

Focus 40 2012

Calling the Church to
40 Days of Prayer and Fasting

Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!
Devotions for Adults

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Focus 40 2012

Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Devotions for Adults

Calling the Church to

40 days of Prayer and Fasting for Transformed Lives

The Church of God is being called to unite in a time of prayer and fasting during the forty days leading up to Easter 2012 (February 29–April 8). Imagine the transformative power that could be unleashed if the church united in a time of deliberate prayer and fasting. How many lives could be changed? How many congregations could be healed and empowered for the sharing of the good news of Christ? Imagine what could happen if we Christians humbled ourselves in submission, sacrifice and prayer? Focus 40 is a call for the church to join together for just such a period of worship and obedience. Growing out of the writers' personal experiences in the Word, prayer, and fasting, the *Focus 40 Devotions for Adults* have been prepared by Church of God people across the nation. God's promise is still true, "*If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray...*" (2 Chron 7:14).

"We are convinced that through the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting, we refresh and connect in our relationship with God and others around us," said Rev. Randy Montgomery, chairman of the Strategic Values Transformation Team Cultivate and Refresh. "As God's children, we need to pull away from all the voices and noises in our lives and focus and reconnect with our Father." "*Even now, declares the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning*" (Joel 2:12).

Imagine if the church came together in the next forty days, in prayer and fasting—praying for God's awesome outpouring of anointing, blessing, and life-transforming power upon his people. Do you suppose anything memorable could happen? Would God show up in our midst in ways yet not experienced by us? Would any lasting positive change happen in our lives, families, churches, and other relationships? We the *Cultivate/Refresh Team* believe all of this and more can happen as we come together in this time of prayer and fasting, and we are delighted to offer these *Focus 40 Devotionals* as helpful resources. We invite you to join us in this life transforming experience and to encourage your family and friends to participate also.

The Transformation Team Connect/Refresh: **Dr. Sam Bruce**, Editor; and **Rev. Randy Montgomery**, Chair; **Rev. Joseph D. Allison**, Co-Chair; **Rev. Barb Ferraro**; **Dr. Steve Birch**; **Dr. James Johnman**; **Dr. Andy Stephenson**; **Dr. Melissa Pratt**; **Dr. Sam Bruce**; **Rev. Gary Moore**; **Rebecca Hodges**

Four Things to Focus on in Fasting

As you begin the *Focus 40* devotional season, realizing that fasting is something we need to grow into, here are four things we need to remember in the practice of fasting.

1. **F—Focus on God**

What should be our primary reason for fasting? We fast to focus on God, to cultivate intimacy with him. When we truly seek him, we will find him (Jer 29:13). What would prove to be the wrong focus for fasting? When we do it to impress people; this leads to pride. (Matt 6:16) When we do it, not out of love for God, but as a duty to follow a set of rules; this leads to legalism. (Matt 9:14–17)

2. **A—Ask God**

Why do we need to ask God? Because he wants us to come to him and ask. He delights when we ask, for it shows humility and God-dependence rather than self-reliance (Heb 11:6). It proves that we have faith in him. We come to him believing that he is greater than our needs and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him.

3. **S—Submit to God**

What can we expect when we fast? We can expect to hear him better. God will speak to us and will answer in response to our prayers and queries. And what does God expect when we hear him clearly in a fast? Obey what he says.

4. **T—Transformation**

What is transformation's relation to fasting? It should be the end-result of fasting. Fasting is useless without real life-change. Because fasting brings us into deeper intimacy with God, our love for him should also grow, which should enable us to obey what he commands. As we are changed, we must help others change, by witnessing for Christ.

Rev. Randy Montgomery, Chair, *Transformation Team Connect/Refresh*; Online Instructor, *Mid-America Christian University*

Reflection: Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

The *Transformation Team Cultivate/Refresh* is delighted to present these *Focus 40 Devotionals for Adults* for your reflection as we approach the 2012 Easter season. As we prayed together and privately, and as we discussed our theme for this year, we believed that God was leading us to focus on transforming lives, *Christ Followers helping people find their way home to God*. As we prayerfully reflected on that idea, we believed God led us to the theme ***Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives....!*** As we prayerfully selected the writers for the devotionals, we gave them some specific guidelines for them, in keeping with the theme. We asked for a relevant Scripture passage to anchor their thoughts in the life transforming Word of God. We asked that they share a story that illustrates life transformation in Christ because someone prayed, fasted, loved, served, witnessed to people, and modeled the unconditional, unlimited, unmatched love of God. We wanted them to relate to the *Great Commission* and/or the *Great Commandments*. Then, we asked for a prayer that flows through the story, Scripture, or theme. We said that we want the fire and excitement, the thrill and ecstasy of *Transforming the Culture by Being the Body of Christ*; the joy of new life in Christ; the fruit of prayer, fasting, loving, witnessing, serving, modeling. We have prayed for God's anointing on the writers and those who read the stories. As you read them, you may find yourself or someone you love in them; when you do, ask God what He wants to do in your life or their lives as a result of the story's message. Invite others to share the stories with you. Tell them. E-mail them. Mail them. *Facebook* them. *Twitter* them. Read them in person to others. Be blessed by them! **Enjoy them!** Let us know your stories of how God uses these stories in your life or others you share them with. Spread the joy of partnering with God in Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Unpacking the Focus 40 Devotions. . . ***Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives . . .!***

When you read the following *Focus 40 Daily Devotions* and focus on their message to you, you might want to spend a few minutes unpacking them, writing their meaning to you in your journal. Here are some reflection starters for you to consider:

1. What would the implementation of this devotional thought look like in your life? Are you there yet? What are your dreams regarding this concept?
2. What, if anything, keeps this from being real in your life? What changes—in attitudes, actions, motives, desires, and habits—would need to occur for God to accurately reproduce his character in you?
3. Reflecting on the Focus 40 theme, ***Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!*** What covenants with God would you like to make today regarding the message of this devotional?
4. Reflecting on the Christ Follower Principle ***Pointing People to the Way Home to God***, write a prayer about what you want God to do in and through your life, based on this devotional.

Dr. Sam Bruce, *Editor (for questions or comments: drsambruce@aol.com or 601-845-8693)*

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Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Ignite!

Revitalize the Great Commission in the life of every individual, church, and agency.

Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally. Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” —Matthew 28:16-20 MSG

Reach the Lost

If a man is in Christ he becomes a new person altogether - the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new. All this is God's doing, for he has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ; and he has made us agents of the reconciliation. —2 Corinthians 5:17–19 (Phillips)

Al, a friend of mine and a dynamic Christian high school science teacher, gave me an acrostic for the word *ego*, which graphically describes the results of refusing to worship God as the center of our lives. He said that *EGO* is *Edging God Out*. When the self is at the center of a life, there is no room for God. When God is edged out of a person's life, there is no place for worship, thus our spiritual formation is checkmated.

The ego-centered lifestyle is the path to absolute defeat, utter frustration, total disappointment, complete havoc in a person's life. Al was the perfect example of *Edging God Out*. Every time I think about Al, I remember that when I first met him he was an atheist and an evolutionist high school science teacher. I didn't like him because he kept trying to pull our high school band director away from God and church. Then, all of a sudden, I didn't see him again for more than ten years. He and his wife Abby showed up in our church on a Sunday morning. When I first saw him come in, a terrible thought ran across my mind, "What's he doing here?!" After the service, Al said, "Pastor Sam, do you remember me?" "Oh, yes, I sure do..." I responded, as my thoughts ran wild for a moment, but they were interrupted when he said, "Do you remember, back in 1972 when you had The New Philharmonic Christian Rock Band here at the church?" I said, "Yes, I do. We had over six hundred kids here that night, and probably half of them came forward to accept Christ into their lives." Al continued, "I was here that night, too; I was invited by Mike, the high school band director, who played trombone with the band." I wasn't prepared for his next words: "I too came forward that night and accepted Jesus into my life as Savior and Lord, and I changed from being an atheist and evolutionist to becoming a Christian and creationist!"

Al was drafted into the U. S. Army and was sent to the war in Viet Nam. After he got out of the army, he and Abby lived in Southern California for a while, and they had just moved back to Madera, where he got his old science teacher job back; but now he was teaching kids about the Creator God! He became an integral part of our congregation and our dynamic Men's Ministries. One morning, at our men's weekly breakfast Bible study, he gave his testimony and shared the *EGO* acrostic with us. He had moved from being a critic of God-stuff to being a proclaimer of the life-transforming power of God in Christ. He changed from edging God out to inviting God in! Talk about no longer being defined by the past! Al met the New Definer and received a new definition! Al became a new person altogether—the past is finished and gone; everything has become fresh and new. Now, that's Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives! Regarding The New Philharmonic Christian Rock Band, when Mike, the band director, and I set up that event, we also had them perform at the high school on Friday and announced to them that the band would be at our church on Sunday. We had no idea what God had in mind, but we prayed that something awesome would happen, and it did! Al came because he trusted Mike; he saw a new definition of Christianity in him and met the New Definer as his Savior!

Empower me, Lord, to always be a Christ-follower who reflects the new definition of Christianity so that others will meet you, the new definer as their Savior! Help me to be the kind of Christ-follower who brings people into the presence of God and God into the experience of people. I'm yours! Amen.

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce**, President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

For we live by believing and not by seeing. —2 Corinthians 5:7 NLT

Elvie was a new Christian and a mother of two young children. Her husband Dick was a former Golden Glove boxing champion, and he liked to go out drinking on the weekends with his friends. Often, Dick and his friends would get involved in fights at the local bar. Elvie knew there was little hope that she would be able to remain faithful in her walk with the Lord unless her husband also got saved. For several months, Elvie prayed and prayed for Dick with no effect. She went to the altar at every church service. The congregation became so concerned for her that they also began to pray fervently for Dick. Even during the offering prayer, someone prayed that Dick would come to know Jesus as his Savior. Months went by; nothing seemed to change. One Sunday morning, Elvie felt that the Lord was calling her to do more than pray. She didn't know much about fasting, but she knew that it said in the Bible that people often used fasting in addition to prayer. Elvie felt like God wanted her to fast for three days for Dick's salvation. She decided she would try it and see what would happen. She asked her sister and her sister-in-law to support her in prayer during her fast.

Dick was the last person Elvie wanted to know that she was fasting, because she knew he would do everything he could think of to stop her. When dinner time came, Dick immediately sensed Elvie was up to something. He insisted that he was not going to eat any dinner unless Elvie ate something first. When Dick continued to insist, Elvie explained to him that she was fasting. Dick's immediate reply was, "I'm not getting saved and you can't make me."

The week went on, and Elvie prepared meals for her husband and the children, but she didn't break her own fast. Often, she would wait until Dick got involved in watching something on television, and then Elvie would sneak off down the hall to the bathroom to pray. Every single time, Dick would follow her and stand outside the bathroom door. "I can hear you in there praying," he said, "and I want you to stop it right now." Elvie told Dick that she needed to pray, and he couldn't stop her from doing it. After the third day, she felt like the Lord had released her from her obligation. There still seemed to be no change in Dick. He continued to insist that he wasn't getting saved, he didn't need to be saved, didn't want to be saved, and nobody was going to make him. Friday night came, as he normally did, Dick went out to the bar with his friends. At 1:30 AM, Dick could no longer resist the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, and he rushed out of the bar and drove home as fast as he could so that Elvie could pray with him and he could get saved. He didn't make it all the way into the house; he fell down on his face in the front yard and gave his heart to

Christ. Often, when we have been praying for a deep soul burden for a very long time, it is easy for us to give in to negative thoughts about why God has not answered our prayer in the way or the time we think is right. We think God is angry or displeased with us or that he has not heard our sincere prayers. Other times, we try to help God along by attempting to create our own answers. We intervene in situations, speak out of turn, and make matters worse instead of better. When we remember that God works in his own perfect timing and in his own perfect way, we can be encouraged to continue to pray and fast for His perfect will to be done in every situation. Prayer and fasting can prepare us to be more in tune with the Holy Spirit as we pray for lives to be transformed and hearts to be changed.

Father, help us to remember that when we have prayed for a long time for something to change, the fact that there seems to be no effect does not mean you are not working on our behalf to transform the hearts of those we love the most. Help us to keep in mind that we walk by faith, not by sight. Amen.

➤ **Rev. Mary Nichols**, *Associate Pastor, Green Valley Church of God, St. Albans, West Virginia*

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. —Acts 4:13

You know, there's just something attractive, captivating, and fascinating about a true Christ Follower. People notice something different – life-transforming – about a Christ Follower. Peter and John were recognized as Christ-followers; Acts says that the people around them “took note that these men had been with Jesus.” *With* means to be in close association with a person; to participate in what he is and does—to transfer or sequence¹ that person's qualities to other people. It's more than being physically present with a person; it's being transformed by taking on his/her characteristics. *With* means a particular order in which related things follow each other²—his presence transforms who I am. The fact that Peter and John had been with Jesus made them so confident, so sure of themselves, that there was no question that they were related to him; his character was sequenced into their lives—Christ-followers!

