

The
Miracle
Man

Our purpose at Reach A Life Today is to:

- Encourage people everywhere to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.
- Equip believers with resources to share their faith.
- Excite believers to reach out with His love everywhere every day.

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The Miracle Man 2014 by Melissa Woods

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*“Jesus went through all the
towns and villages,
teaching in their synagogues,
proclaiming the
good news of the kingdom
and healing every
disease and sickness.”*

(Mark 9:35)

“That I may know Him.”

(Philippians 3:10)

Foreword

Do you need a miracle? Well, you've come to the right place! These are true stories of lives transformed by the miraculous power of the Living God! I hope you will imagine yourself in their shoes, and experience the great love of Jesus, the Miracle Man.

We're not going to just fill our heads with information about Jesus. We are going to plop ourselves right down in the middle of each story. Imagine ourselves there. As if what is happening, is happening to us. As if what Jesus is saying, he is saying to us. These stories were written to help us do just that... to imagine what each person was thinking and feeling, and how each one connected with Jesus.

I hope you love reading this book as much as I loved writing it. My inspiration was the wonderful book, "Jesus, the Man Who Loved Women", by Bruce Marchiano. Bruce taught me to look for Jesus' heart in every verse, and that has made all the difference in the world! Come, let's dive in, sink deep, and soak ourselves in these accounts of Jesus reaching out to ordinary people, not so different from you and me, and those you will share this book with. Right?! And we will experience Jesus reaching out to us all... and I pray, a miracle!

Love,

Melissa

Chapter 1 It's a Miracle!

*"Take courage, son;
your sins are forgiven."*

(Matthew 9:2)

Poor guy. He's paralyzed. Let's call him Sam. How did this happen to Sam? We don't know. We don't know if Sam was born paralyzed, or if he'd had some tragic accident. But the thought of it, even today, sends shivers up our spines! And thank God we can feel those shivers! For your limbs not to respond. For them to lay motionless day after day. How awful. Not to be able to hug your family. Not to be able to scratch that itch. Not to be able to take care of your most basic needs. No end in sight.

It's tough enough to be disabled in this day and age, with all the modern technology. But Sam must have had it super-rough. My friend, Frank, who has late-stage ALS, has the coolest wheelchair with an amazing computer system that he can operate with his tongue. ALS is tougher than tough, but at least Frank has some mobility. He can communicate, surf the net, operate TV, and maneuver through his house. But for the man in our story, all he had was a pallet. Sam lay on that pallet all day, every day, day after day, with no hope of ever getting up again.

And in the quiet of the night, alone with his thoughts... I think Sam was plagued in his mind even more than in his broken body. "I must be cursed", he figured. "I have done some really bad things. This is my punishment. That's what the religious leaders said. God is really really angry with me. But I can't undo what I've done. I can't take it back. I can't take his anger away. All I can do is suffer under his judgment. And, as for after I die, I can't bear to let my mind go there. If this is his punishment for me in this life, I'm

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sure I'm in for even worse then." Hope against hope, I wonder if Sam prayed, "Lord, I know I don't deserve it, but will you please forgive me? Will you help me?" Sam didn't feel forgiven at all. Sam felt forsaken and alone. As bad as paralysis is, to have God against you.... to feel forsaken by him and alone... is even worse. Poor Sam.

But Sam had friends.

What a blessing. From just the little bit we learn from this short story of only eight verses in the Bible, these friends were the best kinds of friends. As we try to imagine ourselves back in the day, I have an idea it was something like this. I picture Sam's friends as construction workers. Maybe Sam had been hurt on a construction site. From the story, it seems like Sam's friends were pretty strong... and industrious. I have a feeling that one day when they were walking home after a long day's work, they saw a huge crowd and everybody was celebrating. Jesus was back in Capernaum, and he was healing people! Healing anything and everything! Anybody and everybody! One person was shouting, "I can see! I can see!" Another was shouting, "I can hear! I can hear!" Someone who had leprosy was shouting, "I am healed!" Wherever Jesus went must have been a wild scene. Rejoicing and celebrating! Joy with complete abandon!

So I imagine Sam's friends looking at each other, and probably without even saying a word, running as fast as they could to go get Sam! There was no time to

waste! Jesus was in town and they had to get Sam to Jesus, pronto! When they got to Sam, I can picture them all grabbing an edge of Sam's pallet and telling him as they hurried out the door, "You're gonna get healed Sam. There's a man named Jesus, and he's healing everybody. Don't worry buddy. We're gonna get you to him and everything is going to be alright!"

I wonder how Sam felt. I wonder what was going through his mind. What? Huh? This is all happening so fast! Healed? As great as being healed sounded, I wonder if Sam had some serious apprehension. By some holy man? If he is a holy man, he will likely know what I've done. He might tell everybody what I did, and then tell them that he's not going to heal me because I'm being punished. And then not only will I be paralyzed, but my shame will be all over town. And my worst fears will be confirmed. That I am under God's curse. And what if my friends reject me too, once they know the truth? I just couldn't take that. "Guys, maybe we need to talk about this... Wait... This is all happening too fast!"

The story goes that the place where Jesus was teaching was packed. You couldn't squeeze your way through the door, much less squeeze through four burly guys and Sam on his pallet. "What are we going to do? We can't miss this opportunity. We won't! We have to do whatever it takes to get Sam to Jesus. Think fast guys!" These were the kind of guys who did whatever it took to get the job done every day. If they needed a special tool for the job, there didn't run to the Home Depot. They just made the tool and kept on

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going. This Jewish home might have had outdoor stairs to its flat roof, but if not, I wonder if these guys just threw together a make-shift ladder. However it happened, in short order they were up on the roof with Sam, tearing through the roof. "Yep, we'll fix the roof later. That's the least of our worries. We're going to plop Sam down right in the front of Jesus." Nothing was going to stop them!

And, by the way, Jesus thought Sam's friends were terrific! The Bible says Jesus saw their faith. They likely didn't say a word, but Jesus saw their actions. I'm sure they got a big smile from Jesus, and probably a chuckle too. Just imagine Jesus standing there teaching, everyone in rapt attention, when all of a sudden the roof was being torn apart! Bits of roof falling and dust flying everywhere! You know some folks hollered, "Hey, what do you think you're doing?! Stop that!" That did not slow them down in the slightest. These guys loved their friend, Sam. They put themselves out, put themselves under potential ridicule, and possible danger, so they could help him. They brought Sam to Jesus. Of course, he couldn't bring himself. And even if he could, he might not have had the courage to go. To be blunt, Sam couldn't do much of anything for these great guys. They were the best kinds of friends. Selfless. Bold. Faithful. Caring. Let's learn from their gutsy example. Let's be good friends like Sam's friends. Let's bring our friends to Jesus in prayer. Let's share with them the hope found in walking with him. Let's put ourselves out... even under potential ridicule and possible danger. Let's help them have the courage to come to Jesus.

All the while, Sam was growing more and more anxious. What's going to happen? If this man they call Jesus is like all the other religious leaders, I'm just going to be condemned and criticized and humiliated, in front of everybody! But my friends say Jesus is different. They say He's not like that. They said He came to save, not to condemn. Hope. Maybe. Just maybe. Before Sam could tell his friends not to, Sam was dangling halfway between the ceiling and the floor. And there Sam was. Lying there helpless. Face to face with Jesus. There's no turning back now. Fear. Shame. Embarrassment. Kinda like us before God.... whether we realize it or not. Sam can't even run away. He's trying to be brave, but I'm sure there were tears in Sam's eyes.

And Jesus knew it all. Jesus had known Sam from the moment Sam was conceived in his mother's womb. Jesus knew every moment of paralysis. Every sleepless night. He knew Sam's every thought. Every fear. Every disappointment. Jesus knew the guilt Sam felt. How condemned. How hopeless. Cursed. Forsaken. Things Sam's best friends didn't know. But Jesus knew. Jesus had prayed for Sam. Jesus' heart went out to him. The moment Jesus saw Sam, he reached right in to heal the spot that hurt the most. "Take courage, son; your sins are forgiven." (NASB)

What? That's not what Sam expected at all. Did Jesus say what I think He said? I'm forgiven? Sam hadn't said a word about his fear... or about needing forgiveness. "Don't be afraid. Be courageous. You

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ARE loved. You are NOT cursed. The purpose of this paralysis was not because God hates you. It was intended to show the great power of God in you. Listen to my words. Your sins are forgiven. You are not in trouble. I'm not angry." Sam just looked into Jesus' eyes. There was genuineness in His eyes that Sam knew he could trust. He knew that Jesus knew. Knew everything. Jesus knew... and He forgave. It was more than poor Sam could take. It was more than Sam had ever dared to hope. Could it be? Sam could tell that Jesus had the power to back up those powerful words. I'm not forsaken! I'm forgiven! It was like the weight of the world has been lifted off Sam's shoulders!

I wonder if Sam's friends even realized that the paralysis had caused him to think seriously about His relationship with God. To realize his need of forgiveness like never before. His need for everything to be alright between him and God. Sometimes, being so busy with his hectic life, he had squashed that basic need of forgiveness with all the noise. But lately Sam had had a lot of time to think. Actually the thought of his relationship with God was always on his mind. I wonder if Sam's friends scratched their heads a little as Jesus was talking with Sam about all this forgiveness stuff. Like, yeah, yeah, get on with it.... we didn't bring him here for forgiveness. We want to see Sam walk! Hurry it up! But Jesus knew. And Sam knew. This was just between the two of them. And that was all that mattered.

Lord, may every illness, every tragedy, every heartache, every need, drive us to connect with you at the deepest level.

Sam was reeling with the loving truth he had just received! I am forgiven! I am loved! Sam realized that his friends were right. Jesus wasn't like other religious leaders. Jesus truly cared. He was there to set Sam free.... in his spirit... and in his body. Jesus was a true friend. I doubt Sam even heard the discussion between the Pharisees and Jesus. If Sam did, he probably realized that the ones most to be pitied were the Pharisees, not him! They were so far from God, even though Jesus was standing right in front of them. So far from forgiveness and peace.

But the Pharisees weren't happy about Jesus forgiving Sam. Not one bit. They thought Jesus was blasphemer, by forgiving sins that only God can forgive. Jesus knew their thoughts. But what's so different about Jesus is that he was going to take this opportunity to reach them with his love.

I have to confess how I used to read stories about Pharisees. I discounted them. Tossed `em. They were the villains of the story. Pharisees enter scene - the crowd yells "Boooooo". I was being a hater just like them! I was completely missing Jesus' heart! I stopped in my tracks one day when I realized that Jesus was trying to reach the Pharisees too. "Oh. Jesus cares about the Pharisees." Hmmm. Have you thought about that? He really loves them. Jesus uses every situation to draw, to teach, to woo, and to help

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each and every one come to know him. Some will. Some won't. But Jesus doesn't discount anyone. He doesn't want anyone to miss out. He wants everyone to turn from their rebellion that is destroying them and be united with him. Really. As you read the story, watch Jesus as he is wooing those cold-hearted, hard-hearted, mean-spirited, hypocritical sorry excuses for humans. Because he loves them. Jesus knows the religious rulers' lives are empty without Him. And that being religious is just a façade for the reality they could have, if they would only be humble like Sam on his pallet.

Isn't Jesus' love something else? His love makes me shake my head in wonder. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God." That is God's love.

Thank God that God loves like that.

So what was the Pharisee's problem? Jesus was on their turf. At least what they thought was their turf. They basically told Jesus, "You're supposed to play OUR game. We're in control here!" Their pride made them do and say things that were completely absurd. Guilty. We've all done it. We have wanted OUR way. They could not wrap their heads around the notion that God was in bodily form, right there in front of them... even when he did miracles right before their very eyes. When Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven", He was saying, "Sam, I am God, and I forgive you for your sins against me." These guys knew exactly what Jesus was saying. But they refused to humble themselves as children and accept plain truth, even

when they saw Jesus do miracles only God can do. They refused to accept that Jesus is the One who grants forgiveness. Because if Jesus was God in the flesh that would mean that THEY were rebelling against God... THEY were the outsiders... THEY were unforgiven, and THEY would have to change. No way. No matter how powerful... how indisputable the evidence, most of them hardened their hearts and stiffened their necks, refusing to accept Jesus.

Jesus knew everything going through their heads. And he also longed to heal Sam. I bet Jesus gave Sam a wink and a nod, as if to say, "Be patient just a little while longer while I patiently teach these "teachers of Israel"." I'm sure Sam was most willing to be the object lesson.

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'?"

They didn't answer a word. Stone silence. Their hearts were harder than stones. Typical. When we refuse to be honest, we usually just say nothing. Pride and cowardice are a deadly mixture. Of course, the answer is that only God can do either. A child knows that. They knew that too. The only logical answer was to accept Jesus for who He was! Jesus obviously had the authority to do both. But they refused to admit it. Plus, if they said anything against Jesus, the people would see right through their jealousy and hypocrisy. So they watched and they seethed. But

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Jesus knew what they were thinking. It was surely very plain on their faces.

Didn't these "teachers of Israel" know Proverbs 29:1? "A man who hardens his neck after much reproof will suddenly be broken beyond remedy." They were treading on very thin ice! And they knew better! But instead they condemned Jesus as a blasphemer – because He claimed for Himself the attributes and rights of God. Jesus did miracle after miracle after miracle. Time after time after time. Another time, Jesus told them, "Don't just believe because of my words. Believe because of my works." See the miracles with your eyes. Accept me in your heart. But instead, they called him evil. How evil it is to call good evil!

So Jesus was giving them yet another opportunity to soften their hearts. Here's what happened. "But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins"—then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house. And he arose and departed to his house."

Imagine you're Sam. Jesus gave him that look as if to say, "Don't worry about what anyone else thinks. Don't let their cruelty bother you one little bit. You and I are good. Now watch my actions. Rise and walk." And Sam did! He jumped right up for the first time in a very very long time... maybe even in his whole entire life! Can you imagine what thoughts were running through His head? "I'm walking! Jesus said to rise and walk, and here I am actually walking!"

Jesus said my sins were forgiven. I'm going to believe that too!" It didn't matter what anyone had ever said that had broken his heart, just as badly as his body was broken. It didn't even matter what the religious leaders had said, that he must have done something unforgiveable, and that this paralysis was proof that God was against him. Now Sam knew better. Jesus said to rise and walk. And he did! Jesus said he was forgiven. Sam knew that was true too!

Imagine the wonderful celebration! I can see Sam hugging Jesus so tightly, telling him how very thankful he was... for everything. And Jesus beaming as he shared Sam's joy and wrapped his arms around him. This one was lost and now he was found! All of heaven celebrates! I can see Sam's friends jumping down off that roof, getting a group hug with Jesus, beside themselves with joy! Bigger than any Super Bowl victory by far! I can imagine Jesus telling Sam's friends how very proud he was of them, and each one of them believing in Jesus for themselves, not just because he had healed Sam. And I can see the Pharisee's sulking, with their arms crossed, completely missing out on the joy of Sam's complete restoration.

Sam's mind must have been racing as fast as his feet were. He picked up his pallet, and headed home with his buddies, just as Jesus said to. This time Sam's friends got to walk beside him, rather than carry him on that pallet! Maybe on the way, they all ceremonially tossed Sam's pallet into a dumpster! Not gonna need THAT anymore! And they laughed until the tears rolled down their cheeks. Can't you

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just see Sam skipping down the road... dancing around ox-carts that were passing by. Strangers likely thought Sam had lost his mind, never imagining what had just happened to him! Knowing guys, they probably had a foot-race... and don't you know that Sam won!

"Guys, I can't wait to see my wife. This has been so tough on her. She is going to faint when she sees me! I can't wait to see the look on her face! And I can't wait to play with my kids!"

And then Sam arrived at his house. Maybe his wife was there, washing dishes. That's what women seem to always be doing! The kids were playing quietly nearby. Then Sam appeared in the threshold. The kids were probably the first to see him, running to him as they shouted, "Dad! Mom, look at Dad! He's walking!" With that, Sam's wife spun around and saw her husband standing right there, with a kid wrapped around each leg, laughing. Mrs. Sam was in total shock. She watched with her mouth wide open as Sam picked up a child in each of his arms and walked over to her, as she threw her arms around them all. I doubt words came out. Only tears began to flow.

Sam's family and friends were laughing and carrying on, so all the neighbors came to see what was all the commotion. I'm sure there was not a dry eye for miles! All talking at once, Sam and his friends told what had happened, how they had gone to see Jesus... and there was no room, and the roof... At some points in the story, Sam's friends took over, because

Sam was too busy playing chase with his kids! Hurray for Sam!

Now imagine you're someone in the crowd who witnessed Sam's healing. There Jesus went and did it again. Those Pharisees were just standing there with dumb looks on their faces. Like the cartoon villains' bubble that says, "Foiled again! Zoinks!" You know it was all the talk around town and at every dinner table. Did you hear what Jesus did? He healed Sam... yeah, the guy who was paralyzed! He's as good as new! You should have seen him get right up like he'd never been sick a day in his life! Sam just walked right out of there, of course, after hugging Jesus with all his new-found strength. And I wish you could have seen the looks on the Pharisees faces! They didn't know what to do. But you could tell they were not happy about this one little bit. The rest of us were so excited about Sam being healed. And this Jesus! There's never been anyone like him. He's so kind. And smart! He sure out-smarted those religious guys. He can do anything! And get this! He actually said He forgave Sam for his sins! He must have authority to forgive sins, because right after that, He healed old Sam. Yep, he can heal AND he can forgive sin. He really does care about everybody... even the ones who hate Him so much. I've never seen anything like this in all my life!

The Bible says, "They marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men." They were filled with awe. Wonder. Amazement. Shaking their heads and rubbing their eyes to make sure they were actually seeing what they were seeing! It was akin to the

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stories they'd heard about God parting the Red Sea. But this man, Jesus, was even greater than Moses. They were seeing God with skin on! His power... His heart.

Sure would have been great if even one of those religious leaders had said something like, "You know what, Jesus? You're right. I'm wrong. I'm going to come into alignment with what you are saying. You obviously are a teacher sent from God because nobody could do what you do, if God wasn't with him. I'm going to adjust my thinking and my ways to you." Well, that didn't actually happen... in public. But, one night, very late, when no one was watching, one of the leaders, Nicodemus, did come and tell Jesus that very thing. And another time, a leader named Joseph, believed too. They became followers of Jesus, but in secret, because they knew the religious leaders were some dangerous characters. Hurray Jesus! He DID reach some of those meanies, and turn them into sweeties. And that's what matters to Jesus.

But our story is about Sam. Good ole Sam. His life was changed forever. "He rose and went home." That's all the Bible says. But you know it was no small event. His life was never the same again. He had had an encounter with the Living God, and that changes a person. He knew from the very lips of God that his sins were forgiven and that sets us free! Not to sin all the more, but to live a life worthy of such great love and mercy! Not only did he walk! He walked taller! He walked straighter! He walked with his head held high in the confidence of being infinitely loved by an

infinite God. You'd better believe that this man told and retold his story... everyone wanted to know what in the world happened. Even to this day, modern technology can't restore someone who has been paralyzed! They were all mesmerized by the story. They asked, "And WHO did this?" Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth. He's healing people everywhere. And He's not at all like the religious leaders. I know with all my heart that He's the Messiah. And He's more. He's God. He will forgive you too! Go see for yourself!

No doubt, people who heard this man's story went to hear Jesus for themselves. No doubt they took people they loved to be healed, just like their friend, Sam. And when they saw for themselves, they believed for themselves! And they were forgiven.

I can just see Sam up in Heaven telling everyone, "Yep, I'm the guy who was on the pallet. My buddies tore a hole in the roof and lowered me right through, right in front of God and everybody – literally! I never would have dreamed that when I was paralyzed, God would forgive me, and then use my life for something huge like this! I just told Jesus thanks again for my paralysis. Thanks for turning my ordinary life into something extraordinary for Your Kingdom."

And this is what Jesus told me...

Sam, I'm so proud of you, and I'm so proud of your friends. This is my heart's desire for my children. To love each other like that. Your love and faith and courage actually encouraged me. When I see my

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children walking in love, I know everything I went through was worth it.

