



AND NOT A DROP MORE...

GRACE FOR TODAY

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Grace For Today And Not A Drop More

My imagination is terrible at predicting the future. I mean seriously, it really stinks.

I've always been prone to worry and fear. When I was little, my brother and I would pray every night that we would have "no fires, no fear, and no bad dreams".

As I've gotten older, my fears haven't gone away, they've just gotten more sophisticated. Now I fear things like cancer, and miscarriages, my children getting seriously hurt. I fear not being able to provide for my family. I fear work drying up. I wake up at 3:00 AM, my mind racing with a thousand possible nightmare scenarios.

When my imagination injects itself into my fears, that's when things get really bad. Suddenly a little shortness of breath isn't a sign that I'm out of shape, but a sign of early onset heart disease. Which means that I might die suddenly of a heart attack. Which means that I won't be around for my kids. Which means...

It goes on and on and on. And it's not only about health issues. My imagination can run wild with worry over just about anything, from difficult situations to concerns for my children to paying the bills.

But here's what I'm learning. First of all, my imagination would make a terrible psychic. Most of the things that I worry about never come true. I waste so much time and energy churning over things that probably won't happen. Mark Twain hit it on the head when he said:

I have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened.

I'm also learning that God gives grace for today. Period. I will meet troubles today and God will give me grace for those troubles.

He does *not* give me grace today for troubles that will come tomorrow. God doesn't give me grace for imaginary troubles, he gives me grace for real troubles. He doesn't give me grace for what might happen, he gives me grace for what actually will happen.

That's why worrying is such a stupid waste of time. I don't yet have the grace for tomorrow, and when I look at tomorrow through the lens of today, it seems overwhelming. In Matthew 6:34, Jesus said:

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

When I get to tomorrow's troubles, God will be there with sufficient grace. The problem with my imagination is that it always leaves God out of the equation. It always imagines a future in which God has forgotten to show up. It imagines a future totally devoid of grace. A future where God has abandoned me.

But God showed up today with enough grace to get me through the day, and he'll show up tomorrow too. So shut up imagination.

Worriers Live In The Future

Since I was a little kid I've struggled with the sin of worry.

Some of my fears were normal little-kid fears like, "What if my mom and dad die?" But I was afraid of some pretty strange stuff too. When I was three years old I was convinced that Cookie Monster from Sesame Street was under my bed, which pretty much scared the pajamas off me.

When I got a older I was terrified that a storm might arise during the night, causing a lightning bolt to come rocketing through my bedroom window, which would in turn electrocute me. I was also afraid that at some point a tornado might hit our house, even though the odds of that happening are about the same as Mr. Rogers getting into a fistfight.

I admit, I had some strange fears. But like I said, I've always struggled with worry. It's woven deep into my DNA.

Unfortunately, worry doesn't go away when you grow up. It just takes on different forms. Now I fear for the safety of my daughters, and my wife Jen.

Sometimes I go into my kids rooms at night just to make sure they're still okay.

I worry about paying the bills on time, and being successful at my job, and the health of my parents and siblings.

I'm a grownup now, but I'm still a worrier. I haven't grown out of worry. I haven't somehow more at peace with life.

That's why I'm so grateful for the book *Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God of Rest* by Ed Welch. This book was written for sinful worriers like me. At one point in the book, Welch says that worriers live in the future. He says:

Fear can be triggered by the past, react to crises in the present, or anticipate them in the future. It's preferred time zone, however, is the future. Dread, panic, nervousness, worry, and anxiety all speak of our potential future vulnerability...Anxiety and worry are less oriented to the present. They say, "I think there will be a danger;" "Something or someone I love might be threatened in the future."

These words spoke to me. Generally, my worries are future oriented. Will my daughter be safe? Will I have enough to pay the bills? Notice that all of them are in the future tense. It's all about things that could happen but aren't written in stone.

As I pondered my fears, God gave me a particularly helpful insight. When I worry, I'm imagining a future apart from the grace of God. For example, I worry that my kids might become seriously ill at some point in the future. I vividly imagine doctor's appointments and doctor's appointments.

And yet in all my imaginations, God and his powerful, loving, sustaining grace are nowhere to be found. If one my children became seriously ill, it

would be a trial beyond my imagination. But I also know that God's grace would be present each moment, sustaining me, encouraging me, and refreshing me. The Lord would carry me through the trial.

When I worry about the future, I'm essentially functioning as an atheist. I'm envisioning a future devoid of the almighty God who sustains me and carries me through trials. I am creating a world without a loving God who is my Shepherd. Without a caring Father who carefully crafts all trials for my good and his glory. I am imagining a future where God and grace simply don't exist. Where I am a helpless victim of the cruel winds of fate and chance.

Thankfully, that future does not and never will exist. The only future I'll ever encounter is a future full of God's sustaining, powerful grace.

Three Words Which Destroy Worry

Worry is the act of imagining a future without God.

When you strip it down to its bones that's what it really is.

I worry when I imagine a future devoid of God. I worry when I project my current feelings and discouragements and struggles into the future. I worry when I take God's love and faithfulness out of the equation. When I imagine a stark and bleak future, a screaming void in which my faithful and loving Father does not exist or act on my behalf.

