# *Finally Me*

## FROM PIECES TO PEACE

*DR.* **JASMIN SCULARK**

Finally Me : From Pieces to Peace
by Dr. Jasmine Sculark

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# Foreword

"Just like there is a purpose to every place in our lives, there is a reason for every season in our lives. The years when we are unnoticed and undiscovered are not wasted years; they are maturing years. And just because we feel unnoticed does not mean we are unimportant. God does not rush greatness."
"From Pieces to Peace"

I've had the honor and privilege of knowing Dr. Jasmin Sculark for nearly twenty-five years. Throughout this time, I've witnessed first-hand her keen ability to absorb the Word of God, embrace and apply it to her own life. I've seen her do this not only in the best of times, but also when life was most difficult and challenging.

In From Pieces to Peace, Dr. Jasmin Sculark effectively pours out biblical truths from God's Word that will empower those who have not yet stepped into their pre-ordained destiny. She takes those truths and makes them applicable to situations that occur in everyday life.

Dr. Jazz, as she is affectionately known, is a dynamic preacher. Her ability to take the infallible Word of God and present it in an impactful and life-changing way is evident to all who experience her ministry. She skillfully weaves this ability throughout all of her ministerial endeavors. This book is no different. I invite you to read on and experience these biblical truths for yourself.

— Pastor John K. Jenkins, Sr.
Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Glenarden

# Finally Me
## FROM PIECES TO PEACE

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# One

# REALIZING YOUR POTENTIAL: A DELAYED DESTINY

Text: Matthew 2:13-16,21-23

I am about to tell you a story you'll recognize; it is about an unexpected journey. Many of us are familiar with the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, but not many of us are familiar with the events and experiences following his birth. In fact, the next time, biblically, that we focus on Jesus, He is either 12 years of age, lost in the temple, He is 30 being baptized by John and tempted by the Devil, or he is 33 and being beaten and tortured and hung on a cross. These are the images and ideas we have of the human side of Jesus. The Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are, in fact, the only accounts that were accepted in the early church. And, they actually offer no information about what happened to Jesus during those first 11 years of His life. History is silent when it comes to the years following the birth of our King and Savior.

Luke's Gospel, alone, gives us a tidbit of Jesus as a child. Luke said the child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom, and the Grace of God was upon Him (Luke 2:52). We observe our own children and our own experiences in childhood, but do we think about

how we grew in wisdom? Do we understand in our own children how they are growing in wisdom and God's grace? Do you ever look at your co-workers or your family, daily, and think: Jesus grew—what about you? We see from Luke that Jesus grew in four areas. He grew intellectually, physically, spiritually and relationally—body, soul, and spirit. And, this is something that we can all relate to.

## We observe our own children and our own experiences in childhood, but do we think about how we grew in wisdom?



In the second chapter of Matthew's, we see Him again—Jesus, as a child. This Gospel closes with Jesus as a young child, and the third chapter opens with Jesus as a man at the age of 30. So, again, between the ages of one and 30, we know little about Jesus' life except that He kept growing. However, His growth was not in the public eyes but, rather, in private. In fact, Jesus of Nazareth grew up, it appears, like any other boy—growing, learning, and living with his parents in private. God made His birth happen and, then, hid Him—made Him obscure and unknown to the public. Though, certainly, many knew that a divine child had been born to this world.

In fact, if we really study the life of Jesus, we find that Jesus spent at least 90 percent of His life hidden, behind the scenes. He was hidden days following His birth, and He had hidden months after His circumcision. He had hidden years after the wise men visited Him, and He had two

hidden decades after the age of 12. It almost appears that God gave us a preview of this big coming attraction and then hid Him and remained silent about His purpose and about what He was capable of doing. In examining these facts, readers, the issue for me becomes, not that God appears to have hidden Him, but where God hides Him.

Matthew's Gospel said that, when Herod sought to kill the child, Jesus, believing that Jesus was his replacement, Mary and Joseph take the child to Egypt. They had been warned to do so in a dream. After they hear that Herod is dead, Mary and Joseph finally bring the child out of Egypt only to find out that Herod's son now sits on the throne. So, instead of returning to their home, they go to a city called Nazareth. I notice here that Joseph and Mary took the child, Jesus, and hid Him in Egypt—and it seems, upon God's directives in the dream. Something big is in store for this child, and, therefore, He needs to be protected. This is apparent.

We recall that, in the Old Testament, Joseph, Jacob's son, was sold into slavery and taken to Egypt. After so many years, God brought them all out of Egypt to take them to the land He had promised them. In addition to that, however, we are shown that God sends Joseph and Mary with this child, Jesus, to Egypt to hide Him. God uses the same place to serve two different purposes. Joseph, in the Old Testament, is in Egypt, and God uses Egypt to reveal Joseph to his brothers. But, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is taken to Egypt—not to be revealed to others—but to be concealed. It is the same place, which is significant, but it serves two different purposes. It is important to note here that, with God, it's not about a place! It is about the intended purpose you have in that place.

We all know that every place has a purpose. The place you are in right now, physically, spiritually, and emotionally, has a purpose. We find or look for purpose everywhere we go. Joseph, too, looked for purpose. This is why he said to his brothers, "I am in the place of purpose" (Genesis 50: 19–21) when he revealed himself to them. God can use the same place to conceal you from your enemies and reveal you to your family. Some of you are here because God is revealing you, and some of you are here because God is concealing you. Sometimes we are not sure why we're here or why we seek God. In fact, do we all know or understand our purposes? Joseph did, as an adult. Did Jesus as a child? Or did He simply do as He was told—as His parents and God told Him—and conceal Himself for a greater purpose later?

The place you are in right now, physically, spiritually, and emotionally, has a purpose.



After the place served its purpose, both Joseph, in the Old Testament, and Jesus, in our current text, are called out of Egypt. And, again, it is the Lord who calls them out! Egypt had served its purpose, and God felt what needed to be done had been done. For Joseph, it helped him become who he was meant to be to his family. For the child, Jesus, it had concealed Him and kept Him safe for His purpose later in life. Again, sometimes we don't know, at the time, why we are taken somewhere or asked to do something, but it may make itself apparent later as it does finally for both Joseph and, later, Jesus.

The Bible said that Joseph, Mary, and the child, Jesus, came out of Egypt and were returning to Bethlehem. Knowing that Herod had died and that his son sat on the throne, the couple knew it was not safe for them to return to Bethlehem. So, they went to a district of Galilee where Herod's other son ruled but was a kinder, gentler version of his father and brother. The text tells us, and we know from hearing where Jesus lived in later texts, that they ended up in Nazareth.

Nazareth was not the gateway to the world. In fact, it was not any type of important place at all. The common proverbs or the belief about Nazareth, at the time, summed up in one statement (still used to this day): Can anything good come out of Nazareth? And, it's not like it was a bad place. It was just like some of the cities we live in; fine—nothing to write home about, so to speak, but fine. Now, at least Nazareth was the place where the world from the east and west traveled to, so it was a crossroads of sorts with many different types of people there. It was a good place to hide—to blend in. So, we know that Jesus and His family went from Bethlehem to Egypt to Nazareth, which was truly an unexpected journey for a humble carpenter, his wife, and their child. Now, readers, as we examine the text and add to it the idea that the traveling to Egypt might have been for a purpose, the journey takes on a different meaning for us. Is this a delay in this divine child's destiny? It seemed, at the time, I'm sure, like an unexpected interruption. How could anyone know that this moving about would turn into something years later? Mary and Joseph do know that this child, Jesus, is meant for greatness, but they have no idea what that is. How could they know how to prepare Him or how to make their own lives fit His destiny and theirs? How can any of us know

that in our own lives? In the text, we ask: What is the future king of Israel doing in Nazareth unnoticed and uncelebrated? For 30 years this goes on! When, we might ask, is He going to take His rightful place on the throne of David? Why would God leave Him in such a place for 30 years, unnoticed and uncelebrated? Why, in fact, are any of us waiting for our destinies or taking turns that we don't understand?

If you ask any devout Jewish people what they thought of Nazareth back then, you would hear words like "small," insignificant," or even "scorned." It was not the place of kings or prophets. Throughout the Bible, Jerusalem is mentioned over 600 times, and that is in the Old Testament alone. But, Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all and very few times in the New Testament. And, whenever it is mentioned, it's not in a positive vein; again, not much went on there. In fact, history tells us that most people didn't tell others they were from or lived in Nazareth. Nazareth appears to be no place for a king or queen, and, yet, this is where Jesus lived. And to me, this is significant, because it seems by design—like certain events fell into place so that He could end up in this humble place to prepare and become ready for His greatness later.

For whatever reason, however, this is where God relocated His Son, the future King of Israel. He hid Him, not for a few days or few months, but He left Him in Nazareth for the first three decades of His life, I suppose, to prepare Him for His greater good.

From Jesus' birth to the age of thirty, He lives in the city of Nazareth. Remember, it's not about the place! It's the purpose in that place—your purpose in that place. Every place has a purpose. As I said before, and

as it is illustrated here, sometimes we are in a humble place or confused about our purpose. It is hard to evaluate or stay patient, but we must. And, again, we might not know what our purpose is right away, but there is one. If we can reflect now and recall all the places we've lived, we have to admit that they all had a purpose. Maybe it's where we met a spouse, maybe we bought our first house, or maybe we met some good friends there. We have learned from and have grown in some way in all these locations. Is it possible that we learned, too, that God tends to show up in common ways and in common places? Or, that He gives us common marching orders to move somewhere, or maybe we just end up somewhere because of God's Will, and…we don't understand why we are meant to be in this place—this particular spot in our lives. But…God knows. He has a purpose for us all. It might not be apparent right away, which we are examining was even the case with Jesus, but it will come.

We have learned from and have grown in some way in all these locations.



We know that Jesus had humble beginnings—born in a stable, hidden in Egypt and grew up in an ordinary place called Nazareth. And, you'll note—and maybe surmise in all of this—that here's why we are fascinated with His birth and life—because there is nothing remarkable to note—until He rises to the position He is meant to hold. Is this why we have so many questions and hear so many stories of the birth of Jesus or His mother, Mary? Are we trying to make sense of these humble

and inauspicious beginnings? This very example—Jesus growing up in Nazareth—should illustrate for us that God does not always come the way we expect Him to arrive. He does not come in a showy way, but, instead, God sometimes comes to us in a humble way. In fact, most often, He comes to us quietly and unannounced—a bit hidden, if you will. And, as we examine our purpose in life and even question why we are in a particular place or position in life, we might want to consider this very point: That we need to keep our eyes and hearts open to receive what God is telling us or sending us—however obscure it may seem at the time.

He does not come in a showy way, but, instead, God sometimes comes to us in a humble way.

In fact, in thinking on this story—this simple account of two parents taking their child somewhere safe when a threat loomed—I'm reminded that most of us, if we knew our son or daughter had the potential to be the next president or king or queen and…further, that that king or queen was in danger, we would relocate to Hollywood, New York, or wherever we needed to go to make sure that he or she fulfilled his or her destiny and…remained safe doing so. And, perhaps, at the time, we would not realize that this was even part of our destiny—their destinies. We might even be frustrated with God, asking why we have to move or why we have to uproot and change direction. Again, those destinies may not be revealed until later, but, with open heart and open eyes, we do what we think is right. Now, further, we would send these children to

an Ivy League school, regardless of money, without asking, "Why, God? Why must I shoulder this financial burden?" This is similar to how Prince William and Prince Harry were sent to boarding school in Wales or President Obama going to Harvard law school and Hillary Clinton going to Yale; we would make sure that our children fulfilled their destinies —without question. Knowing what we know now in modern society, it is hard to believe that, for our Savior, the greatest and the brightest of all of them, a city called Nazareth was His place to come into His own. And, again, for us, this should just solidify the fact that we can't question what is sent our way. We may never even know what our destiny is, but… we need to watch and listen for God's guidance—even when it is quiet, hidden, and unassuming.

So, we know that Jesus grew up in an uncelebrated town and as an uncelebrated boy. People in the town did not see Him as the next king of Israel. He was not voted by His peers in His class to be the "most likely to succeed." In fact, as an adult, when Jesus returned, preaching to them and performing miracles, with messages from God, they still questioned if He was "The One." They questioned Him to the degree that they actually took offense to some of what He was saying, making this long road to preparation, for Him, even longer. It would seem that all of His preparation and hiding and waiting…was for…nothing.

And, truthfully, as we, again, question and analyze all of this, we ask: Why would God hide the future King of Israel in Nazareth for three decades? Is it just so that we can learn about Jesus and about God Themselves? It might be that simple premise. I mean, we certainly learn from Jesus in all this that performing the lesser task comes before the

greatest task is given. We know what His greatest task was; it was to redeem humanity and to establish God's kingdom on earth. And, this is, obviously, a huge task—one that would require all the preparation and more. Did we expect to hear, however, that His prep was simply hiding and growing and learning, working side by side with Joseph, and laying low in that little town? It is surprising that is what He did to prepare Himself for the greatest task ever executed on this earth. That is what His parents did for Him to prepare for that task—put Him in the small town and loved and nurtured Him. And, this, readers, is what God intended. These were all the lesser tasks given to Jesus for his first 30 years so that He might become who He needed to be in the future. When Joseph, the only father on earth He knew, died, Jesus then had to take on the responsibility of being the provider and protector of His family—He and His mother. He had to become a big brother to His younger brothers and sisters. He was learning how to make a living and to be responsible. In other words, He was being faithful as a carpenter and a family man before He became the Savior.

We certainly learn from Jesus in all this that performing the lesser task comes before the greatest task is given.



And, it is important to note that He treated the lesser task or the smaller task just as importantly as He treated the greater or bigger task in life—with respect, hard work, and reverence to His role. So many of us

want God to give us bigger, greater tasks or more responsibilities—even bigger and more grandiose visions and dreams, but we have not learned to master or to be faithful in the small things He has already given us to do or to accomplish. For three decades, Jesus was faithful in toiling away with the little things, the seemingly inconsequential things: taking care of His family, working a laborers' job, and living in an insignificant city. God can't and won't give any of us more until we learn to master the little tasks we already have to handle. We all need to stop asking for more and maybe, instead, ask God to give us wisdom to master what we already have. None of us are ready for the kingdom until we master the house —the little things—the inconsequential things that mean so much and build such good foundations. The Bible says that if we remain faithful over those who are not, God will make us rulers over more. Consider your life now and think about how you might do better—how you might master what you have in front of you before asking for more. Can we be a better parent or friend? Can we give back to our communities? Can we simply become better at a task or a job? It is all a matter of what we put into making our own fantastic destinies real.

And again, I ask you, readers, why would God drop the ruler of the world in Nazareth for three decade of His life? I will say it again: because it is not about the place! It's about purpose! Also, God's plan is to also show us that performing the lesser task comes before obtaining and succeeding in the greater tasks. Finally, too, it is all meant to teach us that private preparation comes before public presentation. We all need to privately prepare—with no glory and no pats on the back—for our greater roles in the world—at which time, we may or may not get any recognition. Dear

readers—my brothers and sisters—hidden, unnoticed years of discipline and preparation are not wasted years. They are training to reign years.

From this text, we learn that it was in those silent or hidden years that Jesus' character was being formulated and developed. It was during these uncelebrated years that Jesus submitted to a delayed destiny. He was given a God-sized vision and mission, but when it was not time to share it, preach it, or make it public, He worked and toiled on His own—honing skills and living a simple life in preparation for all of it. He recognized God's calling on His life, or maybe He was told about it. But, at the same time, He remained delayed but patient. And, how many of us feel this way? That we are meant for something else? That something good or big needs to come our way? We all need to open our eyes, keep our nose to the grindstone, and attempt to see the simple things that God is trying to teach us or show us before moving us to something bigger. It's not always easy to observe this, but we can learn from Jesus and His life. We can save money and cook dinner for our families or attend church every Sunday and contribute money or time to our community. We can do this—and keep doing this—even when we rise to fulfill what we were meant to do on this earth—even when we achieve that greatness that we looked for so long.