I know it was so so tough to be paralyzed. Did you know that I was paralyzed? I couldn't move when they beat me over and over and over. When those nails went into my hands and feet, all I could do was hang there. In every way I know what it's like to suffer. So all the more, I'm very proud of you. You didn't understand what was happening. You felt like I was far away. But I was right there the whole time. Even in the darkest of hours. And I was praying for you.

I anticipated with such excitement the day when your friends would bring you to me. I put that idea into their hearts. And I was so excited to see you coming down through that roof! What a sight you were! I knew you were afraid I would condemn you, but you know now that I'm not like that. I came to restore you, and now you know that full well. Now you see how my plan unfolded, and how your life was used to help others come to know me too! Isn't that the coolest thing ever? I can take something the enemy tried to use to destroy, and turn it around for good! That's actually my specialty. That's exactly what I did on the cross.

And now, we are together forever. You've told me many times that even though it was so hard to be paralyzed, you are thankful for how it all turned out. Just wait until you see my entire story unfold of all the miracles I am working in the lives of my children. One

day, when we are all together, you will see how I wove the broken pieces and the pieces others thought were useless into a beautiful tapestry. Every paralysis will be healed. Every fear erased. Every doubt extinguished. Every pain gone forever. Every sin completely eradicated. All because of my love... because I laid down my life. Remember, I love those who are still fighting against me, so be patient. I am not slow. I am patient. Your sins are forgiven and I have others to forgive too. Because I want our house to be full! I love you Sam!

JESUS

Chapter 2 You Amaze Me!

When Jesus heard this,

HE WAS AMAZED

and said to those following him,

“Truly I tell you, I have not found

anyone in Israel with

SUCH GREAT FAITH.”

Matthew 8:10

I'm sure you had to do a lot to become a Roman centurion. You were responsible for 100 men - 80 soldiers and 20 servants. They mess up...that's your head. You tell each one where to jump, when to jump, and how high to jump. If they jump without your permission, that's THEIR head. There is a pecking order to any military, especially the Roman military. No joking around.

So what did it take to become a centurion? History books tell us:

"The centurion in the infantry is chosen for his size, strength and dexterity in throwing his missile weapons and for his skill in the use of his sword and shield; in short for his expertness in all the exercises. He is to be vigilant, temperate, active and more ready to execute the orders he receives than to talk; Strict in exercising and keeping up proper discipline among his soldiers, in obliging them to appear clean and well-dressed and to have their arms constantly rubbed and bright."

Never thought about having bright arms before! I imagine our centurion friend barking out, "Rub those arms, soldiers! Make 'em shine!" Makes me laugh. My friend told me it meant "arms" as in "weapons". That still makes me laugh, because I was so silly.

To some, it would have been quite a perk to be a Roman soldier, centurion or not... if you're into power, that is. You could make a citizen carry your stuff. Many felt they could do whatever they wanted, to whoever they wanted, whenever they wanted. Roman soldiers were despised by the Jews, mostly for

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abusing their power. The Jews were a conquered people. Most did not have their Roman citizenship and had few rights.

In this story, a Roman centurion asked his Jewish acquaintances to request help from Jesus. Remember, a Roman centurion was not a Jew. No matter what status he held in the Roman army, he had no status before Jesus. And from the story, the centurion recognized that. That was why he sent these men to Jesus, instead of coming himself. As powerful as he was in the Roman army, he couldn't force Jesus to heal his servant. His only position was to plead. To beg. Kinda humbling for a man in a position such as his. Jesus has no "recognized" earthly position. No title, in the world's eyes. But this centurion knew his place. And he knew Jesus' place of authority over him.

The story doesn't tell how the centurion knew about Jesus and His power to heal. We do know the centurion was in Jesus' hometown of Capernaum, which was where Jesus healed Sam in Chapter 1, and also healed the woman with the issue of blood, and raised Jairus' daughter back to life. Word surely spread like wildfire.

And this man was a proselyte, a non-Jewish believer, because the Jewish men who came to Jesus said, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." He worshipped and prayed to the true God the best he understood, instead of worshipping and praying to the

Roman gods. Looks like his prayers for God's blessings were answered in many ways.

The more I read, the more I like this man. He didn't ask on his own behalf, or even on behalf of one of his family members. He humbled himself before Jesus on behalf of one of his servants. Many of the Roman soldiers were brutal, but not this man. Surely he had heard Jesus teaching. Surely he was drawn to Jesus' style of leadership. He could tell that Jesus had authority. Jesus didn't wield His authority by force, but with strength through kindness. Maybe he heard Jesus say "He who wants to be great among you must be the servant of all." Surely seeing the way Jesus cared about people, had an impact on him.

The message he asked the Jewish men to deliver to Jesus was this: "Sir, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain, and is about to die." It doesn't say that the centurion's message included asking Jesus to heal him. And the message certainly did not ask Jesus to come to his home. The Jewish men probably asked Jesus to heal the servant, and to come with them. But I think the centurion recognized that giving Jesus the information was sufficient. He respected Jesus enough to know that Jesus could certainly decide for Himself what action to take. Sounds like a military guy. I like this guy.

Jesus was quick to respond. He told the men, "I will come and heal him." As Jesus was on His way, the centurion heard that Jesus was coming to his home, and sent more friends to Jesus with this message,

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“Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.”

The centurion was completely unprepared to speak to Jesus or for Jesus to come to his home! He recognized that Jesus far out-ranked him. Jesus out-ranked Caesar, for Goodness sake! If he had talked with Jesus, he might have said, “I am unworthy. You are the one heaven and earth adores! How could you enter the house of a sinner? You are holy! You belong in a temple. You are the King of all kings. You deserve a palace. You are the owner of all of Creation. I have nothing worthy to offer you. You are pure. I’m not even a Jew. I’m a heathen. I wouldn’t know what I could serve you and I am too unclean to give you a drink. I am at a total loss as to how to have you as my guest.”

“And I am certainly not worthy for you to take time out of your busy schedule to come to my house. I would never ask such a thing. I can’t even bear the thought of it. I owe you my very existence. You don’t owe me a thing. Even though I have no standing to make this request, I sent my friends to you because you are my servant’s only hope to be healed. I could tell from hearing your kind words, that you are willing to help anyone who needs you.”

We feel that way, don’t we? And rightly so. He is the King of all creation! The Bible says that in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form! But the wonderful amazing truth is that Jesus came all the way

from His heavenly home into this sinful world already... a very long way indeed. He constantly overlooks all our sinfulness and shortcomings. He was happy to pay the price for our sins on the cross. And He is happy to come to our homes to stay with us. When He does, He turns our homes into heaven on earth. When we come to Him empty-handed, He fills our every need.

Listen to the centurion's words of faith that he sent to Jesus. "But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." This man knew how authority worked. He knew that Jesus was under the authority of His Father, and Jesus had authority over all of creation. He knew that if Jesus said the word... it would be done. Just like when the centurion would issue a command. It was done. No questions. No doubts. Done.

My husband is like this centurion. He recognizes the Lord's authority. He trusts the Lord's goodness and His plan. That helps me. In the past, I would worry, and wonder, and waste a lot of time and energy. But I have learned from seeing my husband's simple childlike faith. I settle down. It's in the Lord's capable and loving hands. Peace.

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." That's high

You Amaze Me!

praise coming from Jesus! Jesus was amazed! This centurion was not even an Israelite, and he had greater faith than anyone Jesus had met in all of Israel! This man didn't have a fraction of the information that we have. He simply humbled himself and believed. Amazes me too!

Imagine Jesus saying those words about you! Let's amaze Jesus by simply believing Him today!

Then Jesus said something that rocks us to our core! "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This centurion, an outsider, who had been separated from the promises and blessings of God enjoyed by Israel, was now one of many who have been brought into the kingdom to enjoy it all! He would sit right alongside all the Israelites who had true faith, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Sadly, many would miss out, because they hardened their hearts and refused to simply believe and receive. So Jesus was warning them.... Don't miss it! Look at this man! Follow his example! Your pedigree does not matter. Your past does not matter. Just come to me empty-handed and believe! And so many have for the past 2000+ years! We have come to Jesus and believed. As we express our faith each day, by simply trusting His Word, we are expressing the same faith as our centurion brother. How amazingly simple is that?

So, now, let's get to it! Let's see Jesus' response! "His servant was healed that very moment." Done.

That's the end of the story.

He believed in Jesus. He showed his faith by his actions. He asked Jesus for help. He believed Jesus had the power and authority. He trusted Jesus' wisdom and kindness. He asked. He received.

Let's do that. Show Jesus the respect to ask and receive, according to His perfect wisdom and kindness.

Lessons from our centurion brother:

- He asked Jesus humbly.
- He brought his friend's need to Jesus selflessly.
- He recognized Jesus' authority, and that Jesus was under His Father's authority.
- He believed Jesus' words.
- He trusted Jesus' decision either way.

And let's take a lesson from Jesus too:

Jesus was willing to change His plans and go wherever He was needed. Not out of obligation, as much as out of true love. His heart is so big. He cares so much. Are we ready to change our plans to go wherever we are needed? Let's love like He does. Let's care like He does. Let's surrender our time and our plans, to His will and to reach out today.

You Amaze Me!

Jesus' heart was warmed by the centurion's faith.

True faith is a rare jewel, and very precious. To Jesus, it was the wonderful response to everything He taught. As if Jesus were to say, "Yes! He's got it! Follow his example!" Let's follow the centurion's example and make it our aim today to warm Jesus' heart with our faith. It could be as simple as a whisper, "I trust You, Lord."

Jesus spoke it. Jesus bragged on this man to those around him. I'm sure the centurion was told what Jesus said and was encouraged. And to help others to see what faith is, and how to live it out. There is a lot of power in speaking truth and building each other up. Let's speak life-giving words to those around us today.

Need ideas? See "100 Wonderful Things to Say" on www.ReachALifeToday.com.

Jesus gave the man his request. He loves to answer! Just like we love to give good gifts to those we love, but even more. He loves to heal. He loves to give. He loves to grow our faith. He knows the best thing for us to have is a peaceful quiet trust in Him. So sometimes He stretches our faith. He works our faith muscles to make them stronger. Then we are at peace. He loves us that much.

By the way, sometimes we get the answer to our need, and we don't even recognize it. And by not recognizing it, we fail to give him thanks. Uh oh. Not only is this disrespectful to him, it also does not

increase our faith. We've just missed an opportunity to give Him praise, and to realize how faithful He truly is! Let's pay attention – keep our eyes out for the answer and thank Him immediately! That way we will know for the next trial that the Lord will come through in His perfect way and his perfect time!

I have a feeling that if Jesus were to write the centurion a letter, He might say something like this:

My brother, your faith did my heart good. You showed the Israelites a thing or two about faith. You showed me great honor. I am so honored that you are one of those who will come from the east and the west and sit at my table. It's going to be amazing and wonderful beyond imagination, when we are all together! Larger than the Roman Empire! Greater too, because it is my kingdom of love and goodness.

For now, keep praying and showing your great faith by your actions. That is a powerful testimony you're giving to the watching world. As you honor me in your family, in your community, and in your work, it will have a huge impact now and in eternity. Your wife, your children, your family, the soldiers and servants under your authority, those in authority over you, and on and on will be blessed because of your faith.

You are one of those I talked about whose life will produce one hundred fold into the kingdom! You amaze me!

JESUS

Chapter 3 Remember Me

“So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!”

The other criminal protested,

“Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn’t done anything wrong.”

Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”

And Jesus replied, “I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:39-43 (NLT)

There's only one story like this. This guy was saved by the skin of his teeth. Way past the eleventh hour. Only one, so we don't presume upon God's goodness. But one, to give us hope. Again, as in all the stories, let's put ourselves right smack dab in the middle of the story. Even this one, as awful and gruesome as it is. And then Jesus' words will be all the sweeter. Proverb 25:11 says, "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances." (NASB) No doubt, the words that fall from Jesus' lips are like that. A thing of beauty. To be treasured.

*"You are the most excellent
of men and your lips
have been anointed with grace,
since God has blessed you forever."
(Ps. 45:2)*

That describes our Lord Jesus... especially in this story, as you will see.

The character in this story is a rough character. We'll call him Hank. Hank didn't listen to his parents when they warned him to stay away from alcohol. He didn't listen when they told him the guys he was running with would get him into trouble one day. They prayed for him for years, asking the Lord to remember him and turn him around. Hank thought he knew better than his parents. One little lie turned into lots of little lies, which turned into big lies. One little crime turned into bigger and bigger crimes... every day. Hank thought he had it all under control, until slowly, subtly, the darkness took him over. His heart became

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darker and harder. In his mind, people began to exist for his own use, and abuse. Their belongings were his for the taking. One day Hank got caught by the authorities, but they let him go with just a slap on the wrist. He laughed it off. "I can do whatever I want... nobody can stop me!" Hank refused to work, so he resorted to stealing as a means of survival. He would do anything to get what he wanted. Hank began to carry a knife, and threaten people if they refused his demands. He thought he was controlling his life, but the darkness was controlling him. Hank said he could stop, but he couldn't. He was captive under a power he could not overcome. Hank's corrupt lifestyle grew worse and worse until one day, Hank and his partner, Hal, went out on a usual night of crime. But they did something Hank never imagined they would ever do. Something awful. Someone got hurt. Bad. The hatred inside Hank had taken over and they had done the unthinkable. The two of them were being hunted down. Hank was beside himself with fear. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat. There was no place safe. Nowhere to run. No one to trust. They both knew it was just a matter of time before they were caught.

The day came when Hank and Hal were surrounded. Like animals. They had threatened others. Now they knew what it was like to feel threatened. They were arrested, charged, tried, and found guilty. Their punishment was determined... crucifixion. They were filled with rage. They had no right to be angry. But that didn't matter. Hank remembered what his parents had told him. They had warned him that this

day would come. But that only made him madder. "Telling me not to do that stuff, actually made me want to do it all the more!" Hank seethed and fumed and fought. But that wasn't going to change the verdict. Or the terrifying punishment that was coming. At moments, Hank would begin to realize his parents had been right, and that if he had just listened and prayed with them, none of this would have happened. Maybe I should pray and ask for forgiveness, he thought. But as soon as Hank would begin to think right thoughts, Hal was there filling his head with wrong thoughts. Hank would sink right back to the anger and bitterness again.

While Hank and Hal were awaiting their doom, through the walls of their cell they heard someone being beaten. Over and over and over again. They heard the guards' demonic laughter as they swung each cruel stroke. It just wouldn't stop. The Roman soldiers were brutal, but this torture was even beyond their usual cruelty. Hank and Hal couldn't get away from the horrifying sound of the blows and the moans. The noise filled their cell, almost as if they were receiving the blows themselves! Someone just make it stop! And then they heard something very strange and unusual. "Father, forgive them." Those shocking words made time stand still. The men just looked at each other with disbelief. Hal muttered that the guy being beaten must have been knocked stupid. Nobody in his right mind would say that! But Hank wondered. What kind of man is that? Who forgives those who beat him mercilessly? Even while they are beating him? Hank just shook his head.

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Later, the guards came to the cell to take them away to be crucified. Hank was scared to death. The guards laid a huge wooden beam on his shoulders, but Hank's legs were shaking so badly he could hardly carry himself. So many emotions! Bitter hatred toward these Romans who had no right to do this to him! Unimaginable regret for making such a mess of his life! Horror at the excruciating death to come. Dreadful fear for what would surely come after that! And there was nothing to do but move forward.

And then Hank saw Jesus. At least he thought it was Jesus. This must have been the man he heard being beaten over and over and over again. Hank gasped in horror. He could hardly recognize Jesus, because His body was so bloody and swollen. Jesus had a mocking crown of thorns on His head. Hank just knew it was Jesus who had uttered those words he kept hearing over and over in his head, "Father, forgive them."

Hank kept moving as he was whipped along by the soldiers, but for a moment his mind returned to a much better day... the day he saw Jesus talking in the streets. He saw Jesus do something remarkable! He touched a guy who had leprosy. Jesus actually touched him! As filthy and infectious and contagious as that leper was, Jesus didn't mind a bit. And with one touch, the leper was healed. Totally well from head to toe! What a miracle! But what shocked Hank even more was Jesus Himself. What a man! Hank knew he had seen a truly good man.... a completely good man.

But now this man was right alongside Hank, heading to be crucified. That made no sense at all. If this man had the power to cleanse something as awful as leprosy, surely he had the power to stop his own execution! But he didn't stop it. Hank could not figure it out.

Hank returned to reality, as he felt the ripping of the soldier's whip cutting through his already open flesh. He screamed out curses at the soldier, which only brought down the whip all the more and even harder. Hank heard more cursing and blaspheming from his fellow convict, up ahead. But from Jesus, he only heard prayers and blessings.

As they made their way to Golgotha – accurately named, the Place of the Skull, Hank's eyes fell upon the place where he was going to die. His heart was pounding uncontrollably. His body was shaking. He could hardly breathe. The guards had to force Hank down onto his cross because everything in him was fighting to get away. Hank fought with all of his strength, but they overpowered him easily. Before Hank knew it, he was lifted up for everyone to see his torment. Pain shot through his entire body. Very soon, Hank hung so heavy that he could hardly lift himself to take a breath. Every joint felt stretched as if it was coming out of its socket.

“The humiliation! How could they do this to me? They have no right! They all think they are better than I am, but they've all done wrong. They just haven't

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gotten caught,” Hank brooded, as he looked out over the crowd. Hank was so focused on his pain and his anger, that he forgot all about Jesus and what was happening with Him. Hank was cursing the soldiers and everyone in sight, spewing out more of His venomous fury and resentment. In the corner of his eye Hank saw Caiaphas, the high priest, walking up to Jesus. Even Hank knew who this man was. Everybody knew him. He would strut about town with all of his high and mighty power and authority. But everybody knew better than to get on the wrong side of Caiaphas. So Hank figured out, just like everybody else knew, that it was because of Caiaphas’ hatred and jealousy that Jesus was on the cross. Everybody knew Jesus didn’t deserve it. And guess what Caiaphas said to Jesus for the entire crowd to hear? Something even more hurtful and hateful and cruel than anything Hank could muster from the deepest pits of hatred inside of him. “You saved others, you can’t save yourself. Come down from that cross, and we will believe in you.” Words straight from the pits of hell.

Hank wished he had the courage to tell that Caiaphas a thing or two. But even now, that man made him cower in fear. And then, to Hank’s amazement, he heard Jesus respond, “Father, forgive him.” Hank could hardly believe his ears. Forgive the very man who was responsible for his misery and anguish? Forgive him for his own execution? How could he?! What kind of man was this? Hank was dumbfounded. And then guess who had to open his big mouth? Hal. “So you’re the Messiah, are you? Prove it by saving yourself—and us, too, while you’re at it!” It was more

than Hank could take. That was it! For the first time in Hank's sorry life, he did the right thing. And here's what he said. "Don't you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes, but this man hasn't done anything wrong." Hank spoke truth. He accepted His responsibility. He confessed His guilt. He admitted that he was suffering justly for his crimes. He shouted out the truth everyone knew... Jesus was innocent! Whether anyone else did or not, Hank sided with Jesus. Even if Hank caught some of Jesus' ridicule, he didn't care.

Jesus didn't LOOK much like a king, all bloody, convicted and hanging on a cross. But Hank knew Jesus was a king. The best kind of king too. Kind. Benevolent. Patient. Humble. Best of all... FORGIVING. Full of authority, but Jesus always used His authority for good. Hank knew Jesus was the king of a wonderful kingdom. And this kingdom was out of this world, literally. Oh how Hank would love to be a part of that kingdom!

Hank's heart was won over to Jesus. He could hardly believe the words coming out of his mouth. There was just something about Jesus that gave Hank courage to believe and to hope. If Jesus could forgive his torturers... if he would forgive Caiaphas... maybe Jesus might forgive him too.

