to turn away from God or to embrace Him. That is where the grace impact begins for us. By accepting His grace, we receive total forgiveness, complete acceptance, and unconditional love from God. At this point, the Holy Spirit initiates transformation in the yielded heart. Pastor Charles Swindoll defines grace as:

Unmerited favor. Grace is what God does for mankind, which we do not deserve, which we cannot earn, and which we will never be able to repay. Awash in our sinfulness, helpless to change on our own, polluted to the core with no possibility of cleaning ourselves up, we cry out for grace. It is our only hope.<sup>2</sup>

Grace allows us, as imperfect sinners, to have a connection with God. Only by God's initiative of extending grace to us, can we enter such a relationship. This invitation of grace is further explained in Isaiah 57:15:

For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Here is a magnificent mystery: the holy, exalted God of the universe chooses to restore our relationship with Him. He does not cast us away from His presence because of anything we have done or not done, but



desires to connect with us in spite of our undeserving condition.

I first responded to God as a scrawny, teenage girl struggling with low self-esteem. I felt distant from my family and from God. To me, the mirror reflected loneliness and emptiness. I believed I had little worth. Though I tried to be happy and carefree, inside I felt the sting of self-condemnation. Driven by perfectionism to excel, I also lived in the shadow of comparing myself to others. A web of tension kept me wrapped in insecurity, self-pity, and desiring acceptance. A turbulent home life created by a lack of communication and an alcoholic father brought further distress. I found peace in music; playing the piano brought solace to my heart.

One weekend a visiting choir came to my church, and it changed my life forever. I first experienced the grace impact through hearing a verse from the Bible. In the midst of their song, the words of 2 Corinthians 5:17 were spoken as an antiphonal chant with a catchy rhythm. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

Those words penetrated my mind and went straight to my heart. My soul stirred with an awareness of God's presence reaching out to me. When I found the passage in the Bible, the words jumped into my empty heart. I received His acceptance, forgiveness, and love. I traded my sin-stained self-image for one that reflected the image of the loving God. The holy, exalted God of the universe extended grace to me, and I gratefully took hold of it.

The holiness of God requires a decision from us. We can be fearful and turn away from Him, as if turning away from a bright light exposing us in our darkness; or we can draw closer to Him through His grace. God's holiness leads us to look inward to see where we sin, or fall short of God's standard.

We cannot reach God by ourselves. God made a way to span the chasm created by sin that separates us from Him. He sent His son Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sin through the sacrifice of His life on the cross. Through His resurrection Jesus became the bridge that connects us to God. By acknowledging our position of sin and imperfection, we can receive God's forgiveness through His grace, and then we see a glimpse of His holiness. We are transformed by His grace, right where we are, when we are in His presence.

God's grace draws us to Him, and has redeemed us from sin. We are empowered by the Lord to face the challenges of our lives with new strength and hope because of the grace impact.



From <u>Grace Impact: a devotional</u> by Nancy Kay Grace

1. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. ed. R.F. Youngblood, F.F. Bruce, R.K. Harrison, and Thomas Nelson Publishers, eds. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Ince., 1995), s.v. "holy."

2. Charles R. Swindoll, Growing Deep in the Christian Life (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 215.





### "Then the Lord replied: Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it." Habakkuk 2:2 NIV



hen God tries to get my attention, He sends the Holy Spirit to clunk me on the head. He has to.

I especially felt that clunk a few years ago.

My daughter had been having a string of bad days—a string long enough to send a kite to the moon. I had been praying, but God didn't offer me solace quickly enough. Her grades weren't great; the teachers emailed me constantly; and she couldn't keep friendships.

Her bad days felt heightened by a recent ADHD diagnosis. Her extremes in behavior impacted the whole family. If everything in her day progressed perfectly or held the absence of anything rotten, then we enjoyed peace. If one teeny-tiny piece of her world's minutiae was askew, then everything in her life felt unsalvageable to her.

I enrolled her in after-school activities, thinking it would help. If I knew about the grueling commute, I would have hosted the chess club, basketball team, choir, Legion of Mary, and Girl Scouts at my house. As summer approached, more cars clogged the roadways through the most touristy parts of Hershey, Pennsylvania, with its sprawling amusement park, indoor and outdoor amphitheaters, and a chocolate factory slightly less clandestine than Willie Wonka's. (Hershey did acquire some Wonka products. Maybe the Oompa Loompas commuting from Loompa-Land caused increased traffic?)