Why must we do this? Because, private preparation comes before public promotion. So many of us make the assumption that being delayed is negative, but sometimes being delayed is positive. Most of us struggle, get frustrated, and move to anger with ourselves or even with God when our dreams, visions, and plans are delayed for even a year—let alone the 30 years that Jesus endured. Often, we don't understand why God would

give us the dream or the vision and then hit pause, so to speak, and not let us move forward with it all.

The truth is that the pauses—often at God's hands—in our lives can cause self-doubt and make us feel like we are wasting our time and wasting our potential. But remember, readers, it's in these delay destiny moments or these silent years that we must learn this great truth: the father is never careless nor cause-less with how He spends our lives. In other words, just like there is a purpose to every place in our lives, there is a reason for every season in our lives. The years when we are unnoticed and undiscovered are not wasted years; they are maturing years. And just because we feel unnoticed does not mean we are unimportant.

The years when we are unnoticed and undiscovered are not wasted years; they are maturing years.



God does not rush greatness. God is never in a hurry. Remember that just because for 30 years Jesus was unseen does not mean that He was unimportant. Unseen and unimportant are not the same things. Just like being delayed is not the same as being denied. Again, God often wants us to wait. And, being delayed does not destroy our destinies. In fact, it sharpens us to walk in our destinies.

Sometimes it is enough to seek Him in private—honoring God by paying our tithe and offering, praying, and fasting—truly giving of ourselves—that the father will reward us openly. In the story of Jesus—

the hidden one—the private life that He knew for 30 years but no one else did—we learn that God finally showed to the world His chosen Son. In this way, He will, when the time is right and the lesser tasks have been handled, move us from the un-noticed to being noticed—from unseen to seen. We must remember that once He conceals us, He will reveal us. After private presentation comes public affirmation. After discipline comes the grandeur for which we are all intended.

# Two

# ORDERING YOUR STEPS TO WALK WITH GOD: IT'S NOT ABOUT THE WATER!

Text: Matthew 14:22-28

I'm about to tell you another story—again a familiar one…but…one that we usually read, hear, and interpret the wrong way. I'm going to tell you how to be a "Word Walker."

Recently, I spoke to a friend of mine who shared the fact that he read an article about a pastor who took his congregation to the beach with the intention of proving to them that he could walk on water. Needless to say, that pastor, reportedly, drowned. I'm not too sure if the story is real or not, but what is more important to note is that what this pastor failed to understand was that Matthew chapter 14, and the whole Jesus walking on water incident, was never about the water. It is, in fact, about a word!

We are all familiar with the story and the miracle it details in our Biblical text. It goes something like this: After the feeding of the five thousand or more in attendance, Jesus commanded His disciples to get into a ship and go before Him to the other side of land while He dismissed the crowd. After He dismissed the crowd, Jesus went up to a mountain by

Himself to pray. The text tells us that when evening came, He was alone on that mountain praying, but the boat that was carrying the disciples was in the middle of the sea, tossed by the waves and the contrary wind. Now, going up to the mountain to pray was nothing new for Jesus. For Jesus would often find a hiding place or a private place to pray. Often, we note that Jesus would find a place to go, apart from others before He fell apart, so to speak, and, further, would often find a place to unload before he overloaded. Having the job that He had was often a daunting task! Certainly, readers, you and I might need such a place with all that goes on in our lives!

Jesus would often find a hiding place or a private place to pray.



So, as Jesus is up on the mountain praying, the disciples, who are in the ship going to the other side, find themselves in a storm. The text tells us the time is about three in the morning, and, as they are tossed to and fro, knowing that Jesus is praying on the mountain, and will be joining them later, He suddenly appears, walking on the water. When the disciples see Him walking on the water, they become troubled, thinking it is a ghost. They cry out in fear. Immediately, however, Jesus speaks to them, saying, of all things, "be of good cheer; it is I. Do not be afraid." Peter, one of the disciples in the boat, answers Jesus by saying, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus responds with the directive, "Come." Peter then steps out of the boat and starts walking

on the water, going to Jesus after having been summoned by Him. But, when he sees the boisterous wind, he becomes afraid and begins to sink. He cries, "Lord! Save me!" Jesus does and says to him, "O ye of little faith, why did you doubt?" Then the text tells us that Jesus and Peter get in the boat and the wind ceases, and those who were in the boat started worshipping Him, saying, "Truly this is the son of God." It's quite a story.

Those of us who have heard, read, or preach this text often focus on either the fact that Peter is the only one that got out of the boat, or the later part of the story when Peter begins walking on water and takes his eyes off of the Savior to focus on the storm. Which is when, of course, he starts to sink. As wonderful as both angles are to the story, this text and the often-told story are not about the boat or about the water. The story is about something bigger and more powerful than getting out of a boat and walking on water. Of course, the messages to keep your eye on God instead of on the storms that tempt or sway you, or that Peter, the Rock, got out to approach Jesus, believing truly in Him are fantastic and, yes, applicable to real life. What I'd like to focus on now is that bigger picture—that intended purpose—which we often miss in this and other stories.

Our text tells us that Jesus had commanded the disciples to go to the other side of land on a boat while He went up to the mountain to pray. It is hard not to notice that, while they are traveling to the other side, a storm comes, and the disciples find themselves in the middle of it. Now, when did the storm show up? The storm showed up after they got in the ship and began to travel to the other side. The storm came, because they were going somewhere. And, isn't that when storms do show up? Storms in

your life that impede progress or disrupt an ongoing calm—actual storms that prevent you from progress on daily tasks? In fact, I maintain that storms never show up unless you are going somewhere. Storms, to me, are sure indicators and confirmations that you—that all of us—must be going somewhere or doing something right if we tempt the fate of a storm.

The disciples had to learn like we do, to this day, that obedience to the Lord can position us in some stormy situations. Some of us think that if we are doing everything right and living a disciplined and faithful life—even pleasing the Lord in all ways—that we should have a storm-free trip in this world. But, this is not so. Storms show up, most often, when we are traveling somewhere. Up to the critical point in the story, the storm had the disciples' full attention, and they were holding on to their boat for dear life. And, what time did Jesus show up, walking on the water? He appears at the fourth watch or, as we know it now, three a.m. Matthew takes the time to mention the time Jesus appeared walking on the water, because Matthew wants us to learn that the Lord has a habit of showing up when we least expect Him and in places we least expect Him to. God tends to shows up in the middle of all our chaos, at the peak of the storm, and, many times, in the darkest hour of our struggles. We often forget this. We often forget that, without God showing up when we least expect it, we may not make it through our difficult times—our divorces, our medical issues, or deaths in our family. Without God, walking unannounced, through our storms—through the daily chaos of work and bills and kids and weather—we may never make it.

Jesus shows up walking on water and, because the disciples did not recognize Him, they cried out in fear. Note here that they did not

recognize Him. Why? It might simply be because they did not expect to see Him walking on water, but it might be too because their eyes were filled with fear. And, we need to remember, whenever we are filled with fear, it is hard to recognize Jesus in a storm. We are told to be faithful and show a blind eye to all that is not God or enmeshed in our faith, but this is often hard, isn't it? But, it does take the eyes of faith and not the eyes of fear to see Jesus in a storm.

Whenever we are filled with fear, it is hard to recognize Jesus in a storm.



In the story, Jesus, knowing the disciples were consumed with fear, identifies Himself to them. He says, "It is I; don't be afraid." He comes in the middle of the storm and calms their fears by reassuring them that they are not in this storm by themselves. He calms their fear not by speaking to the storm outside of them but by speaking to the storm within them. He calms their fear by reminding them of who He is. Be of good cheer. It is I; be not afraid. In the Greek it would read: "Do not be afraid. I am in the storm with you," which is a more direct translation of what is really transpiring in this story. Often, we all need a reminder of who God is, what He can do for us, and where He might show up. We think He might show up while we're in church or while we're praying, but we aren't always prepared for the places He will help us. Our "three a.m. in the middle of the water" might be our darkest hour when we lose a parent or a child, or when we are depressed and alone, feeling that no one

understands us. These may be our storms—our hours of need—those hours when we don't expect to see God asking us to come to Him.

But, Jesus did not simply show up at three a.m. walking on water in the midst of the storm to calm their fear. If that was the case, after He calmed their fear, He would have gotten in the boat or disappeared. But notice, after calming their fear, He stays on the water, because He came, not just to calm their fear, but, rather, to starch their faith. And for some of us, Jesus shows up on occasion to calm us as we approach a new year or as we start a new job or move to a new city. Some of us, in fact, do pray often for Jesus to calm our fears and anxieties. Peter, however, wants more than for Jesus to calm his fear; he wants the Lord to starch his faith. And how many of you want your faith to be starched or strengthened in your life, in general? Maybe it is spring, and rebirth is in the air. Maybe it is an election year, and change is, once again, in the air. Whatever the case, we could all use a little jumpstart or a re-strengthening of our faith every now and then. Even when we don't ask for the reinforcement, as we mentioned before, He will be there; God will know when to intervene.

We could all use a little jumpstart or a re-strengthening of our faith every now and then.

I know this to be a fact, because, in the story, as soon as Jesus identifies Himself to the disciples in the boat, Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, bid me or command me to come to you on the water." And this phrase is key: Lord, if it is you, let me come to you on the water. Let's not miss Peter's

prayer request. When he asks for identification then actually asks Him to command him to walk on the water himself—to prove his faith or his worth—this is an outreach—this is a request for reinforcement from the Lord from Peter. And, again, I have to ask, readers: How many of you have, inadvertently asked God to "get you through this day" or to "help you understand this co-worker" or to "keep those bills away for just one more day" or to "keep this teenager out of trouble?"

We all know now that it's not about the water. Notice, too, the emphasis of Peter's prayer. He is not asking for Jesus to grant him the ability to walk on the water; he is asking to be with Jesus—whatever that entails. The walking on the water is simply the by-product of his real request—to be with Jesus—to renew his faith—to be with his Lord and Savior. Peter's basic request is, in fact, to be where Jesus is, even if that means being out on the water. And don't we all want to be where Jesus is or where He wants us to be—again, whatever that entails? Peter says, specifically, to Jesus to command him or order him to cross the water—or, rather, to come to Him, Jesus, thereby causing Peter to take to walking on water. Shouldn't we all be asking for our Lord to bid or command us to go where we have never gone before and to do what we have never done before? How will we ever see and experience new things—things we have never seen before—if we don't challenge ourselves and push ourselves to be with Jesus in every way?

In this text, Jesus responds to, what we now know is a prayer request, by saying to Peter, "Come!" In one word, Jesus transforms Peter; He grants his prayer request, and He moves him to see what he has not seen—causes him to do something he would have never done before.

With that one word—"Come"—Peter steps out of the boat and begins to walk on the water to Jesus—to that word. That one word made the difference for Peter; that one word brought him out of his prayer and into a new, expanded experience. That word made Peter not a "water walker" but a "word walker." It's time for all of us to change our thinking to action and movement based on the "Word." And, it's never about the water; it's always about our actions and moving to a new place based on our desire to be with Jesus and His confirmation that we should be with Him. With that one word, for Peter, life was changed. For us, it might be a different word, but it is a movement that we need to make moving forward in our lives.

It doesn't matter if we are in need and asking through prayer for the Lord's help. It doesn't matter if it is the New Year, and we want to make a new start. The important point to get from this all too familiar story is that we need to step out, step up, or make a movement based on the word that invites us to join Jesus where He is. The word for some of us is step out and for others step up. Whatever it is, don't you make a move until you get you a word. Ask yourselves: What, exactly, will make you leave the familiar for the unfamiliar?

In Peter's case, the word could not be clearer. Notice, however, that Peter does not move until he gets a clear word. In fact, before Peter steps out and steps up, he asks for clarification. Peter asked for clarification, because he wanted to make sure he was not moving on emotions. And, faithful readers, if you know anything about Peter in any Biblical text, you know that he tends to move on emotions. And because he knows nothing is worse than being out on a limb, or in this case, water, without

a word or something concrete on which to place this movement—this faith. He asks for clarification; he asks for a clear word, and…we can all do this. To answer Peter, Jesus gives a clear word. And, it's all right to ask for clarification. So, before you step out of that boat, before you leave that church, before you start that business or walk away from that marriage, be sure to get a clear word.

## He asks for a clear word, and…we can all do this.



I'd like to mention here, too, that this word—"come"—is a strong and clear word—a commanding word. When Peter heard it, he knew it was time to move. It was time to challenge or test his faith. We need to decide what will challenge us to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. And, I'd also like to point out here that He challenges all the disciples in the boat to come, but only one takes up the challenge. When God speaks a word into your spirit, it's often a challenging word. It pushes and pulls us into places we're not naturally trying to go. God often commands people to move. He said to Abraham get up from here and go to there. He said to Moses to go back and tell the Pharaoh to let my people go. Again, ask yourselves—what word—what phrase—what command—will change you or move you to positive, faithful action? What will challenge you to go where you have never gone before, to do what you have never done before, or to see what you have never seen before? What challenges you to be a better father, a better mother, a better son or daughter, a better person? We need to find what challenges us to be greater. One of the

reasons I am challenged and intrigued by the simple command to Peter to "come" is because it is simple with no details; Jesus just says to "come," and it is in that simplicity that Peter obeyed—that I obey. I don't bother with the details. I listen to the commands—clear and strong. If I spend too much time on the details, I won't move. I won't be that "word walker."

And this word is clear, commanding, and challenging, but it is also comforting. When Jesus says to Peter to "come," there is comfort in that word. The comfort comes from the one who invites me or challenges me to go where I have never gone before. In that word "come," Jesus is saying, in a nutshell, that He would not invite us or command us to come if He did not have what it takes to keep us, to hold us, and to provide for us. The one who is challenging me has the power to keep me and provide for me, and that, readers, is hard to turn down.

The comfort comes from the one who invites me or challenges me to go where I have never gone before.



In all these ways, it is also a complete word. On this one word, Peter takes a step—now, it's not a leap, but it is a step on the word. Don't focus on any clutter in this world as you look for this guidance. We touched on the fact that Peter ignored the storm to walk with Jesus, somewhere he had never been before—never even pictured himself before. Don't bother with what you see around you or even what you feel under you. Don't get stuck in the situation or focus on gloomy finances or a mean word from

somebody or all the strife in the world. Focus, instead, on your desires, on your prayers, and on your walk with God. Don't let the storm—the Devil—stray you from your path to change and movement—don't let him block your steps. Ask God to order your steps in His Word. This is all we need to make the changes we want to make.




# GROWTH THROUGH LOSS: WHY YOU CAN'T EVER LOSE YOUR "PRAISE"!

Text: Job 1

All of us, at any given time, can testify that, in this life, we have lost some things. We've all lost jobs, cars, houses, money, or even our peace, hope, and confidence. Not only have we lost things and felt the loss of self or confidence for a variety of reasons, but we have lost people too in many cases—whether those people were family, friends, or coworkers. In many cases, they were here today and gone tomorrow—lost due to life circumstances like moves or break ups and, other times, due to illness or death. Some of the more painful or difficult to understand losses can come when one of the people involved makes a decision to disconnect and discontinue the relationship or friendship. We've all heard of children who emancipate themselves from parents or friends who no longer wish to continue the relationship on one side. It never really matters, because the loss of anything—even something small like a necklace or a beloved item of clothing can hurt or bother us.

We attach meaning to things and to memories. Certainly, the loss of people through death or a decision to abruptly end or discontinue a relationship can all be so painful that, when in these situations, it can seem like there is no recovery. Similarly, death or a life circumstance out of our control can also make us feel irretrievably lost. I recall the pain of losing my mother at the age of 14 and my nephew who died when he was only 24. Up to this day, the pain from both experiences is still very real. It is still, in fact, hard for me to believe that they are both gone. I also remember the pain in my stomach on April 2, years ago, when I was served divorce papers. It hit me out of nowhere that, after four years of marriage, my spouse no longer wanted me. When my marriage came to an end, it was one of the most painful experiences that I ever had to go through. Since then, I can recall, too, friendships that I thought were deep and forever coming to an end because of decisions and choices made. And, I know now that, despite the pain of those endings back then, it was not the season for those friendships. With the ending of any relationship, however, we all lose a number of things—from the simple security of being loved to the more tactile sense of the security of a savings account or even a place to stay or live.