Before he knew it, Hank said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom." And just that quick, Jesus responded with hope, "I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise." (NLT) Hank saw in

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Jesus' eyes the love and power to back up those powerful words. He melted in a puddle of tears. It was amazing grace. Undeserved. Could it be true? Hank deserved the worst, but Jesus opened his arms and his heart and his kingdom wide. Hank believed Jesus. Hank saw with his own eyes Jesus' love being poured out for him... Jesus taking the eternal punishment that he deserved. "Remember Me." It was that simple. All of Hank's running was over. All of his rebellion was over. He was home. He was restored. With those few simple words. And a new heart to receive.

I wonder if Hank's parents were there by the cross. I wonder if they heard Hank call to Jesus to remember him. I wonder if they heard Jesus' gracious golden words of forgiveness and hope. Their prayers were answered, in a way they could never have imagined!

Hank wished he had time to live a life worthy of such great love and forgiveness. But there was no time. He did what he could in his last minutes, to show his change of heart. Jesus knew.

And just moments later, Jesus and Hank were together in Paradise! Hank had escaped the fires of hell by just that much, but he was safe forever. Isn't Jesus something else? In the middle of his suffering, he still took the time to save sorry ole Hank. Nobody would have faulted Jesus if he just said, "I'm kinda busy right now. You're a little late." But that's not Jesus. He gives and gives and gives until his literal last breath. It is his hearts' delight to forgive. Nothing

makes him happier than for His children to come back into the family. He spoke those silver and gold words we talked about earlier, the kindest words a dying man could ever hope to hear. “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

I imagine Jesus saying this to Hank in Paradise:

Hank, I remember seeing you in the crowd when I healed the man with leprosy. How I wanted you to be healed too, healed of the sin that had taken over your life. You didn't see how I could change your life. You were too filled with pride, and thought you could live your life without me. But your parents prayed for you. And I prayed for you. Even while you were running away, I was praying for you. Especially then. And I knew you heard when they were beating me, and how scared you were. I prayed for you to let go of the anger that was eating you up. I prayed for you to accept the fault for what you had done. I know. You can't take it back. Sin can never be undone. It can only be covered by my blood. My blood washes the guilt away. You are whiter than snow, Hank. By turning to me, your sins were forgiven completely.

It's a good thing you don't have to earn your salvation, or you would have no hope. But because my forgiveness is free for the asking, you are free forever. I knew we would be crucified side-by-side. I knew you wouldn't let go of the anger until the very last minute. But, I had prayed for you, and my prayers are always answered. When you finally turned to me and asked me to remember you, nothing could have made me happier. It was for you, and millions of others

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tangled in sins' web, that I went to the cross... to wash away their sins, to set them free, and to bring them into Paradise with me. And we are together forever. No more running. No more fear. No more condemnation. No more punishment. I am proud to call you my brother. I love you.

JESUS

Chapter 4 Born Again?

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

*"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus.
"How can an old man go back into his mother's womb
and be born again?"*

*Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the
Kingdom of God without being born of water and the
Spirit."*

*Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy
Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don't be surprised
when I say, 'You must be born again.'*

*The wind blows where it wants. Just as you can hear
the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it
is going, so you can't explain how people are born of
the Spirit."*

John 3:3-8 (NLT)

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Do you know Nicodemus? I love this guy! I know. I know. I say that about everybody. Nicodemus gives me hope. When I see modern day Pharisees hating on people and judging them, instead of reaching out with the love of Jesus, I remember good ole Saint Nick. If the Lord can change his stony religious heart, he can change anybody's!

The Bible doesn't give us lots of detailed information about Nicodemus, or most anyone, for that matter. But let's take what we do know, and try to fill in some blanks. Let's put ourselves in Nicodemus' position as a religious leader 2000 years ago, imagine what he must have gone through, and what caused his story to be recorded in the Bible. Though I don't know for sure, imagine with me...

Nicodemus was a good little Hebrew boy. He grew up learning everything he was taught, following all the rules. He memorized huge portions of the Torah. Made his family so proud. There were over 613 rules to keep each and every day, and Nicodemus did everything he could to make sure to follow every one. When he had a family of his own, he made sure he and his family kept all those rules too. He had followed the rules for so long, he didn't even hope there was anything more. He didn't feel God's presence in His life, but he didn't expect to. That's just the way it was. The way the teachers taught it. The way God ordered it... he thought.

Nicodemus rose in the ranks of the temple; it made his family beam with pride the day he was elected to the

Jewish Council. He was such an important man. He was influential in Jewish society. There were social benefits, of course. He got to wear a special robe, showing how important he was. People would nod in the marketplace, and give him special honor. He kinda liked getting the star treatment! There were financial benefits too. He and his family had everything they could ever want for. Life was good.

But in the quiet of Nick's heart, he felt an emptiness. He knew that many of the things he and the other leaders did was wrong. But Nick was not one to make waves. Go along to get along. Plus, he knew that if he didn't play along, he could lose his power and his prestige. He would be disgraced! He certainly didn't want to lose his social status! Social status and power have an ugly downside.

Nicodemus entered the weekly Pharisees' meeting as usual. This week there was a lot of hubbub. What was all the chatter about? Nicodemus hadn't heard the latest. John the Baptist, who vehemently denounced the Pharisees, had been getting on the last nerve of Caiaphas and his clan. And here we go again. There was another man causing a stir. This man might be even worse than John the Baptist! They said his name was Jesus, and he was all the talk in the Galilee region. Some were calling him the Messiah! A lot of people were going to hear this Jesus, and if a rebellion started, the Romans would crack down harder than ever. Of course, the top leaders always used "political rebellion" as an excuse to squelch anyone they didn't like. And they didn't like anyone

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but themselves. (And they didn't really like each other very much, when it came down to it!) The Pharisees had a lot of power. It was their way or the highway. They were very protective of their turf. Like a 21st century gang, without the graffiti. You can get away with a lot of mischief in the name of religion, you know.

Without much discussion, it was decided to send a commission to investigate this Jesus and make a full report. So long as Jesus stayed in the background, and knew his place, they just might let him go on with his little fun. But Jesus would have to understand who was in authority, and do as he was told.

I bet Nicodemus had started to back away from the actions of the leadership by this time. Maybe he had gone along with their repudiation of John, the Baptist, but I think that this night, Nick went home feeling uneasy. He told his wife he was afraid there was trouble brewing. "These guys are so filled with hate, you never know what they might do," he told his wife. A few weeks went by, and Nicodemus hoped things had settled down. But Caiaphas called an emergency meeting. The scribes, the priests, all the religious leaders... everybody who was anybody was required to attend.

I can imagine when the meeting began, the high priest, Caiaphas, had a serious look on his face. A hush went over the room. Caiaphas was playing this to the hilt. Caiaphas probably shook his head soberly and said something like this, "Esteemed men and

fellow priests, thank you so very much for your faithfulness to duty in coming to this meeting on such short notice. Unfortunately, this emergency meeting was required because there is a man causing a great disturbance, which requires our immediate attention. As you well know, none of us wants any problems with Caesar, which would likely happen if this matter is not handled swiftly and decisively. Our commission has just returned from the Galilee region, and reported that this zealot, Jesus of Nazareth, is leading a dangerous fringe movement. He is misleading the people with his own teachings, not according to our laws and traditions. Every day more and more of our uneducated citizens go to hear him and are being lead astray. It is reported that this Jesus had a crowd of 5000 men, plus women and children, at just one assembly by the Sea of Galilee. They even reported that he worked some sorts of spells to deceive the people. This cannot be allowed. It has been recommended that a letter be sent out to all the local synagogue leaders throughout Israel, warning them that this man has not been approved by our esteemed Council. The local priests will be advised to warn the people not to be drawn into this man's heresy and possible witchcraft. The letter will also warn them about the potential danger this could cause with the Roman officials, especially if there are riots. Do I hear a motion to send the letter? A second? All in favor? Motion has passed. Thank you gentlemen for taking your valuable time to come out this evening on this very important matter. This meeting is adjourned."

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Can't you just picture it? All the top brass shaking their heads, and groaning in agreement? They likely hadn't heard a word from Jesus for themselves, but he was already judged guilty in their minds.

I have a feeling Nicodemus talked with some of his Pharisee friends in private, and they too thought the decision was rash. They felt they should listen to this man first before making any judgments. What if this man was legit? But the meeting was over before they had an opportunity to say a word. Dissent in any form was not allowed with Caiaphas as high priest.

It appears as if Nicodemus and his friends decided to check out Jesus for themselves. I wonder if Nick privately hoped there was something more to religion than all of this back-stabbing and hypocrisy. I wonder if, instead of his usual, formal, "religious" prayers, Nick quietly asked God to help him know if Jesus was authentic. At the first opportunity, they went to hear Jesus. It wasn't at all what they expected. Jesus wasn't trying to stir up trouble. He spoke words of kindness. He spoke words of faith like Nicodemus had never heard from any of the teachers of the law. He spoke truth. He spoke with authority. And when Jesus touched people with his healing touch, it was obviously not witchcraft. It was clearly the power and love of God! The evidence was overwhelming. Jesus' very persona was curiously compelling. Nicodemus and his friends talked about what they had seen, and they agreed without a doubt that God had to be with Jesus, because no one could do what He did, except by the Spirit of God.

For Nicodemus, this was more than just an academic undertaking. He couldn't stop thinking about what he had seen and heard. Jesus was just so different. His genuine care for people who couldn't do a thing for him, his willingness to touch people who were beyond unclean.... downright diseased, how Jesus connected with each one as if he truly loved and cared for them. Nicodemus had never seen anyone like Jesus. He was baffled. What could motivate a man to such love and selflessness? What was the power behind Jesus and how did he get it? Day after day, all Nicodemus could think about was this unusual man, Jesus. He had trouble sleeping because he just had to know what made Jesus tick. There was a spark of hope growing inside him... he just had to go talk with Jesus! Of course, Nick never let on what he was thinking about to his religious friends. It was just too dangerous. One night, Nicodemus couldn't take it any longer. Jesus was nearby, and Nicodemus was compelled to go to him. He went at night, for fear that someone might recognize him, and word get back to Caiaphas. He promised his wife to be careful, and told her to cover for him, if anyone asked where he was.

When Nicodemus arrived, the Bible says that he called Jesus "Rabbi". That's a good start! Nicodemus recognized Jesus as someone who taught the truth about God. He'd been taught by the teachers about the law and traditions and their 613, or so, rules all of his life. He knew that didn't lead to the kind of goodness and peace that Jesus had. But now he wanted to hear from Jesus. He wanted to learn about

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God. Not just to learn about God. But to come to know God like Jesus obviously knew Him, personally. This is what else Nicodemus said, “Rabbi, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.” (NLT) In other words, Nicodemus was asking Jesus to teach him about God. Which is pretty astounding since Nick was the teacher with all the credentials! Good job again Nicodemus! He was coming, not as a religious leader to tell Jesus his opinions. He was coming to learn. Humbly.

Jesus didn’t waste a second. He jumped right in to tell Nicodemus what he needed. “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”(NLT) Nicodemus was really confused! But I’m sure those words were etched into his brain like a laser.

“What do you mean?” Nicodemus asked, “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” (NLT) That had to be pretty funny! I wonder if Jesus kept a straight face! Jesus explained, and I’m sure Nicodemus was listening with every bit of energy he could muster. “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.” (NLT)

Nicodemus must have had a really confused look on his face, because Jesus said, “So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again’.” (NLT) But Nicodemus WAS surprised. This wasn’t the way to

God he had been taught. He thought you got to God on the basis of what you did. By being a “good” person. By following 613, or so, rules. And by being in the right family on the right side of the tracks! He knew nothing of the Spirit of God giving him a new birth! He certainly didn’t experience spiritual life.

With all of Nicodemus’ learning and credentials and titles and position, he didn’t walk with God. And he knew it. He was empty. He was just going through religious motions. Cold. Dry. Dead. He was sick of it. Jesus said there was a new life – a new birth – available for him, and that sparked hope.

I’m sure Nicodemus’ mind was racing. How CAN I be “born again”? I’ve done everything the teachers of the law said to do, and I’ve never experienced what Jesus is talking about. What else do I need to do?

Jesus knew exactly what Nick was thinking. So Jesus went on to explain about the Spirit of God. “The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.” (NLT) In other words, Nick, you and the other leaders have no authority over the Spirit of God. Any more than you have authority over the wind. Having a relationship with God is not initiated by the religious institutions and formulas of men. It begins by the Spirit of the Living God breathing His spirit into a man. When a man has a living, vital relationship with God, then you see the evidence of God’s spirit in his life.

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Nick deeply wanted the Spirit of God to breathe on him, so he would have the real, living, vital relationship with the true and living God that Jesus had. Now that Nick knew there was more to life than empty ritual, he would do whatever it took to have what Jesus had. He knew it wouldn't happen by way of the flesh... religiosity, his own human righteousness and efforts. He needed mercy. He needed a divine touch of life from the Spirit of the Living God!

The good news is that the Almighty Spirit of God loves to give new life. We must come humbly as a little child, with simple childlike faith, to be cleansed from our wrongs ways, and to walk in his ways. Even though we have no authority over the Spirit of God, we can ask him to blow our way! And the fact that Nicodemus was coming to Jesus humbly, was a great sign that the Spirit of God was already breathing life into him!

As they talked, Jesus even told Nick one of the most famous passages in the entire Bible, "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (NLT) Everyone! Anyone! Not just Jews! Nicodemus didn't quite understand everything Jesus told him yet. I doubt he understood that Jesus was that one and only Son the Heavenly Father gave as the sacrificial lamb to bear the punishment for sin. But Nick was starting to believe that Jesus was the way to exchange his lifeless, perishing existence for a brand new, eternal kind of living. Without a doubt, at some point, Nicodemus

was born again, and began walking with God for real. He humbled himself to receive God's thoughts, God's power, God's righteousness, God's very life flowing through him. He received the water Jesus spoke of to cleanse him of his sins and self-righteousness, and the Spirit of God to give him that new life.

Nick scratched his head when Jesus told him that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save it. Nicodemus and his cronies were all about condemning others. Not themselves, of course. All their energy was spent criticizing and condemning and finding fault. But Jesus said God LOVED the world! God wanted to save people from being condemned! That was so different from what Nicodemus had always thought. But what if it was true! Oh, if it was true! Nicodemus felt as if he was breathing heavenly air!

And when Jesus told Nicodemus that men loved darkness rather than light, he certainly knew that was true. He had seen it and seen it a million times, and he was fed up with it, in others... and in himself. That way of life had to be over. It just made him ill. And Jesus told Nicodemus that he could come to the light, and that it would be obvious that he was doing what God wanted him to do. Wow! To live a life walking in truth and sincerity and a clear conscience! Completely forgiven! All fresh and new and clean on the inside! No more darkness and condemnation! To have God working His truth and light into his life.... how refreshing that sounded!

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Yes, Jesus told Nicodemus an earful, praying for him the entire time. Nick's mind must have been reeling by the time he got home and tucked in bed. I imagine his wife asked him if he talked with Jesus, and what they talked about. "Tell me! Tell me!" I have a feeling Nick just shook his head. "Honey, I have to sleep on it. Soak it in. What he said was life-changing and it's going to take some time to digest." But in Nicodemus' mind, there was no turning back. He knew now there was more to life. Talking with Jesus proved that to him. He started to believe that he could actually walk with God in spirit and in truth. And his life would never be the same.

Let's put ourselves in Nicodemus' world, right in the middle of Jerusalem. Imagine you're at a massive, ornate temple, on a high mountain, surrounded by other high mountains. Imagine priests in fancy robes with decorative shawls, strutting around with all their self-importance. Imagine people listening to them drone on day after day about following this rule and that one, and explaining yet another rule they had just made up to lay on your back. No joy. No peace. Just cold, dry, dead philosophy... in the name of God. Yawn. This was what Nicodemus experienced day in, day out.

Then imagine Nicodemus seeing Jesus coming into the temple dressed in commoner's clothes, likely with dusty sandals from a long journey. Imagine Jesus sitting down in the temple, talking with a few common people, giving them hope, making them laugh. Then another joins, and another, and they all hang on his

every word. “God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way”. (NLT) Then imagine the people getting up from listening to the religious guy, and walking over to listen to Jesus. After a while, there’s a crowd around Jesus. And then imagine a lame person being brought to Jesus. With gentleness and kindness, with one touch, Jesus says he forgives him, and heals him! Right before their very eyes! This is much more than dead, dry philosophy! These are works of the Messiah! The people start to shout, “Hosanna, to the Son of David!” Jesus is the Messiah we’ve been waiting for!

Now imagine Nicodemus following a very pouty priest running back to the top guys whining, “Jesus is here! He’s deceiving the people just like he did in Galilee! He even worked some of his black magic right here in the temple! The people are shouting the he’s the Messiah! What are we going to do to put a stop to him?!”

Believing in Jesus was not even a consideration. So the leaders put their evil heads together and came up with this plan. The Pharisees would embarrass Jesus in front of the people, by asking him trick questions to trip him up. Surely that would not be a difficult task with all of their great learning, they figured. Jesus was a country bumpkin, after all! Then the people would

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stop listening to him, and return to following them. Simple. Sounds like a good plan! If you're evil. Nicodemus was beside himself.

But there was one big problem. The religious leaders completely underestimated Jesus! They tried and tried their best to trick Jesus and bring him down in the eyes of the people, but they never could. Jesus' wisdom was more than they had bargained for. All they accomplished was to make themselves look like fools, filled with jealousy. The whole plan backfired on them! Can't you just imagine the people hearing a complex, politically-charged question posed by the Pharisee, and wondering how in world Jesus could answer? And then Jesus would knock it outta the park! Time after time after time. It just wasn't a fair game. You know the people let out an approving, "Aaahh", when Jesus answered so wisely. And a few snickered too.

That really made them angry. But what got them piping hot mad was when Jesus told the people not to listen to the religious leaders because they were hypocrites! Yep! Jesus said they looked great on the outside in their fancy outfits, but on the inside they were filled with dead men's bones! Yep, Jesus said that! He said the religious leaders weren't going to enter heaven, and whoever followed them wouldn't either! They were blind guides who would lead them away from God! Oh yeah, Jesus really made the religious leaders furious! They tried to keep their cool in public, but in private meetings, Nicodemus saw the full force of their fury!

Why would Jesus stir up so much trouble?! Isn't he the Prince of Peace? Here's why. Jesus spoke the truth clearly and plainly to warn the people of these dangerous men, because He loved them all so much. It broke his heart to see them being lead away from a true relationship with God!

But he didn't just love the common people. He loved the Pharisees too! He was trying to wake them up out of their religious stupor. Blinded by their selfish ambition and pride, they couldn't see the danger they were in. That in an instant, they could be standing in judgment for all their sins, including misleading the people! He didn't want them to have to pay that heavy eternal price. He wanted to pay it for them. Amazing love! He loves each one to the uttermost.

Jesus also spoke these words because He knew it was time for Him to take on his role as the Lamb of God. He was pushing them to decision. What would they do? Believe? Or use their power to have him put to death? They played right into His holy hands. Nicodemus was powerless to stop them.

I wonder if Nicodemus tried to stop them when they sent some of the temple guard to arrest Jesus. It wasn't Jesus' time yet, so what happened is pretty amusing. When the officers went to arrest Jesus, they just couldn't do it. They were so taken in by what Jesus said that they just couldn't! When they returned to the Pharisees, their only explanation was,

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“Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks.”
Isn’t that great? Love it!!

The Pharisees answered them in their usual condemning, unbelieving, rude way, “You have not also been led astray, have you? No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed.” Typical. Condemning. Calling the entire crowd cursed! Besides fighting against God, these guys are a real pain.

It does give us an insider’s view of the Pharisees though. Nicodemus obviously had not told them that he believed in Jesus. Poor Nicodemus. He was between a rock and a hard spot. He hoped that he could use his position to speak up for Jesus, and talk some sense into these guys. Nicodemus tried. You’ve got to hand it to him. Not any easy battle to fight. They had heard enough of what Jesus said, and all they want to do was to shut him up.