We have a sequencer, a digital recorder that you can play a midi keyboard into, and it records (sequences) whatever we play, every note, piano, strings, trumpets, drums. When you play it back, there's no doubt that it's your recording. If you heard the live and recorded versions, you couldn't tell the difference. That is what Christ Followers are: we live so closely to Jesus that his thoughts, attitudes, motives, desires, and actions are played back or sequenced through us. When Jesus was ready to select his apostles, to whom he would entrust the planting of his church that would grow and thrive throughout time to bring people to him, Mark says, “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:13–15). They were *with* him so they could participate in his plans; He could *sequence* into them his God-breathed Word, unconditional love, goals of evangelism and disciple-making, life-transforming power, and unending resources to fulfill his plans.

When the people saw their courage, they couldn't take their eyes off them standing there so confident, so sure! They were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus. When people meet us, are they astonished and do they take note that we have been with Jesus? Do they see us as sequencers, channels of his God-breathed Word, unconditional love, goals of evangelism and disciple-making, life-transforming power, and unending resources to fulfill his plans?

I'll never forget that night. A group of men who met weekly for Monday Night Football at the Trail's End Saloon, on a ranch just outside town, said, “Sam, we invited you here because there's something different about you, and we want to know what it is. You don't push us; you just live it, and we know you care about us; we want you to help us understand more about it.” In the coming years, around the campfire, with plates full of hickory-fired steak and sausage, God *sequenced* his love and life-changing power through me to a group of men who noticed that I had been with Jesus. This is not about me; it's about Christ in and through me. Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

*Lord, I want to be with you like that. Use me as your sequencer to transfer your God-breathed Word, unconditional love, goals of evangelism and disciple-making, life-transforming power, and unending resources to all you bring across my path. Thanks. Amen.*³

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce**, *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

¹ *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*, WordSearch Bible Program.

² *Oxford University Press Dictionary*, Corel WordPerfect.

³ Bruce, Samuel K. *Your Life Repeated in My Life: Story Devotions for Christ Followers*. Unpublished.

Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. —Lamentations 3:21

Dr. Ann Smith shouted a greeting as she walked through our offices a few days ago. She was carrying a cane but scarcely seemed to use it, so I commented on how well she appeared to be recovering from hip surgery. She confirmed this and said she was enjoying a new book I had sent her.

“That was the strangest thing about being laid up after the surgery,” she said. “I wasn’t able to read anything. For the first time I can recall, I had no desire to read. I just wanted to concentrate on healing.”

She smiled and added, “Even so, the Lord brought to mind so many things I’d read before. I had time to reflect on them during my convalescence, so I didn’t feel deprived at all.”

Ann Smith is such an eager student that it’s hard to imagine her not reading for any extended period of time. (Obviously, she was perplexed by it too.) Yet God used that time of “fasting” from study to deepen her relationship with him. He called to her mind resources she had already accumulated.

The writer of Lamentations shared a similar testimony from the Exile: “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (Lam 3:21–26).

Lord, when we are deprived of things that normally sustain us, we trust you to sustain us. Call to mind your faithful provisions of the past, and help us to wait patiently for the future you are preparing. Amen!

➤ **Joe Allison**, *Coordinator, Publishing and Creative Services for Church of God Ministries, Inc.; CGM Liaison, Transformation Team Connect/Refresh*

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! —2 Corinthians 5:17

Sienna came into my office and crumpled dejectedly into the chair across from my desk. With tears streaming from her eyes, she said, “Pastor Sam, I want out of my marriage. Shawn and I were married sixteen years ago. When we started dating, I was on a rebound from a broken relationship. I discovered I was pregnant, and even though we didn’t really have any feelings of true love for each other, we decided to marry for the sake of the baby. There has never been any real love in our marriage. Now, Shawn is drinking too much. He’s becoming verbally abusive, and I’m tired of putting up with him.”

Her words, “I just want out!” reverberated through sobs and tears. My “Daddy heart” wanted to give her comfort, and say, “It’s OK. You’ve given the relationship sixteen years; it’s not getting any better, so it’s all right to get out.” But I closed my eyes and silently prayed for wisdom, and both Sienna and I were shocked at the words that tumbled out of my mouth. I said, “Sienna, our Lord Jesus Christ can give you and Shawn a love for each other that you’ve never had. He can heal your marriage and give you a Christian home like you’ve never dreamed!” I’ll never forget Sienna’s reaction as long as I live. She jumped up. I thought she was coming to hug me for my words of wisdom. But she screamed at me, “That’s not what I wanted to hear from you!” She ran out into the hall, slammed the door, and left. It was so loud that my secretary ran up the stairs to see if I was OK! And I thought, through tears, “Well, Sam, you really helped her a lot, didn’t you! You’ll probably never see her again!” But I did! Shawn and Sienna were out of church for several weeks; they showed up one Sunday morning. Sienna asked if she could talk with me.

I hoped things were better. But it was a repeat performance: “I want out!... “Jesus can put new love in your hearts!”...Scream: “That’s not what I wanted to hear!”...Gone! That scene repeated itself several times in the next year. I began to believe it was a hopeless relationship. Shawn and Sienna were bound by incurable defeat. Months later, I was directing our choir in the musical *Living Witnesses*. In preparation for the song *There’s Life in Jesus’ Name*, the instructions said to have a testimony of the transforming power of God in someone’s life. No one but I knew who it would be. Sienna walked to the microphone. She told the whole story of her and Shawn’s brokenness, her visits with me, the advice I gave her, her screams at me; running out on me, the counseling they received, prayers of family and friends for their reconciliation. She looked down at Shawn, and said, through teary eyes, “Shawn, I want to tell you today in front of all our friends that I love you with the love Jesus placed in my heart for you—a love we never had in all the years of our marriage!” She thanked the congregation and me for our prayers and support. As they embraced in the aisle, everyone stood up and erupted into spontaneous praise and applause. The choir exploded into singing *There’s Life in Jesus’ Name*! And we all knew there was joy in heaven that day as Shawn and Sienna went soaring from incurable defeat to incredible praise! The same God who healed, restored, and refreshed Shawn and Sienna can take you and your loved ones soaring from incurable defeat to incredible praise! new creations! Transforming hearts...transforming lives!

Thanks, Lord, for the awesome power of love, prayer, listening, and the Word to transform hearts...transform lives! For making everything fresh and new in Christ!

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce**, *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.”
—*Luke 10:41–42a.*

I was visiting a home in a South Carolina mill town when the conversation turned to prayer. In the course of our discussion, I confessed that I sometimes let daily concerns distract me from communicating freely with God.

“I know what you mean,” the lady of the house said. “It was so difficult for me to pray while I was having financial troubles a few months ago. I worried so much, my prayers didn’t seem to go higher than the ceiling.

“I couldn’t sleep one night because of it. I paced the floor and cried out to God, but still I could get no sense of peace about my situation. So I went outside and climbed up the ladder that a roofing crew had left there in the middle of a repair job, just to sit on the roof and pray. I said, ‘Lord, I don’t want anything to come between us—not even this roof.’ Right away, I felt God’s peace settle over me and I knew I would be all right.”

The roof wasn’t the obstacle, of course. Preoccupation with her financial needs (including the roof repair) was. So when she put herself physically in a posture that disregarded all of those concerns, she was able to converse with God freely again.

I don’t recommend that you climb up on the roof in the middle of the night. But see if you can put yourself in a posture that disregards everything distracting you from God so that you can talk freely with him and he with you.

Lord, I don’t want anything to distract me from You, not even this _____. *The one thing I really need is my relationship with you. Amen!*

➤ **Joe Allison**, *Coordinator, Publishing and Creative Services for Church of God Ministries, Inc.; CGM Liaison, Transformation Team Connect/Refresh*

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand...And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. —Ephesians 6:12–13, 18

Years ago before the formal focus on the 360 Revolution concept, I used to pray for those around me who didn't know Jesus. The 360 Revolution focuses on looking 360 degrees around you to see where God is at work and to get involved, praying for at least three persons six times a week who don't know Jesus and missing zero opportunities to share God's love.

One of my ministry fields was the gym. I used to compete as a power lifter and was in the weight room most days of the week. I would write down on my prayer list some of the guys I saw regularly and had interaction with and would pray for them regularly. What I found is that when I prayed for them to find Jesus and for the opportunity to share Jesus' love with them, some incredible things happened. I remember I had been praying, and there was a guy over at the dumbbells working out. He said something to me that gave this huge opening to talk about spiritual things. It was just crazy how it happened, and I believe without regular prayer on my part, it would have never happened. God did some incredible things in that place. People came to find Jesus; others who had been walking away from him came back and God did an incredible work. A men's accountability/Bible study group started at Cracker Barrel, and before you know it, we had to go to more groups because it got too large. I believe without a doubt, if there hadn't been consistent prayer, it would have never happened.

The Bible says that we are in a spiritual battle. Paul said, “Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand...And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph 6:12–13, 18). We need the weapon of prayer.

For us to see lives changed, I challenge you, no, better yet, I dare you to try to pray six days a week for three people who don't know Jesus. Pray that you would have a chance to share God's love. You will be amazed at what God does. I double dare you!

Don't be discouraged if nothing happens immediately. Sometimes it is the faithful prayers over years that bring someone to Jesus. I prayed for over two years for a guy who was against any spiritual conversations. Finally, God opened up a window and, well that's another story for another day.

Lord, I want to be part of the 360 Revolution, looking 360 degrees around me for the three people who don't know you, those you want me to pray for 6 times a week, missing 0 opportunities to share your love with them. As I stand in the gap in prayer for them, Lord, please go before me to prepare their hearts to receive your awesome love and life-transforming power. May they never be the same because they have met you in all of your healing love and grace. Thanks, Lord, for letting me be involved in your plan of transforming hearts...transforming lives. Amen.

➤ **Dr. Andy Stephenson**, *Leader of Youth and Family Ministries, Church of God Ministries*

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear.” —1 John 4:18

When I was a child, Dad was president of Wesley College. When I was eight years old, Dad made me a member of the worship team and paid me ten cents each time I sang in a service. I kept my dimes in little bank the size of a dime coin roll. I had saved almost five dollars. I counted and stacked them in dollar -size piles and put them back in the bank. One day, a lady where we were having dinner held out her tightly closed hand and said, “I’ll trade what I have in my hand for your bank and dimes!” I was curious to know what was in her hand, but I knew what was in my bank and how long it took me to accumulate my treasure; fifty dimes represented fifty songs! After much inner struggle, I decided to keep my dime bank and five dollars. When the lady opened her hand, I saw a hundred dollar bill! I was so disappointed that I cried.

Many people are like that, holding on to their puny little desires and toys, a few little joys, some happiness, a few fleeting thrills, along with a lot of fears, frustrations, heartaches, and anxieties. Then Jesus Christ, the Liberator comes along and offers to trade them eternal life—a life of inner peace and freedom, purpose and meaning, fulfillment and joy. Yet, they cling to their little empty or partially full lives because they are afraid to trust him, afraid to lose that which will not last or satisfy for what is eternal and will satisfy immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine (Eph 3:20). I didn’t know if I could trust that lady, and I didn’t know what she was offering in exchange for my bank, but as you spend with our Lord, listening to his thoughts, delighting yourself in him, getting the desires of his heart, making them the desires of your heart, you learn to trust him because his offer of salvation and abundant life is clear. “There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18).

Jesus Christ has proven himself across ages of time to be absolutely trustworthy. Millions of changed lives attest to his ability to save and satisfy people, who, in simple faith, trust him and ask him to come into their lives and take control. God the Father made an offer to trade his gift of eternal life for our time on earth. He sent his Son Jesus to complete the plan and make the offer. We choose to reject or accept it. To accept God’s offer gives new life, opportunities and relationships more valuable than anything we can dream or give up. Jesus asked, “What can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:37). He said, I am leaving you with a gift—peace of heart and mind—worth more than gold, silver, or anything else. What an offer! It’s like trading five dollars and a fifty cent bank for a hundred dollars—only the results of this trade are much more important, with eternal consequences and higher stakes! Choose to follow and serve Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord and enjoy eternal life with him.

I was speaker at a men’s retreat where we gathered around a bonfire. Several gave testimonies of God’s work in their lives. One young man said, with deep emotion and tears, “I declare an end to dysfunctionality in my family tree for generations! I am going to be a godly husband and father!” That night he made a better trade than giving up five dollars for a hundred dollar bill; and his wife and children got a new husband and father. Years later, he is still soaring high with the Lord, and is a Christ-follower and leader in the church. That’s a God kind of trade! Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Thanks, Lord, for your offer to trade your eternal life for my brief life, your full life for my empty life, your presence for my loneliness. Help me to always live in intimate relationship with you, and to offer your gift to everyone I meet. I love and trust you! Amen.