Readers, we all know what it is like to live with loss. Some of us, as I said before, have lost our trust and our confidence and even our hope and joy. I think of those people who lived in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina who lost everything, and I wonder how they managed to live and move forward at all. I see the wild fires in California, and I wonder how those people make it. I see the tornadoes in the Midwest and worry about the loss of life, family, and livelihood there every year. Living with

a loss of any kind can be very painful and, if not handled properly, it can leave any of us devastated for a long time. And, in these times, it is hard to recover; it is hard to believe things will ever be right again.

Living with a loss of any kind can be very painful and, if not handled properly, it can leave any of us devastated for a long time.

In our churches, with our own congregations, we empathize and pray with those who have lost a mother, a father, a husband, a wife, a child, a brother, a sister, a friend, or even a pet. Not only do we pray for those within our congregation, but our prayers go out to people in our community and our extended families for love and comfort in their times of need too. And we do this without the expectation for reciprocation or without the need for a pat on the back for our efforts. We do this, readers, because we are good people and because we can all understand loss.

Not only do we pray for those who have lost loved ones through death but also for those who have experienced loss through divorce, which can be devastating for the spouse who wants to stay married. In these cases, those of us who have experienced such loss or who understand the pain that goes with that type of separation and change in life will often pray for those people to find friendship and love in another place and in another season. It isn't good to dwell on loss. Just like we grieve and move on with a death, we do the same with divorce or the end of a friendship. We move on, and we find what is meant for us with another person or

another experience. And, readers, we all know that this is not disloyalty; this is growth—personal, healthy growth.

Just like we grieve and move on with a death, we do the same with divorce or the end of a friendship.



At my previous church, as a pastor with a successful and growing congregation, I, too, have had to deal with loss. Despite the growth in numbers with my respective churches, I have had to say good-bye to some folks as well. I don't mean that I have had to say good-bye in death, though as a pastor, that is a big part of my reality too. But, I have had to accept that some congregants chose not to renew their membership with me or chose to seek fellowship and worship elsewhere. I have also observed people who, because they either do not care for my personality or the personality of someone else in the church, choose to walk away and find people with whom they have a better fit. Readers, this is nothing to dwell on or to worry about at all. People are entitled to their own decisions in worship and life and, sometimes, we have to accept that. We can try to change someone who is going down the wrong path, but if someone chooses a different path than ours, we have to handle that and move on to our own next steps in life and worship.

And, readers, I know you're recalling now a professional or personal loss of your own. I'm hoping that you're not dwelling on these instances. I'm hoping that you understand that loss is part of life, and we can

learn from it, and we can grow from it. Even if you lose a job or lose a promotion to someone else, that doesn't mean that you don't have value. It simply means that one door closed and another opened. Opportunity may present itself more aggressively if you are open and without a job. The bright side is often hard to see. The need to move on is often hard to see. However, if you keep your faith and keep your confidence no matter what the loss, you can come out better and not bitter. Even in death, life can reaffirm itself. Often when we lose someone, we vow to live everyday better. And, similarly, when we lose a job or suffer a professional setback, we vow to try harder and become a better person. And, readers, this is all good.

I referenced prayer earlier and how we pray for our friends and loved ones, or those close to us in the community, without being prompted. We need to remember that, beyond prayer, we need to help people pick up the pieces and move on. We need to draw on our own times of need to help others and help them grow through it all. Again, if you know you can make it through anything, you need to communicate that to those who don't. This is how we pass on growth and praise and recovery. This is how we understand our own past and future losses and how they have the potential to make us better—provide us the opportunities to improve and embrace life.

Now, readers, we are finally getting to the text and the story referenced for this chapter. The Bible said that there was a man by the name of Job who was an upright and righteous man, and that he feared God and shunned or ran from evil. He saw no evil, and he did no evil. Job ran from evil. Now, the text does not imply that Job was perfect, but what the

text does imply is that Job had a definite affinity towards righteousness and not to evil. Unlike some of us, Job ran from evil, not into mess, chaos, or confusion like some of us do. In fact, Job was righteous and worshipped and loved his God unconditionally and with a pure heart. Some of us reading this now know that we're not always like that. We may even be one of those people who run into church when we do experience loss or chaos or a drama in our lives. We know those people; they show up for service just to make things right with God and themselves. Job, on the other hand, was the opposite—like David, his heart was towards God. Of course, like all of us, he fell short every now and then, but his heart was towards God.

In spite of all his righteous behavior, however, the Bible tells us that one day, Job suffers a great loss and has his world turned upside down. Job literally loses everything but his life. From his possessions to his position in life and to the people precious to him, like his friends and his family, he lost everything in one day. And this suggests to me and to you that just because you are upright with God, get involved in a church, and love the Lord, it does not mean that trouble will not come your way. In fact, sometimes suffering, heartache, pain, and loss comes because you are in church—because you do love the Lord—and because you are seeking to do right by God. It certainly does not make us immune to strife and hardship or loss in life. We always hear the saying that "bad things can happen to nice people." For Job, this certainly rang true. He tried his best to cross all his "T"s, so to speak, and dot all of his "I"s, but it didn't keep him from loss.

Job was living large, truly. In fact, the Bible tells us that he was one of the wealthiest men from the east. Job had a wife, wealth, wisdom, work, worship, and seven sons and three daughters. He owned 7,000 sheep, which is the equivalent to having that much in stock in today's world. He had 3,000 camels, which were the bonds of his day, and he had 500 York oxen, 500 female donkeys, and a very large household with the enviable seven sons and many servants. In today's generation, Job was the Bill Gates, Donald Trump, or Oprah of his day. He was the Jay Z, P. Diddy, or Russell Simmons of the community—a celebrity and successful in many ways. In other words, he was on top of the world, because he was on top of his game—doing everything right and enjoying the fruits of his faith and his labor. Yet the Bible tells us that, in one day, Job's world is turned upside down. What happened to Job in terms of loss was like the stock market crashing, modern day, then the banks repossessing his goods, which resulted in the loss of his wealth and his business. Again, in modern terms, he had to file bankruptcy, and he, basically, became unemployed. In one day, Job got one bit of bad news after the other.

Yet the Bible tells us that, in one day, Job's world is turned upside down.



And, while things are looking terrible for Job professionally, he is still secure in his family, until, in verse 18, the Bible tells us that a servant comes reporting to Job about how he, first, lost his livestock and, then, delivers the most devastating news of all—that all 10 of his children have

been killed in a desert storm. Job's sons and daughters were at a party at their oldest brother's house, and a storm like a hurricane tore down the house, killing them all. And, as we established before, readers, this is devastating. This is the type of news from which we feel we can't recover. We can certainly sympathize—even empathize—with Job in this tragedy.

In all of this—in the loss of possessions and wealth and, subsequently, position in society and friends—and in the loss of his beloved children—Job, who is left with his wife and his own good health, does not lose his faith—or…more importantly, his praise. The Bible tells us that Job arose, rent his mantle, shaved his head, fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, saying, basically, that, "naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked shall I return, the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord." And this is true praise; this is a call to God that He is blessed and beloved by this righteous man who has lost everything!

This text should illustrate for us that Job faced his predicament and embraced his pain without fear or lack of faith. He humbles himself and accepts his position, lying barely clothed, head shaved, spirit bared, and ready for what was to happen next. He doesn't dissolve in tears or even question why so much has happened to him. In fact, as I said, the text shows us that Job faced his pain. The text tells us that he arose and basically tore at his clothes or his mantle, which is a sign of grieving or, at best, a sign of frustration and pain. And, in Job's day, the shaving of the hair meant the loss of personal glory or being shamed. Some would go as far as falling to the ground and putting dirt or ashes on their heads or their bodies as a sign of mourning or grieving, the markings

outwardly showing the torment and pain of the inner feelings. And, Job wasn't praising his situation at all but was, rather, falling to the ground and worshiping as a sign of obeisance to God. In the midst of one of the most painful situations and most painful days, with his clothes rent and his head shaved, he lay on the ground, grieving the loss of his 10 children and the loss of his possessions and his livelihood. Like all of us in past situations, he had tears running down his checks, and he had questions on his mind, but…Job, in agony, cries out, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Job wasn't praising his situation at all but was, rather, falling to the ground and worshiping as a sign of obeisance to God.



We should all note that Job, broken and in the most pain he had ever been in, still cried out and praised God. He did not let that become taken from him. He still had his faith. And, like us in modern day, he may have wanted to escape at first. Today, the doctors would have us on five different pills, and we would be trying not to fall into dysfunction—backups that have become the norm sometimes now. And, we, even today, with all the "assistance" out there for us—all the people willing to let us fall into anger—have to stay vigilant and not allow our faith and our praise to leave us.

I watch people, as a pastor, everyday lose things and carry on in faith and love. By contrast, too, I watch people who haven't lost even half

as much as Job or others, and yet they stop coming to church, stop participating in ministry, and stop singing in the choir. Basically, they stop doing the things they love. And, yes, we have established that life can be painful, but if Job could lose everything and still bless the name of the Lord, surely with our respective losses, we can do the same.

And, readers, I know that some of these losses may be big—the loss of a position in corporate America can be devastating, literally the difference between making it and not making it. Maybe you've lost some possession that either sustained you or meant a lot to you, like an heirloom piece of jewelry or your car. Just like the people across our vast country who lost homes to hurricanes, wildfires, and tornadoes. Even the loss of people, because we know that dying is part of living, shouldn't interfere with our need, desire, and ability to praise God.

It is an odd feeling to feel pain yet want to praise God at that same time. That kind of praise is what the Jewish people call a "lament" or "lamentation," and it can be cathartic and necessary to our grieving process. David, another in the Bible who could praise when it seemed all was lost, says, "Hear my cry, O God, attend unto my prayers from the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, and when my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Praise does not remove the pain! It just confirms that God is still God in the midst of the pain. Praise helps us all to deal with our pain and not to ignore our pain.

My prayers for my congregants in my church and for you, readers, is that, when you do experience loss, and we all will at some point in life—divorce, death, loss of job or friendship—I pray that you don't lose God

or your praise for Him. Can we all step back and tell ourselves that, if someone like Job, an ordinary but faithful and successful man, can lose everything and still praise God, then so can we? Can we do that? Can we make it our point to even tell someone else not to lose his or her praise? Can we spread that type of faith?

Now, how, exactly, you ask, did Job NOT lose his praise in the midst of all this? What steps would I take to follow in his footsteps? I think the key to our answer lies in the fact that Job references coming into the world naked and leaving it as such. He also praises God profusely. We can only infer from that what we already know deep down, and that is that Job was grateful for all he had been given. He had worked hard. Yes, but he knew that he was blessed beyond what other people had, and he was grateful for having experienced it all at all. He knew God's hand was heavy in that success, and he was, therefore, as a faithful and obedient servant of God, not surprised when he no longer had it. None of us know how long our blessings will last, and Job was quick to note that he had many, and that he also had no problem leaving or existing in the world the same way he arrived—humble, naked, and born of God's Grace.

Job was grateful to the Lord for all that he had and all that he had achieved and all that he had accomplished. He was grateful to God for bestowing and blessing him above and beyond his wildest dreams. It is apparent to all of us that the favor of God was indeed upon his life. Job was blessed with possessions, a great position, and wonderful people—sons and daughters, family and friends. But, with all of Job's achievements, with all of his accomplishments, with his elevation and with all those wonderful people in his life, Job somehow kept all those

blessings in proper perspective. He learned that the bottom line is that, while all of this is wonderful, and he was blessed to have it, he had to thank God for making him a steward over it all. The bottom line, as I said, is he came into this world naked, and he was going to leave this world naked. And, he was fine with that.

## It is apparent to all of us that the favor of God was indeed upon his life.

When we all die, we can't take anything but our faith in God with us anyway. Job kept all that in proper perspective, and we can too. Job did not let his position and his possessions define him, and we can do that too. He grieved his children, and he buried them with a heavy heart. Later in the text, his wife even questions why he is able to bear that terrible burden when she is having trouble doing so, and he responds in a way that leads us to believe that, all along, those relationships were healthy for him in that he also kept them in perspective. In death, he keeps his children with him, loving them forever and knowing they will always be a part of him. And, in losing relationships with people who only respected his position and didn't really know him, he loses nothing.

So, yes, Job had a great title, and he was a man who feared and respected God, but he never let his riches define him. As one of the wealthiest men on earth, he did not allow his position in life to define him. And this is where sometimes we mess up with possessions and our perceived positions. We allow them to define us, and we forget ourselves

or our responsibilities. We need to always remember to give back and to remain faithful. We need to always remember to be the best we can be and remain humble. Do we do this, though? Or do we allow ego and other vile motivators to captivate us and make us forget little things like, in charity, it's the giving we should love, not the pat on the back—or, in meeting people and becoming community leaders, it's the interaction and the love we should cherish, not our position, or our power.

We sometimes make the wrong things the focus of our lives. We idolize people with money or we place too much emphasize on our own position—whether that is high or low—and we really need to be focusing on our faith and our commitment to others.

As a pastor, theology, for me, is how I see and understand God and what God is doing with me and in me. When I talk about theology, I am focusing on God, and again, for me, how God is viewed in my eyes is important for how I handle life circumstances and life changes. Job had sound theology. He believed that God is a giver. And, this is true, He gives us life, and he gives us reason, and what we do with it is ours.

The story of Job also reminds us that the Lord is not only a giver of life, love, and liberty, but He is also a taker. God is all knowing, and what He takes from us is usually for the greater good. And, just as in previous chapters, we explored the fact that we might not know our purpose right away. We don't always see the value or the reason for having big things taken from us. It is interesting, isn't it? We are always ready to receive or love what we are given, but we can't seem to understand the taking away? And, we know that life is random and that God's hand gives us what we

need to grow and learn. If we close off to that simple fact, we do lose our praise and can even muse, in those situations, whether we ever had it all. Was our focus always pure or always skewed? In these moments of loss, we feel that. In the moments of giving, we often lose ourselves. We sometimes don't see that God takes in our best interest for His greatest glory.

## We know that life is random and that God's hand gives us what we need to grow and learn.



And, we can try to understand whether it is God or Satan who is taking from us. We can even wonder if it is God or Satan giving to us. For the addict, does he or she ever wonder if the drugs come to her through Satan or, in her darkest hour of withdrawal, from God? The recently divorced woman going through a painful custody battle or loss of finances due to a spouse, who she thought she knew, may wonder if it was God or Satan who sent her that person who was hurting her so much. And, so, it is up to you: Did God or Satan take from Job? And, if it was Satan, why did God allow it? Will we ever know? Maybe not. We do know, though, what motivates us. Do we praise God in good and bad times? Do we maintain our faith at all? In the story of Job, we distinctly hear him say that he never lost his praise, because he kept it all in perspective and did not allow great success or great pain to change him.

You see, readers, before Job went through what he went through, he was a worshipper. And, as a pastor, I know there are different types of worshippers. There are those who come to church and give praise no

matter the season they are experiencing—good or bad. There are others who come when they need something from me, from the congregation, or from God. There are others who praise Him all the time and come to worship so that they can outwardly show what they feel all the time. The latter group I can sometimes never get a handle on. I understand those who come because they need the support and the weekly worship, and I even understand those who come to pray for a single, selfish reason. Often, I don't understand those who come and praise in grief, in happiness, and in loss and pain. I worry about them, and I try to minister to them, but I often realize that they have what they need—the lifestyle that allows them to keep their faith and their praise, and they never stray from it. They know themselves, and they know God.

We've all let some blessings slip away or we've lost them forever. We've all lost focus at times, or went astray from our daily disciplines, or from God. But, did we ever really lose everything? I lost possessions that I held dear, and I did walk in fear somewhat, but I never lost my hope, my joy, my faith, or my praise. Nothing could take any of that away, and I do thank God for that. And, readers, I want you to experience this too.