Nicodemus reasoned, “Is it legal to convict a man before he is given a hearing?” (NLT) Well, the other leaders did not want to hear what the law required – obviously they didn’t love the law as much as they claimed to! Instead of following the rules, they rudely responded, “Are you from Galilee, too? Search the Scriptures and see for yourself—no prophet ever comes from Galilee!” (NLT) In other words, ‘Nicodemus, are you a country bumpkin too? Are you an idiot like all the other stupid Galileans? The Scriptures say that a prophet doesn’t come from

Galilee.’ When people resort to name-calling, it is useless to try to talk sense to them. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Galilee, but these guys weren’t interested in the facts. The Bible just says, “Then the meeting broke up. Everybody went home.” (NLT) No more discussion. These guys..... ugh.

But the Lord placed Nicodemus right in the middle of them:

*“Now he uses us to spread the knowledge of Christ everywhere, like a sweet perfume.”
(2 Corinthians 2:14 NLT)*

The next time we read about Nicodemus was after Jesus was crucified. I am sure Nicodemus did what he could to stop it, but he was completely outnumbered by that ravenous, blood-thirsty pack of wild dogs. Ultimately, this was the eternal plan of God. It had to be this way. But that didn’t take away Nicodemus’ horror over what happened. The utter injustice of Jesus’ mock trial. How Jesus was thrown into that awful pit at Caiaphas’ house, like an animal! The brutal, venomous hatred of these men as they spit on Jesus, and plucked out his beard, and beat him without mercy. How the leaders stirred up the crowd to shout, “Crucify Jesus!” How Jesus was whipped beyond recognition and hung in utter humiliation on that cross. And now Jesus was dead. It was a nightmare that was all too real.

And there Nicodemus stood grieving at the foot of the cross. The Bible says, “Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a

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disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."

Nicodemus didn't care what anybody thought anymore. What he had witnessed was worse than anything they could throw at him. Worse than death itself. He was done with all of it. He didn't care who saw him help take Jesus' body down from the cross. Most of the cowards had run away when the earthquake shook them to their core, anyway. They knew they had done the worst thing possible to the best man ever. And they thought they could run from God. But they couldn't escape their guilt.

The only ones left near the cross were the Roman guards who had to finish the execution, and those closest friends and family members of the dying. And there stood Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. These two men, who barely knew Jesus, took on the terrible task of wrapping Jesus' body and laying it in the tomb. What a sad commentary on friendship. Where were all the people who wanted to crown

Jesus as king? Jesus is there for us, even when we aren't there for him.

As a wealthy man, Nicodemus kept a huge supply of burial spices. He called his servants to bring them for Jesus right away. He just had to find a way to show Jesus the love that Jesus had shown to him! As they carried Jesus' body to the tomb, I'm sure Nicodemus wept openly. The one man who had the most intimate, real relationship with God, and look what they did to Him! The one whose kindness knew no bounds! The one who spoke truth in love! The one who had opened the way of life and forgiveness to him! He's dead. Every death is awful. But the pain Nicodemus felt over Jesus' death was beyond comprehension.

Nicodemus' head must have hung low as he walked home after rolling the stone over Jesus' tomb. They didn't even have time to show due respect, or to apply the burial spices properly, or to complete the customary prayers. The sun was going down, and they had to get home to begin the Sabbath, and perform their religious rituals. Argh. Nicodemus must thought about the truth of the verse he had memorized as a child.

"I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me, more than I want burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:6 - NLT)

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The Lord didn't want their religious rituals. He wanted their hearts. Nicodemus understood that now better than ever.

Nicodemus and John probably formed their friendship as they buried Jesus' body. Maybe it was then that Nicodemus told John the story of how he had come to know Jesus, and how Jesus told him he must be born again. John made sure to record Nicodemus' story in his Gospel account.

And surely Nicodemus became friends with the other disciples later on. Maybe it was Nicodemus who told them what the chief priests told the guards who saw the angel at Jesus' tomb, as recorded by Matthew... "Some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day." When you're up to no good, there are a lotta tracks to cover.

We don't know the specifics about what Nicodemus did after Jesus rose from the dead. But we can be sure Nicodemus was never the same again after his encounter with Jesus. Jesus just has that effect on

people, when received with the humble faith of a child. Evidently, the Spirit of God breathed on Nicodemus and he was born again. His actions are the proof. Nicodemus, who said he was old, finally got to know what it was like to really live, all brand new!

If Jesus ever spoke to Nicodemus on this earth, or if not, when He saw Nicodemus in glory, I imagine the conversation might have gone something like this:

Nicodemus, I was so happy to see you that night you came to meet me. It pained my heart to see the empty religious life you were leading. I prayed for you. You should have seen the look on your face when I told you that you must be born again! I almost laughed out loud to hear your response! Going back into your mother's womb! You were a riot!

But I knew my prayers were being answered when you didn't give up trying to understand. I know it was a lot to take in, so different from everything you'd ever known. But I kept praying for you, and I knew you weren't going to give up until you experienced the new life of actually walking with our Heavenly Father in truth and in spirit. I could see the divine spark in your eyes, and now I see the Holy Spirit has fanned it into a roaring flame! I knew you couldn't do anything to stop the unjust trial. I knew it made your heart ache to see what they did to me. It wasn't your fault. Don't hold yourself responsible in any way. I appreciate that you did what you could. It was all part of the eternal plan, so be at peace.

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It made me so proud to see you standing near the cross, along with your servants who brought the burial spices. I knew you were God's chosen vessel for this difficult task, just like Isaiah prophesied. It comforted me to know you would help Joseph and John and the women. You knew that Caiaphas would likely make you suffer for it, but you did it anyway. I am proud of you. But now we get to rejoice together forever. You will never experience any of the struggles of sin in yourself or others again! Breathe a huge sigh of relief... that is actually the breath of God in you forever..... Ahhhhh.....

JESUS

Chapter 5 The Rock

“But what about you?” he asked.

“Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of John, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

(Matthew 16:13-18)

The Rock

Of all the people in the Bible, I probably relate to Peter more than others. He's easily excitable. He's the first one to speak... at times without thinking first. He thinks he's further along in his faith than he really is. And sometimes his failures are bad, and shock even him. But he loves the Lord. He really does. I like him.

If you notice, we have more recorded about Peter than any other disciple. Probably because he was the one who ran his mouth the most! That revealed his heart. Sometimes pretty... sometimes not so much. But with all of Peter's faults, you've got to hand it to him for having the courage to speak up. Maybe it wasn't so much courage, as impetuosity. And no doubt, that was just the way he was wired. For those of you who are more quiet-natured, please understand that Peter doesn't mean to do it. That really is his internal makeup. He has to fight that tendency as much as you might have to fight the tendency to speak up. As my sweet, quiet husband tells me, "It's a good thing we are all different, or it would be boring." Thanks darlin'.

Anyway, let's think back to the first time Peter met Jesus. Remember? The book of Matthew chapter 4 records that Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee and he said, "Come, follow me and I will send you out to fish for people." Well, I don't think Jesus just happened to be walking by the Sea, and just happened to see these two men. They didn't just "happen" to put down their nets and follow Jesus.

Nothing with God is coincidence. The Bible says God knows the end from the beginning!

That actually wasn't the first time they had met Jesus. Think back farther. John the Baptist had some disciples.... students: John and Andrew, along with many others. John the Baptist taught them to prepare their hearts for the Savior by turning away from sin, so they would recognize him when they saw him. They did exactly as they were instructed. As a symbol of their commitment to having a clean heart before God inwardly, they were baptized outwardly. One day, John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, telling John and Andrew, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." So John and Andrew went to Jesus and he talked with them. They knew immediately Jesus was the Messiah, and they spent the whole day together. From that time on, John and Andrew were Jesus' disciples.

Guess who Andrew's brother was? You guessed it! Peter! (Peter had been called Simon before.) Andrew went to Simon (Peter) and told him the exciting news, "We have found the Messiah!" I wonder if Andrew grabbed his brother by the shoulders, looked him square in his eyes, and said something like, "Listen! Stop what you're doing. I have something very important to tell you. Remember, John the Baptist told us that the Messiah was coming in our time? Well, John and I met him! We got to talk with him all day long! He really is the one! His name is Jesus! You've got to come and see!"

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By the way, did you catch how the word about Jesus traveled? There's always a genealogy. The news spreads from person to person to person. From John the Baptist to Andrew to Simon (Peter). Let's jump in that wonderful life-giving chain!

Simon (Peter) knew Andrew was not going to let up until he went to meet Jesus. So he put down his net, and off they went. When he walked up to Jesus, Jesus said something strange. (By the way, Jesus typically says something a-typical.) Jesus said, "You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas (which is translated Peter)". In other words, Jesus said, Simon, I know who you are. I know your dad. I know your family. I know you... personally. Not only do I know you. I'm going to change your name to Peter. Hmm. I wonder what Peter thought. He was likely taken back a bit. How did this guy know my name? And my dad? How could this guy act like he knows me personally? My name is Simon. Why does he want to change my name to Peter? But Simon (Peter) stuck around. Jesus did seem like someone he had known for a long time. And he had been asking God to help him stop all his sinning, especially his temper! He felt like he had a harder time with sinning than the rest, and he had really hoped the Messiah could help him. He had to listen more for himself.

Have you noticed how Jesus doesn't meet people like we meet people? Simon (Peter) didn't say, "Hi, my name is Simon. I'm glad to meet you." And Jesus didn't say, "Hi, my name is Jesus, I'm glad to meet you too." Nope. Jesus already knows each one. He

doesn't pretend not to know them. It might be a bit unsettling, but each one who meets him realizes that Jesus knows them. He knows their inward thoughts and motives too. Yikes! Watch for that as you read the Gospel accounts. It happens again and again and again.

Cephas means rock. Why in the world would Jesus change Simon's name to "Rock"? Well, let's get to know Peter a little better and we'll see.

You see, Peter saw all the same things that all the other disciples saw. Jesus healing people right and left. Jesus blessing the fish and the loaves to make a spread for 5000 people! Jesus turning a ferocious storm into complete calm. Jesus ordering demons around. And of course Peter's favorite miracle – bringing in the biggest catch of fish ever! Peter heard all the same things the others heard. Like the famous "Sermon on the Mount" that could have only come from the heart of God. And the how Jesus backed the religious leaders up on their heels. Plus all the private talks Jesus had with his disciples.

Plus they all saw Jesus day in and day out. You can't fake perfection. Jesus was walking, breathing, holiness, selflessness, genuine love. Jesus didn't just talk it. He walked it. He loved the Lord His God with all of his heart, all of his soul, all of his mind, and all of his strength, and he loved his neighbor as himself... 24/7.

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Just imagine living side-by-side with God each and every day. Wouldn't it be awesome?! Ask him anything you want. Listen to his wonderful words of love and wisdom. Sense his love and protection for you constantly. As great as it would be, there would be one little problem. You know it would have to reveal your short-comings. Jesus is just so ever-lovin' perfect! At one point, Peter had a melt-down. His sinful self reared its ugly head in a big way. Here's what happened.

Peter and the guys had been fishing all night and hadn't caught one fish. Then they had been helping Jesus all morning. Peter was tired. He was aggravated. He just wanted to go to bed and be mad. Anybody been there? But Jesus told him to go back and put his nets in the water. Now Peter was even madder – he certainly didn't need Jesus to give him a lesson on how to fish! You don't catch fish in the daytime! Everybody knows that! The Bible doesn't show us a picture of the look on Peter's face, but I'm guessing he was not happy about that idea to put the nets back in the water. I think Peter copped an attitude with Jesus. We've all done it. "Ok. Ok. I'll do it. But I'm telling you right now that this is not going to work. Bleep. You are the preacher. I am the fisherman. Bleep! This is my turf. But I'll show you! Bleep Bleep Bleepity Bleep!"

In Peter's defense, he did go back and put in the nets. And, we all know what happened. The nets FILLED with fish immediately. Fish practically jumped into the boat! I know Peter was shaking his head in disbelief

and amazement. But more than that, Jesus was right! And Peter had made a huge fool of himself. He had acted very badly. He had spoken to Jesus so rudely, not at all with the respect Jesus certainly deserved. The other guys were laughing and enjoying the miracle, but not Peter. He felt awful. When Peter got back to shore, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying. "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" Peter figured Jesus would gladly leave. Peter just wasn't up to the task, and they both knew it. He was sinful. Jesus was holy. Like oil and water, they just did not mix. But Jesus was so kind. Jesus didn't even go there. He didn't say one word about what Peter had done. He knew Peter was so sorry. Jesus reassured him, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." In other words, don't feel bad, Peter. I'm not mad. I'm not ashamed of you. Just stay close to me, and I will help you. I want you on my team. We've got a big job to do! So, let's go! And off they went, arm in arm.

As the Bible says, "he who is forgiven much, loves much." It's not so much that Peter was a bigger sinner than the rest. But Peter recognized his sin more. So he recognized his need of forgiveness more. Which meant he loved Jesus all the more.

A long time later, after seeing and hearing Jesus, after living with Him day in and day out, Jesus asked them all these two very important questions. "Who do men say that I am?" The disciples answered that question pretty easily. They didn't have to stick their necks out. They shouted out various answers they had heard –

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“John the Baptist”, “Elijah”, “Jeremiah”, or another prophet.

But then Jesus asked them the second question, which required them to make a commitment. “But who do YOU say that I am?” You, who have been with me every day, day in and day out. I imagine they all just looked at each other, too timid to take a stand. But not our buddy Peter! He piped up... “You are the Christ! You are the Son of the Living God!” It was obvious to Peter. Jesus did all the signs of the Messiah – he made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and the mute to speak. And he brought the Good News! Jesus wasn’t just Jesus, son of Joseph. He was Jesus, Son of the Living God! Peter saw the truth and he spoke it! And that’s why Jesus had renamed Simon to Peter – the ROCK! Peter was as solid as a rock on who Jesus is.

Jesus immediately responded with this positive affirmation, “Blessed are you Simon, son of John, you are blessed for this one reason... because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Your dad did not reveal this to you. Your friends did not convince you of this. It’s not because you’re a smarter than the rest. My Father alone revealed this to you. He impressed this truth upon your heart based on everything you had seen and heard. And you, my brash, feisty, impetuous, spontaneous friend, THAT is why I all you the ROCK. My church will be just like you. My church will stand firmly on this rock of truth. That I am the Christ, the Son of the Living God. They will mess up sometimes.

They will be brash and feisty and impetuous and spontaneous, sometimes, just like you. But nothing will move them from this foundational truth. No matter what others say, they will be rock solid as they stand on this rock of truth.

So Simon was called “Rock”. He wasn’t called Perfect. Or Judge. Or Love. Peter was called Rock. He knew what he knew. He was immovable when it came to what he believed. He believed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And he spoke it when nobody else did.

The things I love about Peter are also the things that get him tangled up. Again, why I relate. As days turn into months and the time drew closer for Jesus to take the battle to Jerusalem, Jesus began to talk more frequently and more openly about the religious leaders putting him to death. Again, Peter just had to open his mouth. Peter took Jesus aside to straighten him out. “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” You know Peter was saying this out of love for Jesus, and love for his kingdom, which he expected to be setup on earth very soon. Poor Peter had no idea he was being a mouthpiece for the enemy!

But Jesus knew. And again he responded immediately to Peter’s words, this time with a stinging rebuke. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Ouch! The Bible doesn’t say how Peter felt, but we can imagine. I’m Jesus’ right hand man! I’m the Rock! How could he say that

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to me? Can't you just see Peter, with a bewildered look on his face, his hands on his forehead, shaking his head, completely thrown off? He was likely thinking, "This doesn't make sense to me at all. I thought Jesus was going to be the King of Israel. How can that happen if he is killed? For the life of me, I just can't figure it out! But I do trust Jesus. I have learned that he does know what he's talking about. Obviously there are some things I just don't understand. I certainly don't want to be a stumbling block to Jesus!" So Peter got back on track. We know he did because on the night when Jesus was betrayed, Peter was all in. He told Jesus he was willing to die for him. I know. I know. He failed miserably. But Peter was willing, at least in his mind. He just didn't realize how weak his flesh was. Note to self: take a lesson from Peter.

Oh, that night of all nights. The last supper... the last time Jesus and his disciples were together before he went to the cross. As usual, we don't have much recorded from what anyone else said, but we do have some of Peter's words. His first words came when Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet. At first, Peter was just watching in disbelief. What was going on?! Jesus wasn't a common house servant! Peter expected the leader to be served, and the servants to do the serving... not the other way around! But when Jesus came to wash his feet, it was just too much for Peter to take! Peter said, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Translation: Are you outta your ever-lovin' mind? What do you think you're doing?!!" Jesus answered and said to him, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will

understand.” We know now, that Jesus was showing them how to humble themselves to serve one another in love. Peter didn’t get that point at all! As usual, good ole Peter spoke first, and asked questions later, “No, you shall never wash my feet.” Don’t you want look Peter in the eyes and ask him when will he ever learn that Jesus knows what he’s doing? (A mirror will work for me.) Jesus answered him, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” Well, just as quickly as Peter had refused Jesus washing his feet, now he wanted Jesus to give him a whole bath! “Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!” You know that made Jesus laugh out loud! Peter was a lot of fun to have around. And he didn’t mind displaying his love for Jesus for everyone to see.

Later during the dinner, Jesus said one of them would betray Him. Peter feared he was the one. He felt like he was always the one messing up. Especially when Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” But Peter said, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” But Jesus knew what would happen, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”

I’m sure Peter’s mind raced in a blur. ‘There’s just no way Jesus is right this time! I would never deny him! He’s my best friend! He knows how much I love him. Is it because I am the one who is going to betray him? Am I no longer “Rock”? Am I out, like I have always

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feared? And how is it that the enemy DEMANDED to test me? I don't want to be sifted like wheat.' I wonder if Peter even heard the rest about how Jesus had prayed for him that his faith wouldn't fail, and that he was to strengthen his brothers. All of this sounded so scary and ominous. But Jesus knew, and as usual, was trying to prepare Peter.

Peter just didn't understand the power of the enemy and his own weakness, apart from God's grace. He hadn't learned to watch and pray so he wouldn't fall to temptation. But he was going to learn that night... the hard way. And he would need that lesson learned for later, when Jesus handed him the keys to the kingdom. He would have to make sure not to drive the kingdom off the cliff!

A bit cocky. Self-reliant. Unprepared. Peter had become so comfortable with the daily routine, he probably never even thought about the next steps ahead. They followed Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus had told them he was going to be betrayed and killed. He warned them to watch out and to pray fervently, so they wouldn't fall under the temptation that was coming. But their tummies were full and their eyes were heavy. And as clear as it looks to us in hindsight, they just didn't get it. They hadn't learned from Jesus' example, how important prayer was. How vital a vital relationship with the Father was. I think that was one reason why Jesus said it was good that he go away. Then they would learn to watch and pray, as he did.

Each time Jesus returned from praying, he would find them sleeping! Peter literally could not explain himself. And Jesus did not ask for an explanation. He always relied on His Father's strength, not theirs. As always, Jesus was so understanding. Never condemning, of course. He gently taught yet another powerful lesson: "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

By then the guards were approaching to arrest Jesus. Of course, now Peter was wide awake! Every time I read this story I just want to scream, "Peter! Stop! Don't do it!" But he does it every time! Peter drew his sword and struck a slave named Malchus. Don't worry. He didn't kill him. He just cut off his ear! Peter was a fisherman, not a warrior. Jesus told him to stop, and just as always, even in the middle of a terrible moment, Jesus was thoughtful and kind. Jesus touched Malchus' ear and healed him. Amazing. By the way, Jesus likely kept Peter from being killed or arrested too! (Jesus gets us out of scrapes all the time.)

Jesus could have scolded Peter by saying, "Dumbie, do you think one sword is going to fight off this huge battalion of soldiers? And do you really think I'm such a poor commander that if this was a sword fight, I wouldn't have been better prepared? Don't you remember anything I've told you about my kingdom? Now look what you've done! You've just caused me more trouble. Now I have to heal Malchus' ear and keep you out of jail!" But of course, Jesus didn't say any of that.

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What he did say was, “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” Jesus never loses His cool. He always speaks faith. And he always speaks truth in love. Always looking out for the good of others. Not only for their physical well-being, but also to help each one walk closely with God.

As Peter stood there with his mouth hanging open, the soldiers arrested Jesus and lead Him away. Peter ran for his life.