Underneath all the anxiety and fear and confusing emotions worry is actually a form of atheism. It's acting as if God does not exist.

Psalm 18:46 provides three words which destroy worry and fuel faith: "The Lord lives..."

Don't pass over those words too quickly. The. Lord. Lives.

My budget is flatlining and we are financially tanking and I don't see hope for the future! But the Lord lives. The same Lord who owns everything and

provides for ravens and sustains galaxies and calls us his children is real and alive and active in your life. You can't provide for yourself but your budget is not too tight for God. The Lord lives.

My child is not doing well spiritually and I've tried everything and I don't have any hope that anything will change! The Lord lives. The same Lord who has saved murderers and prostitutes and Pharisees and drug addicts and money addicts and pastors kids is real and alive and active in your life. You can't save your child but your kid is not too hard for God. The Lord lives.

My marriage is on the rocks and we've tried counseling and we've read all the books and I don't see things getting any better! The Lord lives. The same Lord who created a bride for himself out of rebellious, wicked, God-hating sinners is real and alive and active in your life. You can't rescue your marriage but your marriage is not too hard for God. The Lord lives.

My spiritual life is dry, and I've tried a thousand different things to get it kickstarted, but nothing seems to work, and honestly, I don't think things are going to get any better. The Lord lives. The same Lord who caused you to become spiritually alive is real and alive and active in your life. You can't breathe fresh life into your heart but your heart is not too dry for God.

Your circumstances may be bleak. You may not see a light at the end of the tunnel. You may not see any silver lining. But circumstances and tunnels and silver linings are not the basis of our hope, God is.

Don't be a functional atheist today. The Lord lives. Let's live in light of that reality.

Do You Need Proof That Jesus Cared About Worry?

Jesus had a lot to say about worry.

He came into an unstable and unpredictable world. He lived in an agricultural society where one summer's drought could wipe out crops for the winter. He hung out with fishermen, who might fish all night long and catch nothing to sell or bring home to family.

And Jesus knew the human heart and the temptations presented by the cares of this life. So he gave his disciples some excellent instruction on worry in Matthew 6.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (25)

First Jesus says God gave us our human life and our bodies without us even asking. Human life and our physical bodies are incredibly valuable. Our life is much more valuable than the food we put on the table; our body far more valuable than the shirt we put on.

If God gave us life, which is so very valuable, will he not give us food, which is of far lesser value? If God gave us these bodies which are fearfully and wonderfully made, will he not give us clothes to cover them? And even further, if God has given us eternal life, will he not provide for our temporal life?

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (26)

Jesus reminds us that God faithfully provides for dumb animals. Birds don't sow or reap or store their food in barns – and they don't fret about whether they'll have enough for tomorrow or to get through the winter. Yet God feeds them.

And Jesus tells us that humans, the crown of God's creation, the only creatures made in God's image, are of much more value than birds. If God provides for birds, then surely he'll provide for those he made in his own image. Furthermore, will not God especially provide for those he bought with the blood of his Son?

And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? (27)

Worry does absolutely no good. It won't bring in money, food or clothing. Worry only has negative results: it chokes the word of God and distracts us from God. It is unbelief, the opposite of faith. And it leads to more fear and anxiety. And the different scenarios we play out in our minds can't prevent a single thing from happening. And besides that, most of the things we spend so much time fretting about won't happen anyway.

To sum up:

- Your life and body are far more valuable than any food you eat or clothing you wear. If God gave you life and fearfully created your body, he'll provide food for that life and covering for that body.
- God provides for birds who don't know enough to plant, reap and store up for winter. Humans created in God's image are far more valuable than birds, so he will certainly provide for us.
- Worry can't do a thing. I won't bring in a penny. It can't put a crust of bread on the table or add 5 minutes to our lives.

So don't worry, trust your heavenly Father who cares for you.

Jesus Wants You To Overcome Worry

Jesus wants you to overcome the temptation to worry.

In Matthew 6:28-33, Jesus says:

And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith (28-30)

Wild flowers, don't toil or spin – they do nothing to provide for themselves. Yet God is so lavish and overflowing that he clothes wild flowers with splendor and beauty that all Solomon's royal seamstresses couldn't imitate.

Field flowers are grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven – grass doesn't last and is of little value. Yet God clothes grass with incredible beauty. Will he not much more clothe you, whom he made in his own image, you who have an immortal soul?

If God so lavishly adorns wildflowers, will he not clothe his own children? What kind of mother would spend hours and hours working in her garden and then neglect to clothe her children? Why do we have such little faith?

Next Jesus says when we are anxious about our worldly provision, we think and act like Gentiles – unbelievers.

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (31-33)

Gentiles worry because they have no guarantees of food and provision. Gentiles have no God to provide for them. But we have a heavenly Father who knows what we need, and cares deeply about us.

Now Jesus tells us where to focus our thoughts and energy: on the kingdom of God and his righteousness. These are we should seek first. Here's what should occupy our thoughts and energy: loving and serving Jesus, seeking to obey his kingly rule, seeking to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel, by which God has declared us righteous.

Finally Jesus says each day has enough trouble to keep us occupied.

Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (34)

Tomorrow is going to happen one way or another anyway, and we can't do a thing about it. So focus on today. Seek the kingdom today. Have faith; don't be of little faith. Have faith that God who provides for sparrows and clothes wild flowers with splendor will be far more lavish with you as his child.

Don't think and act like Gentiles who have no God who loves and provides for them. Act like the child of your heavenly Father who knows your every single need and cares about you.

Don't be anxious; trust your Father.

Are You Fearful For The Future?

This life can be pretty scary at times.

Who knows what's going to happen with our government? With drugs, morals, terrorism, the economy or all kinds of other issues? If our finances are tight or one of our children is going through a crisis, we can be tempted to fear and preoccupied with the future.

In the *Screwtape Letters*, by C.S. Lewis, senior demon Screwtape gives his disciple Wormwood advice on tempting his human subject:

The humans live in time but our Enemy destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the present. He would have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present – either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation from Himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present

cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure.

Our business is to get them away from the eternal, and from the Present. It is far better to make them live in the Future – thought about the Future in flames hope and fear. Also it is unknown to them, so that in making them think about it we make them think of unrealities. Nearly all vices are rooted in the future. Gratitude looks to the past and love to the present; fear, avarice, lust, and ambition look ahead. — *C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters*

Satan wants us focused on anything but eternity or today. Worrying about the future is a futile exercise, because most of what we are concerned with will never happen.

We spend all kinds of time consumed with and fearful of unrealities – things that don't even exist. We work out all kinds of scenarios in case of this or that contingency, most of which will never materialize. But Jesus says,

Do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble? (Mt. 6.34)

Jesus does not say we should not plan for tomorrow, but not to be anxious, worried or fearful about it. If we are anxious about tomorrow, we are really saying that God won't be there, he won't be faithful, he won't supply grace.

But for believers in Jesus, our Heavenly Father will supply grace, and strength and all we need. So rather than being anxious, cast your cares on him, ask him for whatever you desire, and thank him for the grace he will supply.

One of my favorite passages is Habakkuk 3:17-19:

Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places.

Habakkuk says that even if everything else dries up, his joy is in God. He describes a total famine – no figs, no fruit on the vines, dead fields, no flocks, no animals in the barn.

But his focus is not on all he lacks but on his God – he says even if all these other things are gone, I'll have joy, because my joy is in the God who saves me. His material goods aren't his strength, his God is.

Jesus would have you tend to today. What does he want you to do today? Ask him for grace and wisdom to help you serve and glorify him today. Cast your cares on him. Ask him to fill you with joy in him. Thank him for his faithfulness. His peace will guard your heart and mind.

Hope For Anxious Hearts

My first 2 years as a Christian I was a ball of anxiety.

Every morning I awoke with a knot in my stomach and an invisible hand on my throat. All day long I'd suck in shallow quivering breaths and exhale, trying to relax. I was stuck in a job from Gehenna, clueless as to my future, my finances were a train wreck, and I was about as organized as an anthill after being blown up by an M-80.

I'd forget to do important things, like pay my taxes and maintain my car. One bitter January night I cracked the engine block on my first car, a blue Plymouth Fury. For some reason I had thought I could substitute water for antifreeze. So when I cranked up Ol' Blue that night, I couldn't understand why smoke began billowing out from under the hood.

I pleaded with Jesus regularly for peace, but was still anxious. Then one day he gave me a picture of a tangled, knotted ball of yarn and spoke to my heart, "Mark, your life is like that ball of yarn. You've messed it up, but I will sort it out, strand by strand, day by day, and eventually you will have my peace."

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you (IS 26.3).

God would sort it out. My job was to keep my mind stayed on him – on his character and promises in Scripture. As I did this, mustering whatever faith I could, he'd provide peace.

Our circumstances scream things like, "You have no resources, no hope of a job! You'll never marry. Your teenager will never accept the Lord. You're doomed!" If we keep our minds stayed on our circumstances, we'll never find peace.

When life's breakers threaten to swamp us, we must grab our minds by the scruff of the neck, make them look up and insist, "Behold your God: sovereign, faithful and loving! Somehow he will provide for me, because he's promised to meet all my needs according to his riches in Christ!"

When I began to do this, I started tasting God's peace little by little, drop by drop, sip by sip. Eventually the anxiety evaporated.

As my little boat continues to sail through the squalls of life, I still must anchor my mind on Christ, trusting him for my children, my church, and myself. As I do he calms my heart. Even when my cars blow up.

Unbelief Makes You A Raving Lunatic

Unbelief does terrible things to people, like turn them into raving lunatics. Don't believe me? Look at what it did to the Israelites. They had been rescued by God from the hand of Egypt and were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. But when Israelite spies brought back reports of enemies on steroids, the Israelites had a total meltdown.

They said:

Because the LORD hated us he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us. (Deut. 1:27)

This is crazy talk. The Israelites were God's chosen, beloved, precious people. He busted them out of Egypt, water-bombed Pharaoh and his army, led them through the wasteland, fed them with bread from heaven, and promised to bring them into a land of rest. God was good to Israel. God loved Israel.