# Session 1

## REVIEW AND REFLECT WITH DR. JAZZ

### Exploring Your Destiny
### A Reflection on Chapter One

In Chapter One, tell me whom we talk about as not fulfilling his destiny until he was much older. And, how, in your own words, did this figure fulfill his destiny, ultimately?

What do you infer from this figure's humble beginnings? Why do you think he was hidden from the world and only rose to greatness later? What, in the chapter tells you that and what did you know from the bible or other text and stories?

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Do you know anyone or have read about or studied anyone who was meant for great things but ended up having a bit of a slow start? Tell us that story here:

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## What Motivates You?
## A Reflection on Chapter Two

Make a list here of what motivates you in life and tell us briefly why. Is it your children? Is it the promise of a promotion at work? Have you gone through a recent weight loss or exercise program? Detail any of that here. Detail a number of things if you feel the need to be motivated or if you have recent motivation stories in different areas of your life:

In Chapter Two, we heard the story again of Jesus walking on water and Peter asking to be summoned to do so himself. What did you learn about that story this time around? And, given that, what moments in life can you remember when you were asked to "Come"—to push yourself a bit? Or—have you pushed someone or motivated him or her to do something they normally would not do? Detail either of those stories here as well:

## How Have You Grown Lately? A Reflection on Chapter Three

Detail below some things in life for which you are grateful. Your financial situation? Your home? Your family? Your faith? Whatever the list involves, provide a short description of why you are so grateful for these things.

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Detail here some of your recent or even distant past experiences with loss. It can be anything from being laid off from a job to losing a loved one. List a few and provide details about how you felt during that time.

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Compare and contrast the two lists you've created above. Compose here a prayer that you might offer to God, talking about your successes and your losses. Include in that prayer a plea for strength or for growth in whatever area you see fit for your present life or your future.

# Four

# GOD'S TATTOO: WHEN WE DON'T WANT TO BE FORGOTTEN

Text: Isaiah 49:13-16

Readers, we've explored some heavy topics thus far, and we have examined ourselves in reflection as well. Maybe now is the perfect time to begin to express ourselves—our secret desires and fears. Maybe now is the time to take stock of how we can improve, how we must be patient, and how we must understand our own self worth and God's plan for us. I think it is the perfect time to begin to work on YOU—to begin to express a sense of true self and even begin to understand how that fits with our exploration of our biblical text, and our urge to fit our lives into our faith and what God intends us to do in life. With that spirit, I invite you to read forth with an open mind, letting desires, fears, hopes, and needs come to the forefront of your minds.

And, I must confess. This confession, from someone so bent on self-improvement and helping people to be the best they can be, may surprise many of you. One of my secret desires, for years, has been to get a tattoo. I have no biblical reason to get one. In fact, I'm not sure why I want one so badly. I have not accomplished reaching that desire, not because

I think it's wrong, but, rather, because I have not had the courage to get one. So many people who have gotten one have told me about the pain. So, I cannot bring myself to go beyond the pain to reach this secret, unfulfilled, albeit minor, desire of mine.

Now, what I have done is observe other peoples' tattoos. I often ask them what their tattoos mean or why they have them. A number of people have reasons and meanings behind their tattoos, and a lot of them are there so that these people can remember or honor a loved one. Of course, some people get one just to be stylish, but, I have to say that even in those cases, I think they are trying to express something about themselves, pay homage to a certain quality or interest in their own lives.

A lot of them are there so that these people can remember or honor a loved one.



Now, of course, some tattoos in other countries and cultures serve not just as a mark of beauty or style, but they serve as a right of passage, or a mark of status and rank. Some of them even represent spiritual devotions. For example, in the Philippines, certain tribal groups believe tattoos have magical qualities and help to protect the bearers of these tattoos. In this country, however, we can choose to get a tattoo or not, whereas in some countries, people have been forcibly tattooed. As we've all heard in our history lessons, people in the Nazi concentration camps during the holocaust were tattooed. These tattoos served as their diabolical identification system. And, in biblical times, Roman soldiers

were required by law to have identifying tattoos on their hands in order to make desertion difficult. In a similar way, gladiators and slaves were likewise tattooed. In fact, exported slaves were tattooed with the words "tax paid," and it was a common practice to tattoo "stop me I'm a runaway" on a slave's forehead. These, of course, are tattoos that are not desirable or have a sinister meaning. Regardless, they have meaning—just like those that are chosen to represent something positive by people, they have a meaning and they are visible and permanent. On both sides, this is what makes them work or makes them appealing. No one can remove it, and no one can be misidentified or forgotten with such a mark.

I would like to point out, readers, that intended tattoos or skin markings are put there for a reason. Regardless of intention, they are clear and permanent reminders of something from our station in life to what is important to us. Again, positive or negative, they are there, and they are prevalent and impactful visually. Now, our text for this chapter says that God has tattooed us in the palm of His hands, basically. In so many words, He says, "behold, I have engraved thee or tattooed thee in the palm of my hands." Now, to bring our reference to present day, why would God go through all of that trouble or pain by engraving us or tattooing us in the palm of His hands? God had to go to this extreme, because His people, in our text and in many situations throughout this world since the beginning of time, feel that they were forsaken and forgotten. Have you even been there? Have you ever felt forsaken and forgotten? Unnoticed, unrecognized? Well you are not alone. Be sure to note, and spread to people who don't know, that we are not alone in these fears, these needs.

In our text, the children of Israel were in a bad state and condition. Jerusalem had been attacked, and some people were taken captive. Oppressors laid waste in parts of the land. During all of this, the prophet, Isaiah, appears with good news to the oppressed. The good news was that God was about to deliver them from their oppression and bondage. And, you would think that after hearing such good news, Israel would rejoice or break out in a praise. But, their response to the good news of deliverance is not one of praise but one of pain. The prophet said to them, in verse 13, "sing and be joyful for the lord will bring comfort to his people and will have mercy on those who have been afflicted." But, Zion or the people would not sing, and they would not rejoice.

Further, in verse 14, Zion raises the question or makes a declaration regarding their present situation. They have no real reason to sing or rejoice or to praise the Lord, because they feel forsaken and forgotten. And, notice who they felt forsaken and forgotten by; they felt forsaken and forgotten by the Lord. They say, in so many words, that the Lord has "forsaken me" and the Lord has "forgotten me." Forsaken means to give up or to leave entirely—to abandon or to leave someone who needs you or counts on you. Further, it means to disown, to abandon, to give up, to set aside or relinquish, to ditch, to leave stranded or isolated, with little hope of rescue. And, readers, these are pretty strong words and meanings. And, even so, I ask you now: Have you ever felt forsaken, abandoned, rejected, relinquished, ditched, or stranded? We all have.

Even Jesus knew something about all of that, being forsaken and forgotten, for a while on the cross. In fact, we all know how He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27, Verse 46)

Why, out of anybody, why have YOU forsaken, abandoned, or ditched me, especially in this time of pain? And, I ask again, haven't we all felt this?

Here I want you to notice that their cry is that they cannot sing or rejoice, because the Lord has forsaken them. But, not only do they feel like the Lord has forsaken them, but they feel He has forgotten them. Forgotten, means to cease to remember, unable to recall, to omit or neglect, to disregard intentionally, to fail to mention or notice, to pass by, or to let go. Again, these are all strong, impactful meanings, feelings, and words. When we feel this, we don't forget it. And, in the text here, they do say the Lord had forsaken and forgotten them. Israel came to this conclusion based on their situation, and they declared that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten them. Like us, their cry, silent or vocal, is one of being forgotten and forsaken. It doesn't matter if you cry out or you suffer in silence, the cry or the outrage is still the same.

Israel came to this conclusion based on their situation, and they declared that the Lord has forsaken and forgotten them.



I asked earlier, and I'll ask again, readers: How many of you have ever felt forgotten and felt forsaken or abandoned? You wonder where is God in your situation or in a difficult circumstance. Even Jesus felt like He was forsaken as He hung on the cross in pain, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Now, why does Israel feel this way or what brought them to such a conclusion that they felt forsaken and forgotten by God? Was this simply a petty complaint over some discomfort they were facing? Well, in the earlier text, they were upset and fearful, because God was silent for awhile and had not yet defeated their enemies. They were lamenting or crying over the fact that God had not yet turned their darkness into light. When God finally responds to them, He assures them that He has not forsaken them, and that He will act on their behalf. But, God does not act right away, and the longer they stay in the same place and in the same situation, they begin to conclude that God has forsaken them. And, this is a fear that we all have.

Later on, they feel forgotten, because God seems to be nowhere to be found. He is silent, and He is nowhere to be found. In light of both of these situations, they have concluded that God has forgotten and forsaken them. They come to a permanent conclusion about God because of their present perspective. And, again, we all do this in our everyday lives.

However, I maintain that their statement shows a lack of patience: you see, they wanted God to do something, and they wanted Him to do it immediately. They wanted Him to rescue them from the hands of their enemies, without a wait, without hesitation. They wanted God to turn their darkness into light, and they wanted Him to do it right away. They wanted God to established His kingdom, and they wanted it to be done again, without that hesitation. And isn't that how some of us are? Our issue is not that God won't move, but, rather, that we need Him to move immediately. We want the miracle without having to wait or put any more time into our present situation. And sometimes, the need

seems pretty immediate. We are up for a promotion that would provide significant financial reward for our family, and, of course, we want that promotion right away. We know we're in debt, and we're taking steps to work on it, but we want to get out of debt immediately. And, when these very timely situations occur, and our hard work is not paid off, or what we feel is deserved in a certain situation is not immediately alleviated or handled, we become upset, and, further, we become upset with God. When God seems to be distant and silent, the enemy seems to convince us and assure us that God's distance means He has forsaken us, and His silence means that He has forgotten us.

They wanted Him to rescue them from the hands of their enemies, without a wait, without hesitation.



I know from experience that unchecked impatience with the timing of God's plan can sometimes lead to doubt and disillusionment. The longer we wait for our situation to change and the longer its stays the same, we can conclude that our request for help has been denied. But, readers, we must never forget that a delay does not mean a denial—especially when it comes to God.

So, in our text, God is awakened to how Israel feels, so He takes the time to reassure Israel that He has not forsaken or forgotten them and that He will take care of His people based on His promissory oath. He provides the reassurance and the answer to them, and that answer

is centered around the imagery of a woman, a mother, to be specific, who symbolizes Zion, or Israel. Remember, the main issue in the hearts and minds of Zion, or Israel, is that the Lord has totally forgotten and forsaken them, and they are accusing God of forsaking and forgetting them and even of no longer loving them. So, in this verse, God asks them: Can a woman, a mother, in particular, forget or forsake her nursing child? In other words, can a woman forget and abandon the child/baby that she has breastfed?

God asks this of Zion and, to this day, His inquiry and His response remain relevant. It makes sense to us, even modern day, that a number of women, due to circumstance or other issues may abandon or give up a birth child, but…once they are engaged in the nurturing and the taking care of that child, that abandonment becomes more difficult, nearly impossible. And, God pays Israel this great compliment by telling them that He has cared for them and nurtured them—that they are truly the "chosen," and that He would never abandon them. In the original language, the direct nature of that text is powerful: Never can a mother forget her nursing child.

So, this imprint, this tattoo of a reminder, if you will, is simply that once something is nurtured and taken care of, it is part of us. It is part of God. This feeling and this love that God or others have for something that is part of them, nurtured and become a daily love and responsibility, is not erasable. It is tattooed on our hearts or, in the case of God, when he says, as we referenced earlier, that we are tattooed on His hands—that Israel is tattooed on the palms of His hands—as a permanent reminder,

something to remember, and something to continue nurturing as part of His own Self.

In the New Testament, we recall that after Jesus was resurrected, He appeared to His disciples, and Thomas was not there. When the other disciples informed him that they had seen Jesus, Thomas said, basically, that until I see in His hands the print of nails and put my hand in His side, I will not believe. It is interesting to me that Thomas did not say he needed to see his Savior's face, but, rather, he wanted to see His hands. The only thing that removed all doubt from Thomas was what was engraved or tattooed in the Savior's hand. What did Thomas get from the Savior's hands that he did not get from His face? He got the reassurance, the reminder, that God has not forgotten or forsaken him, because the tattoo on the palm of His hands, the mark that he would remember, was there.

Remember, in our times of need, God tells us that the reason He won't and can't forget us is because He has engraved us, tattooed us, in the palm of His hand. Every time He looks at His hands, He sees us.

# Five

# COMING FROM BEHIND TO GET RID OF THOSE DEBTS AND OTHER BURDENS (NO MORE "12 YEARS A SLAVE" TO DEBT)!

Text: Mark 5:22-35

By now, readers, the whole world has seen the acclaimed film, "12 Years a Slave" (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2013). The movie is a true story based on the book of this man's struggle. It is about a young man by the name of Solomon Northup who was a free man in New York City and was a gifted fiddle player. He was born in 1808 and grew up going to school and learning his music. He married a beautiful woman, and they had a son and daughter together. One day, in 1841, two men approached him, and offered him more money than he ever dreamt he could earn or see, if he traveled with them to different parts of the country playing the fiddle. They took him to dinner and treated him very professionally, so he consented. Shortly after, he was drugged, kidnapped, and sold into slavery by these two men.

Solomon spent 12 years on different plantations and living life as a slave but knowing all along that he was born free and knew nothing of this

lifestyle. He suffered horribly, as all slaves did, and was unable to get back to his family for many years. For him, he had taken every step to make himself an honorable man, one with many talents and connections, and his only mistake was falling prey to a scheme that would have allowed him to help his family monetarily. And, maybe many of us have done the same thing in our lives, innocently putting ourselves in danger of losing it all.

As we all know, slavery was officially ended in the United States in 1865, but we know that there are different kinds of slavery. From addictions to debt, we often find ourselves in situations that we never thought possible, from slaves to money, food, or drugs. To me, one of the easiest forms of slavery to fall victim to but, also, one of the easiest to avoid, is credit cards and the ensuing debt that they create for everyone.

From addictions to debt, we often find ourselves in situations that we never thought possible, from slaves to money, food, or drugs.



Remember, slavery means, or to be a slave means, to be owned and controlled legally by another with no freedom of actions or rights. Obviously, all of us, when we examine our lives, must make sure that we are not slaves to anything or anyone. However, when it does come to buying items for our family or using credit to dig out of a financial sticky situation, we all fall prey to it. It seems so easy to just charge what we need and worry about it later. It doesn't occur to us, at the time, that doing this makes us indebted to these credit card companies and banks—

slaves, if you will. Being under the control of anything is a form of slavery. In reviewing the Bible verse I reference for this chapter, we see that Jesus dealt with this and came to free us from any form of slavery.

In fact, we see this theme so often in scripture; Jesus comes to set the captive free. In our text for this chapter, we find a woman who is a slave to an illness, and, like the book and movie I referenced earlier, she has been under the control of this illness for 12 years. In this text, the Bible tells us that Jesus was traveling on His way to Jarius' house to heal Jarius' daughter, the woman who had been sick for 12 years. At the same time, as Jesus is on His way to heal Jarius' daughter, the Bible tells us that a crowd follows Him there. They don't want anything from Him; they just want to be part of the group who is interested in what He is doing. And, what Jesus is doing is freeing someone, yet again, from an illness, an addiction, or a problem.

The woman in this story is suffering from a chronic condition that has plagued her since childhood. She remains isolated from friends and family due to a snowballing, worsening condition. She is, in essence, a slave to this illness. And, this is the best way I can show you, readers, how all-encompassing any issue or problem can be in a life. As we read this text or refer to it in our chapter analysis, we see that illness keeps us away from people—from life—from our own true interests. Addiction or other issues in our lives can do the same. Maybe we don't feel bad, as we would if we were sick, but we do think about our plight all the time, and we obsess about the mistakes we make, credit-wise or other related indiscretions and problems. We do so because it bothers us, and it makes us a slave to our own mistakes and, in turn, to our own bad credit, our

own snowballing escape from friends and family—as slaves to something that keeps us from living life.