In his panic, Peter didn’t know what in the world to do. He ended up doubling back and followed Jesus at a safe distance to Caiaphas’ residence. Peter wasn’t sleepy now, for sure! He warmed himself by the fire in Caiaphas’ courtyard, in such a position that he could see Jesus and Jesus could see him. Peter, a man who always had something to say, didn’t want to talk now. He just wanted to be left alone, but the enemy was going to use a few ordinary people to “sift” Peter. They weren’t going to allow him some quiet time to think... or to pray.

Peter kept remembering what he had just told Jesus only an hour before.... that he was ready to die for him. But he wasn’t. He just couldn’t do it. He was beside himself with fear. We all know what Peter did.

He did exactly what Jesus said he would do. It pains me too much to retell it. As soon as Peter denied Jesus the third time, the Bible says the rooster crowed, and Jesus turned and looked at him. I'm sure they locked eyes. I'm sure Jesus didn't have a condemning or angry look. They both just knew.

Now Peter was beside himself with shame. My heart goes out to Peter. He was sick to his stomach over what he had done. He had denied even knowing his best friend. The best friend of all friends! With expletives, to boot! But he just couldn't muster the courage to do anything else. All he could think of was getting out of there. And he did. He ran as fast as he could. The Bible says Peter wept bitterly.

Jesus prayed for Peter.

So Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, wasn't there when Jesus went through the mock trials, or when He was beaten mercilessly, or when the crowds yelled to crucify him, or when he carried the cross to Golgotha. Peter wasn't even there when Jesus was dying. Peter was hiding. He was crying. He was miserable. He couldn't face his fears. And he certainly couldn't face Jesus. Oh Peter. When we don't run right back to Jesus after we have failed, we are miserable, until we do. Until we see his face of kindness and understanding and forgiveness... When will we learn to run back to him immediately?

Remember Jesus' words? The enemy was going to "sift" Peter. That sifting stuff is painful. I have a sifter

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in my kitchen that grinds flour back and forth, back and forth, with an awful scraping sound, until all the pieces go through those tiny little holes. Then I toss the hard parts. That was what was happening to Peter. Thursday night... Friday... Saturday... Sunday. You know he couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat a bite. And you know he probably didn't say two words. He didn't feel like he could pray. He didn't even feel like a disciple of Jesus anymore. He was hopeless. I'm sure he just stared and wept. Until Sunday.

But then the women burst through the door! They were so excited... talking so fast that the disciples could hardly understand what they were saying! They said they had seen an angel, and the angel said that Jesus was not in the tomb, but that he had risen from the dead!

And get this! The angels had one more very important message: "Tell his disciples AND PETER, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'." Well isn't that just something else? Even the angels knew about Peter's failure! They even knew that Peter felt like he was no longer one of Jesus' disciples. So Jesus gave them a very special message just for Peter, as if they were saying, "You ARE still one of his disciples. You are still his dear friend. You are still Peter, the Rock. Jesus is not mad. He wants to see you. Yes... he wants to see you, Peter."

I'm sure, after hearing this message Peter wept even louder! And shook his head, completely stupefied.

He probably buried his head in John's chest and cried like a baby. And then John probably said something like, "Hey Bro, let's go see the tomb for ourselves!" So off they ran as fast as they could to the tomb. The Bible says John got there first, but he didn't go inside. When Peter got there, he rushed right inside the tomb. Typical Peter. Good ole Peter is back! They were still scared, but they believed. All the words Jesus had told them started rushing back to their memories. They started putting it all together, scratching their heads.

You know Peter had so many thoughts racing through his head. "Jesus is alive! Jesus said this would happen, but we just didn't get it. I'm so relieved that he wants to see me... but how am I going to face him? What am I going to say? I have no explanation for myself. Except that I'm sorry. But I'm not running this time. That was just too awful. I believe Jesus loves me. I believe he has forgiven me, even for this. And, I just can't wait to see him."

I'm so glad Peter's back. I love his antics. I love his impetuosity. I love how he openly expresses his wild, enthusiastic, fanatical love for Jesus! And I love the story of one of Jesus' appearances to the disciples! You see, when the disciples arrived in Galilee, as Jesus had instructed them to do, Jesus wasn't there! After maybe a few days of staring at each other, Peter decided to go fishing. The others went along. They didn't even catch one fish, all night. Sound familiar? At daybreak, someone hollered from shore, "Caught anything?" "Nah." "Cast your net on the other side of

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the boat.” Again, sound familiar? Without thinking, they followed the instructions, and immediately the net was full of fish!

Peter still didn’t get it. Sometimes I think he was called “Rock”, because his head was full of rocks! John spoke the obvious. “It’s Jesus!” “What?! Jesus?!” When Peter finally understood that it was Jesus on the shore, he literally could not wait to see Jesus! The NASB version puts it, “Peter threw himself into the sea!” Can’t you just see it? Peter hurled himself into the water, swimming wildly to shore to be with Jesus! Cloak and all! I can see him flailing and fighting through all that fabric to get to Jesus. But he made it there before the rest! Don’t you know that made Jesus laugh? “That’s my Peter! That’s my Rock. Peter, you don’t even know what you mean to me. You are truly a man after my heart. You make my heart smile.” And when Peter got there, I imagine they shared a huge bear hug... and Jesus got soaked!

Jesus already had a fish breakfast on the grill, and the men added some they had caught. Just like old times. But not exactly. Everybody knew things were different. Jesus has completed His mission, and He was not going to be around as before.

After breakfast, Jesus and Peter talked. It’s one of the most poignant conversations in the entire Bible. “Simon, son of John, do you—love me more than these?” (I think Jesus was asking Peter if he loved him more than fish and fishing.) Peter said, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Tend my

lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Shepherd my sheep.” Jesus said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And Peter said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” Every time I read that passage, my heart aches with Peter’s when Jesus asks the third time, just like Peter’s three denials. But Jesus wasn’t saying it to be cruel, or to bring up a grudge... or to hurt up Peter’s wounded conscience. Jesus was lovingly reminding Peter, ever so gently, to walk closely with him. To stay humble, and to watch and pray, because their relationship was far too precious to risk. To remind Peter that there are worse things than pain and death, namely, guilt and shame. And to focus his time and energy on loving and taking care of his people. That was why Simon was named “Rock”, in the first place.

Jesus gave Peter a big job... he gave him the keys of his kingdom, to get his Church started rolling down the road. Makes you wonder? Yes, and it gives us hope that if Jesus can use Peter, he can use us too!

Jesus also gave Peter special insight into his future. Maybe Peter would rather not have known. “Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not

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want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, 'Follow me!'" And when the time came for Peter to be put to death for his faith, he followed humbly and obediently. He watched and prayed. And he came through victorious!

How blessed Peter was to be a close friend of Jesus. To walk with him every day. The good news is that we can too. Imagine Jesus saying this to Peter.... and to you.

Peter, you have always been a great friend. Even before we met face to face, I liked the way you worked hard to take care of your family, through the night, through hot days, whether you caught any fish or not. I like how you speak your mind, even if you're not always right. And you're always willing to learn. I'm so glad you were by my side, day in and day out, for those three years. You made me laugh, and shake my head with delight all the time. You helped me keep going, even when I was physically spent.

I know how you struggle against sin. Your spirit is willing, but your flesh is weak. So you've got to stay close to me. Remember, if you stumble, don't run from me. Run to me! You know I will forgive you and give you the strength to get going again. Watch and pray, so you won't fall to temptation.

You're going to have to be a leader now. I'm handing you the keys. You will build my Church on the rock of who I am - the Christ, the Son of the Living God - just

as our Father in Heaven revealed to you. It will be a big job tending my flock. But don't worry. I will be right there leading you. Follow me just as you have for the past three years. You are going to see some amazing things happen right before your very eyes. People will believe and their lives will be transformed. Some won't believe, and you will catch some flack on account of me. Tend them. Shepherd them. Love them. Just as you have watched me love them.

Remember this. I love you. And I know you love me too. When I asked you if you loved me, I was reaffirming our friendship. That's what friends do. I was also asking to make sure that YOU knew. Our close relationship will keep you strong for the big job ahead. I will always, always, always be with you. When the time comes, for you to come home with me, I will be with you then too. It will be hard, but my strength will get you through it. Before you know it, we will be together again. Then, it will be forever!

I love you,

JESUS

Chapter 6 Bread Crumbs

*Then Jesus said to her,
"Woman, you have great faith!
Your request is granted."
And her daughter was
healed at that moment.
(Matthew 15:25-28)*

By the title of this chapter, you might be wondering if this is a cookbook! Nope. I doubt I will ever write a cookbook. That would be another miracle! I'll tell you about the bread crumbs later.

This chapter is about a woman who was desperate. We don't know her name, so will call her Cari. Cari was at the end of her rope. Her daughter had been taken over by the enemy. The Bible doesn't say exactly what was happening to her daughter. She could have been a young child, or maybe she was grown. The writer didn't tell us. In a sadly similar story, the enemy would continually tempt a young man to commit suicide... making him throw himself into the fire or the water. Was that the case with Cari's daughter? Or was she like the story of the oppressed woman who continually followed Paul, yelling out whatever the evil one prompted her to say? Maybe Cari's daughter couldn't speak at all. Or maybe she was living an abusive lifestyle of drugs, or alcohol, or promiscuity, or other illegal activities, or all of that. Whatever it was, Cari was desperate to get help for her daughter.

We know that Cari was a Canaanite, and her culture practiced witchcraft and worshipped false gods, opening the door to demonic activity. Just as we can open the door to the Holy Spirit, we

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can also open the door to the spirit of the enemy. Jesus taught us to pray “Deliver us from the evil one”. Let’s do that. Maybe Cari had toyed with “fire” and her daughter was getting burned. Maybe she felt responsible that her actions or inactions had put her daughter in terrible danger. Maybe Cari had been pleading with her daughter for years, to no use. Her daughter was caught in a web and she couldn’t get herself out.

Whatever the case, this situation could not be solved with some “self-help” book. As Jesus told the disciples when they failed to cast out a demon, “This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting”. In other words, to help someone be delivered from the enemy’s grip, you must walk in complete faith and surrender with the Father. No quick little rote prayer will rescue someone tangled up in sin. It will take “the effective, fervent prayer of the righteous”. Sin is sticky and tricky. The harder we pull by our strength to extricate ourselves, the tighter the knots become. We need the Lord’s mighty power to untangle the knots. The Bible says “sin so easily entangles us,” and boy, that’s true. Worse yet, when we’re caught in the tangle of sin, whether it is anger or pride or lust or selfishness, our consciences stop working. We end up accepting and justifying anything! And

worse even still, we don't even want to be delivered.

Lord, help us. Deliver us from the evil one.

Cari's daughter was not coming to Jesus herself. Maybe she couldn't. Maybe she wouldn't. But her mom just had to. Cari realized the danger her daughter was in. And she'd likely tried everything else. Canaanite prayers to the Canaanite gods, Canaanite religious ceremonies, Canaanite doctors, maybe even Canaanite witch doctors, medication, counseling, badgering...who knows? She had given up hope on any solution except for one. The true and living God's solution.

But there was another problem. Cari was not in God's family. She was an outsider. She had worshipped lots of gods... mostly ones that let her to live as she liked. But she didn't even know who the true and living God was, much less how to pray to him. Cari had never been taught the Word of God. She certainly didn't have a Bible, or even a part of one. Yes, she'd heard of the Israelites and their God who worked miracles. She'd heard about this God delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt with great wonders, like parting the Red Sea, and the people walking through on dry land. Cari had heard that he worked wonders for THEM. Not for her.

Cari lived north of Israel in Syrophenicia, so how did she even know about this miracle-working Jesus? There were no TV evangelists, no Christian bookstores at her shopping centers. Her parents hadn't taught her the ways of the true God. She certainly didn't go to a Christian or Hebrew school! Maybe she heard through the grapevine about this great man who came from God who knew everything about everyone, and genuinely cared about and loved them unconditionally. Maybe the good news started with our Samaritan sister at the well and travelled like wildfire hundreds of miles right to her! Or maybe news spread about a man who was making the blind to see and the lame to walk... a man who cast out demons! Maybe she'd heard of a Roman centurion whose servant was healed by Jesus, and Jesus didn't even have to go see the servant! Maybe Cari had heard that this man said he didn't come for the healthy, but for the sick... for the down and out, and the desperate. A man who touched the hearts of men and women and children....and those possessed by the enemy!

Hope.

Cari no doubt had heard enough about Jesus that it sparked hope in her heart. Would this God have pity on her, even though she had broken his

laws? Would he rescue her and her daughter? Could she somehow be included in this great God's blessings? Would he extend his great love she'd heard about, even to her and her daughter? He did for the Samaritan woman. He knew all of that woman's faults, but he loved her anyway and transformed her life. He healed people who couldn't do anything for him in return. She had heard that Jesus didn't care at all what the establishment thought of him.

Hope.

So what was Cari's plan of action? She was going to have to reach out to Jesus. And she couldn't just touch the hem of his cloak like the woman with the issue of blood did. That wouldn't help her daughter. Cari was going to have to be as bold as a lion. But as humble as a little child. She knew very well that she didn't deserve anything from him. She realized his high and lofty position, and she realized her lowly position, even though to look at him outwardly, there seemed to be no difference between them. But he was special. One-of-a-kind. He held great power in his hands. More than that, he was compassionate – he was the embodiment of love. She felt that she could go to him, without credentials, completely empty-handed, and he would help her.

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And guess what? Jesus was in her hometown! It was extremely rare for Jesus to be outside Israel, so this was her opportunity to see him. Here was the answer to her hopes and dreams... the answer to her prayers that she didn't even know how to pray. But Jesus had surely prayed for her and her daughter. He had heard them crying. No doubt, Jesus was coming all this way for them, because he heard their cries. That's what Jesus does.

"Ok...here's the plan. I'm going to search until I find him and when I do, I will beg for mercy – I don't deserve his favor, so the only thing to do is beg. I will recognize him as the Master, the Lord, the One who rules over all things. And I have heard that he is the promised Son of David, the Messiah that the Israelites have been waiting for. So that's what I will call him... Son of David. Maybe he will save us. Just maybe he's coming here because he cares about us too!"

As Cari was searching for Jesus, she was reciting over and over what she would say when she found him. And, then, as if it was a dream, there he was. She could tell it was Jesus, even by the way he walked... his every step conveyed humility and gentleness. No arrogant, authoritarian gait, like the religious leaders she knew of. There was no doubt in her mind that this man had the power to help her and her daughter. She could

tell just by the gentle expression on his face that he was trustworthy. He was her hope. She had given up hope on any other way to rescue her daughter. No one else could help. So she took a deep breath, gathered her courage, and whispered to herself, “Here goes... I will make a fool of myself begging if I have to. I won’t take no for an answer.”

In case you have never heard this story before, I want to warn you to sit tight. This story doesn’t go as you might expect... as you are familiar with Jesus responding to those in need. But by the end of the story, you will see that Jesus had a very good and loving reason for everything he did. So, with that said, here goes.

It seems as if Jesus and the disciples were walking somewhere. Cari tried to get Jesus’ attention by crying out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed”. But Jesus didn’t say a word to her. He completely ignored her. What? She kept following them and calling out louder. Maybe she thought he didn’t hear her the first few times. Still, no response. What?! From what Cari had heard about Jesus, this didn’t make any sense at all. And this doesn’t sound like the Jesus we know either! I wonder what was going through her mind. “Is this the great man I have heard about? Where’s the love?”

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Where's the compassion?" Did Cari stomp off in a huff? She could have allowed pride to well up inside her, saying "I deserve respect – I don't have to be treated like this!" Well, Cari could have, but this mom would do whatever she had to do, bear any insult, to save her daughter from torment.

I think that even though Jesus' outward actions appeared harsh and unloving, Cari was confident that he was kind and compassionate. She was likely confused, but there is no indication that she was put off in the slightest. Cari didn't care if she had to make a fool of herself. Her pride was pretty much gone anyway, since her pride and joy had been overcome by that evil spirit. All that Cari had been through with her daughter, had taught her that pride is the enemy to healing. She wanted her daughter to be well. How she was treated just did not matter.

So Cari kept pleading. She doubled her efforts. She kept begging. She must have made a pretty good scene because the disciples were the first to pipe up. They were sick of hearing her voice. They asked Jesus to send her away. They really didn't care so much whether he helped her or not... they just wanted her to be gone! But Jesus was doing something. He always is. And it is good for us to remember that, especially when we don't get a quick response to our prayers.

When the disciples asked Jesus to send her away, Jesus only responded to the disciples, but likely Cari heard him. He said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Cari knew that. She wasn't a Jew. She had no rights to the blessings. She didn't deserve for him to give her the time of day. But she didn't turn and leave discouraged because of the facts. She redoubled her redoubled efforts! She fell at his feet begging, "Lord, help me"! She couldn't argue the facts... she could only beg. She pled on the basis of her need. She needed help desperately. She needed his help. If he didn't help her, she and her daughter were finished... hopeless.

Cari's persistence reminds me of another story Jesus told about a poor widow who needed help in the worst way. She kept badgering this unrighteous judge, but he just wouldn't pay her any attention. The poor widow knocked on his door into the middle of the night! He finally gave her what she wanted, basically to shut her up. That story teaches us that when we don't at first get what we ask for in prayer, we are to keep asking, and to keep on asking some more. He is stretching our faith. Strengthening our trust in him. Isaiah 30:18 says, "The Lord longs to be gracious to you". Many times, he longs to give us our request, but he is patiently waiting, so he can

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draw out our faith. By not answering immediately, he is working in us a trust in him, that he is faithful and has us safe in the palm of his hands. He wants us to be mature, not spoiled children who pout and fuss when we don't get our way. He wants us to look to him and walk with him in humble, patient, peaceful obedience, as our Heavenly Father. He wants us to ask and keep on asking, in recognition of the fact that our help comes from him.

The Psalms are filled with prayers where the writer feels like God is not answering, and the writer doesn't understand what's going on. Why is God taking so long? Ever felt like that? You pray and you pray for something, but nothing happens. Is God listening? Does he care? Listen to Psalm 22.

*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Far from my deliverance
are the words of my groaning.
O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer;
And by night, but I have no rest.
Yet You are holy,
O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
In You our fathers trusted;
They trusted and You delivered them.
To You they cried out and were delivered;
In You they trusted and were not disappointed."*

There are things in everyone's life where a prayer, or maybe several prayers, have not been answered yet.

The Lord has the power to act. We know he's loving. But he says, "No". Or maybe he says, "Not now". The waiting can be agonizing. When will he answer? Like the one who wrote Psalm 28,

*"To You, O LORD, I call; My rock, do not be deaf to me,
For if You are silent to me, I will become like those who
go down to the pit."*

Cari felt like that. And we have too. We know he's the only one who can truly help us. It's no use looking for help somewhere else. If he doesn't help, we're done for. But we have to wait.

Did you realize that Jesus knows the feeling of not being answered by his Heavenly Father? You might say, "Well, that's ridiculous! He and his Father were One. His Father would move heaven and earth, 'lest he strike his holy foot on a little stone!' "That's true But did you realize that Psalm 22 was what Jesus prayed when he was on the cross? He felt forsaken because He WAS forsaken. His Father ignored Him. God the Father was gone from Jesus' presence and Jesus' prayers were not answered. At least not immediately. So Jesus knows what it feels like. Whenever you're feeling alone and forgotten, or even forsaken, he understands.

So this story too, teaches us to remember that our Heavenly Father is up to something good for us when he does not answer. He is not being cruel. He is not toying with us. He has a perfect purpose. And he promises that his grace is enough to see us through.

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He truly will never leave us or forsake us, even if it doesn't feel that way.