But the sin of unbelief always leads to faulty thinking about God. In the face of the enemy, Israel's faith in God evaporated. Suddenly they viewed God through the lens of unbelief, a lens which made God appear to be cold, unloving, and hateful. Israel failed to believe God's promise, which led them to doubt and accuse God.

Unbelief caused them to become raving lunatics.

Unbelief turns us into lunatics too. In the face of challenging circumstances, our faith often evaporates and we start to accuse God.

For example:

- **CIRCUMSTANCE:** You have yet another conflict with your son or daughter.
- **UNBELIEF:** I will never change, my child will never change.
- **ACCUSATION:** God why are you letting this happen to me? Why do I have to deal with this unruly child? My son/daughter will never follow God.
- **TRUTH:** The gospel is the power of God to save and change your child. God is working these conflicts for your good and his glory.

We must fight against the sin of unbelief by exercising faith in the promises and character of God.

It's the only way to avoid lunacy.

Sometimes It Gets Worse

Moses spoke thus to the people of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery (EX 6.9).

God had promised Israel deliverance from the crushing weight of Pharaoh's cruel fist and their hopes had soared. Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh, demanding Israel's release. But instead of letting them go, he turns the screws even tighter, intensifying Israel's cruel slavery.

God again promises to deliver them, but this time Israel doesn't listen because Pharaoh's brutality had broken their spirits.

The Scripture above teaches us that sometimes it gets worse before it gets better. But that doesn't mean God has abandoned us. It means he's setting the stage to gain even more glory and give us even greater joy than if he answered our prayers right away.

How stunning was his rescue of Israel from Egypt! How astounding was Jesus' rescue of us from our death and sins. Just when all looks lost, Jesus

comes bursting forth from the grave!

Often in superb dramas, things get increasingly impossible for a character before a sudden and glorious rescue. He's knocked unconscious only to awake strapped to railroad tracks. A train whistle blows in the distance. He struggles, only tightening the knots. Now we see smoke. The train rounds the corner, bearing down. The extremity of the character's peril makes his escape that much more incredible.

We must keep trusting God's promises, even when things go from bad to worse.

We must seek his grace to keep our spirits from being broken. We must keep asking him to fulfill his promises and keep thanking him that he'll help us.

But even when our faith wanes, God is patient and longsuffering! Even though Israel didn't listen to Moses in their discouragement, God still rescued them. Sometimes trials crush believers so much they struggle to believe God's promises. Just as God bore with Israel's weakness, we should bear with our brothers' and sisters' weakness.

So let's be patient with the weak in faith, and pray for them and encourage them. And if you are in the cooker and things have gone from hot to boiling, remember, sometimes it gets worse before it gets better – for God's glory and your joy.

How Will God Do It

Too often we try to figure out how God will keep his promises.

Like predicting how the game Mouse Trap will work. “If God turns this gear, then the ball will roll down this channel and trip that switch, which will turn that wheel, thus dropping the answer to my prayers.”

We try to imagine how God will provide. “Let’s see, Joe owes me \$50.00 and I have a birthday coming up – maybe Grandma will send me some cash. And if I take a second job, sell my baseball cards, and quit giving to the church for a while...” Sometimes we just can’t see how God will possibly come through for us.

We never consider that God can open the eyes of the blind with clay and spittle, he can work above, beyond, and even contrary to means...’ Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain, yet the valley shall be filled with water’ (2 Kings 3.17). God would have us depend on him though we do not see how the thing may be brought about... —
Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*

God isn't limited to the means and channels we can see for him to answer our prayers. We may not see a cloud in the sky, yet God can water our thirsty souls. God doesn't need our company to give us money. He doesn't check polls and odds.

The disciples saw no natural means for Jesus to feed the multitudes but it wasn't a problem to him. When Jesus needed money for the temple tax he told Peter to throw his line in the lake, and he'd catch a fish with a coin in its mouth.

Imagine Peter trying to figure how that would work. "Let's see, if I can get Zacchaeus to go out in the boat, and I ask him for some change, and he slips and drops a coin into the lake and I can get my line into the water quick enough..."

We trust God based on his promises, not on what we can see. If we can figure it out, we don't need trust.

If God has promised fire, we don't need to worry if he has matches. Our task is to ask and trust, not try to figure out how God will do it.

I Can't Walk On Water So I'm Afraid

Sometimes I think that Jesus' disciples get a bad rap. We tend to think of them as Jesus' bumbling sidekicks who couldn't get anything right and always seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sort of a Jesus and his twelve stooges kind of thing.

But when I take a closer look at the disciples I see a lot of myself in them. Matthew 8:23-26 is a great example:

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?"

I'd say that the disciples reacted in a pretty normal way in this situation. Their boat is on the verge of getting destroyed and they are on the verge of dying. Being utterly terrified seems like a pretty normal reaction given the imminent death that was approaching. If I had been in the boat I would have been screaming at Jesus to wake up as well.

But after Jesus wakes up and calms the storm, he asks the disciples, “Why are you afraid?” Now if I had been there I would have said, “Well Jesus, did you happen to notice the massive waves crashing over the boat or the gale force winds that were ripping the sails apart? Unlike you, I don’t have the ability to walk on water. I wasn’t there when that gift was distributed. So that’s why I am afraid.”