Because slavery of any kind seeks to separate you from your family, from your friends, and from your own future, it is a hard thing from which to free yourself. Just like Solomon before us, we don't have the support to help our situations when we allow something to separate us from our family, from our own presence of mind, from what we know is the right path. Sometimes is it our fault and, other times, like with Solomon, it is something that has happened to us, and we have to get ourselves out of it. In the text, Jarius' daughter's issue has handicapped her in that she cannot reach her full potential. Her issue has placed limitations on her so that she cannot strive for excellence or for that which is ahead of her. Her issue has kept her from getting involved in kingdom building. And really, that's what issues and any form of slavery will do to you. Issues can handicap, shackle, hinder, or slow you down, so that you fall behind in your God-given gifts, responsibilities, and commitments. Because you spend so much time living with the issue, other things that are more important are neglected or put on hold. You focus so much on the issue you don't even realize that you're losing life and losing time.

In the text, she is losing blood, and the Bible tells us in the Old Testament that life is in the blood. Her issue that she has been dealing with, struggling with, for 12 years has practically cost her everything that is dear to her, including her life. The Bible tells us that she went to the doctor, trying to get help for her issue, but she still grew worse. Now, although the woman grew worse, we must take our hats off to her for at least trying to get help dealing with her issue. You see, too many of us make the mistake

of thinking that our issue is us. We make the mistake of thinking that we have to always live with and struggle with any of our issues.

The Bible tells us in the Old Testament that life is in the blood.



Because of her issue, she has reserved the right, and become comfortable with it, like so many people do, to sit on the sidelines and allow life to pass her by. She looks like she is living, but she is really just going through the motions, and life and ministry are passing her by. And this happens to all of us; we obsess on an issue and feel that it is so much a part of us that we don't seek to rid ourselves of it or improve our situations in some way. Even if we are sick, we can vow to live life and keep friends and family close. We can still pray and keep our faith. Sometimes, we have a tendency, like the woman in our Biblical text, to make our issues larger than we are—bigger than what we feel we can handle. And, the truth is, nothing that we create or allow is bigger than our own power to change things for the better. Nothing! In our text, we see evidence that the woman has allowed her affliction to consume her, and she has lived with the issue for so long that she has made the issue part of her, something that will not go away unless she sends it away. Again, we can't cure an illness, but we can surely take control over how we handle it. Certainly, we don't want it to be the only thing that people see, and, similarly, we don't want it to define us.

We obsess on an issue and feel that it is so much a part of us that we don't seek to rid ourselves of it or improve our situations in some way.

Again, in the case of someone who has a self-imposed affliction—credit card debt or other personal issues—he or she can definitely take control. It's not like it will change or become OK overnight, but, why remain a slave to your affliction, your debt, or other life circumstance simply because you have blown it out of proportion? Often, we do take advantage of credit to pay for school or take our families on vacation, and that's OK. Once we start to shirk responsibility, however, by adding to the debt or not taking steps to change our situations, we are wallowing in our debt—in our self-imposed slavery. And, we don't want this to hold or control us for 12 years, do we?!

Many times, we know this woman in our text. Maybe she doesn't have an affliction, but maybe she does have student loans or other issues that make her feel tied to her situation or trapped in a certain stage in her life. She is behind financially, emotionally, in her relationships, and in other areas of her personal life; she cannot get involved with anyone or anything that interests her because she is consumed with her bad choices or decisions that have rendered her temporarily helpless or out of control. I am here to tell you, readers, that she can take control. And, you can take control—of your finances, your education, your personal life, and more. You are not a slave to past mistakes or bad decisions! You are not a slave to afflictions or other issues!

Some of us have issues that cause us to feel that we need to hide something, or cover something in our lives from others. And, who knows what really scares us or bothers us? It is sometimes what others think, and it is sometimes what we think of ourselves, or how we see ourselves, in terms of success and where we need to be in our lives. But I ask you: Do we all live in glass houses and this is why we can't throw stones? Yes! We all have that tendency to look at others and judge so that when it comes to ourselves, we assume that we are being judged. And, truthfully, we all have something in our closet that God is still working on. No one is perfect, and no one is sinless on a good day. Some of us have external issues and some of us have internal issues, and none of them matter—especially if we take steps to change them. On some people, we see the stealing or other deviant behaviors. On others, we don't see anything, but they feel jealousy, rage, or constantly have a bad or wrong attitude, hatred for others, and things we cannot see right away. All that I'm saying, readers, is that you and I don't have time to figure out other peoples' issues; we have enough of our own. We can't worry about others or even how we're perceived by others AND work on our issues at the same time. Our energy needs to be put into resolving our own issues and becoming the best people we can be in our own eyes.

Many times, in our lives, our issues stem from childhood. Maybe we started out in a disadvantaged home or maybe we didn't get the education we should have. We need to address all of this. We need to own the fact that we are not perfect. Sometimes, these childhood issues manifest themselves in adulthood later, and our desire to create debt to get that education or that secure home lies within the insecurities of childhood. We are willing

to enslave ourselves to a bank simply to keep giving ourselves or our loved ones the material possessions that we desire when we should use our means to get on our feet and move forward in the same way, becoming better and stronger instead of indebted to someone else and weakened. Maybe we have issues with addiction or relationships because of a lack of love and support when we were children. We need to shake it off, though, and move forward, keeping faith, body, and mind strong.

## We need to own the fact that we are not perfect.



In the text, the woman struggled for 12 years, and in the book, Solomon struggled as a slave for 12 years. I ask you, how long have some of us had some big issues in our lives? And, we have to be honest with ourselves; what relationships or friendships have these issues cost us? And can I ask you another question, readers; what has that issue cost you? "It" cost Solomon 12 years of his life and 12 years away from his family. And, for him, his plight was beyond him, though his healing process when it was done was not good either. Are people able to address the healing and the changing? "It" cost the woman in the text her own life too—her ability to interact with others and her productivity in life. The Bible tells us that in the midst of all of this, she hears that Jesus is passing through her area, and this wakes her up to her plight and makes her realize her need to change—her need for help. She makes herself visible, and the text tells us that Jesus recognizes her faith and tells her that it will make her whole again. Her faith, readers! We all have that, and we all have strength.

We can come from behind our issues and our ailments—from behind our debt and our addictions—to make a comeback.

To make a comeback properly, we need to get in the flow of what God is doing and get our own flow back. Sometimes, we get behind because we do the right thing at the wrong time. And, sometimes, we do the right thing in the wrong place. God has a flow or a rhythm and a season of life for all of us. And, sometimes, we get off-season, and we miss the flow or the move of God. Jesus is flowing on His way to Jarius' house to heal his daughter, and this woman got in the flow of the path that Jesus was showing her, and she touched His garment and was healed. The Bible tells us, in so many words that there is a time for everything and every purpose under the sun—a time to sow and a time to reap, a time to cry and a time to laugh, and a time for peace and a time for war. Remember, there is a season for everything, and if we take the time to understand the seasons, then we get into the flow again, and onto our right path. And once we're back on that path, we can see Jesus and touch Him. In Geneses 8:22, God tells us, in a nutshell, that while the earth remains, there will always be seed time and harvest time—and extremes like cold and heat—and seasons like summer and winter—and that day and night will never cease to complement one another. Other religions call it "Yin and Yang"; psychologists will tell us that it is the ebb and flow of our emotions and our life.

In our lives, we will experience many things. We will have good times and bad times. We will be sick, and we will be well. We will make good decisions, and we will make bad decisions. We have to live with it all, however. Once we understand what we need to be successful and happy

in this life, we can take steps to modify our behaviors and get back on track. Sometimes, while it is hard to even see where we are falling short, if we just allow ourselves to feel that ebb and flow of life—the good, the bad, the easy, and the trying—we might be able to get our faith back on track and our flow with Jesus as well. Once we know what we want in terms of faith, our focus on our own lives and expanded interpersonal and other relationships will follow suit.

Once we understand what we need to be successful and happy in this life, we can take steps to modify our behaviors and get back on track.



We need to remember, readers, that nothing holds us as slaves. We are in control of our own destinies. Whatever we need to resolve or put behind us, we must do. And, it might take time, but we have the time and we have the patience. Once those issues are identified, we can move forward without them. Once our faith is in place, we have that strength. Once we have Jesus back in our sights, our flow is back. And, once we identify our issues—whether they are illnesses that define us or debt that enslaves us—we can address them.

# Six

# THE MEANING OF ME: THE GOALS OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Text: Genesis 2:8-10; 15-17

We are all unique human beings, aren't we, readers? We should all have a healthy sense of self, shouldn't we? We have alluded to the fact, over the past chapters, that love and other functions of a whole person do not work unless we know ourselves and know God. We don't want a heightened sense of self to ever lead to behavior that is selfish, self-centered or self-conscious but, rather, we want to hone our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in order to lead a well-lived life. When we are self-confident, have self-respect, and are self-aware, we are better people in our endeavors and in relationships with others. When we became living souls, God bestowed upon us our personalities and all the qualities that make us who we are. It is up to us to, therefore, to honor Him always and His plan for us by continuing to nurture our senses of self.

## When we are self-confident, have self-respect, and are self-aware, we are better people in our endeavors and in relationships with others.



In order to complete the journey to being the best that we can be, we absolutely need to get to know ourselves and understand our strengths and our weaknesses, and we did touch on those a bit throughout this book, thus far. We explored looking into ourselves and finding where we need to change or where we need to unburden ourselves and move forward. I've said it before, and I'll say it again; we must learn to love, respect, and have confidence in ourselves. Because, none of us will find this in another person. We simply must look inward and develop ourselves. And, sometimes, it feels like guilty pleasure, especially if, living in a relationship or with another person or people, we feel that we need to entirely focus on them. In truth, the relationships won't exist—there will be no "we"—until we develop the "I". We need to understand that the relationship we must cultivate, after our relationships with God, is the relationship that we have with ourselves. If each of us cannot tell ourselves the truth, or know intrinsically what makes us good and what could use improvements, we will not be truthful to others in the same way.

Of course, when it comes to learning about self and becoming interested in relationships, inevitably sex and marriage come up. I have counseled many people, at length, in marriage and in finding love and a true mate. I have, in all those instances, encouraged the full exploration of self before I even approached marriage and couples. Even in cases where I wanted

to delve into preparing for marriage or issues about being in a marriage, I had to step back and ask if I had done my job communicating to people how important the sense of self is to any relationship or endeavor. And, of course, questions about why people got married, or issues in a marriage that require attention are important, but if I had the chance to step back and speak on a topic, I would certainly preface all the relationship help with a healthy look inside. Not everyone will get married, and not everyone will find a mate or a partner. But, everyone will have relationships of some kind, and everyone will, at some point, want to better themselves or reach out in some way. Again, the relationship next in line with your relationship with God is the relationship you have with yourself.

I like to call this little exercise "the meaning of me." I feel that the meaning of me is so important for all of us, because if we do not understand ourselves, we may choose the wrong relationships in life, and we may even seek out relationships that are wrong for us. Many times, in life—in marriage, in friendships, or other familiar relationships—we are disappointed with our choices in people and how close we allow them to get to us. Many times, this is because we have made a wrong decision and, in these cases, none of us are necessarily bad people. But, the combination is, at best, uncomfortable, and, at worst, lethal.

I see this happening in so many relationships. With members of the opposite sex and with platonic friends, we sometimes seek our own meaning in someone else. Of course, this is a difficult task to put ourselves up to, and it is a difficult position in which we place the other person. If we took the time to find and understand our relationship with God and with ourselves, however, we would find that these one on one

relationships, outside of our own person, are more rewarding and make more sense to us overall. When we don't make sense to ourselves, we can't fully participate in a relationship with others. In fact, our intended mate, who I like to sometimes call our "help mate," is not the person who is going to help you seek or find your meaning in life. He or she is going to help you fulfill your purpose or meaning in life, including friendships. When we don't know ourselves well, we end up doing a lot of seeking, trying to find our meaning and our worth in others instead of finding it with our relationship with God and our relationship with ourselves. This is also important, because if you do not understand the meaning of you, you might mismatch yourself with the wrong mate. And, with the right sense of self, for all of us, we can pair ourselves with the right mate or the right group of friends to suit all of us.

As we start focusing on the meaning of you or me, let me ask you a couple of questions, readers. First, what is your definition of living? When does it begin? How does it actually end? What sustains you? What gives your life meaning? In a world that tends to tell us that meaning and living are defined by the "stuff" that we have or the things we achieve and tell everyone about, or even the car we drive and the clothes we wear, we all have a tendency to buy into that lie. As a result, we work and work to get more stuff to achieve more that means nothing to us, and we become, in our minds, only partially successful, because people tell us we need to be rich, and we die trying to reach all these lofty, meaningless goals. We have confined the meaning of living to the stuff we can only touch, taste, feel, hear, and see. To define life as only tactile elements, ignoring the spiritual or emotional elements, makes us vulnerable to a deadly form of

hopelessness in which we experience the pain of constant disappointment or weariness, and this leaves us defenseless in the normal, biological, truly God-given temptations of appetite.

We have confined the meaning of living to the stuff we can only touch, taste, feel, hear, and see.

Now, regarding these appetites I allude to, I'd like to pause and mention some of them to you. As we begin, readers, please note that appetites are neither good nor bad, but they do help us seek fulfillment. Now, the Bible said that after God created man, He planted a garden and a home eastward of the garden called Eden, and He placed the man in that garden. This man's assignment was to dress and keep the garden. In verse 20 of Genesis, Adam is going about his assignment or purpose, and he is naming everything in the garden. It is in this job or assignment that Adam's appetites are being manifested.

And, readers, as I said, we were all created with at least eight appetites. God did this to allow a curiosity in all of us. He did it to create the need for us to find another and procreate. He had many reasons for giving us these appetites, and we cannot ignore them. They are meant to work to our benefit with the proper restraint and execution. Again, the appetites in of themselves are not good or bad; they serve to bring people together, and they sustain us physically. Appetites also lead us to pleasures that enrich and fulfill us, and appetites draws us closer to God.

The first two are simply basic human needs that, as I mentioned before, simply sustain us. First, there is our appetite for food or nourishment. In Genesis 2:16, we learn that eating and feasting are common themes in the Bible. God created His people to love to eat, and He encourages them to feast as a means of celebrating the blessings He gave them throughout the year. Second, is the appetite for sex. In Genesis 1:28 and 2:24, we learn about the importance of this desire in connecting humans and sustaining the human race.

The next couple of appetites are more abstract in that they are hard to reign in or pinpoint for us as individuals. They require no action from us, and we all have them to varying degrees. They are not critical in terms of sustaining us, but they do enhance our lives if managed properly. So, the third appetite is one for authority and power. In Genesis 1:26–28, it talks about how humans have an inherent need to be in a position of authority to elevate themselves and protect loved ones. But, again, with varying personalities and other factors like shyness, humility, and polite societal behaviors, we see this appetite to varying degrees. The fourth is the appetite for pleasure in a broad sense. In Genesis 2:9, it tells us that the Garden of Eden was created for the pleasure of the human race; it was a joy to look at and to experience. The fifth is the appetite for work, basically—a human's inherent need to work to make things better or to create a home, get to food, etc.—all survival instinct, for sure, but an appetite that may not be easy to define within ourselves or easy to determine how good we are at it, where we need to improve, or where we need to hold back. God has a plan for us, and these are all critical components to our success.

With the last three appetites, we come full circle to what we are discussing here in this chapter. The sixth is the appetite for companionship. In Genesis 2:18, 20, and 24, the Bible discusses this need to be with other people or to love and be loved and to feel a sense of acceptance and belonging. This, we are told, is at the very core of every human being. This desire for companionship does not necessary mean sexual involvement. Our desire for companionship and love is healthy and God-given. And, again, it may not lead to marriage; it may just be our desire to make friends and be part of a group. The seventh appetite is related, because it is our appetite or desire for a fellowship with God. In Genesis 3:8, we are told that Adam and Eve were so close to God, they knew "the sound of his footsteps." We, too, desire to know that sound. We want Him with us always. And, in a related note, the appetite for gaining wisdom—or the eighth appetite—is part of us as well. We desire to know God and to gain the wisdom that He wants us to have—again, to take into all of our relationships and endeavors. In Genesis 2:9 and 3:6, we are told that this search for wisdom is the knowledge of good and evil. Modern day, our wisdom reaches further but leaves that deep good and evil distinction at the core.