I took a different route one particular day, thinking I could outsmart the other commuters. Nope.

My long commute felt like an excellent time to pray, at least until some orange-skinned, green-haired driver cut me off. I tried mustering my patience, although I didn't always lead with that. My baby wasn't



thriving, and the Lord wasn't working fast enough to grow her.

This particular stretch of highway was a known must-to-avoid, complete with weird six-point intersections and flow-interrupting traffic lights. I didn't know what I was thinking driving this way. I didn't want this extra time, even to pray and finish my coffee. I needed to know how my daughter's day went before my own life could feel right. I needed the full report so I could rejoice or commiserate with her, and tell her she would forget about her childhood nonsense until her own children went through it.

"Lord? Are you there?" I sipped my coffee. "Lord?"

I counted the stick figures on the rear window of the mini-van in front of me. I wondered how these parents managed with four girls. Just one felt like plenty to me.

I looked at the sky through my windshield. "Lord, if You're everywhere, then You're here. Even right here in the middle of hell."

I glanced to my left and saw a black billboard with white lettering that read: WE NEED TO TALK. — GOD

Whoa. I gripped the wheel. "That was kinda creepy," I said to no one in the passenger seat, placing the coffee in the cup-holder between us.

Well, since He brought it up...

"Lord? I don't know what I'm doing. I'm trying my hardest, but I still feel like a lousy mother."

The next billboard read: DETERMINATION, with the second "T" branded for Temple University. The billboard next to it read: MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR GENERATIONS. Some public service announcement. But still, weirdly on the nose.

"Lord, I know I can't sit with her at lunch or shield her from every bully. But if I can't protect her, then who will?"

The next billboard brought another public service announcement: PROTECT PA FAMILIES. Beside it was another billboard for a home improvement company called CHAMPION.

Wow, it even used the word *protect*. Had I seen the billboard out of the corner of my eye before asking the question?

"I feel like we're on a hamster wheel. I don't feel we're growing as a family."

The next billboard, this one from a local landscaping company, read: LET'S GARDEN TOGETHER. A family patted the earth around a tree, leaning on garden equipment.

Was I reading what I wanted to interpret, or was the Holy Spirit speaking to me through Lamar Advertising?

"Lord, if You're really talking to me, will our family ever get through this? What's our path?"

I swear I'm not making this up. Two companies each bought half a billboard. One side was for a spa called DOLCE, which means "sweet," and the other was for a store named JOURNEYS. The Lord wanted to tell me we would have sweet journeys. Journeys even added the advice: SHAKE UP YOUR STYLE.

Billboards and prayers fresh in my mind, I reached the parking lot of my daughter's school. I braced myself. "Lord, good day, please?" I prayed. As she walked toward my car, I tried to read her face for any micro-expression to give me a clue how our house would be that night.

"How was school?" I tried to sound bright.

She wouldn't answer at first. Her delay left me perched on a ledge, trying to surmise clues like an amateur detective.

Finally, she said, "That's hard to answer today. It wasn't all good. It wasn't all bad. A few annoying things happened, but they didn't spoil the whole day."

Driving the opposite way down that same stretch of road, I read the Holy Spirit's final telling billboard:

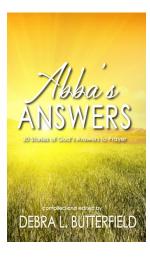


Wellspan Health Network asked: WHAT'S YOUR BREATHTAKING MOMENT?

Wherever Wellspan was going with that question, I didn't know. But I had no doubt that the Holy Spirit brought me God's message through each billboard. It doesn't get any clearer than the Holy Spirit clunking a person on the head with an enormous literal sign.

My experience reminded me of the Bible verse called "The Lord's Answer" in Habakkuk 2:2: "Then the LORD replied: Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it" (NIV).

My prayer for us all is that when God speaks to us, we may know it in our hearts, and then proclaim it to all, serving as a sign that God loves us.