So why did Jesus rebuke the disciples, and why would he have rebuked me? Because Jesus was with them. He was right there, in the boat with them. Fear and Jesus don’t coexist. When Jesus is around, there shouldn’t be any fear. The only appropriate response when Jesus is present is faith.

All this forces me to ask the question of myself: why am I so afraid about so many different things? If Jesus actually dwells in me, why am I afraid about [insert any of the thousands of things I fear]. Jesus and fear don’t dwell together.

Jesus would say to me, just like he said to his disciples, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?”

Father Abraham's Flimsy Faith

Hebrews 11 is sort of like the Bible's version of the Hall of Fame.

As you walk the hall's long marble corridors you see a picture of Abel on your left, offering up a sacrifice to the Lord. And there on your right is Noah, constructing a Titanic that wouldn't sink. In one alcove you find yourself face to face with busts of Samson, Gideon, and Jephthah.

As you wander a little further, one display catches your eye. It's size alone makes it impossible to ignore. You're standing face to face with Abraham. A little golden placard at the base of the display says "Father of Faith".

To the side of the display is a small video screen playing the "Top 10 Moments of Abraham's Life". You give your attention to the screen, expecting to see one glorious triumph of faith after another. After all, this is the hall of fame. But what you see baffles you.

The documentary begins with Abraham leaving all he knows to obey the call of God. So far so good. But then you see Father Abe, quaking in his sandals, basically giving his wife to Pharaoh. Odd.

Abraham believes God and it's counted to him as righteousness. Now we're talking. Abraham tries to sabotage the promise of God by having a son through Hagar. That seems very un-heroic-faith-like.

Abraham is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac out of obedience to God. Now that's extreme faith. Abraham again tries to give his wife away, this time to Abimelech.

You take a second look at the "Father of Faith" placard.

Was Abraham really a faith champ? Absolutely...sometimes. But there seems to be something else bigger going on here. You watch the documentary a second time.

Yeah, now you're seeing it more clearly. Every time Abraham tried to drop a bomb on the sacred promise, God stopped him. God keeps his promises in spite of human unfaithfulness.

You flip over the golden placard and notice writing on the back. Now everything makes sense. It reads: God is Faithful.

That's how God works. He keeps his promises even when we're unfaithful. He stays with us even when we walk away. You can know and believe that God is faithful. He'll always keep his promises.

Through Thick and Thin

God has graciously given us who believe in Christ great and precious promises. But it's not enough to simply have them. We must believe them.

O! He is a suitable Savior! He has power, authority, and compassion, to save to the uttermost. He has given His word of promise, to engage our confidence, and He is able and faithful to make good the expectations and desires He has raised in us. Put your trust in Him; believe (as we say) through thick and thin, in defiance of all objections from within and without. —John Newton

It's easy to believe God's promises when we're prospering, when our children are doing well, when everything is going our way. When Israel marched triumphantly out of a crippled Egypt after the destroying angel had killed Egypt's firstborn, and Israel was laden down with the treasures their captors had given them, it was easy for them to believe God would fulfill his promises.

But shortly afterward, when they came to the Red Sea and Egyptian chariots were barreling down upon them, everything around them screamed that God had abandoned them.

Reminds me of the song Stuck in the Middle with You by Stealers Wheel:
“Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am, stuck in the middle with you.” Israel was stuck with nowhere to go.

Everything within and without them screamed, “God has abandoned us.”

The big question when we go through a trial is what are we going to believe – God’s promises or our circumstances? God’s word or our emotions? God’s promises or our interpretation of the circumstances?

How it would have glorified God if the Israelites had said, “Don’t worry, he’ll be here. He’s brought us this far; he won’t abandon us now.” How it would have pleased God, when they heard the thunder of chariot wheels, if they would have said, “Don’t worry, God will protect us. He’ll make a way of escape.”

Trust him through thick and thin, in defiance of all objections from within and without. And you will see the One who is able to save to the uttermost fulfill his promises.

Our Flimsy Faith

Sometimes we think it's the strength of our faith that gets things from God. This just isn't the case.

Jesus said we only need faith the size of a mustard seed. Remember the story about the man whose son was afflicted by a demon? He said "I believe; help my unbelief."

Jesus didn't say, "Is that the best you got? Do you think I'm going to heal your son when you have such flimsy faith? Come back when you really believe."

No, Jesus said, "I can work with that!"? Jesus responded to his weak faith and healed his son.

Faith is like a power cord that plugs into a wall socket. The cord itself has no power. The cord is thin and flimsy and weak. But when we plug it in it taps into the vast resources of the electric company, which has more than enough power, vast power, far more than we need to run our vacuum

sweeper or circular saw.

Our flimsy weak faith connects us to the ultimate power source, Jesus Christ.

It's not the strength of our faith that matters, but the strength of the One our faith connects to. Next time you pray for something and you feel weak in faith, keep your eyes on Jesus, not your faith.

Keep your eyes on the One who spoke and it came to be, who sustains the universe by the word of his power. Keep your eyes on the One who told the wind and the waves to be still and they obeyed. Remember his vast power and infinite love for you.