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Cultivate!

Nurture the spiritual gifts of every individual, church and agency.

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. —1 Corinthians 12:1-7

Equip for Ministry

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." —John 1:45

In greater and greater numbers, I discover people who are burned out on the institutional church. Some have given up on church but have not given up on God. In our outreach to our respective communities, let us not neglect this key group. Let us not give up on them, either. With time and the right opportunity, they will come back.

Robert is a local business owner in our community who needed some computer work done within his store. He heard about someone named Bill, who had computer skills, and invited him to come by his business to provide an estimate. In the course of their dialogue, Robert invited Bill and his family to our church. For Bill and wife, Susan, there was immediate hesitancy, due to a debacle that happened at their previous church that had left them jaded and confused. Needless to say, their ecclesiology took a major hit. After some time, though, they came and brought their children.

What they found was not what they expected, which was "more of the same." What they found, instead, was a loving community of people who helped them heal and believe again. Note this excerpt from a testimony written by Susan and published on our church's web page:

I knew in my heart that not being a part of a local church was not healthy and more importantly not something that I should be doing with my children. At the beginning of 2008, I started a prayer journal. One thing that I put on my list of goals for 2008 was to find a church home. In February of 2008, I had my third child, and I knew that the most important thing for her life was to be raised as a Christian. In April, my family attended Olde Towne for the first time. What a difference this church has made.

We were welcomed and celebrated before we could get out of the car. The people were loving in a way that I had never experienced. The services are so God-centered and worshipful that I have begun to let go of my fears and hurt. Olde Towne has restored my life in Christ by freeing me from religion and laying the pathway back to the relationship I had with God when I was first born again.

Bill and Susan are now totally involved in the local church and serve as lay leaders. Just think: it started with a simple invitation, just like the one Philip extended to Nathanael. For the family listed above, they are grateful that someone reached out and dared to extend hope where hope was needed.

Lord Jesus, help us to extend invitations to those who are separated from the body and need to find a home among your people. In your name, Amen.

➤ **Dr. Marshall Stokes**, Pastor, Olde Towne Community Church, Ridgeland, Mississippi

You Had a Hole in Your Lung, but It's All Healed Up Now!⁴ Day 10

"If you listen carefully to the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, who heals you." —Exodus 15:26

My friend Ken (hunting, fishing, and general mischief farmer buddy, who always lived on the edge of everything he did) had a four-wheel drive pontoon army vehicle. He loaded up his two kids and several neighborhood kids and was driving up a huge mound of dirt in a vacant lot. As he was going over the top of the mound, his foot slipped off the clutch and the pontoon flipped over backward. Most of the kids were thrown off safely; Ken's two-year-old, Mandy, had a broken collar bone. The steering wheel landed in the middle of Ken's chest, and he had to be rushed to the emergency room.

When I arrived, the nurse escorted me into his room. Ken was in extreme pain, having difficulty breathing. His skin was ashen color, and I was fearful that he might not make it. When he began trying to talk, with excruciating pain and effort, he said, in broken sentences, "Sam...I've got it figured out..." I thought he was going to say something deeply spiritual and profound, like, "If I don't make it...take care of my family," or "This is what I want you to do at my funeral!" He continued, to my consternation, "I've got it figured out...when I get out of here, we're going to put some roll bars on that thing!" I didn't know whether to laugh, or cry, or punch him! I blurted out, "Oh, no, you're not! Janet and I have already decided to sell that pontoon before you get out of here!" Of course, he was under heavy pain medication, and in a lot of pain, and wasn't up to saying much more. I took him by the hand, and in prayer I lifted him up before the throne of our healing Lord. After praying, my heart was heavy, and I needed to cry a bit, and I wanted to see Janet. He still looked ashen, and every breath was extremely painful. I went out and visited with Janet and the family, and had prayer; and because I felt so intensely for Ken, I went back to pray with him.

I was not prepared for what I witnessed! He was breathing normally, effortless, freely. His skin was back to its normal ruddy complexion. He was talking clearly and smoothly. He said, "Sam, get the doctor. I'm ready to go home!" Our friend Elvan had been to pray with him a few minutes before my first visit in the room. Ken said, "After you prayed, as you were walking out of the room, suddenly, I started breathing normally and feeling better!" Of course, he still had sore ribs and muscles, but his breathing was good; and that was the main thing he needed. The doctor came in and discharged him and Janet took him home. Later that night, Ken's neighbor, a doctor, came to see him and said, "Let me check you over and see how your ribs are." The doctor said, "I'm taking you back to the hospital. There's air in your abdominal cavity; you have a hole in your lung!" After the doctor ordered new lung X-rays, he said, "Ken, over here is a scar from when you had Valley Fever; but here is a new scar. *You had a hole in your lung, but it is all healed up! You're OK, and the air will go away.*" Ken told him about Elvan and me praying for him and how he started breathing normally as I walked out the door; and the Muslim doctor raised his hands and said, "Praise be to Allah. Only God could have done this!" I remembered the words of God to Moses, at Marah (place of bitterness), in answer to his prayer, where God sweetened the bitter water and said, "I am the Lord, who heals you!" (Jehovah-Raphe).

Thanks, Lord, for that day in the emergency room when you demonstrated the awesome power of prayer to you, the One who says without hesitation, "I am the Lord, who heals you." Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives! Amen!

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce**, President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

⁴ © 2010 by S. K. Bruce. *Your Life Repeated in My Life: Story Devotions for Christ Followers*, unpublished.

“Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage.

“Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.” —Matthew 5:13–16 MSG

In 1982, I became an ordained minister in the Church of God and served side-by-side with my husband in pastoral ministry. We co-pastored churches with Tom preaching in the morning worship services and me preaching in the evening worship services. My preaching always seemed to turn into teaching. At times I looked back and wondered why my messages were not evangelistic. However, two occasions stand out in my mind when God validated my style of ministry. And two phrases come to mind: Life-style evangelism and marketplace evangelism.

On one occasion at our daughter’s wedding, her friend from high school came into the bride’s dressing room and said she wanted to tell me something. She thanked me for letting her stay in our home on many occasions throughout high school. She said my example as a mother and a Christian woman influenced her life and was the reason she is a Christian today and raising her children in a Christian home. (Not my preaching.)

The second occasion was this past summer while visiting with friends of nearly thirty years. As we all sat around the table with mutual friends from the same time period and same pastorate, my friend said, “Mary is the reason I became a Christian. (We worked with our desks pushed together so that day in day out we faced each other.) Mary never pushed her faith on me. She was just my friend through a very difficult time in my life.”

Wow! People were watching my life, not particularly hearing me preach. So, in our homes, in our churches, at our jobs, where we shop and do business, people are reading our lives and making decisions to follow Christ because they see something in our lives that they want. The old hymn “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” says it best: “Drop Thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease; Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace.” My mother, Lois Bruce, had this gift. Once she entered the intensive care newborn nursery where she was the head nurse and one of the doctors declared, “Here comes the stabilizing presence of calm.”

Lord, let us be salt wherever we are placed, so people can experience all the flavor of God. Help us be light in a dark world so people can see all the colors and beauty of God and sense his stabilizing presence of calm. Amen.

➤ **Mary Bruce Fuller**, *Minister and Attorney; Florence, Mississippi*

"Bear one another's burdens." —Galatians 6:2 NRSV

Dan is a believer in his early fifties. He has a wonderful supportive wife in every aspect. His two children are grown and living very productive lives. However, Dan was called upon to face what he had never faced. He had grown up in a poor economic environment. He had therefore determined he would rise above this level. He spent the important years preparing himself through education, training, and experience to always be able to provide for himself and family.

Suddenly, at the age when he thought he would have reached his professional apex, he found himself without employment for the first time in his life. The first few months he took it as a challenge and set about spending time becoming credentialed in areas of his field that he thought would bring more opportunity. Yet after months of such advanced training there were still no job opportunities. As most men would he threw himself into sending out more resumes hoping that the law of percentages would be on his side. Still the months moved on without a concrete job offer. Then the phase began when the few offers that came called for him to enter new fields or relocate jeopardizing his wife's career.

All the time he was serving his local church and going through an elder-in-training program. During one of his meetings with the Board of Elders and me (his pastor), I suggested we as an elder board and spiritual brothers of Dan join together. Let us designate a specific day for fasting and prayer on behalf of Dan's employment issue. A few days later Dan e-mailed me with a thank you stating how encouraging it was to have a group of men in his life willing to fast and pray for him. This very effort brought him closer to each of us as we fasted and prayed every Wednesday for Dan. Each man was weekly in contact with Dan. They were naturally drawn to seek Dan out each Sunday to speak a word of encouragement or pray with him.

This time of committed fasting continued for the next four months. During those four months, Dan reported to the board of elders various possibilities, with all the highs and lows of expectations rising and falling.

On September 1, 2011, I opened an email from Dan that read; "Hello All, The prayer and fasting has been answered. I start my new job on September 12." The new job was in his field and was just twenty minutes from his home. Dan would later share with the elder board that although he was unemployed for over a year, his checkbook balance ended \$400.00 above the day he lost his job.

The bearing of one another's burdens will produce "perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us" (Rom 5:3-5).

Dear Father, may I not waste the use of spiritual disciplines just on myself. Help me to see that in engaging in these spiritual disciplines I can benefit another. May I come to experience that your discipline in my life will produce a blessing in another's life. I yield myself to you, O Lord, this day for your spiritual formation in my life. Amen.

➤ **Rev. Claude Robold**, Pastor, New Covenant Church, Middletown / Franklin, Ohio

“You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for.” —Matthew 5:7

MSG

There is a ballad by John Denver about his Uncle Matthew that tells the story of Matthew’s life, of joy and sorrow, having and losing, life and death. When I hear that song, I always think “That’s how I was raised.” Most of the time we do not recognize that life and death go hand in hand and the key to living is to live with joy. The way we as Christians experience life and respond to the death of a love one is a powerful witness to the world of the hope of eternal life that we possess. People facing death themselves or facing death with a loved one grasp for hope from those around them who have the hope and serenity of being in a right relationship with God.

When my father experienced his second stroke within a week’s time, he was in the intensive care unit in a deep coma, so deep he did not even respond to pain stimulus. The whole family—Mom, three children, four grandchildren and their spouses—gathered in his hospital room. The doctor, nurses, and we knew there was little hope of recovery. We asked permission to sing in his room since music and ministry was part of our lives. We sang his favorites, “The Old Rugged Cross,” “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say, ‘Come unto Me and Rest.’” I was watching Dad’s vital signs and his heart rate was erratic, but as we sang his breathing became even and his heart rate smoothed out as though he relaxed and was at peace.

During this time of looking death square in the face, there was a knock at the door. A woman was standing outside the door wringing her hands. She said, “My husband is in the next room dying. I heard you singing. Does anyone in here know how to pray?” My husband and I were closest to the door, so we left with her and entered her husband’s room. She told us that she was not sure if he was a Christian or not. We held her hands and her husband’s hands and prayed for his salvation before meeting God. Whether he could hear, whether he could respond, whether he had already made his peace with God, we did not know. Hopefully, his wife received comfort and sought God for her own salvation after this experience. What we do know is that God, like the waiting father of the prodigal son, is eagerly waiting when his wandering created-ones to turn toward home; and like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, hearts and lives are transformed! And we wonder if, in God’s seeking grace, the man opened his heart to Jesus, and he and Dad walked through the gates together? We don’t know, but it does resemble the heart of the Waiting Father, doesn’t it?

The doctor told us to go home, go back to work and be prepared for days, weeks, months or years of Dad being in this kind of coma. We did, except two of the family remained overnight. The call came early the next morning that Dad died peacefully in his sleep. There was no doubt in our minds about the mercy of God, the love of God, and the joy in both living and dying. While each of us daily cared for congregations of people and carried their burdens, several hundred people came from all over the country to pay their respects to our family. Your faith, your witness, in fact, your whole theology is on display to others as you live and as you confront death. Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

Lord, let our lives count, let our lives be “care-full”, so that when we need to be cared for, we rest in your arms.