From <u>Abba's Answers: 30 Stories of Gods' Answers to Prayer</u> excerpt by Gina Napoli



7 A Fourney Through the Maze

"Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you." — Deuteronomy 31:8 NLT



ne fall Friday evening I took my oldest daughter and a friend of hers to a local flashlight maze. I had never been through a cornfield at night, so I wasn't sure what to expect. However, being one for adventure, and the fact that this had been on my to-do list for a while, I was really looking forward to roaming through the maze in the dark.

We entered the grounds of Cherry Crest Farms and were met with a festive atmosphere. For us, the mood changed to excitement as we stepped on to the maze path. Moving through the entrance of the maize, we approached a sign that gave us three path options: easy, intermediate, or advanced. Unanimously we decided to take the intermediate route.

We clicked on our flashlights and headed into the dark field in search of clues to guide us along our way. After a while we reached our first sign. The information on the back of the sign gave us directions to our next checkpoint, so we took off down the trail in search of our next clue.

Throughout our nighttime journey, we occasionally saw others who were on their own path, who at times, crossed over the same path we traveled. We were all

looking for clues and puzzle pieces to fill in our maize maps. At one point in our adventure, my group happened upon a really long and dark path that must have been near the center of the cornfield. Until this point in our trek I had been quiet. When we turned down this path I uttered, "I'm glad I'm not out here alone. I think I'd be really freaked out by now." At that very moment, God reminded me of His presence, and how He has been with me throughout this journey called life.

In reality, we are all on a journey with varying paths that cross in and out of the lives of others. Sometimes our paths are easy. Sometimes our paths are a little more challenging. And sometimes we find ourselves in the midst of an extremely difficult trek. I have personally been on some very rough roads that, had I known



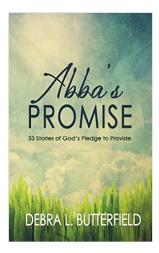
were coming, I would have been looking for an off ramp.

Going through a recent health crisis with our youngest daughter was one such road. However, this crisis led me personally to seek more of God through His Word and through prayer.

While I knew God was walking with our family through this event, there were times when I wondered if He was hearing my prayers for her healing, or if I was just talking to thin air. He seemed silent most of the time, which frustrated me. Often, through my frustration with this silence, I fervently verbalized my raw feelings. As a result, my anguished heart echoed some of the same words found in Scripture that Habakkuk and David both spoke long ago when they too were burdened. As strange as this might sound, it was comforting to know that others who have been through difficult journeys have also voiced their raw feelings to God and pleaded with Him in prayer for answers.

It took me several months to recognize that, although God seems silent, He does hear our prayers, He is listening, and He will rescue in His own way and His own timing. The key word is timing. My own selfishness wanted God to answer my prayers immediately, but God works methodically and on His timetable. It took more than ten months for my daughter's health to improve. During that time, God faithfully walked with us each day, and on days we were too tired to walk, He carried us through that journey.

I have no idea what road you are currently traveling. Maybe it's an easy road. Maybe it's an intermediate one. Or maybe it's a road of such difficulty you have no idea how you got there or if you will ever get through this particular journey. Rest assured, Jesus stands willing to walk with you, and to help guide you down each of life's roads. In fact, He's willing to carry you if that is what you need. Just keep trusting in Him and His promise to never abandon you.



From <u>Abba's Promise: 33 Stories of God's Pledge to Provide</u> excerpt by Jill Printzenhoff





# "His salvation extends to the children's children of those who are faithful to his covenant, of those who obey his commandments!" — Psalm 103:17b–18



od is in control." I closed my eyes. "He really is in control."

My mantra wasn't working. Sitting in that tiny Ukrainian apartment I was scared—and heartbroken.

The last year had been an emotional rollercoaster. My husband and I celebrated as we mailed our adoption application and cried when our homestudy was returned because it was signed in black ink instead of blue. We high-fived as each dossier document arrived on schedule and then sighed as we drove the two hours to our state's capital for the umpteenth time to replace a simple apostille stamp.

We poured every dime we owned into the adoption process, every ounce of strength into bringing a child home. We dreamed and prayed over a child we didn't know, hoping she was warm, healthy, and happy, but we had the stomach lurching fear she was really cold, sick, and afraid. And all the while, as we rumbled through the adoption process, we wondered which day was her birthday and prayed someone would make it special for her.