He can work with our flimsy faith.

Hard Thoughts Of God

One night a few months ago I expressed to my wife Kristi that I was feeling overwhelmed. At that time she asked me an incisive question: “What are you believing about God right now?”

This is a brilliant question to ask any time you are feeling disquieted in spirit, or anytime you’re feeling depressed or discouraged.

I answered Kristi, “Well, if I am feeling overwhelmed, I guess I’m believing that God is giving me too much to bear. I guess I’m believing that God won’t be faithful to help me. Which in essence means I guess I’m believing that God has lied to me and is not good.”

Kristi’s question revealed that I was thinking hard thoughts of God.

Many Christians think hard thoughts of God by believing their heavenly Father is continually disappointed with them. This reveals a deficient grasp of the Gospel, which tells us that in Christ God sees believers as justified — “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned,” and “just-as-if-I’d-always-perfectly-obeyed”.

In other words, because of the blood of Christ God declares us not guilty, and because of the obedience of Christ God declares us to be positively righteous. Our heavenly Father looks upon his children with overflowing love, gentleness and compassion, not disappointment, anger and frustration. If we think that God is continually disappointed in us that is thinking hard thoughts of God.

John Owen says,

Consider that it is the greatest desire of God the Father that you should have loving fellowship with him. His greatest desire is that you should receive him into your soul as one full of love, tenderness and kindness to you. Flesh and blood is apt to think hard thoughts of God, to think that he is always angry and incapable of being pleased with his sinful creatures, that it is not for them to draw near to him... 'I knew that you were a hard man', said the evil servant in the Gospel." (Communion with God, 31)

When we suffer and go through trials we can be tempted to think hard thoughts of God. We can think God is not good, God is not faithful, God does not hear my prayers, God does not have loving intentions toward me.

But the Bible is filled with promises like Lamentations 3:21-23:

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

What are you believing about God right now? Do you have hard thoughts of God? Or do you believe your heavenly Father is filled with love and tender feelings for you? Do you believe he delights in you and rejoices over you with singing (Zeph. 3:17)? Do you believe he is good and working all things together for your good? Do you believe his steadfast love to you never

ceases? Meditate today on God's tender love for you in Christ and give him praise.

The Battle We Fight Every Single Day

There is one battle that we fight every day. Multiple times a day. Probably hundreds of times a day. The battle is this:

Will I let my circumstances shape my view of God, or will I let the Word of God shape my view of God?

Every single day we encounter circumstances that fight to shape us and mold us and twist us. My tight budget tries to squeeze me into the mold of fear. My disobedient child tries to twist me into a sculpture of unbelief. My constant sickness tries to wrestle me into doubting God's goodness.

Circumstances are always trying to shape our faith.

When Jesus' disciples came face to face with a massive crowd of hungry people, they let what they saw with their eyes shape their faith, rather than letting Jesus shape their faith. They trusted more in what they could see than in the Son of God standing next to them.

That's our temptation too. To let our faith be shaped by what we see rather than God's truth and God's character.

Today, let's seek to have our faith shaped by the word of God. Period.

You Know You Are Losing The Battle Of Faith When...

Your circumstances seem more overwhelming and powerful than Jesus. You are overwhelmed by the “giants” that surround you.

So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” (Matthew 14:29-30)

Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. (Deuteronomy 31:6)

You regularly find yourself plotting out your future instead of trusting in the Lord with all your heart. You run different scenarios through your mind, working out all the “if-thens”, planning for every contingency, creating plan ‘A’, plan ‘B’, and plan ‘C’. Your assurance and peace comes from your ability to “figure things out” rather than trusting in the Lord.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make

straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. (Proverbs 3:5-7)

You trust your feelings more than you trust the promises of God. You rely on your fluctuating feelings to give you an accurate picture of life, rather than on the unchanging word of God.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalm 119:105)

You despair when circumstances get “too big” for you. Rather than trusting in the God through whom all things are possible, you sink into a funk when your circumstances get bigger than your ability to handle.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. (Psalm 42:5-6)

Insert Jesus, Change Everything

The twelve disciples tend to get a bad rap. We often talk about them as if they were some sort of bizarre slapstick circus act, bumbling fools who were always doing the wrong thing at the wrong time.

“There go the disciples again, keeping kids away from Jesus!”

”There goes Peter, running his mouth like usual, promising Jesus he would stick with him to the end!”

”James and John sure were morons for asking Jesus if they could sit at his right and his left.”

We talk about the disciples as if they were characters from a sitcom called *Those Dumb Disciples* (probably starring Tim Allen as Peter).

We’re pretty darn sure that if we were in the disciples shoes we would have responded much differently. But I don’t think so. We would have responded exactly as the disciples did. How do I know? Because we do our best disciple impersonations every single day.

Just a few examples. In Matthew 14 Jesus walks on the waves of a stormy sea. When the disciples see him, they, understandably, have a colossal freak-out session. Peter calls out to Jesus, and Jesus tells Peter to come out on the water. Peter hops out of the boat and begins walking on the water toward Jesus. Finally, Peter realizes the insanity of what he is doing, is stricken with fear, and starts to sink. When Jesus rescues him, he rebukes Peter by saying, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt? (Matthew 14:31).