➤ **Rev. Mary Bruce Fuller**, Minister & Attorney, Florence, Mississippi

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us. Glory to God in the church! Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus! Glory down all the generations! Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes!
—Ephesians 3:20–21 MSG

When I was visiting in Madera, where I formerly pastored, I attended Ken's wedding. After the ceremony, his mother, Ann, told me that she had not told me before we moved. Soon after Tom and Ann began attending our church, they learned that Ken had gotten in some trouble with the U.S. Army in Germany and was going to be court marshaled. Ann and Tom requested prayer for Ken repeatedly, in worship services and men's Bible study. Ann and Tom went to Germany to help Ken through the crisis. He could be imprisoned for a long time. It was the night before court martial; the three of them were sharing a motel room. In the wee hours of the morning—during a time of extreme turmoil and agitation—after Ann had fallen asleep, she said that my face appeared in a dream. In the dream I said to her, "Ann, remember, I've told you that we just need to get together and pray about these things. Pray together." She awakened from her sleep, woke Tom and Ken, and said, "Pastor Sam said we just have to get together and pray about these things!" So the three of them stood in a circle holding hands and prayed for guidance. God answered their prayers. Next day, in the court martial, things turned out in ways they could not have imagined. After just a few months of incarceration, Ken was back home in Madera. But the awesome good news is that during the ordeal, in the midst of intense intercessory prayer by the church family, Ken invited Jesus into his life! When he returned home, he began attending church and our men's Bible study. He met and married a lovely Christian lady. Ken served on the church board for some terms, and he and Susan are involved in various ministries. But that's only part of the story.

Ann wrote the following letter to me: "You know how many years we have been praying for our daughter and her family to come to know our Savior? Well this last year has brought the realization of our prayers. Our children, their spouses, and all six grandchildren call Fourth Street Church their house of worship! Maybe no one else can understand what that means to us, except you, having been alongside us through some of the worst times in our lives. Ken and Susan are very active in various programs, Tom has just started helping with the Truck Stop Ministries, we are both attending a Bethel class, AND Susan and Jeremy are teaching their second Sunday school class. I hope you understand that I am not trying to toot a horn, only to show you how much their love for the Lord has grown. I feel so peaceful even with all the anguish around us. I just really thought it was time that I took a moment to thank you for your advice to never give up!"

That's the awesome power of God-fired intercessory prayer, Transforming Hearts ... Transforming Lives! That is cause for rejoicing! Prayer can melt the hardest heart, remove the toughest obstacle, cleanse the worst motives, clear the hardest conscience, and mend the severest broken relationships, both with God and with other persons. Prayer can accomplish what we know humanly to be impossible.

Thanks, Lord, for the power of intercessory prayer and letting us partner with you in it. You can do anything, far more than we could ever imagine or guess or request in our wildest dreams!

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

"They said to each other, 'Didn't our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?'" —Luke 24:32 NLT

Sometimes you need a change of perspective to hear what God is saying. There were two guys who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. He walked with them, but they didn't recognize him. He asked them a question, and they replied, "You must be the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know about these things". That must have seemed ironic when they thought about it later. They thought they were going to enlighten the stranger, but they were in line for the surprise of their lives.

Jesus in resurrected form walked with them but was hidden to them. He explained the Scriptures from Moses through the prophets. They saw the events, but they didn't understand what was going on. As they got into the Scriptures their hearts began to burn. It started to make sense. They began to put the pieces together, and the more they learned, the more they wanted to learn.

When they got to where they were going, Jesus was going to keep on walking, but they implored him to stay and eat so they could continue the conversation. In the process of breaking bread, Jesus revealed himself to them. They were so excited, they turned around and went back to Jerusalem that same night to tell the others Jesus was the risen Messiah! Can you imagine? They were some of the first to see the risen Savior!

How long has it been since your heart burned within you as you discussed the Scriptures? It started because they were willing to talk about their faith with a stranger. It is amazing what can happen when you give God a chance to show up in your conversations. Remember that when you bring the Word of God up in a conversation, it is a living Word. If you give God a chance to show up in a discussion, it is an opportunity to watch truth reveal itself. It can change the perspective of everyone in the conversation.

Why is it that we pray for opportunities to share Christ with others and then talk about things like the weather, traffic and everything but the Scriptures? The Bible promises that God's Word never returns void, but it accomplishes God's purpose. So why don't we talk more about it? When we do it is powerful and life changing just like it was for these disciples.

Will you commit to study God's Word, not just for yourself, but also for those with whom you will cross paths? When you get into conversations, will you bring up God's Word? If you do, you might just feel your heart burning with new passion and insight. You might experience the Holy Spirit giving you new insight even as you talk. And you might find yourself breathless later as you tell your friends about how Jesus showed up in the conversation. Do you need a change in perspective? You don't study the Scriptures for yourself but to share them with others. It's about Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Lord, meet us today as we study the Scriptures. Make them come alive in us and give us the courage to share them with others. Show up in those conversations and make the truth burn with us. Thank you.

➤ **Rev. Gary Kendall**, Lead Pastor, Indian Creek Community Church, Olathe, Kansas

“Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” —Genesis 18:17

Often prayer is more about listening. Early in my ministry, a group of five persons visited the church I was pastoring. Three of the individuals were siblings of a lady whose immediate family was long-term members. A few days later, I was informed that one of the guests had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and was hospitalized for treatment. This family that had visited our church had spent their lives living on the edge. “You name it, and they had done it” was an apt description of their lifestyles.

After hearing of the lady’s diagnosis, I determined to visit her at the hospital. As I was about to leave the office for the visit, I heard what I sensed was the Lord saying, “Pray for Jane (not her real name), she will give her life to me today.” First, I asked “Lord is this really you?” Then, I thought of possible distractions from family members that may be present. Finally, I prayed that if this was really from God that he would clear the way and fulfill what he said.

As I entered the room, sure enough, some family members were present. They quickly excused themselves. As I approached Jane’s bed I said, “I have some good news for you.” She replied, “Good, I could certainly use some good news.” To which I responded, “Jane, God loves you and wants you to spend all eternity with him.” That brief conversation began one of the most beautiful transformations I have ever witnessed. The next eleven months she radiated with God’s love and was instrumental in leading those other family members to Christ. During the following months, transformation after transformation occurred throughout that family. I have often thought back on this incredible time. Here are some lessons I have learned from this experience.

- **God is at work in the world, even when it seems he is not.** God had been preparing this family to receive his gracious love in Christ while the external evidence looked bleak.
- **We are never first in other persons lives; God is!** God had already prepared Jane to receive him. He just told me what he was doing and sent me to tell Jane. She accepted his invitation and was forever transformed. Helen Keller, the famous American author and activist, contracted a disease at nineteen months of age that left her blind and deaf. It is said, when someone communicated Jesus Christ’s love to her, she exclaimed, “I have felt him for a long time, but I never knew his name.”
- **If we will listen, God will direct us and use us in his transforming work.** God is going about his transforming work in this world. If we tune in, we can hear his voice and be directed by him in his work. I have discovered that is much more fruitful than me attempting to direct my own efforts.

Father, we are thankful that you are working your plan in this world. Forgive us for not listening as we should, and deliver us from our attempts to direct you in your work. Help us to maintain sensitive hearts and ears that we may hear clearly when you speak. Amen.

➤ **Dr. Charles Wright**, *Regional Pastor and Overseer for Kansas and Oklahoma Panhandle*

Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Refresh!

Renew our efforts toward relational connectivity and identity for every individual, church, and agency of the Church of God.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.” —John 17:20–22

Celebrate Unity

While he was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples.

Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed."

Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.

When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region. —Matthew 9:18–26

Jesus was interrupted two times in a few minutes. While he was teaching, a ruler interrupted him, asking him to come to his home to heal his daughter who had just died. Jesus healed her. While he was on the way to the ruler's home, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years interrupted him when she touched his cloak and was instantly healed. Many would be upset with those two desperate people for interrupting Jesus in the middle of his important business. Not Jesus! He turned interruptions into opportunities for healing hurting people.

Several years ago, during my recuperation following knee surgery, I had set up a study in our home. Early one Sunday morning, while I was making final preparations for the morning worship service, I heard a gentle, quiet, little knock at my door. It was my little girl Janelle, who was seven years old. She had come in earlier to get a phone book from my desk, and Sandie had told her not to bother me because I was preparing my sermon for the morning service, but this time she came over close to me and said, "Daddy, I just came in to hug you and give you a kiss, and tell you I love you!" After she gave me a hug and a kiss, she stepped back, with a big, beautiful smile, and said proudly, "You know what? I'll bet I'm more important than your sermon!" I pulled her up on my lap, gave her a big hug, and said, with a lump in my throat and a tear in my eye, "You sure are, honey! You're more important than anything to me!"

As she walked out of the room with a proud That's-my daddy-kind-of-smile on her face, I paused to reflect and thank God for the special gift he had given me in that little girl. Sometimes we get so tied up with the things we're doing, the goals we're trying to reach, that we forget the most important relationships we have: God, children, wives or husbands, friends. It's important that we set our priorities in proper order. Then we need to be open and responsive to the spontaneous interruptions from God that are some of his finest blessings. It's about Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!—investing love, prayer, listening, modeling the Christ-follower lifestyle, sharing the Word, and mostly, just being there, leading those we love on the path home to God. Today, Janelle is a godly Christ-follower, wife, mother, and teacher. As we're open to God's will and plan, we will be recipients of constant blessings and joys that no amount of planning or money can achieve.

Lord, thank you for those little interruptions that turn into huge blessings. Help me to always recognize and cultivate them, to recognize them as opportunities to renew and strengthen those precious relationships. Enable me to keep my priorities in order in my relationships with you and others who are especially important in my life. I love you, Lord, and I praise you again for another gentle reminder of how blessed I am to be surrounded by people I love and who genuinely love and respect me. Thank You! Amen.

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

Every time you cross my mind, I break out in exclamations of thanks to God. Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer. I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. I am so pleased that you have continued on in this with us, believing and proclaiming God's Message, from the day you heard it right up to the present. —Philippians 1:3–5
MSG

In 1978, my husband and I moved to Anderson, Indiana, to attend the School of Theology. For the next four years I had the privilege of taking classes from Dr. Gilbert Stafford, whose teaching influences my preaching even today. The first thing I noticed about Dr. Stafford was his sheer joy in his personal life and in his professional life. I still smile when I remember having to give an impromptu eulogy and having difficulty getting started. Dr. Stafford pulled up two chairs in front of the class and stretched out on them and folded his hands as if he were the deceased. I cannot remember what I said, but I remember his sense of humor and his infectious joy. In the Introduction to Philippians in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson said that Paul's letter did not tell us we can be happy, nor did he tell us how to be happy. Paul was simply and unmistakably happy. That quality is what students and colleagues saw in Dr. Stafford.

Years later, Dr. Stafford was speaking at a ministers' retreat. Our family had been through attack after attack on our family and our ministry. One pastor left us a message on our answering machine that he was praying for us while we were "under this siege." That was a true description of our experience. I attended the retreat so I could hear Dr. Stafford. After his morning conference, he greeted me and we walked outside to sit and talk on the benches out under the trees. He got right to the point and said, "I've heard about your situation. What's going on?" I related the circumstances of being under siege, and he listened intently. At the end, I shrugged my shoulders as if that is just how it is and there is nothing I can do about it. Dr. Stafford said, "Do you still have your joy?" Up until that moment, I had not thought about joy. I was hanging on by my fingernails. Suddenly, the heaviness lifted from my heart, a smile came to my face, and light filled my eyes. I responded, "Yes, I still have my joy."

That was a turning point in my life. By August of that year, God allowed me to start on a dream I had set aside to fully participate in my husband's pastoral ministry and to raise a family—I was one out of 150 people accepted at Mississippi College School of Law. I began to practice "being happy" and found that the witness of joy is one of the most powerful tools a Christian can use. People are drawn to happy people. People want to know what makes you happy, what makes you able to weather the storm. Another significant period of time passed and we were at the International Convention of the Church of God. Dr. Stafford was in charge of a healing service. People moved to the aisle all over the auditorium to stand ready to pray for whoever needed prayer. My husband and I gravitated to where Dr. Stafford was standing. He laid his hands on both of our heads and prayed a prayer of blessing on our lives and our ministry. "Yes, I still have my joy!" Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Lord, I choose to be happy. Just like Paul wherein none of his circumstances contributed to his joy—he was in jail, attacked by people with bad intentions, tired, sick, and weak. Let me experience joy from the inside out. Amen.

➤ **Rev. Mary Bruce Fuller**, Minister and Attorney, Florence, Mississippi

Afterward Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus...asked Pilate for permission to take down Jesus' body...With him came Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus by night...they wrapped Jesus' body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth. —John 19:38–40

After the conversation Nicodemus had with Jesus by night, we don't hear his name again until this scripture. Jesus had told Nicodemus he must be born again, and in this moment of supreme grief and loss something came alive inside of Nicodemus. He went public with his faith. Throwing caution to the wind Nicodemus and Joseph come out of hiding and identify themselves as disciples of Jesus. They had to go to the very one who ordered Jesus' death. They received the body of Jesus and took it to Joseph's tomb. They performed a shortened version of embalming because the Sabbath was approaching. And a Roman guard was commissioned to guard the body. There was no turning back. They risked everything.

Can you believe it? This tomb became the place where the greatest miracle in the history of the world took place! Year after year people from all over the world flock to see the empty tomb. What a turnaround! Two disciples come out of hiding and God uses what they have to offer to change the world forever!