So, back to our story. Cari was begging for help at Jesus' feet. What was Jesus going to say now? I know Jesus' heart went out to her, and he wanted to give her what she begged for. Remember, "He longs to be gracious..." I am sure he was praying for Cari the whole time. But he is so wise, and so patient, and so strong to wait. He drew out her faith even more. What Jesus said next sounds shocking. Even rude. Callous. Heartless. So buckle your seat belt. He said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Ouch! That stings! In other words, "You don't belong to me. You're not in my family. Even if I wanted to, it wouldn't be good to give you what belongs to my children. Even worse... you're a dog." A dog! Did Jesus call Cari a dog?! You see, the Jews called the Canaanites "dogs"... and not in a flattering way at all. "Gentile dogs" was their derogatory term for these people they despised, and the Jews thought God despised the Gentiles too. (Side note: whenever we get so uppity as to think God is finished with someone, just wait and see. That person may be just the one he's going to reach down and save!) Jesus went there. Oh yes he did! The Israelites were the children; Cari was the outside wild dog. It's just as outrageous as it sounds. But sit tight. Jesus was not being cruel. He was testing her faith. Would she walk away? Would she give up? Honestly, what would you have done?

The fact is, by and large, the Canaanites were a pretty wild bunch. And Cari had been complicit with the Canaanite lifestyle... until now. Now she wanted no more of it. Cari wanted to be “transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son.” She’d had a bellyful of these false gods, and it has come to a very bad end. Cari realized she was guilty along with her people. She had been living like a dog. A dog-eat-dog lifestyle. But that was all over... if Jesus would take her in. She didn’t want to have her cake and eat it too... to get the answer to her request, and then go back to living like the devil. If she did, Cari knew she would be right back in the same mess! She wanted all of Jesus. The blessings and the obedience. Wherever he would lead, she would go.

How do I know that is where Cari’s heart was? Because “out of the mouth, the heart speaks”. We know what is going on in someone’s heart pretty easily... it comes right out of their mouth! What was Cari’s response when Jesus called her a dog? A quick one! She didn’t take time to calculate her answer... her answer came straight from her heart. From a place of deep humility. “You’re right, Master, but dogs do feed on the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” Woah....Wow....Wowie. In other words, “You’re right Lord. You don’t owe me a thing. But I’m asking for crumbs, scraps, the leftovers, the leavings’. I’ll take whatever the children don’t want. I’m not asking to be seated at the table. I’ll gladly sit on the floor nearby and gather up the crumbs.” And did you notice that Cari changed her status from the outside wild dog to the family pet? Wow! Cari desperately

Bread Crumbs

wanted in the family! Even if she was just the family pet! Cari was ready for God. She wasn't claiming any rights... she was admitting her wrongs... coming clean and completely empty-handed. That's the kind of heart the Lord can work with! That's the kind of heart the Spirit of God has already been working in! The Lord had used all the suffering Cari had been through with her daughter, to make her heart tender and receptive to Jesus. What a beautiful thing! What a precious gift is a heart that has no hardness left in it!

Well that was it! Jesus couldn't hold back a moment longer. They both now knew what changes had taken place in Cari's heart. Jesus knew what he had worked in her. Now she knew too. What a proud papa Jesus was! He was so touched by her tender heart... he was overwhelmed! If I'm getting teary-eyed thinking about it, I know Jesus must have. "Oh woman, your faith is great!" Whoa! That's high praise coming from Jesus! He didn't pass out those giant trophies of praise to every little-leaguer. Jesus had tested her faith... tested it really hard... and she passed the test! She made Jesus shake his head in amazement. "Be it done for you as you wish." He was so happy to grant her request! He loves to say yes! Cari's daughter was healed at once. Cari got what she came for, and then some. Her daughter was all well.... no doubt a shining example of the grace of God. Their lives were never the same again. The Holy Spirit was ruling their home, and the blessings began to flow there, and out to countless others, to be sure!

Best of all, Jesus was proud of her. What could be better? For the one whom angels adore and the whole earth bows before, as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords... to look into her eyes, shake his head and say "YOUR FAITH IS GREAT!"

We don't have a letter from Jesus to that woman, but if he had written one, I think he would say something like this:

Cari, I'm so proud of you! You have learned from our Heavenly Father to move heaven and earth, to do whatever it takes to save your little one. This love came straight from his heart. The love and courage in your heart came from him, because you are his special child. You are not an outsider. You do get to sit at the table and eat of all my sumptuous feast. Because you were willing to take the crumbs, now you get to enjoy it all! You are in my family. You and your daughter are my precious daughters! Both of you are loved with an everlasting love. Do you know that you are loved like that? You don't have to worry about being in the enemy's kingdom any more. He can't hurt you anymore. You're safe in my kingdom. Nothing can separate you from my love. Believe it. Rest. You are safe.

And this is only the beginning. Just wait and see... you will see blessings to you and to your daughter and to your family and to your friends! Everyone you meet will be blessed as I live through you. There won't be any mistaking it. You are mine and everyone will know it. We will walk through life together. Just

Bread Crumbs

follow me. I am humble in heart. I am the servant of all, even though I created the heavens and the earth. Just follow in my steps. Come what may, trust me. I will never leave you, or your daughter.

I love you.

JESUS

Chapter 7 Poor Bartimaeus

A blind man, Bartimaeus, was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Jesus stopped and said, "Call him."

So they called to the blind man, "Cheer up! On your feet! He's calling you." Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

(Mark 10:46-50)

Poor Bartimaeus

Once upon a time... all the good stories start like that, so I just had to write that. Long ago, in a far away land... I know... Get serious. There was a town called Jericho. Famous Jericho, where the walls came a tumblin' down. Who doesn't love that story and the cute kids' song that goes with it? Joshua won a great victory without firing a shot, rather, shooting an arrow. All God's people did was SHOUT! What a miracle! The walls of Jericho literally tumbled down! With a LOUD SHOUT from God's people! Remember that. It's important in our story.

But that was very, very long ago. It was even long ago for our long ago story of poor blind Bartimaeus. Same town... fast forward a thousand years. (Actually 1400 years).

I wonder what it's like to live in a city with such a historic history? The miracle-working God worked one of His mightiest miracles right there! I wonder if that elevated the lives of the citizens of Jericho. I wonder if they believed in God working miracles in their lives. That he was still well able to do miracles. It looks like from our story, that maybe they are. I like how the book of Luke records the story.... "Jesus and the disciples entered the city, and when they left there was a crowd with them." I like that. It was as if Jesus picked up people as he walked through Jericho like a magnet picks up pieces of iron. Before he left the city, he had a throng around him. We are drawn to Jesus like that. We just can't stay away. Gotta hear his words. Gotta be near him. Like breathing.

We don't know exactly what Jesus did while He was on that trip to Jericho. It appears that the people gladly received him and his wonders. It appears Jesus left them wanting more, so they never left him! Jericho was Zacchaeus' town, which is another story, for another chapter. It would be quite a miracle if each citizen of Jericho was transformed by Jesus the way Zacchaeus was! Some towns didn't want the transformation that Jesus brought, but it looks like Jericho did. Good for Jericho!

But Jesus didn't stay; he had a big job to do. He had to keep moving. Once city and then another, until he and his helpers went all throughout Israel.

As Jesus was leaving town, there was poor blind Bartimaeus sitting by the road. I call him "Poor Bartimeaus" because I read a children's book to my daughters so many times that I still have it memorized, all these years later. "Poor Bartimaeus. His eyes were sick. He couldn't see the town. He couldn't see the people. He couldn't see the children. Poor Bartimaeus." My daughter, Kristen, was only two, but she could turn the pages, and "read" the story word-for-word, from memory, of course! When our friends saw her, they thought she was really reading the book! It was a hoot!

But back to our story about poor Bartimaeus. He certainly was "poor Bartimaeus". What must it be like to be blind? To live in total darkness? I don't know if it would be worse to have had sight for a little while, and then to lose it, or to have never seen the

Poor Bartimaeus

light of day. Either way, my heart goes out to anyone who is blind. Let's thank the Lord for our eyesight right now. As I write this, I am sitting on my back patio enjoying the beautiful spring flowers, and the cardinals that keep returning for birdseed from our feeder, and our cute dachshunds that make me laugh. I am able to enjoy writing this story and reading God's Word and surfing the net for inspiration. I am able to see my beautiful daughters and look into my wonderful husband's eyes. And on and on and on.

Thank You, Lord.

But Bartimaeus' eyes were sick. He couldn't do any of that. Of course, people who are blind in this day of marvelous technological advances can do much more than Bart could to live meaningful, productive, fulfilling lives. But Bart sat by the road to Jericho, because that was pretty much all he could do. Sit. And beg. Every day. Bart could hear what was going on around him, but not really participate. Every day, he spread a garment out around him and shouted for coins, and then he would listen for coins to land. That way people didn't have to get near him or risk touching him. Poor Bartimaeus.

One thing Bart had going for him was this: he didn't mind begging. That might sound a little strange. But, it sure did come in handy when Jesus walked by. That's really our only stance before God. And it's a blessing to be willing to beg from God. The religious leaders thought they were too good to beg. The people of Nazareth weren't about to beg from this

whippersnapper they'd known from childhood! The people of Bethsaida didn't think they needed God for anything. They felt fine on their own. The Gerasenes did beg. They begged Jesus to leave, rather than beg him to stay and do bless them with his words and miracles!

But Bart knew better. He knew he needed a miracle. He needed Jesus. Bart couldn't read God's Word for himself... this was way before Braille was invented, or audio Bibles, or the internet! But he had learned enough to know that when the Messiah came, he would work miracles. Bart probably knew Isaiah 35 by heart:

*“Say to those with fearful hearts,
“Be strong, and do not fear,
for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.
He is coming to save you.*

*And when he comes, he will
open the eyes of the blind and
unplug the ears of the deaf.
The lame will leap like a deer,
and those who cannot speak
will sing for joy!”
(Isaiah 35:4-6 NLT)*

I just know Bart was one of those fearful hearts who had taken courage by this promise in Isaiah. He knew God worked miracles. He lived in Jericho for Goodness sakes! So when he heard news that Jesus

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was making the lame to leap and unplugging deaf ears, he knew Jesus could also open the eyes of the blind! His eyes! Bart must have been so excited to hear that the Son of David had come in his lifetime! I imagine Bart asking the Lord not only to send coins flying his way, but to send the Messiah his way too!

Every day, Bart's hope was, today could be the day! "One of these days, the Messiah will come by me in answer to my prayers. And when he does, here's what I will do. I will recognize him as the "Son of David", the promised Messiah. Because the Son of David is the one who can open the eyes of the blind! I'm going to make the biggest scene I've EVER made. I will SHOUT as loud as my ancestors did 1400 years ago when they made the walls of Jericho come tumblin' down!" That's what I would have done if I had been Bartimaeus! Bart kept that hope alive day after day after day.

So one day, just like any other day, Bart was sitting in his usual spot, and he began to hear a big commotion. You just know Jesus was coming straight through Jericho, right by Bartimaeus, in answer to Bart's prayers. Passing by Bartimaeus was no coincidence. This was divine appointment. When we pray, the Lord sends answers walking right in front of us! That's reason enough to pray without ceasing! Look at Jesus, acting all coy, as if he's just happening along. As if he was passing by Bart and he wasn't going to stop!

I wonder if Bart hoped against hope that maybe this could be Jesus. Blind people see with their ears, so when Bart heard the crowd, he asked, "What is happening?" He probably had to ask several times before anyone paid him any attention. Folks are blind to the blind... and to beggars. But Bartimaeus kept on asking, "What is happening? Tell me! Tell me, WHAT is happening?!" I can still hear my 2-year old shouting "What is happening?!" as she "read", and see the wide-open mouth of Bartimaeus in the storybook.

"It's Jesus! He's coming this way!" Immediately, Bartimaeus put his plan into action! He didn't know which way to go, so he just stayed put where he was sitting. He knew better than to find Jesus by wandering aimlessly. But, remember, Bart had another thing going for him. Bart SHOUTED for a living! And he let her rip! "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" He usually shouted for coins, but this time Bart took his shouting up a notch or two. He kept shouting, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" over and over and over. Now was no time to be shy! He was not going to miss this once in a lifetime opportunity. Bart was going to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" until Jesus, the Son of David, had mercy on him! He didn't care what anyone thought. He didn't care if some didn't believe that Jesus was the promised Son of David. Bartimaeus was blind, but he could see that if Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Messiah, He WAS the Messiah!

The people told Bart, "Be quiet!" Looks like Bartimaeus annoyed the people. Looks like they

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usually just tried to ignore him. They'd probably heard him begging for years, and they were used to telling him to pipe down. Bart, you don't matter. You're just a beggar on the streets. We really just wish you would be quiet and go away. You obviously don't matter to God either. We don't need eyes to see that he doesn't care about you either.

Lord, save us from such cold indifference!

And the Bible says that MANY people yelled at Bart to zip it! "Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet", it says. You have got to be kidding me! How could they be so cruel to try to stop Bart from getting help from Jesus?! How sad. They might feel differently if they were the ones sitting on the side of the road, blind and begging. How callous the people were to Bart's suffering!

Lord, help us to open our eyes to people around us and their needs.

Hello?! Bart was not just an annoyance. He was blind! But the people were so blind! Why didn't they realize this was the perfect opportunity for Jesus to give Bartimaeus his sight? Is it because they had walked right past him for so long, his being anyone but "Blind Bartimaeus" didn't even cross their minds? Is it because they were so slow to believe that God could do miracles? Is it because it is just so hard to love our neighbors as ourselves? Or all of the above... Ugh!

Lord, help us to believe that you can transform any life. Help us to reach out to each one and give them hope in your ability to rescue! Help us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves!

Bart didn't pay the people any attention. He SHOUTED all the louder! Just like when the walls came tumblin' down with a LOUD SHOUT long, long ago! Bartimaeus SHOUTED with all his might!

Somehow, above all the noise of the crowd, Jesus heard Bartimaeus' cries. Jesus has extra sensitive hearing to the cries of those who need him. Especially those who call him with a humble heart. And especially when they acknowledge him for who he truly is.... the Son of David... the Promised Messiah... Jesus, the Christ. Of course, Jesus had been waiting... longing... to help Bart, so he was straining his ears to hear Bart's voice calling him. Jesus had heard Bart so many times whispering to him in prayer. Now Jesus was going to answer that prayer. And that is what Jesus just LOVES to do!

The Bible says Jesus stopped. Funny how the people told Bartimaeus to stop shouting, but the one who stopped in his tracks was Jesus! He wasn't moving one more inch until he took care of Bartimaeus. And Jesus wasn't leaving until he taught these folks a lesson that Bartimaeus was important to him! He was not a nuisance to Jesus. Bart was his friend. And Jesus loved him.

Poor Bartimaeus

Jesus told the people to have Bartimaeus come to him. Jesus could have easily walked over to Bart, or even healed him without even stopping. But Jesus was getting the people to reach out to Bartimaeus! “Come on Y’all. Join my team. Yeah, go get that guy. The one that you all think is so unimportant. The one you’re all yelling at to stop shouting. Yeah, him... bring him to me.” I just love Jesus. Well, now the crowd jumped on the Bart bandwagon! “Hey, old pal, Bartimaeus! We’ve got great news! Jesus is calling you!” I imagine how quickly they changed their tune. I picture them now hurrying to help Bart find Jesus. Maybe someone who wanted to appear kind-hearted even escorted Bart to Jesus. Nothing like fickle. Gives you a warm fuzzy feeling inside... like nausea.

Bart didn’t care about any of that! Jesus was calling him! Little old blind beggar Bartimaeus! Jesus was going to heal him! Any help to get to Jesus was good help, as far as Bart was concerned! He threw aside his garment, sprang up like a rocket, and hurried to Jesus! Coins went flying! Bart didn’t care about the coins either! He was getting to Jesus fast, and that was all that mattered!

In short order, Bartimaeus was standing right in front of Jesus. I bet you could hear a pin drop! And if anybody made a noise, they were probably told to zip it! Jesus looked into Bart’s eyes that were so cold and dead. He asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” Does that seem like a funny question to anybody besides me? Duh. The eyesight thing. Of course, Jesus knew what Bartimaeus wanted. And of

course, Jesus could have healed him without Bart saying a word. But Jesus was showing Bartimaeus tremendous respect. Bart, the one no one paid attention to, the one everyone dismissed and discounted, and didn't even consider worth the time for Jesus to heal. Bart, the one "many rebuked and told to be quiet". Jesus wanted to hear what Bart had to say. Jesus cared about Bart. Not just his eyes. Bartimaeus was important to Jesus.

Bart couldn't see Jesus, just like he never could see him when he prayed. But Bart knew this was his Lord. Have you ever noticed that when Bart was face-to-face with Jesus, he didn't call him, "Son of David"? Bart called Jesus, "Lord". You are my Lord. You're Lord of my life. Lord of my eyesight. Lord of my days spent sitting by the roadside. "Lord, I want to receive my sight." That's what I want. Well, Jesus didn't have Bartimaeus wait one second longer. Jesus healed him right on the spot. Jesus said, "Your faith has healed you." You didn't let the cruel words stop you from shouting my name. You didn't harden your heart against me because of your affliction. You believed I am the promised Son of David. You didn't let anything keep you from me. That is true faith, Bartimaeus.

And remember the precious children's book? It ends this way.... Bartimaeus could see the town. He could see the people. He could see the children. And Bartimaeus could see..... JESUS!

Poor Bartimaeus

Imagine that! The first thing Bart saw when his eyes were opened was Jesus! Jesus' smiling face. The face Bart had been praying to. The face he had been longing to see for so, so long. The face of his best friend, who loved him just as he was. I imagine Bart looking into Jesus' eyes and both of them knowing that they had been friends for a very long time. I imagine them both smiling, as Jesus put his arm around Bart's shoulders, and showed him all the people, and then he showed Bart the city of Jericho, and then he showed Bart the roadside where he had been sitting. Looking at these for the very first time with his brand new eyes!

And then Jesus showed Bartimaeus the road he was leaving on. Jesus told Bart to go his way in peace. But Bartimaeus wanted to go with Jesus. And that sounded like a great idea to Jesus too! So that's what Bart did. Bart had his sight and a new life, far from sitting beside the road as a blind beggar. And he got to see Jesus every day!

Bart was part of Jesus' entourage that followed him wherever he went. These folks just wouldn't leave his side. They wanted to listen and learn and just be near him. I wonder if Bart was one of those who followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem. I wonder if Bart was in the middle of the crowd that yelled to crucify Jesus, and he saw how fickle the crowds were to Jesus. I wonder if Bart saw with his own eyes the horrific sight of Jesus on the cross. Maybe Bart locked eyes with Jesus, and Jesus was encouraged. I wonder if Bart got

to see Jesus after he was raised from the dead! Now wouldn't THAT be a sight?!

If Jesus wrote Bartimaeus a letter, it would probably be something like this one. And Bart could read it for himself!

Bartimaeus, you are the finest example of great eyesight I know! And I'm talking about before I gave you your physical eyesight. Even though you were blind, you saw that I was the Messiah. You saw that I was your Lord. You saw that people's cruel words didn't matter a hill of beans. You saw that following me, and helping others see my love was better than staying in Jericho and being a rock star! And I have been using your life to teach those lessons for thousands of years!

I am still praying for the blind to receive their sight. To see spiritual things. So many walk around in blindness. Leading aimless lives. Living only for what they can see with their eyes. Groping around in the darkness of sin and self. And they don't even know it. If they would only shout out my name, I would open their eyes to a whole new world!

You discovered that not being able to see my kingdom is far, far worse than not seeing the things of this world. I'm so glad you are on my team and you were willing to surrender your life to my higher purpose.

By the way, I loved seeing your eyes open for the very first time! And the look on your face when you saw

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my face! You knew it was me! That I was your friend who had been beside you through it all. It brings me the same joy each time my children get their spiritual sight! Instead of just hearing about me and my words, they see my love and the new life I have for them, for the very first time. You, my buddy Bart, are the ultimate example of that miracle of sight!

One day you will see people in Heaven, with your very own eyes, as far as the eye can see. These will be the people who began to see my love because of your faith. Your faith healed you, and it has been instrumental in healing countless more! Just you wait and see!

I love you, Bart.

JESUS

Chapter 8 Beautiful

She has done a beautiful thing to me.