I can imagine Peter thinking, *Why did I doubt Why did I doubt?! Jesus, not sure if you noticed, but I was walking on the water. I was defying the laws of physics!*

Or how about the time the disciples were crossing the sea and a momentous, whopper of a storm fell on them? They were on the verge of sinking. Death by drowning was a real possibility.

And yet when the disciples cry out to Jesus in fear, he says to them, “Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?” (Matthew 8:26).

Why are we afraid? Why are afraid?! Because we are about to die! Because we want to live, for crying out loud! We want to live! [insert hysterical pleading]

The disciples were rebuked by Jesus whenever they behaved as if Jesus were not present. Under normal circumstances, it would be perfectly acceptable to have a nervous breakdown while walking on the sea.

But with Jesus there are no such thing as normal circumstances. Ordinarily it would be okay to freak out when your boat is sinking and your are on the verge of drowning. But with Jesus, there is no such thing as ordinary.

Insert Jesus into any situation and everything changes.

We are no different than the disciples. When our finances get tight, we have ourselves a grand ol' panic session. To which Jesus would reply, "O you of little faith! I'm right here with you! I am your good shepherd! I'll provide for you. Why have you forgotten about me?" Insert Jesus into your finances and everything changes.

When our children begin fall into sin we allow ourselves to be buried under a mountain of unbelief. To which Jesus would reply, "O you of little faith! I'm mighty to save! Why are you afraid?" Insert Jesus into your family and everything changes.

When a promising relationship dissolves into tears and heartbreak, we can fear for our future and doubt the goodness of God. To which Jesus would reply, "O you of little faith! I have every moment of your life in the palm of my hand."

Insert Jesus into any situation and everything changes. What once appeared hopeless suddenly is splashing over with possibilities. What once appeared bleak is suddenly ripe with God-ordained possibilities. We act like the disciples when we forget about Jesus. When we act like he's not there, not powerful enough to intervene.

We can laugh at the disciples, but we need to laugh at ourselves as well. We are all the disciples.

You Could Give Up Or You Could Do This

The Christian life is full of utterly impossible challenges. You think you can overcome your sin and live a holy life in your own strength? Have at it my friend! Come back in six months and tell me how it's going for you.

You think you have enough wisdom to help your children navigate all the landmines and pitfalls of life? Well huzzah for you! (Side note: we really need to bring the word "huzzah" back into usage.)

Do you think you have enough insight to untangle the sticky relational mess you find yourself in? Do you think you have the strength to sufficiently lead your small group, worship team, counseling team, church planting team, or church? Right. Have at it my friend. I'll have a bed in a padded room waiting for your return.

The reality is, God *constantly* places us in situations that are far beyond our ability to bear. He places us smack dab in the middle of befuddling, perplexing, overwhelming, even crushing circumstances.

Why does God do this? To humble us. To make us painfully aware that we cannot make it through this life apart from him. To highlight our desperate dependence on him. God strips us of our own strength to make us totally reliant upon his strength.

In 2 Corinthians 1:9, Paul says:

Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

God allowed Paul to be pushed and pressed, hit and hammered, even sentenced to “death”, SO THAT he would not rely upon himself, but upon the power of the God who raises the dead. God puts us in situations that are so far beyond our ability to survive so that when deliverance comes, only God can receive the glory.

Speaking of pastoral ministry (but this quote applies equally to a million other situations), Charles Bridges says:

Did we depend upon the failing support of human agency [strength], or upon the energy of mere moral suasion [our ability to persuade] – we should cry out, prostrate in heartless despondency – “Who is sufficient for these things?” But the instant recollection – that “our sufficiency is of God” – “lifts up our hearts in the ways” and work of the Lord. (The Christian Ministry, page 19)

Are you in a situation that is too hard for you? Are you being stretched beyond your giftings and abilities? Are you pushed down and crushed, even to the point of despair? Do you feel like butter scraped over too much bread? You really only have two options.

Behind door number one: give up. Let despair, anger, and unbelief wash over you like an acidic shower, eating away at your faith. Start calling yourself a “realist”. Allow cynicism to have its way with you.

OR...

Behind door number two: rely upon the God who raises from the dead. Throw aside any foolish remnants of self-sufficiency and depend wholly upon our mighty, powerful God. Depend upon God to work in your rebellious children. Depend upon God to work mightily in your shaky marriage. Depend upon God to save your “unsavable” relative. Depend upon God to give you physical and emotional strength to serve your family. Depend upon the God who slays giants, shuts lions’ mouths, and rescues out of fiery furnaces.

God does incredible things when we stop relying upon our own abilities and start relying on him. He does incredible things when we finally give up on our own abilities and find all our strength in him.

How To Grow Strong In Your Faith

In Romans 4, Paul tells us Abraham “grew strong in his faith” and urges us to walk in Abraham’s footsteps. To believe like he believed. How do we do this?

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:18-21)

Look To God’s Promises Not Your Circumstances

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations (18)

Abraham's situation looked bleak. God promised him multitudes of descendants, but the only problem was he was well past child producing.

“He considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old).”