I hope that encourages you as much as it does me. I think of people I know today who may believe, but they are secretive about it. For whatever reasons, they explore faith outside of the public eye; but don't write them off. They could be one decision away from making a choice that God will use in a history-making way. What chain of events could be started if they would come out of hiding? Keep praying for your friends, relatives, neighbors, and co-workers. Their eternal destiny is at stake. It could change in a single choice to act on what they already know to be right.

I get excited when I think about people putting the pieces together. Something clicks in their head and their heart goes all in. I've seen it happen to my friends. Keven became the dad and spiritual leader Robin always hoped he would be. Glynis restored her marriage on a Sunday when she knew it was her time to choose. Eugene said yes at a pizza restaurant when I drew the bridge illustration on the paper table cloth and he's never looked back. One choice, one step to cross the line of faith, and everything changed. Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives! Don't give up on your friends. Keep praying. Keep believing. Keep looking for opportunities to share your story and his story. The change may be closer than you think. In fact, go ahead and let yourself get excited about it now in faith. God is at work. Things will change. The tumblers will fall in place and your loved one will trade hiding for faith.

Lord, thank you for the privilege of helping people find their way back to God. Don't let us grow weary while we wait for your timing and preparation in their lives. Give us your words and courage to keep sharing until they come out of hiding.

➤ **Rev. Gary Kendall**, Lead Pastor, Indian Creek Community Church, Olathe, Kansas

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." —Matthew 22:37–40

Can a five-year old child love his neighbor and make a difference? Yes. An eternal difference can be made by a child's love for Christ and his love for his neighbor. Our son, Caleb, was only five when he made friends with the elderly lady who lived across the street from us. We had recently moved into the neighborhood and noticed that this lady was particularly shy and did not exude any desire to visit with neighbors. Her life consisted of tending to the hundreds of roses in her yard.

She did not have the joy of having any grandchildren. Sadly, she did not have the joy of knowing Jesus either. She made it clear when we introduced ourselves and she found out that I was a pastor, that she was not interested in religion.

Since my grandmother lived too far away to see very often, I asked our new neighbor if she would mind if Caleb could treat her like he would his own great-grandmother by occasionally bringing over a dessert for her. The elderly lady warily agreed.

Every Monday a men's prayer group met at our home, and Caleb helped me prepare the desserts. I prepared the pies for the men, and Caleb prepared a single-serving sized pie for our neighbor, whom he now called Grandma Angie. Each week Caleb would deliver to Grandma Angie a warm pie prepared by his chubby little hands. With each pie, Grandma Angie became more and more friendly. As the weeks and months continued on, Caleb's love and friendship softened Grandma Angie's heart. He became to her the grandchild she never had, and she became for him as his own great-grandma. Along with praying for his other grandparents, Caleb's love for Grandma Angie extended into his nightly prayers as he prayed for Jesus to touch her heart.

After a year and a half, the day came for Grandma Angie's eighty-second birthday. Caleb, carrying her birthday cake, led our family to her door to deliver the surprise treat. When she came to the door, we sang "Happy Birthday" to Grandma Angie. In the course of that birthday conversation, Grandma Angie talked about how the love she had experienced from Caleb was different than any she had known before. The opportunity to share gospel was opened as she expressed a desire to know Christ. Caleb held her frail hand as our family prayed with her. On her eighty-second birthday, Grandma Angie was born again as a child of God because one little boy loved his neighbor as his own great-grandmother. Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Dear Jesus, may we be faithful to persistently pursue relationships with those who appear to be reclusive so your love can draw them to you. May we also be faithful to help our children demonstrate your love to a hurting and lonely world of people. May those who are guarded toward adults be reached through the genuine and innocent love from your little children.

➤ **Rev. Judy Weeks, Pastor, Northside Church of God, Jacksonville, Florida**

When they return to the outer courtyard where the people are, they must take off the clothes they wear while ministering to me. They must leave them in the sacred rooms and put on other clothes so they do not endanger anyone by transmitting holiness to them through this clothing. —Ezekiel 44:19 NLT

Think of the message of this verse. God is warning the priests to be careful because when you have been in God's presence, you are contagious and you can be dangerous. That is profound in its simplicity. God is saying the closer we are to him, the more likely we are to rub off on those around us.

Jesus believed that. Jesus was constantly being criticized by the religious leaders of his day for hanging around with unsavory people. The religious leaders were careful about who they hung with because they didn't want the dirt and sinfulness of others to rub off on them.

Unfortunately, that attitude didn't die with those first-century religious leaders. Most of us Christians tend to gravitate toward other Christians. It's easier and it feels safer to hang out with others who think and believe the same way we do.

Because of this, we've turned evangelism into a standalone activity. Books are written on evangelism techniques. Churches look for the latest evangelism programs.

The truth is we can't argue people into the kingdom. In fact, we can't even attract people to Christ. Only Christ can attract people to himself. To be attracted to him, people have to see him. He can only be seen through us; that can only happen if we look like him. The only way to look like him is to spend time in his presence.

Jesus' pattern was simple. He started the day in the presence of the Father, and then he went out and loved people where their lives hit the ground. In that same manner he's been rubbing off on people for two thousand years.

If we spend enough time in God's presence, Jesus rubs off on us. As we go out and love people where they live, I think we'd be amazed at who begins rubbing off on whom.

Father, teach us to make your presence the starting point for everything in my life. Please rub off on me, so that through me, you can rub off on others.

➤ **Rev. Bruce Steffensen**, Portland, Oregon

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. —John 15:7–8 NRSV

There are times when the Lord speaks and his instruction seems too simple for our skeptical minds to grasp and believe. For instance, look at the above passage. In a previous devotion, I shared about a time when the Lord spoke to me about a lady who was ready to yield her life to him. I followed the Lord's instruction and discovered what he had told me was true. She was indeed ready, and joyfully opened her heart to Christ. That was the beginning of a magnificent transformation in her life. Her willingness to receive Christ was the event that broke the barriers that had held her and her family in captivity to lifestyles that were destructive to themselves and others associated with them.

It was sometime before this event that our church decided to try something different in our mid-week services. We decided to test and see if the above passage was really true as it relates to prayer and answers to prayer. We knew better than to pray selfishly. Somewhere I had heard that if a church began to focus on the harvest and pray for individuals far from God that it was highly likely that they would see God move in powerful ways. So in a very naïve way, we began to list names of individuals who we knew needed Christ and began to pray for them. That practice became a major part of our mid-weeks services. It took a while, but we began to see God start drawing some of those persons we were praying for to himself. The above story was one example. One after another we began to mark individuals off the list as they came to know Christ. The amazing reality was the very ones we were praying for were the ones coming to Christ. Imagine that!

This was a miraculous time in the life of our church. When I began to conduct discipleship meetings in the homes of this family, it caught the attention of others who needed Christ. Most of these people were trapped by Satan's devices, but they were so hungry to know the truth that they would call in and ask if the phone receiver could be placed on the table so as to listen in as we discussed this new life in Christ. One night in our prayer circle a lady was delivered from alcoholism. She never drank again!

Honestly, I miss those days. I miss the simplicity of a few people who believed that if we would look outside ourselves and focus our thoughts and prayers on others far from God that we would see God do mighty things. What we discovered during that time was that Christ really did mean what said. Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Father, thank you for the many promises you give to us through your word. Please forgive us for our cynical attitudes and lack of faith. Grant to us the child like faith to take you at your word. This we ask in Christ's name. Amen.

➤ **Dr. Charles Wright**, *Regional Pastor and Overseer for Kansas and Oklahoma Panhandle*

The people brought children to Jesus, hoping he might touch them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus was irate and let them know it: "Don't push these children away. Don't ever get between them and me. These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom. Mark this: Unless you accept God's kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in." Then, gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them. —Mark 10:13–16
MSG

Late night calls at the church parsonage seldom mean good news. Our phone rang late Saturday night and Betty said, "I am so sorry to disturb you, Pastor Fuller, but my five-year-old granddaughter is staying with us and said I needed to call you. Betty was a beautiful redheaded grandmother. Her daughter was a brunette, but her granddaughter, Michelle, was a miniature redhead just like her grandmother.

Betty said "Michelle has a Boston terrier, and someone dropped poisoned hamburger over the back fence. The vet told me the dog will probably not survive the night. Michelle wants you to pray for her dog." At first my husband was speechless, but then he began to pray for Michelle's dog – that God would heal the dog if it was his will to do so. (We always have to get that phrase in there just in case the prayer is not answered exactly like we want it answered.) It was difficult to sleep that night knowing a child's heart was broken and none of us could ease her pain.

Through the night our hearts were breaking for a little girl experiencing the death of a loved one for the first time. I truly dreaded seeing Betty and Michelle Sunday morning. They were not in Sunday school, but as the morning service began, I noticed they were present. At the prayer time, Betty stood up to give a testimony. She told the story of the poison meat and the little Boston terrier, which was expected to die. Then she told about Michelle's request to call Pastor Fuller and ask him to pray. Tears glistened in her eyes and she said, "Her dog made it through the night and the vet doesn't know how, but the dog will survive."

I have no problem knowing how that dog survived. The reason was certainly not Betty's faith, not Tom's faith, and not my faith. No, we were too blinded by knowledge, logic, and common sense to believe God would reach down and heal a poisoned animal. Life just does not usually work that way. But a child had absolute faith in what she had been taught about God, about the power of prayer, and she exercised that faith.

Oh Lord, help me never to be faithless. Help me to believe you meant that "whatever you ask in my name, I will do." Help me to comprehend that "whatever" means "anything". Help me to understand that I cannot come up with one thing that is left out of "whatever." Amen.

➤ **Rev. Mary Bruce Fuller**, *Minister and Attorney, Florence, Mississippi*

Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously. —Matthew 10:8 MSG

“This man must be older than dirt,” I grumbled to myself as my mother introduced me to my new music teacher, Mr. Grady. I was twelve years old and was sporting a bit of an adolescent attitude. My first fifteen minutes of introduction time consisted of listening to him describe in great detail his triple-bypass heart surgery and all the other physical ailments which vexed his body. He informed me that his “ticker” could go at any moment. This was an unnerving concept for me as a young girl, and I prayed the final tick would not occur during my lesson time. He presented his life with optimism rivaling Winnie the Pooh’s friend Eeyore.

Mr. Grady was convinced he had one foot in the grave. He lived in a body that seemed to imprison the vibrant desires of his heart to live life as fully as he once had lived. At twelve years old, I too had been living with one foot in the grave. I had been an unhappy teenager who was braced for another divorce to occur for my mother. The vibrant desires of my heart had started to wane and had likewise become imprisoned in my unhappy home environment.

Mr. Grady had a resurgence of purpose and joy as he gave me lessons and I had a resurgence of purpose and joy as I was challenged to learn to play several instruments over the years. When my mother could not afford lessons, he provided them free of charge for many years. Preparation for talent competitions became the new positive focus for Mr. Grady and me. He found his life could still make a difference in someone else through the gift of music, and I found my life could encompass dreams beyond my home. We brought a new sense of life to each other as our friendship grew throughout the years.

Twenty years later, Mr. Grady’s health declined. I found myself at his hospital bed looking at a small frail man whose body seemed much too small for his large heart of love. He had given so much to me. He had given me the gift of music and spoke into my life to encourage me to reach for my potential. Through the many competitions, I found courage that I never knew I had within me to successfully face challenges. It was this same courage that helped me face the challenge of having a critical conversation with Mr. Grady. I had to talk to him about Christ.

He was a good man, but he never expressed having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I could not imagine letting him pass without sharing Jesus with him. At this point in my life I was not in pastoral ministry and had not led an adult to Christ. Nevertheless, I was compelled to share the gospel with him. Mr. Grady was not wearing his hearing aids, so it was rather awkward and humorous having his hospital roommate stare at me, as I yelled the gospel message for Mr. Grady to hear. To the glory of God, that night he prayed to receive the gift of salvation. He gave me the gift of music and I gave him the gift of the gospel message; and Jesus gave him the gift of eternal life! Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Dear Jesus, please help us to be faithful to freely give what we have been given. We are here to be used by you to transform hearts and lives through the love of Jesus Christ. May we be faithful to generously love others through sharing what we have been given so that your name is glorified.

➤ **Rev. Judy Weeks, Pastor, Northside Church of God, Jacksonville, Florida**

Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Permeate!

Engage every individual, church, and agency in the Great Commandments.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” —Matthew 22:36–40

Live Out the Love of Christ

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. —1 Peter 4:8

The message of the gospel is simple. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Our challenge is simply to give people a taste of what it means to be loved by God. When we love people deeply, they will experience grace that attracts them to the love of our heavenly Father.

Jesus was generous with people. His love toward people displayed that they were more important to him than anything they had done. You see, like grace, love covers people. Being generous with people means we don’t take opportunities to expose them. We don’t seek to shame them for what they have done.