Now it was all over. Our dream was dead. After twenty-one long days of waiting in a foreign country, dozens of roadblocks, and two failed appointments with the Ukrainian government, we were at the end. If we wanted one last meeting with the adoption officials, we would have to wait in Kiev during the Christmas holidays. They wouldn't hand out new appointments until the middle of January and even then there was no guarantee they would see us. But leaving Kiev would shove us to the back of an already long line and honestly, we couldn't afford to come back.

We agonized over the decision. We sent up half-hearted prayers but never felt any peace. Finally, we



called our travel agent. There was nothing more we could do. Staying in Kiev wasn't going to do us any good. We needed to fly out as soon as possible.

Her news wasn't any better. All the flights were booked. We were stuck.

Furious, I slammed down the phone and let my heavenly Father have it. Weren't we doing what He wanted us to do? How could He drag us halfway around the world on a wild goose chase? All the money we spent, the emotional energy we invested, the hearts I knew would be broken when we told our three other children the news. How could He let me love a child I would never know? I'd done everything He asked. On and on I went, my list of complaints growing by the minute.

"What more do you want from me, Lord?" I cried.

Exhausted, I fell on my face and sobbed. I lay there for what seemed like hours, spent. Then, I did what God wanted me to do all along.

"Father," I whispered, my cheek pressed against the cold tile floor, "I'm tired of this rollercoaster. It's all yours. Take us home or work a miracle...whatever you want is fine."

A quiet peace filled me. Exhausted, I fell asleep.

The next morning we got a call. Our facilitator found a little girl in the southern part of the country, near the Black Sea. Did we want to meet her?

With no time to think, we jumped back on that rollercoaster. But this time we held on to the roll bar with one hand, and downed a bottle of antacid with the other. Without so much as a name or a birthday to go on, we took off for Odessa. We were in the dark about what we would find, but that was okay. After all, God was in control.

Isn't it amazing how often we forget that simple lesson? How many times do we have to reach the breaking point before we learn our heavenly Father has our back?

The apostle Peter wrote in his first letter, "God opposes the proud but favors the humble.' So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you." (1 Peter 5: 5b-7)

It's not our tears God is after. Our heavenly daddy hurts as much as we do when we face tough times. It's the broken and contrite spirit He needs. God is not going to step in where He isn't wanted. Unfortunately, we just get in the way of His perfect will when we try to handle things on our own.

But when we reach the end of ourselves, and turn everything over to our all-knowing and all-loving Abba Father, He will move. It requires letting go of our pride and leaning on Him, depending on Him, realizing He has the best possible outcome in mind for us. When we do that, He will give us peace and honor our sacrifice.

When I finally figured that out, when I humbled my heart and handed God all of the control, He gave my husband and me the desire He placed in our hearts.

Twenty-four hours after that phone call, we stood in an orphanage director's office in southern Ukraine as a beautiful, energetic, and intriguing little girl bounded into the room and straight into our hearts.

After more than 320 days of paper-chasing, waiting, praying, and searching, we finally recognized God's hand in the whole process. His plan, His timing was perfect all along. We had finally found Ellie.

From <u>The Benefit Package: 30 days of goodness from Psalm 103</u> excerpt by Tamara Clymer







#### "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:19 NKVJ

racy, after months of evaluation and prayer, I've decided to quit my job and move to Missouri." Shock registered on my boss's face at my declaration. Months of seeking direction had yielded no definitive answers. In reality, the desire to leave Colorado had plagued me for the past eleven years. Ever since my husband confessed to sexually abusing my daughter, the comfy home we once shared had become a tomb.

Apprehension stimulated my heart rate to just under cardiac arrest when I gave July 29 as my last day. The Realtor hadn't yet pushed the "For Sale" sign into the front yard. Without a job, how would I pay the bills if the house didn't sell? Did I trust money or God? Had I made the right decision or a giant mistake? My answer volleyed like a tennis ball at Wimbledon.

"How exciting," my co-workers would say. "What new job are you going to?" Many commented on my faith when they learned I had none. Their comments forced me to examine my faith. The Hebrew patriarch Abraham came to mind. What did he feel when God said leave your country and go to a place I'll show you?