Our desire for companionship and love is healthy and God-given.



All of these appetites were God-given to us. Some are greater in our lives than others, but they all bring meaning and fulfillment to our lives

in some way. And, each one is designed to help us decide or find our purpose in some way. We sustain ourselves with some, and we reach out with others. Certainly, our desire to work is going to lead to jobs and success in some way. We are meant to fulfill ourselves with daily work. We are not meant to measure ourselves against others, however, and assign meaning to material possessions. Similarly, we are not supposed to measure ourselves against others in terms of relationships in that others seem more popular than us or more fulfilled in that way. We are all different, and, again, we need to know ourselves to decide what we need in life and make it happen. We can't be distracted by what makes others happy.

We are all different, and we need to know ourselves to decide what we need in life and make it happen.



In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were taken care of. In some ways, we may find, in our own struggles, that they were given too much. They were provided the tools they needed to make a happy life. They had each other, and they had all their basic human needs met. In some ways, they had their material needs met too, living in such a beautiful paradise. When they were given the opportunity to exercise free will, they made a few wrong choices. God provided them the opportunity to gain incremental knowledge, though they pushed for more. And, all of us, in some way, can relate to this. We know what is right, the tried and true

path, but…we also know shortcuts and other ways to get what we feel we need or really want. God gives us these appetites and many other gifts, but He deliberately sets us up decisions and opportunities for free will that force us to exercise restraint and control. And, in this way, those are gifts too. Will we always make the right decisions in life and in relationships? No. We'll make plenty of mistakes, but, with our gifts, our appetites, and our knowledge or what we've learned, we can make a successful life and, in large percentage, correct our good decisions for ourselves.

Solomon, the wisest man in the Bible, tried to find purpose and meaning in things and people. In fact, these are the very things in which we try to find meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. In the book of Solomon, Solomon seeks or searches for meaning, fulfillment, and purpose, exploring opportunities in wealth, women, wine, work, and wisdom. But after all of that, he comes to the realization that meaning and purpose in life do not come from stuff or from people but from worship. He said that, at the end of life, all of those things are driven by vanity and result in emptiness. While all these things—the wine, the wealth, etc.—can bring us some pleasure, they do not provide a path to fulfillment. In other ways, good food with friends, deep relationships with the opposite sex, or wealth born of hard work and fellowship, are good things and can bring fulfillment. In our search, we need to remember to take the right path and use our desire for pleasure or companionship to help us and others, not hurt or obscure what is really important.

According to Dennis Proctor, a prominent Bishop in the church, what we do with our lives is in direct line with what we are given. None of us are the same people inside or out. We have to tap into our own strengths,

and, again, remain focused on ourselves and not others. We don't want to begrudge others what they have, nor do we want to deny ourselves what is ours, by God-given rights and gifts. God will do everything to assist us in finding happiness and fulfillment in our lives, just like He did for Adam and Eve, but He also expects us to do for ourselves too. We have all been given so much in the way of intelligence, a thirst for knowledge, the go ahead to enjoy food and relationships and the fruits of our hard work. What more do we need? Of course, the logical answer to that is that we need what comes next—the success and the fulfillment that comes with a nose to the grindstone approach to getting to know ourselves and to keeping our faith strong.

We have to tap into our own strengths, and remain focused on ourselves and not others.



In our text, God created Adam and Eve with meaning; their purpose is expressed by God in chapter one of Genesis when He tells them to "be fruitful and multiply," to "fill the earth and subdue it," and to "rule over it." God does everything to assist them in finding fulfillment, because a fulfilled life brings God glory. So, the Bible said God made provisions for Adam and Eve to reach their God-given vision. In Verse 8, it says that after the Lord created man or humankind, both male and female, that He placed them in the garden. And, further, God actually establishes or sets up a covenant relationship with the two individuals in the garden. And, yet, with all that so clear to them, there was still work to be done

regarding how they interacted with each other and how they handled their gifts. So, readers, we need to go a little easy on ourselves and take the time to do the same in our own lives. There is so much going on, modern day, that the gifts and opportunities from God are not as clear, not to mention all the restrictions and opportunities that we need to notice as well.

We need to go a little easy on ourselves and take the time to do the same in our own lives.



God gave Adam and Eve the rights to eat everything in the garden, plus He gave them specific directions regarding their purpose. Their job was the blessing of tending that garden. And, readers, don't we all need to take notice of our blessings more often – those opportunities I mentioned earlier? It is a blessing to take care of our elderly relatives. It is a blessing to be such a good cook that our food is asked for at every gathering, no matter how long it takes us to make it. It is a blessing that some of us are academically gifted and have to help others. And, it is a blessing that some of us have more money and have to bestow gifts and charity upon the needy.

In the Garden of Eden, everything they did was, by all intents and purposes, enjoyable, but it was also fulfilling. As I tried to bring up previously, when we discussed Solomon and his experimentation with what might make him happy, these acts added meaning to their lives and put them on the right path, because they were fulfilling their God-given

purposes individually and making sure to apply their gifts appropriately and reap the benefits. Keep in mind that most of this occurred without any sexual union or emphasis on the relationship between them. And, again, I don't mean that sex and love and deep personal relationships do not add meaning or fulfillment to your life, but we need to make sure that initial attraction with another person does not cloud what we, as people and individuals, need to keep our lives on track, and our senses of self intact. Adam and Eve find fulfillment, purpose, and meaning in their walk with the Lord and in working to fulfill their God-given tasks. We can all do the same. Remember, one of our appetites is the desire to gain power or authority, and it should be clear to us now that it should be directed within, at ourselves, before we go anywhere or to anyone else.

# Session 2

## REVIEW AND REFLECT WITH DR. JAZZ

### The Fear of Being Forgotten
### A Reflection on Chapter Four

In Chapter Four, who, in our Biblical text is feeling forgotten or forsaken by the Lord and why, specifically? Dig deep in to the chapter to detail the progression of this answer:

How, do I propose, that God remembers us always? And, what do I mean by that mark or that reminder? How do we know we are loved and remembered? Look through the chapter for your answer and look inside yourself as you write for futher elaboration on this question:

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Have you been forgotten by someone? Did you feel, in that case, also forsaken by God? Tell your story from despair to renewed joy here. If you feel that you still have some issues from that time, talk about that here too:

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## What Burdens You?
## A Reflection on Chapter Five

Make a list here of what burdens you in life and tell us briefly why. Is it your credit cards? Is it a mistake made long ago? Have you gone through a divorce or a hard time with friends or family? Detail any of that here – how it makes you feel, the steps you have taken to improve – steps you will take to improve or heal and / or how the incident or season has changed you for the better or worse:

In Chapter Five, we heard about two people who experienced wasted time in life – either due to illness or horrible circumstances beyond their control. Who were these people and how can we learn from their respective experiences. Has anything that happened to them paralleled something in your own life or did you feel or learn something hearing their different stories? Detail your thoughts here:

## Who Are You?
## A Reflection on Chapter Six

Think about the things in life that make you most proud of yourself, individually – your job, your education, your community involvement, your positive attitude, etc. Detail those things here:

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Now, think about the things in life that you do with others – your marriage, your recreation and friendships, your children, your family, and more. Compare how you feel about yourself in those situations to those that you do on your own (above). Talk here about what makes you proud, where you could be better, and maybe even what you don't understand about others or what you might change about yourself:

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If you had to pinpoint the following, how would you put it into writing: Fears, loves, hopes, and interests. Also, if you had to describe yourself in the following terms, how would you do it: I am (three adjectives) _____, _____, _____. I enjoy _____, _____, _____. I would like to do _____, _____, _____. Explain yourself on all the above below:

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# Seven

## SURVIVING THE WORST: IT'S NEVER JUST YOU, ALONE

Text: 1 Kings 19:1-18

Recently, a dear friend of mine had to preach his own friend's funeral. His friend was a successful pastor who seemed to have his life together. He had issues and problems along the way like the rest of us, but he seemed like he was handling it all and thriving in his career and personal life. Unbeknownst to many of us, he had been in a long term battle with mental illness, was overseeing a struggling church, and while he had built up the program ministry significantly, the stress had taken a toll on him, and he was in a difficult marriage on top of it all. When I spoke to my friend about this pastor and his issues, he told me that, as close as he thought the two of them were, he had no idea of the gravity of his friend's problems. My friend actually said that he had "no clue" at all regarding what his friend was going through. I suggested that maybe it was because his friend thought that he was the only one with such problems—that he

was the only one going through such issues, and, therefore, he felt that he couldn't tell anybody what he was going through.

In many of our lives, we have difficulties. And, depending upon how adept we are at the time, regarding handling our issues or even recognizing them, we come out of it OK or we suffer in silence and wait for the period of misery to end. In the latter case, it is our enemies – false prophets, those who don't know the Lord, and forces against us that make us think that we are alone. We are, in essence, tricked into thinking we are all alone or that we are the only ones going through the particular problems that we are facing. Most of the time, there is someone who can relate to us; there is someone who knows the pain of mental illness, or the uncertainty of a career in jeopardy, or the loneliness of a relationship gone bad. It is simply a matter of connecting with these people and, above all, learning to recognize when we need help, or when a simple step towards an empathetic ear, or a call to someone who can provide counseling, or medication would help in leaps and bounds. Yet, when the enemy clouds our point of view, we fail to see the solution right in front of us, and, as in the case of my friend and his colleague, the results can be devastating.

We are, in essence, tricked into thinking we are all alone or that we are the only ones going through the particular problems that we are facing.



In our text, I believe this is where Elijah finds himself. Those of us familiar with Elijah know that he, in his day, was a bit of a superhero

in the religious community. He was on the battlefield, so to speak, for years for the Lord. In everyone's eyes, Elijah is a prophet who is put up on a pedestal, and, for all intents and purposes, he was one of the most faithful prophets to God in his day. In this text, we see Elijah, knowing that the last time we heard of him, he was fresh from an incident on Mount Carmel, when he called down fire from heaven to support him in his efforts to stay true to God's path, and keep the prophets in His name on the right track. In fact, after calling down fire from heaven and proving that the God he serves is the true God, Elijah eliminates all the other false prophets. Then, with all the authority of heaven and God, he calls down rain by declaring he hears the sound and the abundance of the rain. He is given this power, and he knows how to use it, because he did reach out and ask for help, and he did question the false prophets and messages around him. He is given the power of the kingdom to do as he sees fit in the moment.

In chapter 18, Elijah reminds us not to give up on what God promises or tells us for, sooner or later, in the distant future, what is meant to happen and what has been promised will come to pass. In chapter 18, Elijah is in a great season in his life. It seems like everything he touches turns to gold. When we see Elijah, he is having a triumphant moment on the mountaintop. As we know from his story, however, his moment on the mountaintop does not last. According to the Bible, once word of Elijah's cleansing of the land and killing all the false prophets spreads, other false prophets and enemies of God, like Jezebel, after receiving word from Ahab, vow to make Elijah's life on earth a living hell. And, when he experienced his victory on the mountaintop, Elijah knew that

he might incur some wrath from others or make himself a prime target for the opposition with his actions. He may not have felt prepared for the valleys after this time on the mountain, but…in facing what he did on top of that mountain, he was readied for the pain and strife of the valleys.

Recently, I, myself, went through a valley in life, when I truly felt life without my mother, who is no longer of this earth but lives with the Lord. For me, the absence of her body here on this earth without me was a burden to bear—and one that I knew was coming someday—but one that I felt ill prepared to handle. Even thinking on the many mountaintop experiences I had in my life did not make the deep valley any easier. So many things went through my mind, similar I'm guessing, to what Elijah experienced. I thought that I had not celebrated my victories enough to prepare for this deep valley, and I felt attacked on so many levels by feelings and pain and disbelief or helplessness. And, like in the beginning of this chapter, we see this so often; there are many people who are strong and faithful, yet the deep valleys, and the surprise of a valley after a big victory, sometimes becomes too much to handle.

Sometimes, too, in life, the strife can be ongoing. Sometimes, there are people or opposing forces that make it difficult for any of us to even get to the mountain, let alone elevate ourselves on it. It is actually amazing to me that some people can dislike another or hate another so much that their only assignment in life seems to be keeping their "opposition" from succeeding. And, we see this in all walks of life, from the woman at church who doesn't like another getting attention for good cooking or continued fellowship and support in the church or community and, so, talks badly about her in mixed company, to Congress continually voting

down positive initiatives like Obamacare or education funding simply to stall another's potentially helpful agenda.

Sometimes, there are people or opposing forces that make it difficult for any of us to even get to the mountain, let alone elevate ourselves on it.



So, regarding Elijah, his victory in chapter 18 made him a target in chapter 19. Just like today, when we get some bad news or a disconcerting email or Tweet, Elijah responds, and we learn that his response to Jezebel's threats is to run. This brave man, who killed all the other false prophets and rained fire from heaven to make his point, chooses to run. He ran all the way to Beersheba, a full 20 miles or more from his previous location, fueled by fear for his life. He keeps running, even leaving his servants and any help he has behind. And, readers, we all know that fear can make you do such things—abandon everything you have and everyone you know to preserve yourself or your life. And, the fear can be any kind: Fear of commitment, fear of failure, or fear of success. Elijah is so consumed by his fear that he runs into the wilderness and hides under a broom tree. He moves from faith in chapter 18 to fear in chapter 19. And, when Elijah runs and finds a hiding place, he also prays. He prays, basically, that he wants the Lord to take his life because, despite his tremendous recent successes, he no longer feels worthy of God's favor, having made mistakes beyond what he perceives others have done. He is internally and emotionally spent from the victory of chapter 18 and the unprecedented

fear in chapter 19, and he only wants to die. He is in a state of depression. He is weary in his soul. He feels empty and like a failure and, further, that he failed everyone including his God. He is left feeling that all he wants to do is die. He asks for it.

Fear can make you do such things—abandon everything you have and everyone you know to preserve yourself or your life.



In response, an angel shows up and feeds him. The angel tells him to rest and reflect that night. He is nourished and has been given the reassurance to relax and think more clearly on his feelings. And, how many of us know people or experienced a time like this ourselves in which we could have used a little TLC—a home cooked meal and a good night's sleep. We could have used an angel to tell us not to act rashly or evaluate ourselves too harshly. And, we all know of stories—of young people in distress or making bad decisions when maybe they could have used an angel to tell them to hang on another day or that they should sit back and think for a minute. How many lost souls have simply needed an angel to give them warmth and satisfaction of a nourishing meal and the cushion of one more truly restful night to contemplate next steps?

For me, readers, in my time of darkness, in my valley, I missed my mom not being with me. All through my life, no matter how crazy or difficult things got, I knew I could go to that familiar house, on that familiar street, and get a home cooked meal or some much needed

rest. In Elijah's experience with the angel, and in my experiences with my mom, sometimes touch made it all feel better too. The angel, in our text, touches Elijah and, thereby, gets his attention and, ultimately, gains his trust. He trusts enough to eat and to sleep and reconsider his plight and his request to end his life. In my life, I knew my mother's touch meant that food, love, nurturing, warmth, and the gift of true rest was coming. And, again, readers, so many people need this but never get it. If even one person would have offered a kind word or the outstretch of understanding to my friend's colleague at the beginning of this chapter, his outcome may have been much different. If people would know to reach out like Elijah did, we could use our own experiences in the valleys to offer a warm touch, the gift of understanding, and the reassurance of food and sleep, all simply but necessary components to human empathy.