Who was it that brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus? It was the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. Because of Jesus’ love and tenderness, more exposed than the woman’s sin was the absence of loving grace in the hearts and lives of the religious leaders.

Jesus spoke lovingly to the woman because *she* was what was important to him, not what she had been accused of. Grace isn’t focused on a person’s behavior but on their need. Her need was for forgiveness, so Jesus dispensed grace in order to help her experience what was needed, the forgiveness of her sin.

Grace lovingly points people toward the future they can have in Christ rather than recounting the dark details of the past. “I don’t condemn you.” “Go and sin no more,” was Jesus’ prescription. Guilt, shame, and condemnation will cause people to retreat away from the grace of God, but generous doses of loving grace will propel people into the future and destiny God has for them. Loving grace says, “Though you aren’t like me, I will love you.” Why should it shock us that sinners engage in behavior contrary to the standards of holiness in God’s Word? Their actions merely reflect who they are—sinners who have yet to know Christ.

I was on Facebook a few years back when my eye caught the post of a young girl I had known several years prior. She had been a part of a youth group at a church and had been pursuing the things of God. She was in college now. Her post seemed to indicate that she had gotten away from that pursuit as it was filled with all kinds of expletives. Well, righteous indignation rose up within me, and when I saw she was online, I thought, “I’m going to set her straight.”

I heard the voice of the Holy Spirit immediately say, “No you’re not.” Love her. Grace her. Check in on her. So, I started the chat this way, “Are you alright?” Rather than slam her behavior, God allowed me to see that her behavior was a cry for love. She had a need, a need that loving-grace should respond to. She typed back, “I guess you have heard?” “No.” “Heard what?” “I’m pregnant.”

My heart was filled with loving compassion, and in that moment and in the following weeks, God gave me opportunities to let her know God loved her, that I loved her, and that I was praying for her. I became a listening ear rather than a condemning voice, and I am so glad. The last thing this precious young woman needed was some Christian pointing out what she had done wrong. She already knew what she had done. Because of loving grace, she chose Christ again, reconnected with a church, and found the support she needed to begin her life as a single, young mom. Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Lord, please give me the opportunity to go out and “grace” someone in love today! Amen.

➤ **Dr. Melissa Pratt**, Pastor, Teays Valley Church of God, Scott Depot, West Virginia; Transformation Team Cultivate/Refresh

“Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.” —Ephesians 6:19

They called him Grandpa Rogers. I first met him when he was about seventy-seven at my first Thanksgiving dinner in the Newcombs’ home overlooking Millerton Lake in the Sierra Mountains above Madera, California. He was a brilliant successful lawyer and land developer. He was an avowed agnostic. A staunch advocate of evolution, he had neither desire nor time for God, and he most certainly did not believe in creation. However, through his relationship with the Newcomb family, Fred became a friend of mine. He took me duck hunting and fishing. We had wonderful times together, talking about law, politics, farming, hunting, fishing, psychology, current events, and education. But as I moved the conversation toward Christ, he would move it in a different direction. So, for fifteen years, the Newcombs and I prayed for him.

Eleanor said Grandpa Rogers had cancer and that we needed to visit him. As we entered, Eleanor said, with urgency, “Grandpa, I brought Pastor Sam to see you. He’s going to tell you how to ask Jesus into your life so you can go to heaven. Listen carefully to what he says, because heaven will not be complete for us if you’re not there!” He broke in to her sentence and patted her on the cheek, and said with a smile, “My dear, I already have!” I said, “Eleanor, listen to what he’s saying. He’s already invited Jesus into his life!”

I talked to him, explaining the plan of salvation, and giving him some scriptural assurances to make certain he understood. He did! Over the next few days we visited and prayed with him several times. Soon the doctors told Russ that he should take Fred to a convalescent home where he could receive better care during his last days. Knowing that he would not be able to attend church again, I suggested that we have a baptism and Communion service in his room. The Newcombs and his family all came. After the service, Grandpa told his daughter Pat, “Honey, all across the years, you have been a creationist and I have been an evolutionist; you have been a believer and I have been an agnostic. You have been a Christian, I have been a sinner. I have now joined the ranks of Christianity! I too am a creationist and a believer.” A few days later, he was home with Jesus. I officiated at his funeral service, which was a beautiful tribute to a special man.

This is a testimony of the awesome power of intercessory prayer. The Newcombs and I prayed for, and witnessed to, Grandpa for nearly twenty years. We never gave up on him. He was ninety-two when he was born as a babe in Christ. As long as people draw breath, there’s hope. Intercessory prayer keeps persons we love before the throne of the God, whose purpose is to draw them to himself in love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The true spirit of intercession keeps us praying for those who are dear to us until...until we see our prayers in their behalf answered.

Lord, this kind of prayer isn’t easy. It’s difficult to follow through with a commitment to pray for others, for I often face more difficulties and setbacks of my own than I can handle. Yet it’s true that when I enter deeply into the needs, hurts and concerns of others, I begin to find my own needs, hurts, and concerns being met, healed, and fulfilled. For when I bring other persons before your throne, I too am escorted into your healing presence where I can be touched at the very core of my being. Since your heart, Lord, is large enough to embrace the entire universe” certainly there is room there for me and for those you have entrusted to my care. Empower me, Lord, to be faithful in intercessory prayer. In the name of the One who is my strength, my help, my shield, my source—my Lord Jesus Christ, I pray. It’s about Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives! Amen.

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." —Psalms 14:1

Everyone who believes in him [Jesus] will have eternal life. —John 3:15 NLT

Fred Rogers's son Russ was a man who had a deep respect and reverence for life. He took me hunting and fishing in the Sierra Mountains of central California. He came to church a few times. We had a great friendship, but he was not interested in Christ. He said he was an agnostic, like his father Fred. Then Russ went off the deep end, got involved with drugs, divorced his wife, wandered around for a while. I lost contact with him for several years. Then I ran into him when I was fishing Granite Creek, high up in the Sierras. It was like old home week. He was on his honeymoon. He had just married Lois, a beautiful lady, who was a committed Christian. But Russ was still not interested in Christianity. I didn't see him again for months, until his dad became ill with cancer. We were drawn together around Grandpa Rogers as he made preparations for his home-going. Russ attended the Communion and baptism service we had for Fred. Sometime later, Russ was stricken with cancer. I began visiting with him. We renewed the friendship that had begun eighteen years earlier.

Russ was deeply impressed when his father accepted Christ at age ninety-two, and he saw the peace that Christ brought into Grandpa's life. Fred had taught his family to be agnostics all their lives, but now Russ and I talked about Christ, eternity, and the abundant life God offers us. He believed in a "great Power in the universe" and had a certain reverence for that Power, but he didn't believe in a personal God as revealed in Jesus Christ. I shared with Russ about how to invite Jesus into his life and receive eternal life and peace with God. He said he was not ready to make that commitment that day. My phone rang early next morning. It was Russ who said, "Happy Thanksgiving, Sam. After our talk yesterday, I invited Jesus into my life, and I want to be baptized into the Christian religion Sunday in the church baptistery?" I was thrilled! That made one of my best Thanksgivings! The Bible says there is rejoicing in heaven every time a person invites Jesus Christ into his or her life. I baptized Russ and Lois next Sunday.

Russ became a tower of strength to all who knew him, until his coronation day when he stepped into heaven. His relationship with God became the strength that carried him through his suffering with confidence and peace. As I watched him grow in faith during his last few months, I was reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul, which I used in his memorial service: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor 4:16–18). When Russ accepted Christ, it was the fruit of many years of intercessory prayer. Later in the evening after Russ' memorial service, one of his close friends asked Lois how Russ found the peace that Pastor Sam had talked about. She explained the plan of salvation, and he invited Christ into his life. He went home a new person because of intercessory prayer for Russ.

Awesome Lord Jesus, thanks for caring enough to die for people like Russ...and me, too! So we can have abundant and eternal life! Thanks for the intercessory prayer partners who believe, love, care, witness, and pray until...You are able to enter into our inner beings, Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives! May we always reflect Your transforming presence as bearers of Your unconditional love, grace and peace. Amen.

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. —2 Timothy 1:5

About three months before Russ Rogers' death, I visited with Russ, Lois, and Russ's son Robert. Robert, who was reared under the influence of two generations of agnostics (his mother was into New Age stuff), was sharing how he had accepted Christ two weeks before this time as a result of the radical change Christ brought to his dad's and grandfather's lives. It was refreshing to talk with him and Russ about who Jesus is and the paradox of submitting our lives to his control and leadership. We talked about Jesus' statement that the only way to really find life is to lose one's life. Such a commitment is awesome. It was encouraging to hear Russ share his commitment to Christ. Even though he was losing the battle against cancer, his faith and trust were growing.

During our conversation, when Russ was sharing his concerns about the pain and feeling like the cancer was taking over his body, Robert reached out and placed his hand on his dad's hand. Russ said, "Robert, that big hand on mine feels great." It was a demonstration of love and compassion from a son to a father. It was inspiring to see a son and father who came to Christ out of a tumultuous past expressing deep love for one another after years of strained relationships—a demonstration of the reconciling power of the love of Christ. It was graphic portrayal of the potency of intercessory prayer. Reflecting on this demonstration of the unconditional love, unlimited grace, and unending life transforming power of God, I thought, "But isn't it a bit sad that Fred and Russ waited until the end of their lives to receive Christ. Wouldn't it have been so much better if they had made the decision back when we first met many years ago?" A still, small voice—a gentle whisper—in the deep inner recesses of my spirit said, "But just think! We'll have all eternity to celebrate with them!" And I understood: it's the quality of life, not the quantity of time, that's important; and I could rest in that truth.

I was privileged to witness that day a live model of Paul's thrilling comments to Timothy, "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Tim 1:5). The biblical pattern is the good news handed from generation to generation: Grandpa Fred; dad Russ, and son Robert. The message is: Do not give up when you are praying for someone and the answers are not immediate. God always hears our prayers, and he is always at work with the answers. We simply wait for his timing and resources. The stories of radical transformation of people who have basically turned their backs on God remind me of the ministry mandates our Lord gave us in the Great Commission. In summary, we have a lost world that is broken, hurting, dying, and separated from God. There's a loving Savior who died on a cross to reconcile a lost world to God and to bring salvation and healing to men and women, boys and girls. We need living witnesses to bring together a loving Savior and a lost world in reconciliation and peace. We need liberal partners—generous people—to invest in various ways to empower the continuing ministries of God's people in creating lasting legacies for men and women, girls and boys, who come to Jesus and receive life—abundant and eternal.

Energize us, Lord, to be Liberal Partners who empower Living Witnesses to connect a Loving Savior with a Lost World to create Lasting Legacies for people to come to Jesus and receive life – abundant and eternal. Enable us, Lord, to join you in Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives... and to never give up on those who seem hopelessly lost! Amen.

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

God the Father knew you and chose you long ago, and his Spirit has made you holy. As a result, you have obeyed him and have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. May God give you more and more grace and peace. —1 Peter 1:2 NLT

Jim is in mid-sixties. He retired from his job as a professional welder. He and his wife raised some wonderful children. Jim and Donna are now in the season of enjoying their grandchildren. Last year as our congregation was participating in Focus 40. Jim and Donna came forward for prayer in a Sunday service. Jim had just been diagnosed with leukemia, and on the day of his diagnosis, a brain tumor was found in his five-year-old grandson. The tumor began to affect his grandson's motor skills. As he walked, he was dragging one leg. Jim said, "I'm not worried about myself, I'm in God's hands; but I ask that you pray for my grandson. The whole family was now standing in front of the congregation—Jim, Donna, their son, daughter in law and grandson. They shared with us that Jim and his grandson would be going back for further tests that week. We took special time to anoint with oil and prayer over them.

The next visit to the doctors did not bring wonderful news. Jim was told that his leukemia was an aggressive form of cancer. The family was told that their grandson would have to have brain surgery. And both were scheduled for another round of tests to prepare them for surgery and treatment. Jim later said about this day, "It was one of the darkest days I had faced in a long time." He shared that when he faces this kind of turmoil, he often paces. He stated, "I was just pacing around my dining room table, saying, Lord, what are we going to do? He shared that in those moments the old hymn "There Is Power in the Blood" came to him. Jim said, "I am not a singer but I started praying that hymn. There is power in the blood to heal my cancer; there is power in the blood to heal my grandson." He stated, "I just kept pacing and praying, "There is power in the blood."