Abraham had a promise and his faith in God. I yearned for life at a slower pace. For less traffic and smalltown living, for green grass and all four seasons, all of which Colorado Springs didn't offer. My Midwest childhood home beckoned me.

Three weeks after the Realtor posted her sign, the house sold. I believed this was a confirmation from God.

The last eleven years had been some of the roughest of my life, which included divorce and putting my family back together after my husband's crime and jail time, and



reentering the work world after ten years of being a stay-at-home mom. I had a \$60,000 profit on my house, and so I decided to take things easy my first year in Missouri. I sought God and what He had for me and wondered about the dreams I still had for my life but not yet realized.

When I started job hunting, I couldn't find one. Some part-time work, but nothing full-time. God kept bringing me back to something a co-worker had said about writing a book. I took the plunge and started writing. In 2007, I published my first book. I was on my way to realizing my dream as a writer.



Book sales were slow to non-existent. I didn't know how to market my book. I started a blog and kept looking for work. Was I truly trusting God to provide? I frequently quoted Philippians 4:19, "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (NKJV). My faith wavered, a lot.

In early 2010, things came to a head. My \$60K profit had long ago been consumed. Part-time jobs had helped, but I needed a steady way to pay the bills.

The job market was dismal at best, the economy only beginning to recover from the 2008 recession. As I sat one morning reading my Bible and praying, I cried out to God. "I'm so tired of constantly battling with money all the time. God, you've got to do something." I questioned myself, probably for the thousandth time, whether moving to Missouri had been God's plan for me. I cried for several minutes, then finished praying. I told God I knew He would take care of me.

My mom had requested I come over that morning and had asked my siblings from out of town to be there also. My father had died a few months earlier and there were still things to settle, so this didn't seem like anything strange.

After we were all there, my mom explained that now she was the last remaining beneficiary of my grandmother's trust fund, she had decided to dissolve it. This was actually not to occur until my mother died. She and my brother had been working for several weeks with the necessary people to make it happen.

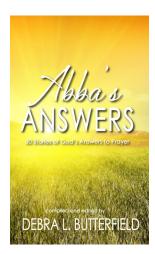
She handed each of us a check. I took mine and said thank you, but did not immediately look at the amount. I started to protest that she had done this, but she quickly cut me off.

"I wanted to do this for each of you. I know several of you have been struggling financially," she said.

At that point, I looked down at the check written in the amount of \$93,000. (My three siblings got a check for the same amount.) Tears immediately sprang to my eyes, and I started crying. God had answered my prayer and in less than four hours! But He had been preparing that answer long before I expressed my need. That's often how He works in our lives.

God strengthened my faith that morning, and I have reminded myself of that extravagant provision many times when other difficulties assaulted me.

God loves His children. He generously provides all we need so we can share with others (2 Corinthians 9:8). He delights in our prosperity (Psalm 35:27). We can trust His Word. "God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?" (Numbers 23:19 NLT).



From <u>Abba's Answers: 30 Stories of Gods' Answers to Prayer</u> excerpt by Debra L. Butterfield





The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises and faithful in all he does. — Psalm 145:13b



mom concludes her talk about telling the truth with her nine-year-old daughter and holds up her little finger. The seriousness in her voice commands direct eye contact and the attention of the child. The girl responds by entwining her pinky with her mom's. "Pinky promise," they state together. An oath has been made and will be taken seriously. Trust is established.

When a promise is made, we anticipate it will be fulfilled. If it isn't, the promise is empty, leaving us disappointed and hurt. Broken promises are like glass shards in our hands, painful and sharp, leaving scars in their wake. We can live in the aftermath of broken trust for years.

The promises in the Bible are solid words of hope for the believer, like anchors to which a rock climber clings for life. Abraham received the covenant promise from God and grasped it until its fulfillment. David humbly accepted God's word that one of his descendants would be on the throne forever. Mary believed the angel and gave birth to The Promise, Jesus Christ. The power of God's grace enables the fruition of His divine promises. In other words, grace flows through God's character to secure His promises. Because we have seen the declarations of God consistently completed in the past, we can firmly believe in them for today and the future. God is faithful to bring about the culmination of His promises.