He also considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. Not only was Abraham almost 100 years old, but Sarah his wife was very old and she had never been able to have children her whole life. How are they going to have children? If Abraham had based his hope on his circumstances he would have given up. But In hope he believed against hope – God's promise gave him hope in his hopeless situation. He put his hope in God's promise, not his circumstances.

We may feel hopelessly unrighteous. We may feel like God could never forgive us for the sins we have committed, that he would never accept us. But we must not look at ourselves, just like Abraham didn't look at himself, but like Abraham, we must believe God's promise of grace. He counts me righteous in Christ!

Our teenager may seem hopelessly lost. Our finances may be out of control. We may lack direction for our lives. Our marriage might be frustrating or our church might be a mess. Look to Jesus Christ! Don't look to yourself. Look to the promise of the gospel – everyone who believes in him shall be saved. Look to his promises to draw near to those who draw near to him. Promises to hear and answer our prayers.

Give Glory To God

No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (20-21)

Abraham strengthened his faith. Here's how: He grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God. Begin to give glory to God – start thanking and praising him for his every promise. Thank him for saving you and declaring you righteous in him. He has promised to be with us when we pass through the waters and walk through fire. He has promised to never leave us nor forsake us. He has promised that nothing will be able to separate us from his love. He has promised to give us everything we truly need to glorify him. He has promised that we can do all things he requires through Christ who loves us. Praise him for these things!

We can look to our circumstances – it may not LOOK like God is being faithful. It may not FEEL like God is with us in these waters.

It may FEEL like he has abandoned or forsaken us.

We may not SENSE his love.

But WE MUST NOT WAVER CONCERNING THE PROMISE OF GOD!

Rather, we grow strong in our faith as we GIVE GLORY TO GOD, as we are fully convinced that God is able to do what he had promised.

In Ps 43 the Psalmist says “Why are you cast down O my soul? Hope in God for I shall yet praise him.”

Keep thanking God, keep praising him in faith in the midst of your hard times. Say, “Jesus thank you that you are with me. Thank you have promised that your steadfast love never ceases. Praise you that your mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.”

Growing stronger in our faith is not complicated. Look to God's promise and glorify him. So what are you going to believe today – God's word or your circumstances? God's promises or your feelings? God's bedrock pledge

of faithfulness or your wavering emotions? Walk in the footsteps of Abraham and strengthen your faith.

God Doesn't Want To Fulfill My Dreams

I'VE BEEN THINKING A LOT ABOUT DREAMS LATELY.

Not the kind of dreams you have when you're sleeping, but the kind you have when you're awake. The kind of dreams that actually keep you from sleeping. The dream of starting a business. The dream of having kids. The dream of getting married. The dream of signing a record deal. The dream of publishing a book. The dream of having a large house. The dream of becoming a missionary.

My generation has been told that if we dream it, we can have it. You want to be President? You can do it. You want to be a teacher? You can do it? You want to be a famous actor? You can do it. With enough hard work, you can make all your dreams come true. It's sort of like *Field of Dreams* - if you build it, they will come. If you dream it, it will happen.

I'll be honest: there have been times when I've bought into the dream machine propaganda. I've bought the books and read the blog posts and listened to the podcasts. I've written out "life plans" for myself, in which I

sketch out all the things I want to accomplish over the next five years. I've purchased goal-setting apps for my iPhone (yes, I know I'm a nerd).

But in recent months I've come to realize something very important: **God isn't in the dream fulfilling business.**

Actually, God does fulfill dreams, just not my dreams. God is in the business of fulfilling his dreams.

This theme runs through all of scripture. God has a plan, a dream if you will, for each person, and he always fulfills that dream. Abraham and Sarah dreamed of having lots of kids together. God dreamed of them having one son together, who would, along with Abraham, be an instrumental part of an incredible covenant between God and God's people.

Moses dreamed of growing up in Pharaoh's palace. God dreamed of sending Moses into the desert for forty years, then using Moses to lead God's people out of Egypt.

Hannah dreamed of having a large family. God dreamed of her having a son, Samuel, who would be dedicated to the Lord's service.

The people of Israel dreamed of a Messiah who would come in power and destroy all the enemies of Israel. God dreamed of a Messiah who would come in weakness and humility and be crucified upon a Roman cross.

The moral of the story? God's dreams for me are better than my dreams for me, and God will always fulfill his dreams.

Deferred, deterred, and destroyed dreams can make your heart feel sick. They can make you question God. Why God? Why am I still single? Why am I stuck in this job? Why is my church still so small? Why can't I have kids?

Why am I still struggling in my marriage? Why am I still battling these health problems?

To which God would reply (without minimizing your pain one bit):

You can trust me. Your dreams aren't working out, but mine are. You are mine, and I have a plan for you. I will make it happen.

There's a fascinating phrase in Acts 13:36. Paul says, "For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption..." God had a very specific purpose for David, and he ensured that David fulfilled that purpose. Once David fulfilled that purpose, he died and went to be with the Lord.

God has a very specific, good, wonderful purpose for you and me. He will fulfill that purpose. My dreams may not come true, but God's dreams for me will come true. And the good news is: God's dreams are always much better than mine.