*It was intended that she should save this perfume for
the day of my burial.*

*The poor you will always have with you, and you can
help them any time you want. But you will not always
have me.*

*She did what she could. She poured perfume on my
body beforehand to prepare for my burial.”*

(Mark 14:6-7)

Beautiful

I'm so looking forward to sinking deeper into this story. This one is different from most. In most stories about Jesus, the bulk of the story is about someone's need, and how they are coming to Jesus for help. That's not terribly surprising, because he is the only one who can ultimately help us. He even encourages us to come to him with our problems and he will give rest to our souls.... and to cast every care on him, because he truly does care.

But isn't it refreshing sometimes to just come to him to worship him? To show Jesus our love and appreciation... expressing to him how much we admire him, and how much he means to us? To adore him... that is the heart of true worship.

That's what Mary did.

Sorry, but, yes, this woman's name is Mary also. There are four women named Mary in the New Testament. Yes, that's confusing. Mary, Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, who was delivered from seven evil spirits, and Mary, the wife of Clopas, who was Joseph's brother. Confused yet?

And then there was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, who lived in Bethany. These were very special friends of Jesus. As wonderful as all the other Marys were, you're going to love Mary. And maybe you'll want to change your name to Mary too! (Please don't.)

Let me start early on, with the first time we hear about this Mary. You see, Jesus travelled so much, and they didn't stay in motels or eat at diners, even if there were some in town. It seems that Jesus and the disciples usually didn't have firm plans for where to stay, and what to eat. Jesus didn't have a place to lay his head. How's that for trust? This three-year mission was go, go, go. Jesus showed the disciples by example as he instructed them, "Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, leave that home or town and shake the dust off your feet."

So a typical day for Jesus and his crew went something like this: they would enter a new town, walk through the streets, likely going to the marketplace and door-to-door. The disciples would tell the people that the Messiah they had been waiting for was in town. Some would come to the town square, where Jesus would teach the people and heal the sick. Then Jesus and his disciples would search for someone who received their message, and stay at someone's home while they were in town. Whenever Jesus gave the word, they would move on to the next town, and repeat.

Beautiful

Mary's sister, Martha, found out that Jesus and his disciples were in Bethany. She likely went to hear Jesus speak, and she saw him heal her neighbors. Martha could tell right away that Jesus was authentic, so she invited him and the disciples to their home. I can just see Martha hurrying home, telling Mary the wonderful news that the Messiah, Jesus, and all his disciples were coming to dinner! "Hurry Mary, there are a lot of them and there's a lot to do to get everything ready!" I'm sure both ladies' feet and fingers flew, busily making preparations. From what happened that night, it seems that Martha got caught up in the party planning. Throwing an impressive party was her primary focus. I'm guessing Martha had a reputation as a terrific hostess, and she took a lot of pride in that! But it seems that Mary's focus was on getting to spend time with Jesus, listening to him and learning from him. Mary worked quickly to make sure everything was ready by the time Jesus arrived, so she could spend as much time with him as possible! "Jesus is coming to our house!" She could hardly wait!

Mary had just finished all her necessary preparations, when the doorbell rang! She hurried to the door and welcomed them all into their home. Mary and Martha graciously offered them refreshments, escorted them to the family room, and made sure everyone was comfortable.

Martha went back into the kitchen to take care of a few more details, and Mary stayed with the group, listening to Jesus. She was mesmerized by his wisdom and his kindness. Every gracious word that fell from

his lips stirred her heart to a noble theme, just as Psalm 45 said. Jesus embodied every truth, every grace, every act of love she had learned from the Scriptures. He embodied the very Word of God, and spoke as one having authority. It was as if the very God of the universe was in human form, right there in her living room! He told them of his love for them, and to trust in his guidance. He told them that he was the bread of life, that he would sustain them. He told them he was the living water that would refresh them and give them life. He told them he would never leave them or forsake them. He told them he was the good shepherd who takes care of the sheep, and that he would search the world over to save even one that was lost. Mary knew that somehow this man was more than a man. He was more than a good teacher or a prophet or even the Messiah. He was the very God she poured her heart out to every day and night. I think, without even realizing it, Mary nestled into a cozy spot near Jesus' feet, so she wouldn't miss a word!

Time completely escaped Mary. How could it not? She had no idea how long she had been sitting there, listening to Jesus, when all of a sudden, a very aggravated Martha interrupted Jesus. Martha complained, in front of everyone, that she didn't think it was fair for Jesus to let Mary sit there, leaving her to do all the work! Oh dear! Martha! What was Mary going to do? Well, before Mary could jump up, Jesus responded to Martha. He told her, kindly but firmly, that she was bothered about a lot of things that really didn't matter. (...probably like doilies, and parsley on

Beautiful

the plates, and napkin-rings, and such.) Jesus told Martha that Mary had made the better choice. He said it was really the only choice that was needed. He was not going to ask Mary to go do any more work. What had been done was sufficient. Can you just see Martha's face? I know Jesus said it as gently as he could, but Martha was stopped in her harried tracks.

So Mary and the rest just went back to listening to Jesus, taking in his every word. I like to think that Martha put down her dish towel, came into the family room, sat down, and listened to Jesus.

By the way, Martha heard that lesson loud and clear. She was corrected by Jesus, in front of everybody. Ouch! Yes, she asked for it, and no doubt, she needed that correction. I'm thinking Martha ran Mary ragged on a daily basis! Martha was so stressed, and that spilled out onto everybody in the house! I'm sure Martha took Jesus' words to heart, but true, inward change usually does not come easily or quickly. There's a lot of sitting at Jesus' feet that we need, so he can work in us what he knows is best. Funny, the Bible doesn't say that Jesus went into the kitchen and told Martha to come sit and listen. He let her be free to do as she wished. But oh, how Martha needed to sit and soak in his presence! She needed to learn that his approval and admiration were all she needed.

So let's take a lesson, ladies. I think we have trouble with this more than men do. If we don't watch out, we can fret and fluster over so many things. Is my hair

right? Is this outfit perfect? Is my house a showplace? Will others brag about my accomplishments? If we aren't careful, we can let these things become our identity... idolizing the approval of others. .. allowing others' judgments of us run us ragged! And God help the poor Marys that have to live with us! If we get taken in by this subtle stronghold, we won't stop running long enough to spend time listening to Jesus. He has better for us.... the important things. He wants to set us free. So let's let him!

The Bible says that Jesus loved Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. They became good friends. Jesus must have found them deserving, and he let his peace rest on their house, just like he instructed the disciples to do. Wow! That sounds like a blessing we could all use! Let's ask him continually for his peace to rest on our homes! This family wasn't perfect... but they loved him. Of course, Jesus loves everyone, but he had a very special relationship with this family. They connected with him and made him feel appreciated, just for himself, not merely for what he could do for them. He could relax, and speak from the heart, without the onslaught of criticism and testing. He probably stayed with them whenever he was passing anywhere nearby. Now wouldn't that be awesome?! I imagine Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to him intently every time. Hopefully Martha allowed herself to sit and listen too.

The next time we hear about them is on a very sad occasion. Lazarus was very sick. Martha and Mary sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was deathly ill, and to

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please come right away. But Jesus didn't. Jesus could have healed Lazarus from where he was. But he didn't. He didn't on purpose. He always has a purpose. Lazarus died.

When Jesus arrived on the edge of town, Martha hurried out to meet him. She knew that Lazarus would have lived, if Jesus had been there. She just couldn't understand. Losing someone you love is so painful... it was so hard for Lazarus to be gone... so final. Jesus consoled Martha with his comforting words, "Your brother will rise again. I am the Resurrection and the Life." He asked if she believed that. Martha told him she believed she would see her brother again, and that she knew that even now God would give Jesus whatever he asked for. That is comforting to believe. But I think Jesus was asking her, not only if she believed in her head, but if she trusted him from her heart. If she trusted that he himself... Jesus, right there standing in front of her... was resurrection itself. LIFE itself! Jesus knew Martha needed to be set free of her worries, and to trust him. Trusting and receiving his life-giving, resurrection power are more of those things that take time quietly sitting at his feet. Nothing like the pain of loss to drive us there.

Then Jesus asked Martha how Mary was doing. He knew Mary was heart-broken. He knew how tender her heart was, and how deeply Mary loved her family. Martha just shook her head. She went to get Mary, taking her aside from the group of mourners, and told

her that Jesus was asking for her. Mary went straight to Jesus, mourners following close behind.

“When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet.” Her broken heart could barely keep her upright. The only thing that helped ease her pain was to keep her focus on the Lord and his loving plan. She trusted him completely and walked humbly with him. Everything Jesus had taught Mary, even her very relationship with him, was being put to the test. Mary poured out her heart to Jesus, “ ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Jesus saw her weeping,... he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” Mary held nothing back. Her heart was suffering in anguish. She sobbed at his feet.

It broke Jesus’ heart to see Mary’s broken heart. Her weeping moved Jesus to tears. Her dear brother Lazarus was gone. It literally felt as if Lazarus had been ripped from her heart. How could she go on without him? Jesus knew the pain of losing his own father, Joseph. All those years without him! Jesus knew the devastating pain Mary was feeling. Mary’s sorrow, and her humble cries at his feet, pressed Jesus to move quickly to complete his mission. He wanted with all of his heart to give her relief. And it was according to the eternal plan for him to work a miracle to do just that. He immediately asked where they had laid Lazarus’ body.

In light of the miracle Jesus was about to do, the Bible tells us two strange statements about what Jesus was

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feeling. It says “he was deeply moved” and it also says “Jesus wept”. Those who were standing nearby, having no idea in the world what Jesus was about to do, were overwhelmed at Jesus’ display of deep anguish, saying, “See how he loved him!” Have you ever thought about why Jesus was so deeply moved and weeping? He certainly wasn’t crying because he believed death is the end, or because he was powerless to do anything. Jesus surely wasn’t crying because he missed Lazarus, or sad because of the future without him. I don’t even think he was crying at this point because of Martha’s and Mary’s grief, because he knew that their pain would be alleviated very quickly! And the anger had nothing to do with criticism for what he did or didn’t do. He was always content to do his Father’s will. What others thought didn’t even faze him. So, why was Jesus in such anguish?

Because death is awful. Horrible beyond words.

Jesus didn’t speak about death at Lazarus’ tomb. He groaned. He groaned from the depth of his being. He cried in sorrow as no man had ever heard before. In Jesus we see how our God grieves over death. As painful as it is for us, our God feels it far deeper. He knew it should never have been this way. Death, simply put, is separation. And it all started when we rebelled against God, separating ourselves from him. We have all felt it. Separated from God. Separated from each other. All the pain that going our own way has caused! All the selfishness and the fighting and the broken families and the running from God. All of

this temporal separation is excruciating. But Jesus could not bear to be separated from us forever. That price is too, too heavy. That is what grieves and angers and troubles Jesus beyond words, to the point of deep groaning. Death is awful.

And, I think that was a significant part of Jesus' time spent with his heavenly Father. Grieving over the dying condition of the people he met every day, and pleading for them to have his life poured into them. He knew then and he knows now, that he is the only one who can truly satisfy our hearts. He prays for us to be reunited with God - to have his life in us. His prayers are always answered.

Jesus went to Lazarus' tomb and told the men to remove the stone. What?! Lazarus had been dead for four days, and Martha was sure that opening the tomb was a very bad idea! I always shake my head at how the King James version has Martha saying, "Lord, by this time he stinketh." You've just got to love the King James Version! It can even make rotting flesh sound highbrow! And, I don't mean to pick on Martha, but didn't she figure Jesus knew that? Martha had the tendency to think she knew better than everybody else. And she felt the undeniable urge to tell everyone her opinion. Even Jesus! In my opinion, since nobody asked me either, Martha would have done better to leave some dirty dishes in the sink, and to pay closer attention to Jesus! And didn't she just confess she believed Jesus was the Messiah? And that God would give him whatever he asked for? She believed in her head, she just couldn't imagine

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what Jesus was able to do! You see, believing in our head is great, and necessary. But when we believe Jesus from our hearts, now there's a peaceful place to live. Of course, Jesus didn't say criticize Martha. He just patiently reminded her of what he had probably told her many times before, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?"

Lord help us not to second guess You and Your wisdom, and Your power to work miracles in our lives!

Mary, on the other hand, had wisely learned to patiently watch Jesus. She displayed her trust and confidence in him, which is the highest form of respect. Mary had learned from practical experience that Jesus was wise and loving, and so faithful, no matter what was happening. Mary was free from any fretting in her spirit to sit at Jesus' feet, so to speak, and to completely rejoice in the miracle Jesus was about to work for her.

After Jesus cried aloud in anguish, praying silently to his Father, Jesus prayed aloud for the crowd to hear, "I thank you Father that you always hear me – and that these may believe that you sent me." And then he shouted....

"Lazarus, come forth! "

Mary and Martha could hardly believe their ears! Was Jesus calling Lazarus back from death? It was as wild then as it would be now! But immediately, before their very eyes, Lazarus came walking to the entrance

of the cave, like a mummy on an old black and white movie! The shock! The utter joy! The crowd let out a huge gasp in amazement! Mary and Martha could not move because of the shock! Their mouths hung open, but no words came out. We've heard the story so many times, don't let your familiarity let you miss what happened... Jesus spoke and Lazarus came back from the other side! His body which surely did "stinketh" was reconstituted in a flash! Jesus truly is the Resurrection and the Life! He has complete power over death!

After what seemed like forever, but was just a moment, Jesus told them to loose Lazarus from the linen cloths. Funny he had to say that. Everyone must have just been standing there, unable to know what to do next. With that, the sisters were shaken out of their state of shock. They ran to their brother, and began tearing the linen wrappings off of him. They laughed and they cried and they gave glory to Jesus! They were beside themselves to see him Lazarus alive again!

Not to spoil the moment, but have you ever thought about how Lazarus felt about all of this? To leave the safety and bliss of Paradise, and be back in his earthly body? The Bible doesn't say, but he must have been in shock too! One minute he was in glory... the next minute he was inside his tomb. But to be sure, he was happy to be back with his family, and happy to be part of Jesus revealing his truth and power. This precious family was blessed to be part of one of Jesus' most amazing and significant miracles. They had told

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Jesus that they would help him in any way they could, and he sure took them up on it! And it wasn't over yet! This miracle caused a huge hubbub with the religious leaders in Jerusalem only a few miles away. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead was witnessed by a large crowd. It was undeniable. This miracle was all the talk in Jerusalem! And it was broadcast from every news outlet! Lazarus was a rock star! But not so much with the religious leaders. Because of their hatred and jealousy of Jesus, Lazarus was number one on their "Most Wanted" list! Seriously, the Bible says that the religious leaders made plans to put Lazarus to death too. Why? Because so many people believed in Jesus because Lazarus was raised from the dead! His very life was proof of Jesus being the Son of God! So the religious leaders figured they had to kill Lazarus! Isn't that outrageous? Those guys were out of control! Now Martha really had something to worry about! Or maybe, all of these lessons taught them to live in peaceful trust of Jesus and his perfect plan and loving protection.

If the leaders were out to kill Lazarus, no doubt they wanted to kill Jesus even more. As awful as it seemed then, and now, I think this family began to understand that Jesus' death was his very purpose for being born. Mary certainly did. She had listened to Jesus intently with her heart. She was one of the few who understood that Jesus was going to literally be the atoning sacrifice for sin. Just like the lambs they sacrificed year after year, transferring their sins to those lambs, she knew Jesus WAS the eternal Lamb of God. Mary knew Jesus was going to die for her sins...

very soon. Jesus had withdrawn to Ephraim since all the uproar over him raising Lazarus from the dead. The Passover Festival was in only six days. Mary felt strongly that this Passover was the time. His days with them were running out. Each night of the Passover that Jesus and his disciples stayed with them, might be the last.

When Lazarus died, Mary had learned the importance of doing good to those you love while they are with you. What a temporary home this earth is. So she thought and wondered and prayed about what would be the perfect gift to give Jesus. It would be her last gift to him. She and Martha decided to have a special dinner in honor of Jesus when he stayed with them during Passover week. They made a beautiful celebration for him. And this time there was no complaining about any of the work! I imagine all of his friends were there. It might have been a huge surprise for Jesus, that is, if you could ever surprise Jesus. They all had a wonderful time together, but some sensed that there were rough days ahead, though no one brought it up.

After the dinner was over, everyone relaxed, talking among themselves. Jesus wasn't teaching that night. Though by his very presence, I guess Jesus was always teaching. He was simply enjoying the precious moments with good friends. Then Mary did something stunning. She had a very expensive jar of perfume called nard. It cost a year's wages! Of course, it was only meant for a very special occasion, and was to be used sparingly. It was her most prized

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possession. But it meant nothing to her except to be used for her true prize, Jesus. There was nothing and no one more dear to her on all the earth. And he was going to die soon. For her. As painful as her brother's death was, losing Jesus' was going to be painful beyond explanation.

I picture Mary sitting at Jesus' feet, as usual. Trying not to draw attention to herself, she opened her jar of perfume, and started pouring it out on Jesus' feet. Maybe she didn't intend to pour out the whole thing, but she kept pouring, and pouring, as if she was pouring out her love for him. The soothing scent filled the room. Jesus' heart was overwhelmed by her display of love. She was anointing him for his burial. Mary understood what he was about to do, and that comforted his heart. Just as Jesus had lovingly poured out his life every day, serving and teaching everywhere he went, very soon he would pour out his life's blood for her... for all of them, until his life was all spent. His life was far more precious than any perfume. Mary was in tears. Those who understood what was happening were heard weeping through-out the room. Mary rubbed the fragrant nard into his dry, calloused feet until they were soaked and supple. I imagine she hadn't thought to bring a towel, so, not wanting to leave his side, she started wiping the excess with her hair... mixed with her tears. Her heart was broken for what he was about to do, but she knew that was his mission. He was the only perfect man who could pay that heavy price of sin, and bring forgiveness.

Then Mary, led by the Holy Spirit, got up, took some of the oil, and poured it on Jesus' head. That was the Jewish custom for a king's anointing ceremony. She might not have even thought about that before she did it, but she was anointing Jesus as the King of all kings. I wouldn't be surprised if she quietly recited Psalm 89.

*"I have bestowed strength
on a warrior;
I have raised up a young man
from among the people.
I have found David my servant;
with my sacred oil
I have anointed him.
My hand will sustain him;
surely my arm will strengthen him.
The enemy will not
get the better of him;
the wicked will not oppress him.
I will crush his foes before him
and strike down his adversaries.
My faithful love will be with him,
and through my name
his horn will be exalted.
I will set his hand over the sea,
his right hand over the rivers.
He will call out to me,
'You are my Father, my God,
the Rock my Savior.'
And I will appoint him
to be my firstborn,
the most exalted*

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*of the kings of the earth.
I will maintain my love
to him forever,
my covenant with him
will never fail.
I will establish his line forever,
his throne as long as
the heavens endure.”*

So Mary anointed Jesus king. A wonderful king. A powerful king. Her king. And Mary's words were a fragrant aroma to him, encouraging him for the battle ahead. The Bible says our prayers ascend to our Heavenly Father as a pleasing aroma to him. Such a sweet-smelling sacrifice... from a heart of tender affection... worship filled with adoration and love. Jesus was moved deeply, saying, "She has done a beautiful thing to me. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial." He even said that wherever the Gospel would be proclaimed, they would also hear of what she did for him.

This poignant, tender moment was like cherished moments of prayer in his presence, where time does not exist. Sadly, it was interrupted by the screeching of Judas' criticism, like the awful scratching sound on a record player, or nails on a chalkboard. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." Looks like others joined in with Judas. The Bible says, "they rebuked her harshly." Really?

Every time I read that passage, I want to shout, “Are you kidding me?!” Have you ever wondered what was at the root of that rude accusation? Yes, the Bible says Judas wanted the perfume sold because he held the money bag, and took money out of it for himself. But deeper than that. I think this beautiful moment was just more than Judas could take. He knew nothing of heart-felt devotion and worship. Judas didn’t love Jesus as his dear Savior. Plainly put, he didn’t think Jesus was worth that bottle of perfume. He didn’t see the trouble with sin, and he had no concept of Jesus coming to pay the awful price. He had no tears to cry. I think Judas wanted to stop what he considered to be ridiculous adoration of Jesus, even more than he wanted the money.