In our text, the angel touches Elijah a second time and tells him to get up and eat, for the journey that he must take will be too great for him otherwise. And, again, we all know a time in our own lives or in the lives of others when just some sustenance or some reassurance would see us through times that would, otherwise, be unbearable. So, in our text, Elijah eats and rests and then he is able to go 40 days and 40 nights on that food and rest recommended by the angel and initiated with a simple touch. Elijah makes it to the mountain of God, Mt. Horeb, and he is renewed enough, and has the presence of mind enough, to enter a cave. Renewed by his nourishment, by the encouragement from the angel, and due to his opportunity to truly rest and reflect, he has, once again, found his purpose in God and made his way to the mountain.

We all know a time in our own lives or in the lives of others when just some sustenance or some reassurance would see us through times that would, otherwise, be unbearable.



In this next step of his journey, he finds a cave and enters the cave. Not really knowing what is next, just like many of us present day in our troubles, he stays there and waits. During this time, the Word of the Lord comes to Elijah in that cave. It's not an angel this time; it is the Word of God. After his touch from the angel and his decision to partake of the food and the rest, Elijah is able to experience the Word of the Lord. And, what he hears is, basically, an inquiry into why he might be hiding in a cave. He tells the Lord that he is not hiding really, but that he is fearful because, after following God unlike most of the children of Israel, he is in danger of being killed. The Lord responds by performing a miracle and dramatically sending an earthquake and wind and fire. Unlike the soft touch of the angel previously, he jolts Elijah and his newfound strength into action.

God's response and His new plan for Elijah is to get up and go back from which he just came. God tells him that he has unfinished business and must resolve it in some way. God tells him to get up and go to Damascus and to anoint Hazael as King over Syria and Jehu as King of Israel and Elisha as his own successor. The Lord reminds Elijah that he cannot handle life alone and that setting up the powers of authority, as he has been told, will afford him some support. He tells him that

he is not alone and that he never was. He reminds him to step back and remember that and to also take steps to make sure he is supported. We know, readers, from studying our Bible, that Elisha does lighten Elijah's burden as life goes on. We know, too, that Elijah continues on in his life as a well-respected and powerful human being and an effective prophet. We, too, readers, can get past the valleys in our lives and back onto the mountains simply by remaining open to one last reflection and one last simple breath and bit of nourishment, because God, and those who love us, can affect us in the softest and most impactful ways.




# LOSING WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN ORDER TO FIND IT AGAIN

Text: Luke 2:40-49

We have talked a lot in this book about things that make us feel bad but will make us better people. We have shared stories of loss and failure and how to come back from it all. We have even discussed death, illness, and the loss of everything that defines us and how, with some faith and some self-discipline, the world can still be ours. For us, the sky is the limit. What we have admitted and analyzed and concluded, thus far, is that, sometimes the ride is bumpy, but…for us as Christians and as strong, successful people simply working hard to make it through life can be daunting at times, but success and true happiness are never far from our reach.

In our text this chapter, we see Joseph and Mary, as it was their Jewish custom, traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, as they do year after year. This time, however, they take Jesus with them to celebrate the Passover. Three times a year, the males of Jewish faith were required to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of

the Tabernacle. Most Jews could not afford to go to Jerusalem three times a year so they chose to go and celebrate the Passover and they tried to take their families with them, for it was the most important feast on the Jewish calendar. People traveled to, and returned in, caravans of family and friends, and the women and children led the way to set the pace and the men and boys followed behind. Relatives looked over other people's children during the long trip to and back home. Around this time, Jesus is 12 years of age, which is where we began our examinations and reflections in this book —back when Jesus was 12 years old and teaching us, in the stories about Him, to wait for our own destinies. So, readers, we should then be familiar with this time in His life.

Year after year, Jesus and His family would join this caravan of people to celebrate the Feast of Passover and make that long journey that everybody had to make, annually. Now, we all know how important the Feast of Passover is in the Jewish faith; it is commemorative of the exodus from Egypt. Years before, when Israel cried out to God for help in their plight being nearly enslaved and certainly oppressed by Pharaoh and his soldiers, Moses was given the marching orders, so to speak, to become God's messenger to Pharaoh and, therefore, the liberator of Israel. Moses' assignment was to go and tell Pharaoh to "let God's people go," but Pharaoh would not comply. So, God said to Moses, after sending plague after plague to fight the cause to no avail, to tell the people of Israel to kill a spotless lamb and take it's blood and put it on each door post for the last plague on the land would come to pass that night. And, at midnight, when the angel of death passed over all the houses, killing the babies in

the homes in Egypt, He would pass over the houses with blood on the doors, thereby saving all the Jewish children from this terrible fate.

In our own lives, many of us know that God has allowed something to pass over us. Many times, readers, there are things that should have killed us or, at the very least, stopped us dead in our tracks, but we were spared. And, while many of us do not celebrate Passover, we are acutely aware of how things that could have destroyed us were sent away or, somehow, got past us without any harm to our lives at all. Some cultures and ethnicities have been given gifts to allow for help against nature in that, it is no mystery that, in hotter climates or harsher environmental conditions, some people were lucky to have darker skin, eyes, and hair to protect them. And, even when they live in other colder climates, they are still protected while others fall victim to the sun or other elements because of coloring or body type.

In our own lives, many of us know that God has allowed something to pass over us.



Scientifically, we know that adapting is nature's way of helping us live. Emotionally and logically, on this earth, however, we also see evidence all the time of God's work among us—beyond what saves us from the elements. When an African-American man serves in the White House as President of the United States, we know God is at work. And, when women in our church can serve as pastors and bishops, we know the same. In this way, God has gone beyond the event of Passover, and we can

clearly see that He also allows for crossover into realms we never thought possible at one time in our lives.

So, in our text, we hear that Mary and Joseph, along with their son, Jesus, were in the temple celebrating the Passover holiday or festival, which lasts seven days, beginning on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Nisan. When they were done celebrating and packed up to head back home, unbeknownst to them, their son, Jesus, lingered behind in the temple, where, again, readers, we started this book in chapter one, observing Jesus, as a young man, in the temple.

Now, in our first lesson at the start of this book, we saw Jesus, waiting to be used by His God in the way that He was supposed to be. We talked about how, at His birth, kings came from miles away to greet Him, even anticipated what His birth meant to the world. But, for years, all anyone saw was the little boy and the young man who lived with His parents and celebrated Passover and holidays like everyone else. Coming full circle for us you can now see that, after all the trials and tribulations in your own lives and all that I've had you explore in this book, that we may all be called to action later in our lives or when we least expect it, and that is what we prepare for—that is what Jesus prepared for.

In this text, I want you to notice how Luke refers to Jesus as "the child" in the beginning. By the time we find Jesus in the temple, He is referred to as "the boy." And, by the time Mary finds Him, she is using the term "son." At the end of the text, He is simply, Jesus. We have come full circle; it seems that, when Jesus goes to the temple as a young man, really for the

first time out of his true boyhood, He is beginning to come into His own and others are starting to take notice—finally.

Now, readers, what struck me about this situation was that Mary and Joseph lost their son, Jesus, for a time. This very important boy—young man—was lost. And how many times have we all felt lost, like we didn't matter, like the ones who were meant to take care of us were nowhere to be found? And maybe Jesus did feel this way, and maybe He just wanted to stop and worship and take in the temple on His own. Sometimes, we find ourselves doing the same thing—forced into reflection or introspection, because we do feel left behind or lost. In this story of Jesus, we know that the caravan journeyed for days—weeks even—to make this pilgrimage to the temple. What was lost when Jesus was left in that temple was not just a young boy, but, for me, the sense of community and family and caretakers looking after all the children, and communal meals, and worship and travel and movement together—true fellowship, readers—was lost—lost in leaving that one boy behind.

Sometimes, we find ourselves doing the same thing—forced into reflection or introspection, because we do feel left behind or lost.



For me, this is one of the dangers the church is facing in this 21st century. While churches grow and individuals have smaller personal and professional victories—just as Jesus probably had that epiphany to stay and absorb His God in that temple—we have lost some things. We

have sacrificed the essentials for the incidentals. And, further, readers, as I examine this text and reflect on real life examples in today's world, I do wonder if we also—just as Joseph and Mary did years ago—lost Jesus? And, truly, how is it possible to lose anything in this high-tech, Facebook-driven world? And, yet, we go through the motions of worship and fellowship without, sometimes, feeling our true God, seeing and knowing Jesus is with us. In His own sanctuary, just as in the text, we lose Jesus!

We have sacrificed the essentials for the incidentals.



It is never ever "off of us" when it comes to ministering to others and, yes, ministering as worshipful Christians, to Jesus as well. He needs us, as we need Him. What He teaches us must be brought forth in the churches and communities across all this communal Christian fellowship and, yet, sometimes, we forget to do that. Do we always honor our fathers and mothers? Do we honor one another? Do we remember, when we give our time to the soup kitchen or to the meal ministries for grieving and needy families at church, that we are lucky to have hot meals and a place to eat them with people we love?

Unfortunately, this generation is fraught with issues that stem from entitlement and detachment. Anyone born after 1965 and was raised as Generation X, Y, or as a Millennial, as they say, has lived with technology ruling their lives and the ensuing detachments and social issues that arise

with that. These generations often feel that they know more than those of the past, and this creates a certain disrespect. And, I am certainly not suggesting that they are all bad people—that you, readers, need to improve in any way, but I am suggesting that we need to return to a sense of close, personal fellowship and ministering to others hand to hand instead of over social media. It is easy to forget, when we get so into ourselves or attached to devices and virtual relationships, that we have people around us who need us or want to spend time with us, even if that time spent is cleaning the house or tending to the kids.

In order to get all these responsibilities—and, again, they are all healthy responsibilities born of a sense of duty to family and friends—back "onto us"—because, again, nothing is ever truly "off of us," we need to do the following easy "1 – 2 – 3" steps to make it right:

One: We need to take the emphasis off of events and put it all back onto experiences. What I mean is, in the text, we see that Mary and Joseph are on a journey to a temple in order to worship for Passover. While on the journey, they get to spend large amounts of time with their only son. They also enjoy the companionship and sense of community born of traveling with a large group. They cook and eat with their traveling companions—again, in a large caravan. The group looks after one another's children, and the families and friends benefit from this close-knit world. While I do not want to downplay the value of interacting with one another in a social event or an important church holiday, I do want us to notice that the beauty in this journey was not Passover, it was the interaction among family and friends, and the ability of parents to spend time with their only son, Jesus, who was growing into manhood before their eyes.

In this text, we see Jesus, feeling his transformation from young boy to young man, and while He lingers and reflects, similar to how you and I may reflect after the benediction at mass, His family and His community leave without Him. In these moments of reflection and in these moments of community and fellowship, we sometimes find what we are looking for. Maybe we do focus on the celebration of a church holiday or the party at an event for another person, and we feel like we are showing reverence or support, but maybe we are still detached—going through the motions, invited through an Evite and showing up to mingle, eat, worship, and leave. In these smaller moments, however, when the kids are conferring or the adults are exchanging ideas, we can find our reflection, and we should open our eyes and ears and find our sense of self, of true worship, of faith; in these moments with those we love, we can learn and we can rediscover Jesus.

In these moments of reflection and in these moments of community and fellowship, we sometimes find what we are looking for.



In our text, when Mary and Joseph find Jesus, He is conferring with a group of teachers and scholars. This former child is conferring with the best and the brightest in the community, and, yet, the friends and family who are traveling with Him, and who experience a deep Passover reflection with Him, do not notice. What do we not notice in our daily lives anymore, readers? There is beauty and fellowship in taking care of

our young children or cooking for the elderly in our churches. It's not always about the big events; in fact, we find Jesus most often sitting down with the people we know—the older people with stories to tell and the young people with hope in their eyes.

Two: How, in our text, could such an important boy be overlooked? How could Jesus, who was so important to His parents and His community, be left behind? After that long journey, we have to assume, readers, that they all became close and knew one another more closely at the end of this long caravan and sojourn to a faraway temple, how could they leave anyone behind? And, Jesus, who, for so many, would become the center of their existence, was left. While He was at the center of at least His family's world, He was still left and no longer the center of attention. And, maybe, as the text suggests, the other members of the group thought he was with someone else and, at least, still with the group, albeit hidden and silent, but why, then, didn't anyone check? Why did they all just bump along and assume that everything was OK?

How many times do we all lose Jesus in our lives, because we are just going about our business and assuming that others are doing the work at church on Sunday? How many of us assume that others are giving Jesus, our Lord and Savior, attention while we take a break? And, even the clergy in our churches are guilty of this. How many feel that simply by imparting the Word of God onto others, they are doing the deep, true work of God and paying homage to Jesus, worshipping as they should be? How many feel that by growing their churches and putting in new carpet or getting new curtains and building new wings to the building, or getting new buses, is doing the work of Jesus in our daily

lives? And, again, I don't mean to downplay the benefits of growing churches and having facilities that accommodate people and worship and, yes, fellowship, but our focus needs to be on Jesus and what He expects from us—what He can bring to our lives with His presence.

Three: We can't have unrealistic expectations of ourselves or others, and we have to seek what we truly need—again, the presence of Jesus in our lives. Why do we have to assume that people want what we want and that, even in our own families and groups of friends, people are exactly the same as us. Why can't we seek what we need and allow them to do the same? Above all, why can't we all satisfy our needs to connect with others, again truly face-to-face and soul to soul—not Facebook message or Tweet—in order to realize that we all can enjoy a shared fellowship in our love for Jesus?

In the text, the fact that Joseph and Mary, first of all, hunger and thirst to see their only son, once they realize they have lost Him, is significant. It means that, once He was taken away or potentially out of their lives for good, they panicked and immediately went to seek Him. Also, when they find Him, He has a conversation with them in which He tells them that His true calling is not that of His father, Joseph, but, rather, His one true God. And, readers, we know, as intelligent and faithful people, that seeking Jesus is something we must do. How many of us forget that until we realize it might be too late? How many of us pray or ask for His guidance when something has gone wrong? And, how many of us, too, don't remember that, despite all of our success in work and all of our triumphs in our daily personal lives, we still need to find fellowship and common ground in our worship of our one true God? When we forget all this or focus on things that matter but shouldn't be foremost in our minds, we, as individuals, risk losing that sense of Jesus next to us, guiding our

lives. When the church does the same, we risk never truly knowing the deep worship of the one true God in our lives.

## How many of us pray or ask for His guidance when something has gone wrong?



Simply put, in "1 – 2 – 3" steps, we can put our lives in perspective. Remembering that we need to seek Jesus in our daily lives is easy, but executing it like Christians who truly see Jesus next to us in all we do, and understanding the importance of living with Him and listening to Him all the time is harder. Find Him in your daily devotions to others, and see Him in your mundane, everyday tasks. Understand that worship and seeing what God intends for you in this life comes from honing your daily skills, staying mindful of your daily—yes, daily—worship, and honoring those who fill your lives with God and joy and community is what is truly important. Don't lose Jesus in trying to find another avenue to happiness and fulfillment.

# Nine

# WE'RE ALL IN RECOVERY!

Text: 1 Samuel 30:18

Readers, for anyone who has lived in this world in the 21st century, particularly in this country, the United States, you have witnessed or experienced a recession. By definition, "recession" is "A period of general economic decline; typically defined as a decline in GDP for two or more consecutive quarters" (Webster's Dictionary, 2014). A recession is typically defined also by the following: A drop in the stock market, an increase in unemployment, and a decline in the housing market. A true recession is generally considered less severe than a depression, and if a recession continues long enough, it is often then classified as a depression, or within the realm of a depression. And, readers, just this word makes it hard to recover from such a drop in prosperity and opportunity, doesn't it? Of course, there is no one obvious cause of a recession, although overall blame generally falls on the federal leadership, often either the President himself, the head of the Federal Reserve, or the entire administration.

Of course, most of us have been of working age from the years 2001–2009, which is when the worst of the most current recession occurred. From 2001–2003, although the recession effects were not widely or dramatically felt, it was beginning. The Internet bubble had not yet burst, but we had just experienced the horrible attacks on 9/11, which spurred the country's expenditures on advanced national security. And, the big bank and financial accounting scandals of 2002 were at the top of the news, which was not great for spending and economic morale in the United States. All of this caused a downturn in prosperity in the U.S. And, after a brief period during which the country rallied in December 2007, the official arbiter of business cycles, the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), made the announcement that the country was officially in a recession. This more widely felt recession lasted 18 months with unemployment at an all time high. The recession of 2007-2009 was the deepest and most profound on record since the Great Depression.