This became Jim's continual prayer as he and his grandson prepared for their next round of tests. They returned for their test the following week. The physicians working on both cases had called in specialists to assist with this round of test. As the grandson visited the doctor's office on that day, they all noticed he was no longer dragging his leg but walking normally. Jim went for another round of blood tests. After tests were completed, they were told to return in a few days to hear what the physicians would determine should be the next steps. After the final round of tests and review, the doctors determined that the best action for the grandson would be to monitor the tumor, which they said was not increasing in size. Jim's blood test came back with all results in normal range. The doctors determined to watch Jim's blood test and not do any immediate treatment. They are now into their seventh month of observation. The grandson entered school again this fall and is living and learning with no difficulties or side effects. Jim's blood counts all remain normal. There is no loss of weight or any signs that his cancer is active. Jim says, "There is power in praying the blood of Jesus over your life and your family's lives." Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

Lord, we thank you for your precious blood shed on Calvary. We thank you that the power of the blood of Jesus saves from sin and renews our lives. Thank you, Lord, that a blood line has been drawn around my life. I proclaim today over my life and my family's life the power of the blood of Jesus for every area of our lives. Thank you, Lord, for the privilege to plead the blood of Jesus over all circumstances, to declare that there is wonder working power in the blood of the Lamb. Amen.

➤ **Rev. Claude Robold**, Pastor, New Covenant Church, Middletown/Franklin, Ohio

And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." —Matthew 22:39

Not too many months after arriving in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, as the senior pastor, I was called into our bedroom by my wife Linda. Our five-year-old son Ryan was lying on our bed. He had been listless for several days and we had taken him to the doctor, but it did not seem serious. However, Linda asked me to look at his hands. With the palms of his hands facing upwards, we watched bruises just move across his hand. We immediately took him to the emergency room, thinking he would be given a shot or we would go home with some medication. You can imagine our surprise, when after running some tests, the doctor came out and said that a medical helicopter was on its way from Pittsburgh Children's Hospital.

With almost disbelief at this turn of events, we placed him into the care of the medical personnel, called our dear friend Cindy Emhoff, who came to get Elizabeth, our eight-year-old daughter, and then headed to Pittsburgh not knowing what to expect. Ryan was diagnosed with Henoch-Schonlein purpura (HSP). During the next several days, his head swelled to the point that he could not see out of his eyes. He had spontaneous bursts of blood from his bowel. He had near total kidney failure. His words were at one point, "Mommy, I just cannot go on." At times his pain was severe, but for the doctors to always know the symptoms, he could not receive pain medication. Neither of us left his side much for those two and one half weeks.

But during that horrendous experience, we also experienced Great Commandment love. In fact it permeated the whole experience. God's faithfulness was amazingly expressed through so many. We were so exhausted, and although wanting to pray, we had little strength to do it. Thank God for intercessors who held all of us up—near and far! Our state minister, Greg Hall, had just arrived at a meeting out of state but immediately returned to visit with us. Many pastors and parishioners came by to encourage us. The church leaders told us to stay with him as long as we needed to. We made countless trips to the doctor after the hospital stay, but the fees were all waived. A neighbor mowed our yard. In so many ways we experienced Great Commandment love over and over. Shortly after returning home the symptoms began to show again. (In most situations the disease returns but not as strong as previously.) We took him to the altar during the morning worship service and prayed for him. God touched him and the disease never came back.

It was the prayers, presence, and generous acts of kindness from so many that helped us through one of the toughest time in our lives. Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

Dear God, may I serve as a tangible conduit of your grace and encouragement to those who are struggling. Remind me of the critical importance of interceding for those who have become weary with life's challenges. In Jesus' name, Amen.

➤ **Rev. Ryan Chapman**, *Credentials Services Coordinator, Church of God Ministries*

Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.
—*Revelation 5:8*

A number of years ago I read the story of a German tree farmer. This farmer was planting trees that would not mature for at least a hundred years. When the farmer was questioned about why he would plant for a harvest he would never see, he replied, “I am harvesting trees planted long before I was born by my great-grandfather. I am planting trees for those not yet born.”

My wife Brenda and I started praying for the future wife for each of our boys from the time of their birth. We prayed for just the right woman to enter each of our son’s life. We prayed for a woman whose heart was tender for God. We were praying for someone who might not yet be born. We believe God answered that prayer for each of our three sons.

As you pray for people far from Christ, I think it is important to also pray for future generations that will need to know Christ. The same prayer we used to pray for each of our sons is now an appropriate prayer for each of our eight grandchildren. These prayers should not be necessarily be secret prayers. We often told our sons what we were praying for in their lives.

There were moments that it seemed those prayers were not going to be answered. Two of our sons were traveling a dangerous path, but God brought the right people at the right moment into their lives. These prayers need to be consistent and persistent. Brenda’s mother prayed for decades for her brothers and sisters who were far from Christ. One by one they came to Christ, most of them in their seventies, after years of prayer that seemed to be going nowhere. Your prayers are planting trees for a future harvest, plant faithfully and persistently.

I love the image of Revelation 5 where it describes the golden bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints. I envision some of those prayers to be hundreds of years old. Prayers prayed by great-grandfathers for children yet unborn.

Dear Father, today I pray for family members who are far from you. I also pray for children in my family who are not yet born. I pray that you will send people into their lives who will speak your words of hope and that they will come to know you. In Jesus’ name, amen.

➤ **Dr. Steve Birch**, *Pastor, White Chapel Church of God, South Daytona, Florida*

Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. —Psalms 37:4

I teach online courses at Mid-America Christian University. My favorite course is Spiritual Formation. In one of our discussion questions, I asked, "How does delighting yourself in God fit into the overall process of spiritual formation? One student answered, "To me, the spiritual discipline of delighting myself in God are the moments that take my breath away. Those moments that capture my heart and I can see God shining through those relationships. The intimacy of our human relationships reflects our intimate relationship with God." Another student said, "I have never had a take-your-breath-away moment, as you wrote. An emotional one, for sure, tears, etc., but nothing jaw-dropping. What would qualify to you for such a moment?"

I responded to that student, "I'll tell you about one of my take-your-breath-away, jaw-dropping, heart-capturing, day-making moments. My eleven-year-old grandson Allen and I were sitting on log stools by our wood pile, splitting pine lighter kindling to start a fire. It was one of those tender, awesome times as we laughed together and talked about grandpa-grandson kind of stuff! Allen said, "Now, Grandpa, this is what I like—just hangin' out with you, splitting firewood, or anything else we do together!" That's what I'm talking about, that's one of my take-your-breath-away, jaw-dropping, heart-capturing, day-making moments.

Allen is now eighteen, a senior, and a wonderful Christ-follower. He is an excellent guitarist, who can hang with about any praise band. He does a lot of illusionist tricks, like picking out a card someone places in the deck without Allen seeing it and making money and other stuff disappear. He has lots of invitations to do presentations for youth groups and other settings. After doing several of the disappearing tricks, he'll say, "Everything I've done up to now has been an illusion, but I want to tell you about someone who is real, and positive, and life transforming. His name is Jesus." And he gives his testimony.

A few weeks ago, I shared with Allen the following story about My Life Goal Prayer, expressed in Elisha's request to Elijah, just before Elijah was transported to heaven in the fiery chariot. Elijah asked Elisha, "What can I do for you before I'm taken from you? Ask anything?". Elisha responded, "Your life repeated in my life, I want to be a holy man just like you!" (2 Kings 2:9 msg). And Allen said to me, "Grandpa, you've been that in my life!" That's what I'm talking about, my take-your-breath-away, jaw-dropping, heart-capturing, day-making moment. My heart leaped within me, and I prayed, "Lord God, let me always be that in Allen's, Austin's, Kelsey's, and Caleb's lives and in the lives of all you bring into my sphere of ministry. Out of that experience, my Life Purpose Prayer was born, based on Elisha's request to Elijah: "Empower me, Lord, by your Son, to become all you created me to be. Energize me, Lord, by your Spirit, to accomplish all you call me to do." If he will accomplish that in my life, I will feel that I have fulfilled his awesome plan for me. My challenge is to make this prayer part of your spiritual disciplines:

Empower me, Lord, by your Son, to become all you created me to be. Energize me, Lord, by your Spirit, to accomplish all you call me to do. Create through my life and witness many of those exciting take-your-breath-away, jaw-dropping, heart-capturing, day-making moments in the lives of all you bring into the sphere of my life and ministry. And let me live in partnership with you, my Lord, in Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Free!

Commit to stewardship principles (Matt 6:33) leading to a flexible ministry future and the management of debt (debt free as the goal) for every individual, church and agency.

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. —Matthew 6:33

Disciple Believers

Search me, O 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. —Psalm 139:23–24

Psalm 139 has always intrigued me. I find it to be a magnificent prayer. It seems like a well that never runs dry. You can return to this prayer of David's again and again and find spiritual refreshment and revelation for your life. There is an aspect of the prayer I find very interesting. David begins by stating, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me." As he comes to the conclusion of the prayer in verse 23 and 24 he states, "Search me, O 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."

"Wait a minute," he said, "You have searched me and know me." Then he says, search me and know my heart." David, are you contradicting yourself? I believe David's closing entreaty gives to us the sincere prayer of his heart. God, I want to know me as you know me, therefore, "Search me!"

This is a prayer that calls for divine scrutiny. David is implying, "God, the truth is you are the only one who can hold me accountable. Lord, I want to be accountable to you. God pull back the layers and let me see my heart like you see it." David wanted to handle the truth about himself. When we desire the truth from God concerning ourselves, we have reached a deeper level of spiritual maturity.

David reveals that such an answer to his prayer will require divine discipline. He then calls for God to test him. "Lord, examine me, even if it is painful." It is our natural tendency to avoid pain at all cost. However, a right relationship with God may require a time of testing to reveal our anxiety so that we may grow in our faith and trust of God.

David seems to be calling for divine accuracy. He has suffered enough from the pain of sin and self-ego. He now calls for the laser accuracy of God to point out anything offensive to God, to himself and to others. "O what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

Finally, David calls for divine leadership for his life as he prays: "and lead me in the way everlasting." David has reached a moment of truth in his life. He has become aware that knowing oneself by a pure light is not a false light. He wants his pathway to be eternal in all its ways so that all his ways are eternal. David has reached that place where he wants to move beyond forgiveness alone to heart purity. And this is what empowers Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

O God, the words of David truly reveal to me the man after God's own heart. Help me, O Lord, to find the will to pray such a sincere prayer that I may walk upright in your ways. Amen.

➤ **Rev. Claude Robold**, Pastor New Covenant Church, Middletown/Franklin, Ohio

So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith. —Galatians 6:9–10 MSG

Ninety years old, a retired railroad engineer wearing the weight of the past, unforgiven sin and grief on his face, Paul came to church one Sunday night. He had never been a church-goer, but he had married a widow who loved the Lord and attended church every time the doors were open. Because Paul wanted to be with his bride, he came along. Usually, on Sunday night the pastor gave an opportunity for testimonies, prayer requests, and praise. A short sermon would follow and a prayer of dismissal. Although he didn't normally give an invitation on Sunday night, this night the pastor opened the altar for anyone who wanted to come pray.

Paul got up out of his seat and slowly made his way to the altar, with his expression of sadness, grief, regret, despair, pain, fear of dying written on his face. Who knows all he was feeling at that moment? The pastor asked him how we could pray for him, what was he seeking. Paul said he had never been saved and he wanted to do that now. The pastors and congregation gathered around Paul and laid their hands on him. Fervent prayer went up for Paul.

What a glorious transformation in countenance the congregation saw when Paul raised himself up from that altar with the help of people near him. His face was literally shining with freedom from sin and guilt, release from fear of dying, and his sorrow turned into joy. Paul was changed from the inside out. Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives! He was still ninety years old, but now he was ready to meet the Lord whenever his name was called.

As pastors, sometimes we assume everybody coming to church is okay—everyone is saved. Sometimes we miss the expressions, the meanings behind the words spoken, and the body language that would give us a clue that all is not well. Of course we ask and the person usually says “I'm fine”. Many people in the church are not fine. Sometimes people have a mask in place and we truly believe they are fine. The Holy Spirit speaks to hearts even on Sunday night when one might assume only the faithful are present. Every time the Word of God is proclaimed in a service, in a book, on the radio or television, the opportunity for someone to get saved exists.

Lord, help me to really see people, really comprehend when they are in pain or are afraid. Make me willing to stop doing what I think is most important and just listen, just be there for them. Amen.

➤ **Mary Bruce Fuller**, *Minister and Attorney, Florence, Mississippi*

The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning. —Psalm 29:7

The Churches of God in Southern Idaho had junior high camp in June at a United Methodist camp in the Sawtooth Mountains. We always recruit a nurse to go with us since the Idaho wilderness plus junior-high energy and decision-making ability often lead to “medical opportunities”. This year we found ourselves without a nurse close to camp time. A mother (an ER nurse) of one of our preschoolers, even though not a church-goer, saw a camp registration form we had posted, remembered she had attended this same camp in her youth, and contacted our youth pastor, Brian Seidel, about the opportunity.