We can confidently depend on God's promises because each one is rooted in God's character. Past promises that prove true are evidences of the grace impact at work around us giving hope, guidance, and strength. An explanation of the purpose of the promises is offered in 2 Peter 1:3–4.

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and



precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

It is mind boggling to imagine sharing in the holy nature of God, but that is what grace allows us to do. It does not mean we become god-like, but rather we can have a relationship with God through the promise of Jesus Christ. The very great and precious promises flow from God's nature of revealing Himself to us, undergirded by His grace. We escape the corruption of the world through salvation but also through the hope of God's promises.

When circumstances are confusing and I don't know what to do, I know the Bible will offer strength and wisdom. Sometimes I turn to it readily, other times, I read it as a last resort. God's promises give me hope, change my perspective, and direct my prayers when I choose to read the Bible. It's easy to slip into the default mode of worry and fret instead of being still before God and letting His Word speak to me.

Several years ago my husband and I believed that the Lord had led us to relocate to a different state for him to serve as senior pastor in a multi-staff church. The job started with high expectations but soon crumbled into broken promises and chaos. As time passed, staff tensions increased—people vied for leadership positions and control. The ever-changing economy also threatened to eliminate personnel, even the need for my husband's position. We lived in uncertainty for months, not knowing how things would resolve. Although we prayed and trusted God, the situation had not gone as we'd hoped or expected. I felt scared and uncertain for our future. I had a choice—to look at the crisis with fear or remember God's declarations for assurance.

Opening my Bible, I turned to Psalm 37, a passage that had brought hope to me in the past. I read "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). The words of this verse helped me refocus on the Lord. As I began meditating on Bible verses, they drew me closer to the Lord and bolstered my hope. The passage continued, "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun" (Ps. 37:5). This reminded me that God sees the big picture, not just the day-to-day struggles of life. Reading these words brought peace to my restless heart. His promises can indeed be trusted. Eventually, our situation resolved, our ministry continued, and I learned to trust God more.

In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers wrote of the strength of God's promises, with an important caveat of wisdom:

The promises of God are of no value to us until, through obedience, we come to understand the nature of God. We may read some things in the Bible every day for a year and they mean nothing to us. Then, because we have been obedient to God in some small detail, we suddenly see what God means and His nature is instantly opened up to us. "All the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen." (2 Corinthians 1:20) Our "Yes" must be born of obedience; when by obedience we ratify a promise of God by saying, "Amen," or, "So be it." That promise becomes ours.<sup>1</sup>

Obedience comes through diligently seeking God and letting Him transform our hearts and minds. The promises of God await our compliance so the "Amen" can be spoken.

The Bible is full of promises. Here are some to encourage and bring us hope.

• When we are vulnerable, we have the assurance of God's protection — "I am your shield." (Gen. 15:1)

• God offers guidance when we don't know what to do — "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way." (Ps. 25:9)



• When we need empowerment to carry on, God pledges inner power — "I will strengthen you." (Is. 41:10)

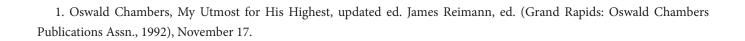
• God assures provision — "I will strengthen you and help you." (Is. 41:10)

• When we are weary, He vows His rest — "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matt. 11:28)

• When we are lonely, we have the promise of God's presence — "Never will I will leave you; never will I forsake you." (Heb. 13:5b)

Realigning our attitude with God's promises can bring order to a chaotic heart. Through focusing on God's unchanging nature and believing His word, our trust in Him grows. We gain inner stability when uncertainty shakes our world. Because of the grace impact, our hope is restored through God's promises.

From <u>Grace Impact: a devotional</u> by Nancy Kay Grace





NANCY KAY GRACE

# Because GodHas Given Us Abundant Life



esus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly" (John 10:10, NKJV).

We encourage you to read your Bible daily and step into the life and purpose God has for you—to live a confident, intimate life with Christ.

We hope you have enjoyed these ten devotions and that they spoke to your heart with encouragement, hope, and comfort.

To purchase any of these books visit the <u>CrossRiver Bookstore</u>. There you'll find many other nonfiction as well as fiction books that will help ignite and grow your faith—because you were made for more.