And, why was everybody always picking on Mary? Was she just an easy target? They probably knew she would not respond with rudeness. But maybe there was something more. Did her pure, sincere devotion to Jesus, strike some nerve of guilt, so that others felt compelled to put a stop to it? Probably. But Jesus came to Mary’s rescue again. “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.”

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It seems as if Jesus was already prepared for the criticism.... there always is criticism, of course. He likely didn't even open his eyes. He spoke a mouthful in a few sentences. In his always wise and gracious way, he put the criticizers in their place, gave honor to Mary, gave glory to God for his intentional plan, spoke truth about his upcoming death and burial, and gave us a golden nugget of wisdom that there will always be poor on the earth, no matter what we do. Truly we don't have him on this earth to show our affection to, so I'm very glad Mary didn't allow this opportunity to slip by. Mary, just an ordinary woman, with no priestly and prophetic title, both anointed Jesus as king, and also anointed him for burial. Correction. This Mary was an extraordinary woman.

Judas, on the other hand, was furious at being put in his place. The Bible says that after this, Judas went to the religious leaders to betray Jesus. As God told Cain, before he killed his brother, "sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

Even though Mary knew that Jesus was going to die soon, the Bible does not mention that she was at the cross. With Bethany so close to Jerusalem, they surely got the awful news of Jesus' arrest, especially when he and the disciples did not come back to spend the night. I wonder if Jesus and Mary had talked about it beforehand. Maybe Jesus told her that his death was going to be too awful, and it would be too hard on him if she were there. Maybe. We know he told her in

front of everyone, that what she had done was beautiful. She had anointed him for burial. He said she had done what she could. Maybe he told her what she had done was enough. Maybe he reminded her of the lesson he had taught her and Martha, that sometimes we need to accept that we've done what we can do, and that is enough. I think Mary even understood what Jesus meant when he said he would rise after three days. So, knowing Mary, I think that even after Jesus left, she followed his advice to look past the suffering, to the glory on the other side.

We don't read anything more in the Bible about Mary of Bethany. But what was recorded about her is so inspiring. What a heart of devotion! Did you notice that every time we read about Mary, she was at Jesus' feet? She learned at his feet. She sobbed at his feet. She anointed his feet and she kissed his feet. She was so completely devoted to Jesus, so in awe of who he is, so captivated by his love, that she naturally went to his feet.

She could trust Jesus to treat her with absolute love. He never judged her. He was never rude or cruel. Jesus didn't make demands of her. It was his kindness and gentleness that drew Mary's heart to him. He loved her and her family just as they were, and he was always looking out for their absolute best.

Mary loved to learn from Jesus and she followed his every word. She knew she could trust his wisdom and his goodness and his power. Mary poured out her

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heart to Jesus when she was distressed; she didn't feel the need to pretend or hold back her emotions with him. She was completely transparent with what was in her heart, because she trusted his heart. Mary displayed her love for Jesus openly. She didn't let it bother her if others didn't understand, because her relationship with Jesus was so very precious to her. I'm glad the story of Mary is recorded in the Bible. What an inspiration of loving Jesus with total abandon!

Lord, give us hearts like Mary's.

Of course, to have hearts like Mary's, we will need to follow her example, and sit at Jesus' feet. We'll need to listen intently to his every word, follow him with our whole hearts, and trust him completely. And we will have to love him openly, without concern for what others think. So let's make that our aim today. Imagine Jesus talking with Mary... what would he say to her?

Dear Mary, your tender heart did my heart good. You humbly received my words like a little child. You listened to my words and knew I brought the Scriptures to life. You knew that I loved you. And you wanted to follow me, no matter what. After all the skepticism and the criticism I encountered, it was refreshing to simply speak, and for my words to flow right into your heart. Your heart was the good soil I talked about. Your life produced wonderful fruit.

When I spoke about those who are blessed - the pure in heart, those who are gentle, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, I was thinking about you and those with your same faith. You are truly blessed. You are a shining testimony to what a life of total surrender to me can be. You were kind to your sister, even when she was harsh. You prayed for her instead of quarreling. You were persecuted by Judas and the others, for doing what was right and kind to me. Instead of being angry, you were sad for them because they just didn't understand. When I didn't save Lazarus from dying, you were confused, but you weren't angry with me. Your tears brought me to tears. I knew what I was about to do, and I wanted so badly to relieve your anguish. I will never forget the look of complete joy on your face when Lazarus walked to the front of that tomb! Nothing makes me happier than to make my children happy!

And that is just what we are now. Completely happy. It all makes sense from the viewpoint of heaven, just as you knew it would. So you strove to live in that peace, every moment. Well done!

When you anointed me as king, I knew you understood that I was not the kind of king many of the people were looking for. I was not going to deliver them all their earthly troubles, like the oppression of the Romans. I was going to die to deliver them from the oppression of their fiercest enemies: sin and death. You understood that. Your faith encouraged

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me to keep looking past the cross, to the complete deliverance of my children. I was reassured that my death would not be in vain, because my followers would understand that I am the king of their hearts. I am the king they always wanted, more than they ever realized.

You got it. I told everyone that you had done a beautiful thing for me, anointing me for my burial. But it was even more than that. You lived a beautiful life for me. The times we spent together, even after I ascended, are forever precious to me. You knew I was beside you, even though you couldn't see me. You trusted me, even when you didn't understand. You believed me, even when others scoffed, and even when the lives of those you loved were in danger. Yes. Your life, our life together, is beautiful. I love you, my daughter, Mary.

I LOVE YOU... JESUS

Chapter 9 Eyes of Love

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'"

(John 1:43-51)

Eyes of Love

Many have never even heard of Nathanael. I don't think I've ever read a story or heard a message about Nathanael, outside the six short verses in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. And before things even got going good in Jesus' ministry, we never even hear about Nathanael again!

But Nathanael is super-awesome. He was one of those rare people who was looking for the Messiah, and recognized him immediately. But, I'm spoiling the story. Here's a teaser... I'm going to tell you HOW I think Nathanael recognized Jesus so quickly. And you're going to think Nathanael is super-awesome too!

You probably guessed that Nathanael was Jewish. He lived in Cana, a village west of the Sea of Galilee, and Capernaum, Jesus' home base.

From what I have learned from Nathanael's story, I'm going to make some educated guesses, so we can imagine what it was like to be him. Nathanael was a true believer... not just a "religious" man. He walked with the Lord every day, and loved him with all of his heart, mind, soul, and strength. He knew Scripture by heart, and meditated on it all the time. He didn't memorize Scripture because he was required to. He didn't do it to impress others. God's words went straight from the Lord to Nathanael's heart. To Nathanael, God's Word was more than just words on a page or some religious exercise. God's Word spoke life to him. Each word was a lamp to his feet and a light to his path. Walking with the Lord was his

delight; it was his greatest joy to spend time with God. The Lord had become more to Nathanael than his God. The Lord was his friend and confidant.

This particular morning, Nathanael sat in his usual spot under the fig tree near his home. This was a very old fig tree with low branches, making it cool and quiet, and very secluded, so he could just enjoy talking with his Heavenly Father. Nathanael's family knew how important his time alone with God was, so they were careful not to disturb him. He always came back so refreshed, with a huge smile on his face. Many times whistling a happy tune, and sometimes sharing with them some golden nugget of wisdom that God had impressed on his heart.

For the past days Nathanael had been dwelling on these verses from Psalms 32 and 139.

*Blessed is the one
whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in
whose spirit is no deceit.*

*I will instruct you and teach you
in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.*

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Eyes of Love

Nathanael wanted with all of his heart to be one of those blessed ones, who is forgiven, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. He didn't only want to be saved from hell. He wanted to be saved from himself! Saved from all the deceitful, prideful, sinful, selfish ways out to destroy him. He wanted to be as clean as a whistle, even in the deepest places of his heart, where nobody but God saw. He wanted to be a man after God's own heart, like the one who wrote those verses. To have truth in his inmost parts, just as the writer had prayed for. Nathanael asked the Lord to search him and help him to be that kind of man. "Do you see me, Lord? Nobody else can see me under this fig tree. Do you see my ways? Do you see deep inside my heart? No one but you can see what is in there. Do you see any deceitful wicked way in me? If you do, remove it so I can walk with a clean conscience in all of your ways. I don't want to be a hypocrite. I know that any sin in my heart is emptiness and darkness. I want to be a true Israelite, who has no deceit at all. And I sure don't want to miss the Messiah. I want to walk in truth, so I will recognize him when I see him.

I trust your promise to instruct me and teach me in the way I should go, with your loving eye on me. Oh, how I long for the day in heaven when I will see you face-to-face. Until then, keep watch over me every minute, so I will be safe and walk in your ways faithfully.

Before Nathanael knew it, it was time to leave the fig tree, and get to his daily work. But he knew the Lord

was working right beside him. It made Nathanael so happy to be forgiven and to have a clear conscience. He experienced joy and peace that many can't even imagine.

What Nathanael didn't know was that on that very day, something remarkable had happened that would change his life forever! You see, when Nathanael went to hear John the Baptist, he had become close friends with a man named Philip. On this very day, Philip was in Bethany listening to John the Baptist, and John had identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, the Chosen One, whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. And Jesus had asked Philip to be one of his disciples! Philip had made his heart ready for the Messiah, just as John the Baptist had instructed. So he jumped at the opportunity to be on Jesus' team!

Whenever Jesus told someone to follow him, they always just dropped whatever they were doing, and followed. Jesus wasn't even well known at this point. He hadn't even done his first miracle yet. But Philip was already convinced and ready to go! Of course, he had John the Baptist's testimony. And, two of his hometown buddies, Andrew and Peter, were already Jesus' disciples. But there was something more that caused these men to drop everything, and follow Jesus everywhere he went for three years. What was it? Well, the story about Nathanael gives us some insight.

Here's what happened. Philip was on his way back toward Galilee with Jesus and the disciples. Philip

must have told Jesus he just had to take a detour to Cana, to tell his buddy Nathanael the good news! Of course, Jesus thought that was a great idea. Why hadn't he thought of that?! So Philip raced off to Cana as fast as his legs could carry him. As Philip arrived at Nathanael's place, he was calling out, "Nathanael! Nathanael!" Nathanael wondered, "What in the world is up with Philip?" He came running to see. Philip was so excited, the words poured out of him, "We've found the one that Moses and the prophets talked about! His name is Jesus! He's from Nazareth. And he wants me to follow him! Me! I'm going to be a disciple for the Messiah!" Philip added that Jesus was the son of Joseph. (Isn't it funny how everybody wants to know "Who's your daddy?" I know, I know... everybody was expecting the Messiah to come from King David's family, and Nathanael would want authentication that Jesus in fact was from King David's family. But did Philip actually expect Nathanael to know of Joseph? Maybe so. King David likely had hundreds of grandsons, so keeping up with them all would have taken a lot of papyrus! Anyway... back to the story.)

Nathanael knew another prophecy about the Messiah - the one that said the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, so he was a little confused, asking Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Sounds like Nathanael was a bit skeptical, but Philip was very convincing and enthusiastic, telling Nathanael to come and see for himself. So he did. I wonder if Nathanael really thought this could be the Messiah, or if he was

mainly trying to make sure his buddy Philip didn't get taken in by a deceiver!

Philip and Nathanael were just approaching Jesus, when Jesus smiled and stretched out his arm to welcome Nathanael, as he told the other disciples, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathanael was completely taken back. That's what he had just been praying about! He asked, "How do you know me?"

"I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you," Jesus replied, knowingly. He could have added, "Of course". Now Nathanael was in complete shock. I can just imagine Nathanael looking into Jesus' eyes with his mouth wide open, realizing Jesus was the very one he always talked with under the fig tree! Nathanael didn't need any more convincing. He declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel!"

"I saw you."

That was all Nathanael needed to hear. Jesus was answering, in person, the very prayer he had prayed just a few hours earlier! "Lord, do you see me?" Jesus' answer was yes, I see you. I have my loving eye on you all the time.

Nathanael knew immediately, that this was his dearest friend! Jesus was the God he always talked to, the God he loved with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. The one he had just told how he longed to

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see him face-to-face, and now he was actually seeing him face-to-face!

Jesus not only saw him, he also heard his prayer. Nathanael had asked him to search inside his heart and to remove any deceit, and now Jesus was telling him, "I saw you. I have searched you. And I am saying that you are an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathanael was overwhelmed. His greatest desire was to do what pleased his Lord! And now he was hearing from Jesus' very lips, that he was proud of him. Nathanael was flabbergasted. From the depths of his heart he cried out, "You are the Son of God! You are my king!" I'm so happy for Nathanael! He got to hear what we all long to hear, and will one day hear from Jesus, as we remain steadfast, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" And one day, we will see our most faithful friend, face-to-face! But Nathanael didn't have to wait one second longer. His faith was made sight on this earth. Hurray for Nathanael!

Of course, I wasn't there to interview Nathanael, and I don't know that this is exactly how it happened, but I just can't imagine any other explanation. Jesus had obviously seen Nathanael under the fig tree. With that, Nathanael immediately recognized Jesus as the Son of God. The connection was undeniable.

Can you just see Philip standing there with a huge grin on his face? See, I told ya so! Nathanael looked at Jesus... then looked at Philip... then back at Jesus. These men had asked God to help them recognize the Messiah when they saw him, and that prayer was

answered big-time! It was not merely an academic recognition of Jesus as the Messiah. It was a personal recognition of Jesus as their friend and their Lord, from getting to know him through his Word and prayer. Beautiful!

Of course, Jesus knew that when he said, “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” and “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you,” that he would knock Nathanael’s socks right off. Jesus loves to do that. He loves to surprise us with little whispers of his love. Many times he takes us completely off guard. We’re reading along in the Word, or meditating on a verse, when out of the clear blue, he will impress something to us so powerfully that we are completely overwhelmed. Oh... Wow, Lord. Thank You for seeing me. Thank You for talking to me. Thank You for loving me in a very real... and a very personal way.

Remember the hymn, “He Lives!”? I sang that song for years, belting out the chorus, “You ask me how I know he lives, he LIVES WITHIN my heart.” All of a sudden, when I came to know the Lord personally, that song knocked my socks right off! I know he lives because HE LIVES WITHIN MY HEART!! I might not necessarily be able to “convince” someone why Jesus lives from a historical, a prophetic, and an archaeological standpoint. This knowledge surpasses intellectual knowledge of merely knowing about him, to knowing him personally, in a very real relationship. I know he lives, because he lives within my heart. He lives with me. All the time. That’s what happened to

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Nathanael. He recognized Jesus as the Son of God, because he already knew the Son of God, personally.

Isn't Jesus funny? He was acting like he was just having a typical conversion, but you know Jesus was just waiting to see Nathanael's reaction. He knew Nathanael would be in shock! He knew that Nathanael would be so surprised to see him face-to-face!

As if that wasn't enough, Jesus had even more exciting news for his friend. "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

What Jesus was telling Nathanael was something like this: "When I told you that I saw you under the fig tree, that was only a little taste of my power that I revealed. If that blew you away, just wait and see, my friend! You ain't seen nothing yet! It is going to be awesome! Very soon, you and Philip and the other disciples will be eye-witnesses as I do amazing miracles. It will be like heaven coming down to earth, and you'll get to experience a bit of heaven for yourself! So get ready, Nathanael. This is only the beginning. Buckle your seatbelt tight! If you were knocked out by knowing that I saw you and heard you, even when I was miles away, your heart might not be able to take it when you see me reveal my power and glory, with my angels!" I'm sure the disciples looked at each other and at Jesus, ecstatic to be at the

threshold of the greatest adventure of all time. Living day-to-day with the Messiah as he fulfilled his mission!

Nathanael was beside himself with joy. Jesus asked him to be on his team too! He not only was getting to see the Messiah face-to-face, he was getting to be one of his disciples! I'm sure he thought to himself, "Of all times, I get to live during the time of the Messiah's coming! Of all the people in Israel, I get to be one of his disciples!" You know Nathanael went on and on, thanking Philip for hiking all that way to Cana to tell him about Jesus! Can't you just see these two guys, shaking their heads at how blessed they were?

There was a lot to get ready, so the disciples likely all went home to pack their bags for the most excellent adventure! Nathanael's feet barely touched the ground as he sped back to Cana to tell his family the wonderful news, and get ready to go with Jesus. I wish I could have heard his conversation with his family. He probably gushed just like Philip had, and told them how Jesus had seen him under the fig tree, and said he was an Israelite with no deceit, and how Jesus was always with them... for real! They probably asked him to slow down and tell them the whole story again from the beginning, very slowly. After they took in the impact of what was happening, that the Messiah had come, and that Nathanael was getting to be one of his disciples, I'm sure they were beside themselves with joy, just as Nathanael was. He told them he didn't know exactly when he would be back, but Jesus had promised him that his family would be

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safe and provided for. Nathanael was confident that the Lord, who saw him under the fig tree, would have his loving eye on his family the whole time.

Nathanael kissed his loved ones goodbye and headed to Capernaum to join the group. The men visited, getting to know each other a bit, sharing eager anticipation for what lay ahead. After some preparation, Jesus told them all, "Let's go! We're headed to Cana to celebrate a wedding!" And off they went. I bet Nathanael's family was surprised to see him back in Cana so soon! Surely they all went to the wedding, and experienced Jesus' first miracle, turning the water into wine. I think Nathanael realized they weren't only celebrating the wedding in Cana. They were celebrating the greatest wedding ever... marrying the eternal King of Israel, Jesus, to his eternal bride... us! Now that's a marriage made in heaven!

And do you think lots of wine makes for a great party? Ha! Jesus can top that! One of his names is "The New Wine". He brings more joy and laughter than wine ever could! And there's no hangover!

*You have given me greater joy
than those who have abundant new wine.*

(Psalm 4:7)

As Nathanael followed, Jesus turned ordinary days into extraordinary days, filled with joy and laughter everywhere they went! Each day Nathanael and Philip marveled at Jesus' miracles, and the great lessons he

taught. They saw his tender compassion for each person, as lives were restored right before their very eyes. They witnessed his patient strength as he reached out even to those who opposed him. But they marveled most of all as they watched his love and devotion for his heavenly Father.

At the end of each long day, they all rested around a campfire, or in someone's home. Jesus would answer their questions, and they would share with each other about the amazing things they had seen and heard. And then Jesus would spend time with each one, blessing them individually, encouraging them to keep up the good work. Nathanael treasured these moments most of all, because it was just like old times under the fig tree, only better. Nathanael could ask Jesus anything, and get the answer straight from his lips. Sometimes though, Jesus told Nathanael there were things that were not for him to know, but to patiently wait for. Nathanael learned that even with the Son of God physically right by his side, he still had to walk by faith. After everyone was settled in for the evening, Jesus would slip away to a quiet place to spend time with his Heavenly Father.

Jesus and Nathanael still visited under the fig tree, so to speak...

Nathanael, it means so much to me for you to be on my team. Your heart is good soil for my words to grow in. My words, treasured in your heart, will keep you safe, walking in my ways. It is wise for you to be so watchful and to pray, because you know how easy

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it is to slip into deceitful ways. The enemy is always lurking about, seeking someone to devour. But I promise I will deliver you from the evil one. I am stronger than he is, and I will protect you. I have made many more promises to you, and I will keep each one. I will lead you in the everlasting way, and guide you with my loving eye on you. I began the good work in you and I will be faithful to complete it. I will never leave you or forsake you. I will guard your coming and your going from this time and forever. Just stay close to me. I am your shield and your protector.

As close as we were all those years when you met me under the fig tree, we've grown even closer over these past few years. You've seen angels ascending and descending on me, just as I told you, with countless wonders, as I brought a bit of heaven down to earth.

Yes, you've seen some amazing wonders, but there's even more! You can't even imagine it, but the best is yet to come. Keep your seatbelt buckled tight and I will show you joy inexpressible and full of glory, both now and in eternity!

I love you, Nathanael.
JESUS

*Jesus did many other things as well.
If every one of them were written down,
I suppose that even the whole world
would not have room for the books
that would be written.*

(John 21:25)

*These are written that you may believe
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,
and that believing,
you may have life in His name!*

(John 20:31)