After Brian interviewed her and prayed about the situation, he felt God was telling him that Jenna was the person he wanted for the position. Brian contacted the other camp director, Drew Stenson, about the situation only to be told that Drew had already engaged someone for the assignment. However, after they talked Drew also felt impressed that God wanted Jenna and so he disengaged the other person. As Brian was making the final arrangements with Jenna, she asked if her seventh-grade son, Tucker, could attend the camp. Brian quickly assented.

To say this was a camp unlike any other and that God moved in mighty and miraculous ways would be a classic understatement. Major miracles began on a stormy Wednesday night. In Jenna’s own words, “Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to be a part of such an awesome week. How do I thank you for helping me find God again? How do I thank you for being with me and guiding me as I opened my heart and accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior? Thank you for making me feel safe when I was scared and uncertain. Thank you for helping me find the words I needed to begin my journey again ...thank you for not judging...Thank you for offering me every opportunity to find my faith again...I have been ready for years, but found too many excuses. I was too scared, too doubtful, and too weak. But you helped me find my strength again so I would be ready to witness the miraculous events I did...I have a long road ahead of me as I continue my journey. I know I have much to learn. But I also know he waited for me for so long and he will lead me if I just keep working and keep my heart open.”

Jenna’s son Tucker also committed his life to the Lord on that eventful Wednesday evening. Again in Jenna’s own words, “I love seeing the change in him. He prays every night. He sends me scriptures that relate to events going on in his life. He has much to learn as well, but his heart is open. He speaks openly of his relationship with God and seeks his guidance. Thank you.”

Lord, may we always listen for your voice, whether in the flash of lightning or in solitude. And in hearing, may we obey. Amen.

➤ **Rev. Gary Moore**, *Transformation Team / Cultivate Member, Associate Pastor, Cloverdale Church of God, Boise*

So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." —Exodus 3:3–4

Our church was planning to send a work team to Haiti, but for various reasons the trip fell through. One of the most disappointed people was Brandon. Brandon was a seeker who had been attending church with his family for some time but just hadn't put the whole "becoming a Christian" thing together yet. However, he was deeply affected by the devastation caused by the earthquake in Haiti. Finally, after two more failed attempts, Brandon was able to join a team (this one with people from Texas and Colorado) that successfully made their way to Haiti.

Since the arrival of construction materials for their project was delayed, Brandon ended up doing "people" things and spending a lot more time in deep conversation with his other team members and the people he was assigned to work with.

Through many different conversations Brandon continued to seek and God continued to reach out to him. From his Haiti journal, "I have been asked many questions about my relationship with God that I have been unable to answer. I am trying to figure out why I can't really 'talk' to God, or if I am, how to understand it." One night after some serious table talk at dinner, Brandon gave his heart to the Lord. After Brandon returned home, he wrote in his journal, "I was not able to build any walls for the people of Haiti, but I was able to tear down most of my own. It is a daily struggle to fill up my newfound space, but I have learned so much. I have learned what we are doing is not just a series of random events but a plan. Not my plan, and that's ok with me."

Brandon is now discovering the spiritual disciplines and their relationship to spiritual transformation. Just like Brandon we have to remember that our primary task is not to calculate how many verses of Scripture we read, how many minutes we spend in prayer, or how many meals we've missed. Our task is to use these types of activities to create opportunity for God to work—to get ourselves out of the way so God can do his work.

Just as Moses and Brandon found out, God's responsibility is to provide the burning bush. Our responsibility is to turn aside and give attention to the bush. We never know what burning bush God will use. For Brandon, it was an earthquake in Haiti. But, as God does his work, transformation will take place. God will change us, from the inside out, as we get out of the way and allow him to work. Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

God, today help me to turn to the burning bush you have put in my way so you can do your work—transforming my heart and then my life. Amen.

➤ **Rev. Gary Moore**, Transformation Team / Cultivate Member, Associate Pastor, Cloverdale Church of God, Boise

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. —Ephesians 4:31–32

If we would model, teach, and empower people to live like these verses instruct us, we could transform the world. God is still in the prayer-answering, life-transforming business! In my morning prayer time, I wrote a list of prayer requests, leaving space to record their answers. One of those requests was for Geri¹, who lived in personal turmoil and frustration. She always had a critical attitude, looking for the worst in almost every situation. She complained to the parents of children she taught in Sunday school, about things she didn't like in the church. Geri found it difficult to talk constructively about changing her attitudes. She said things that severely hurt our hand-bell choir director, Penny, and Geri didn't want to deal with her harsh attitudes in a positive way.

Those of us who knew about Geri's situation began praying for her. I wrote on my prayer request list Geri's need for healing of her negative, bitter, critical attitudes. I prayed that she would experience release from these feelings and would be able to make amends with Penny. My wife Sandie had tried to talk to Geri in a helpful way, but Geri had tuned her out. Two weeks later, Geri called Sandie and our office manager to tell them that she regretted the way she had handled the situation with Penny. She felt that she had committed sin in the way she had acted. She had already called Penny to apologize and ask for her forgiveness.

When Geri brought a plate of homemade Christmas goodies to me two days later, I sensed a spirit of release in her. God had begun his healing work in her spirit. She began growing spiritually and relationally. I prayed that she would allow him to continue and complete the work, for she was one of our most gifted children's teachers. If she could be released from those negative, complaining, critical attitudes, she could be used by God to teach children about his love, forgiveness, and acceptance.

This is evidence of the power of intercessory prayer to heal inner wounds, strained or broken interpersonal relationships. This opens our inner spirits to the healing balm of God's love and grace. It reminds me of on my hand. My hand and forearm were red, swollen, hot with fever. When I saw the doctor, I wasn't prepared for his treatment. He cleaned it with alcohol. With small sharply-pointed scissors, he cut an X-incision in the boil. The pain was excruciating! It got worse! The doctor closed the scissor blades, inserted them into the incision and opened them, spreading the incision wider. I thought I would pass out as the infection gushed out. After pressing around on the boil and draining a lot of infection, the doctor cleaned the incision and covered it with antibiotic ointment and a bandage, and wrote an antibiotic prescription. Within a few days, the pain, swelling, and fever left. It was painful, but by lancing the boil, the doctor set the stage for healing to begin. Likewise, "getting rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" from a person's heart is painful like draining a boil. Applying kindness, compassion and forgiveness is like the antibiotics that aid in the healing process. In intercessory prayer we escort people to God for healing. It's about Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

Lord, shape me as a bearer of Your healing balm of love and grace to bitter, hurting, broken, critical folks I meet; a carrier of kindness, compassion and forgiveness. Enable me to open my heart to your great heart of love and compassion as an intercessory prayer warrior. Amen.

➤ **Dr. Sam Bruce;** *President, Sam & Sandie Bruce Ministries; Pastor, Hope Point Church, Pearl, Mississippi; Online Instructor, Mid-America Christian University, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma*

1. Names have been changed.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times that amount." —Luke 19:7–8

Most of us have some negative feelings about evangelism. Rob Bell describes the guy with the bull horn screaming at people passing by that they need Jesus. I find it interesting that people far from Christ were attracted to Jesus. What was his secret? One of my favorite Bible stories is found in Luke 19:1–9, the story of Zacchaeus.

What I find most interesting about the story is that Jesus does not begin with the obvious: Zacchaeus is far from Christ. He is a sinner. Instead, Jesus begins by inviting himself to dinner. Truly a man after my own heart. What was Jesus doing? He was building a bridge so the gospel could be heard. He was demonstrating a true concern for Zacchaeus, the man, not the spiritual scalp.

Sometimes I share with my church the concept of seven touches; there is another one called five touches. Basically the concept is we need to build relationships with people so we can share the good news of Christ. Those bridges can be sports or a lunch. While I was pastor at Lexington, at one time we had four or five people coming to church through bridges built while working out at Gold's Gym. When you think about the whole gospel message, it is about relationships, a relationship with God and a relationship with others. Relationships are by nature messy. It is easier to preach to someone than it is to get involved in their life. When I came to White Chapel and we began to pray for the families in our community, I warned them that the families in our community had messy lives, and if we were going to pray for them, we would have to get involved in the mess. That has proven true. Various people over the years have made this statement, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." It is our acts of love that give us the open door to share God's love. So when you pray for someone far from Christ, realize this means you must be willing to get involved in lives that can be messy lives. Transforming Hearts...Transforming Lives!

Dear Father, as I pray for people I know who are far from Christ, I realize their lives are a mess. I am willing to get involved in their mess if it means I can build a bridge to you. My prayer is that you will show me how to build that bridge. In Jesus' name, amen.

➤ **Dr. Steve Birch**, Pastor, White Chapel Church of God, South Daytona, Florida

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. —James 5:16

Since I was a child, I have seen persons within the church anointed for healing as instructed in James 5:13–16. When I accepted my call to ministry, I followed what had been modeled for me by my pastor and the leaders of our church. Even as a teenager, when asked to pray for someone, I would quote this passage, anoint the person with oil, and pray for God’s will to be done. In the intervening forty-five years, I have prayed thousands of times for individuals seeking healing of body, soul, or mind. I have not kept a statistical account of how many were healed in the moment, some later, and some never. Yet all received the best I had to offer in that moment as I requested a mighty outpouring of God’s grace and power.

Often, people outside the church, and sometimes inside, make disparaging remarks about praying and fasting because they have not seen evidence of results. At the core of any type of prayer is the fact that you are addressing the Creator of the world, the holder of all destinies, and our ultimate adjudicator—asking for his will on this particular subject or issue. At times, our own understanding of the situation may be clouded by our own desires and biases. The text from James places in proper perspective the attitude of the one praying: “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective”.

It is critical to understand what it means to be a “righteous person.” As I understand it, a righteous person is one who seeks the will of the Father in all situations and circumstances and has his or her life and lifestyle committed to living out the “perfect will of God” (Rom 12:2). The solution we envision in any given situation may or may not be the will of God. It can be very difficult to separate our personal viewpoint from the will of God. This is where fasting and praying intersect. There are times when we need to get our own wishes out of the way so we can hear from God. An extended time of prayer, an interruption in our normal schedule, or some other change in our normal routine, may provide the opportunity for God to speak into the situation in a fresh way.

A moment from my first pastorate illustrates how God may take our humble efforts and bless them. I had been called to the home of an elderly lady who was near death’s door. The family wanted me to pray for her before she died. She had been a faithful servant of the Lord for many years. As I entered her bedroom with other family members, I saw a very frail person having difficulty breathing and barely conscious. I prayed for God’s will to be done in her life, for support for the family as they walked this journey with her, and that God would be glorified through this experience. We all left the bedroom to let her rest. Later, as I was eating dessert with the family in the kitchen, she appeared in the door and asked if they had any more pie. We were pleasantly shocked and immediately gave thanks to God for her recovery. Some months later, I preached her funeral, but for that night, the prayers of the righteous were heard.

In our praying, let’s keep God in the proper perspective as defined by the Bible and recognize that we are vessels made of clay. Praise God for the opportunity to pray. Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

Lord, empower me to be a righteous person seeking the will of the Father in all situations and circumstances; a person whose life and lifestyle are committed to living out the perfect will of God. Then, empower me to speak powerful and effective prayers that escort people into your presence to be touched, healed and transformed. Amen.

➤ **Dr. Ronald V. Duncan**, *General Director, Church of God Ministries*

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out..." —Acts 8:26–27a

There is an amazing story in Acts 8:26–27. Phillip was having great success as an evangelist among the Samaritans. Suddenly, God calls him to go to the desert. There is no explanation, just the command to go. As you fast and pray for people far from Christ, be open to the idea that the Holy Spirit may take you down a path and lead you to people you never intended to meet.

I have a chair in my office that reminds me that God's plans are not always what I have decided to do. Several years ago at Thanksgiving, my wife and I went to Brenda's parents for the thanksgiving meal. It had been a very stressful time at church and I was glad just to eat a lot and watch football and probably fall asleep. Esther, Brenda's mom, told me about her neighbor, Julie, who was very sick. Julie was a Lutheran, but she had not been to church for a long time and they could not get a pastor to come out and give her Communion. Esther wondered if I would go over and take Communion to Julie. I was less than excited. I needed a day away from constant demands! Surely Esther of all people should know that. I reluctantly went to Julie. She was a tiny woman sitting in this little lounge chair. I talked to her about Jesus' love and had prayer with her and served Communion. The next day Julie told Esther that during that prayer she asked Jesus into her heart. Two week later Julie died. Every time I look at that chair I realize how close I came to missing God's plan.

As you pray today, remind the Holy Spirit that you are available to the Julies in your world. The Bible calls these special moments *kairos* moments, opportune times that if we are available God can use us to change our world. Transforming Hearts... Transforming Lives!

Dear Father, as I pray for people I know far from you, help me to be open to those opportune moments you place in my life. In the loving name of Jesus, amen.

➤ **Dr. Steve Birch, Pastor, White Chapel Church of God, South Daytona, Florida**

**Have an awesome Resurrection Day
celebration with our risen Lord and carry the
Focus 40 spirit with you all year long!**