And, readers, I don't know if you realize this, but none of us in the modern day are the first in this world to experience recessions. In our biblical text, we witness a recession in the life of David. David, who was promised to be King over Israel, finds himself in a recession. In chapter 27 thru chapter 28, David has everything—a palace, over six hundred allied men are at his side, and he has a job, a wife, and a prosperous life line up with Achish, a powerful Philistine man. However, by the time we get to chapter 30, David moves from flying high to finding himself in a recession of sorts, which leads to a depression. The recession is caused by outside forces. Achish, as a Philistine, is planning to attack the children of Israel,

who are, of course, David's people. David has been working and fighting with Achish to help him win battles for his own people, and he feels that he will be rewarded with the same type of alliance in return. Because Achish and his commanders do not believe that David will give his all in battle with people so close to his own heart, they relieve him of his post, leaving he and his 600 men, basically, unemployed with no home—no palace—to call their own. And, in some ways, readers, we sympathize with David and can see our own modern day plight—hard work for nothing.

None of us in the modern day are the first in this world to experience recessions.



Loyal to David, in some way, Achish does give him some land: Ziklag where David takes his 600 men. Previously, David had sent all of the women and children associated with he and his group to this land. When they, themselves, finally get there, it has been destroyed—burned and people killed. Those remaining are ready to stone David and those who allowed this to happen. The men with David, however, also no longer trust him and plot to kill him as well. David is at his lowest point in so many ways, from his choices to circumstances brought about, even after he thought he was doing everything right.

In any recession, and as we mentioned before regarding the big recession in the U.S., individuals, communities, corporations, and political bodies, alike, will always try to find someone or something to blame. And, as in the case of David, those we are blaming are often suffering the same that

we are or worse, and we don't understand or know what they've been through, as in the case of David. In our text, David, along with everyone else, has lost finances, family, and more. Recessions affect everyone—the saved and the sinning, black and white, rich and poor, heterosexuals and homosexuals—we are all the same in a recession, united in suffering in many ways.

And, in our text, it appears that David has nowhere to turn. In examples in our own time, we don't always see the unity in a recession or a depression. Instead, we see further separation and accusations and blame. Often, we don't know where to turn. When life is difficult, we turn to God, but when it feels like we've worked and toiled and done the right thing and we still feel suffering, we sometimes question where to turn. In that way, we do unite, albeit on our own. In our text, we should note that David does turn to the Lord. He doesn't try to analyze why people are after him, and he doesn't feel sorry for himself. So, there is no looking outward or inward for David; instead, he looks upward. He learned that if he looked outward, he would only see more recession. And, if he looked inward, he saw more depression. But, when he took the strength to look upward, when he lifted his eyes beyond the hills in which he stood, he saw that his help would come from the Lord.

We don't always see the unity
in a recession or a depression.



To reiterate, readers, David does not look outward—he does not look inward —but he looks upward. And in any recession or depression, focus is everything. If you look outward, you see the recession, and if you look inward, you will experience the depression, but if you have the strength to look upward—to lift up your eyes unto the hills from whence comes your help—for your help comes from the Lord—you will find strength in your recession or depression.

And, while we can learn from HOW David asked for help, we can also learn from him as he starts his recovery. Because isn't that what we all want to hear—that the country is in recovery—that we are in recovery—that our families, our businesses, our finances, and our lives are in recovery? So as David is between recession and depression, the Bible tells us he connected with the Lord. And, sometimes, my brothers and sisters, my dear readers, our greatest connection comes when we have lost it all and find ourselves in Ziklag, lagging behind and seeking the Lord.

We have discussed before, in this book, that finding ourselves down and out often leads to our redemption and our recovery in many ways. Sometimes, however, we don't know how to facilitate that recovery, but we know that being at a low point does force us to, at least, think about rebounding and getting out of the situation. In the text, we see David inquire of the Lord, asking what he should do. He asks, in Verse 8, should we pursue and overtake our enemies? And, the Lord does tell him to overtake his enemies because, in doing so, he will find recovery; in the Lord's words: "You will recover all." So, with the green light from the Lord, so to speak, he takes what is his, recovers his two wives, redeems

himself in his people's eyes, stands up to the enemy, and makes it safe again for his city—his Ziklag,

I'm not saying, readers, that everything is worth recovering. When we look back on hard times that led us to a demise, our own recession or depression, we often have to be critical in our analysis of who was in our life at the time and what we were doing. Maybe there were behaviors that we shouldn't repeat or associations that should be severed. In our text, we learn that, of David's once loyal 600 men, more than 200 stay behind and don't help in the recovery efforts. To David, those men are lost. And, in some ways, this is a very good thing; after all, those who are not going to help are, most likely, going to hinder, so they are best left to their own devices. And, again, in our own worlds, we often need to leave behind a bad relationship, bad spending habits, or bad decisions and lifestyles to redeem ourselves and find a new way of life in recovery.

And, readers, we are all up to this task. We can handle recovery! We can handle getting our houses in order, our finances in order, our relationships and emotions in order. It is not for the faint-hearted at times, because it can take brutal evaluation of current circumstances. But, if we do what David did and trust in the Lord and our abilities and foresight, we will succeed.

So, David leaves 200 men behind, and he and the 400 press on. As they cross a brook, they run into an Egyptian boy who was left behind by the people with whom he was traveling; he was in a field, sick and weak. David gives him bread and water, and when the boy had eaten and regained his strength, David asks him who he is and why he was

alone. The boy, or young man, rather, tells David that he was with a band of people who had invaded the south and a place called Ziklag and burned it with fire. David realizes that, facing him, is one of the men who had invaded his home. Instead of killing him or harming him, however, as many of us would expect, David asks him to join him, to partner with him. David asks him to take him to the main troop, who invaded David's home, and, in return, he promised to not turn the boy over to his master or his former leader when they find them. They make a strategic agreement and move forward.

This example that David provides for us, in the midst of his recovery, tells us that we must think clearly and determine if, in our recovery, we need to ally with people who are former enemies, if unfamiliar to us. We need to try new things and move into new territories in order to facilitate recovery in some cases. When we are down, it is often hard to see that mending our ways with another might be better than avoiding that person. Or, striking a strategic bond with a person in our line of work, or another who has wronged us or tried to take our job or our livelihood away, might be the way to have a better future. Make the best business your business in recovery, readers.

When we are down, it is often hard to see that mending our ways with another might be better than avoiding that person.

And, it is important to note in the text, and to simply remember from what we've accomplished in this book, that recovery can and will apply to everyone. An open mind, as always, is key. When you are in recovery—from financial to emotional and from addiction to illness and beyond—it is not about race, color of your skin, ethnicity, religion, or political persuasion. It is not about who is your color of who is of your economic class. Those of us who truly understand recovery understand that not everyone of the same color is of the same mindset, and not everyone of the same economic status is of the same heart. You have to expand beyond your familiar realm, another common theme in this book. Readers, take heart and move forward in recovery accordingly.

Those of us who truly understand recovery understand that not everyone of the same color is of the same mindset.

Simply put, recovery, of any kind, is going to not only require prayer and the possibility of leaving some people behind, but it may require that you partner with people who are not part of your denomination, but are connected to your destiny, or maybe are not part of your ethnic group but part of your intended world. In this recovery mood, you want to connect with people who can help you with your destiny.

The text tells us that when David and his 400 men get to where the enemy is located, they are having a party with all the captured women and children. In his fury, it would be conceivable for David to attack

right away, but he waits until twilight and makes his move then, defeating the enemy and gaining custody of his children and freeing the wives. And, this is important to note that having a plan is key. Showing restraint and control, continuing to rise above the enemy and ask the Lord for strength, and planning with the knowledge you have from hitting bottom or experiencing that depression is the only way to think and to execute. The Bible tells us that David went hard from sun up to sun down, and he recovered it all. Notice that David did not just work hard, but he worked smart, meaning he had a plan on how he was going to recover it all. Prayer and planning always works well together. Faith in your plan, readers, will see you through to recovery.

When David returns to confront the 200 men who would not join him, the Bible tells us that the 400 who did go were reluctant to give up what they had recovered. David, in the wisdom gained from his own depression and recession, and with the strength given to him by the Lord's support, he tells them that they have to return it all, even to those who did not help. As he points out, we all went through our tough times together, so we will all recover together. We all hit bottom together, and we will recover together. And this is a hard thing to do, isn't it, readers? But, we are Christians, and we would have learned nothing from our own troubles if we didn't learn to give back and include others in our recovery—in their recovery.

And, so, present day, we know that in 2009, a declaration came across the land, telling us that the recession of 2007 had ended. It ended in 2009. And, some of us are noticing that we have yet to see it or feel it. The word on the street is that America is no longer in a recession, but it is

in recovery. And while we have heard that, again, many of us don't see it. And why? Well, if you examine what we've just gone over, we have to wait; we have to wait until the recovery shakes down to all of us and, step by step, we are restored, renewed, and even redefined as whole again, together, as one nation, all of us under God.

# Session 3

## REVIEW AND REFLECT WITH DR. JAZZ

### When Did You Feel Lost? A Reflection on Chapter Seven

In Chapter Seven, we addressed some difficult things – suicide, depression, and other problems. Have you ever experienced dire straits yourself, a point so low that it is hard to talk about. If so, try to put it into words here. If it is not you, talk about someone you know or a story that affected you.

How did you help yourself from the above detailed troubles or how did you help another? Detail that here and talk about how the experience changed you.

## Exploring What You Lost in Order to Find Your Way
## A Reflection on Chapter Eight

Do you do something well? Did you see yourself in a certain position when you were young or in school? Did you have a definitive path that you wanted to follow? If so, detail that or your search for such a thing here:

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How has your life turned out in comparison to those expectations you had for yourself? Or, on a similar note, how do you feel about the choices – good and bad – that you have made in life?

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## When Could You Use a Time to Recover? A Reflection on Chapter Nine

When did you go through a hard time? Did you ever feel that you did not have a plan for yourself or your family? Analyze that struggle here or, if you have not experienced that yet, talk about your fears in that respect. Again, analyze your thoughts: Why do you feel this way? How do you cope with it?

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Detail a plan here for your future. Include what you have learned from past experiences or what you have observed in others:

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In an exercise reminiscent of our time as schoolkids, detail your ideal lifestyle or world here. Don't hold back and use extra paper if you need it:

# Ten

## THE SKY IS NOT THE LIMIT!

Text: Genesis 13:14,15:1-5

We live in a culture and society that seeks often to put limits on us. Because of the color of our skin or because of our gender, we have often been told what we can and cannot do. Not only does the culture tend to place limits on us because of the color of our skin and our gender, but also I've come to the understanding and realization that the church is guilty of also putting limits on us. Given what we've learned in this book thus far, we can't allow that to happen to us, and we have to remain vigilant about understanding ourselves to understand how we fit in the world and in our respective churches and our place in faith with God.

In society, and, as I've identified, in many churches, women are reminded to stay in their places and to not to rock the "church boat" by stepping into roles not traditionally meant for them. And, in society, as women or as people of different ethnicities, races, and faiths, we do encounter both expectations and restrictions. While many of us have to address issues or live with a culture and a church, in general, that

seek to place limitations on us, I still believe and maintain that the limitations that we place on ourselves, as women or as people of color or different economic backgrounds, is far greater and more powerful than the limits that society or the church or "Corporate America" or anyone else places on us.

In society, as women or as people of different ethnicities, races, and faiths, we do encounter both expectations and restrictions.



How often do we question ourselves and wonder and even doubt that God can ever use us as we see ourselves being used—in positions of power or in authority roles or even in critical support roles? How often do we wrestle with questions regarding the doors God opens for us and the others that he leaves out of our reach? These thoughts fill all of our minds because of the ideals that society—our businesses, our schools, our churches, and even our own peers—place on us. In turn, we restrict and doubt ourselves. Even if we do know our abilities, we are still restricted by neighbors who tell us that we can't upgrade to a better house or teachers who tell us that we'll never get into that school, and it is odd, because…many times, from those same people, we hear encouragement and good things, yet it is human nature to question our abilities. And, further, it seems to be human nature when it applies to someone, like many of us, who do put ourselves out there and work hard. We expect so much of ourselves sometimes that we, unintentionally, begin to think, "I

can't get that scholarship," "I won't make that team," or "I can't get that promotion." Further, we expand our thoughts to thinking about how we won't EVER better our situation or change things in a positive way about ourselves. What we need to understand, however, is that God is limitless and, therefore, so are His plans for us.

We expand our thoughts to thinking about how we won't EVER better our situation or change things in a positive way about ourselves.

In our text, Abram experienced these same spiritual and emotional dynamics that we sometimes experience today, modern day—those doubts and self-fulfilling prophesies brought about by the negativity and restrictions of others and the limitations we place on ourselves. Abram, after he separated in a disagreement from Lot, was advancing and truly growing in his faith and his walk with God. It's in the midst of this faith walk, however, that Abram faced an emotional and spiritual crisis. Abram's mind and heart moved from faith in God to anxiety and fear. He became afraid. And I know this "fear" to be a fact, because when it is identified God shows up and says to him, "Abram, don't be afraid." God noticed that Abram had once exhibited dynamic, decisive, and courageous behavior, yet he had suddenly turned into a feeble, ambivalent, and fearful reactionary man.

Now, what happened to change Abram's sense of security? What made Abram move from walking by faith to walking in fear? What caused him

to move from faith in Chapter 14 to fear in Chapter 15? What caused him to move from courage in Chapter 14 to cowardliness in Chapter 15? To answer these questions, we need to reconstruct the events that took place prior to God's revelation to Abram when he said, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield and your very great reward."

In the previous chapter, we note Abram, unselfish and generous in his actions towards his nephew, Lot. In the midst of some family strife regarding their herdsmen, Abram offered Lot an unprecedented choice. Lot could select the land that best suited him, and Abram would take what was left. Lot chose the best, leaving his uncle with the more barren and unproductive areas of Canaan. Abram's reaction, at the time, was a remarkable demonstration of self-denial, self-control, and self-sacrifice. He turned the other cheek towards an ungrateful, self-indulgent, and egotistical relative who was only interested in feathering his own nest.

When Lot separated from Abram, he eventually settled in Sodom. It was while Lot was living there that four warring kings swooped down and seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food, then they went away with no explanation. During this attack, they also carried off Abram's nephew, Lot, and his possessions. When Abram heard of Lot's kidnapping, he took action. He laid his life down for Lot and took with him 318 trained men and recovered everything that the enemy had taken, including Lot and his family. When he returned, the King of Salem blessed him, and the King of Sodom tried to bride him. Abram had not only recaptured Lot, but some of the Sodomites. The King of Sodom wanted to show his appreciation to Abram, so he offered him possession. Abram refused by saying that he had made a promise before

God that he would not take anything from anyone, because he never wanted anyone to accuse him of not making his own way in life, and, as a rich man, Abram was certainly showing noble restraint and a bit of a self-fulfilling prophesy, in a positive way.

It still seems as if everything is going well for Abram, doesn't it? However, it is just after this incident that Abram falls prey to the negativity that left him fearful and in need of God's intervention. And, readers, I can only explain it to you like this, particularly after we have worked through so many issues together in this book: Have you ever made a series of decisions that, in retrospect, seemed to be naïve and reckless? I believe this is what happened to Abram. When he reflected on what had just transpired, he lost his grip.

## Have you ever made a series of decisions that, in retrospect, seemed to be naïve and reckless?



The first decision that he made was that he took 318 trained men and fought four kings with their armies of highly trained warriors. These four kings could have retaliated at any time and wiped out Abram's household; they could have taken his servants into slavery, and they could have confiscated all of his goods, his gold and silver and whatever else they might find. It certainly could be, at this point, after battle, that Abram asked himself, "What was I thinking?" In questioning his abilities and taking away, in essence, the honors bestowed upon him—even allowing himself to think that his family could have been harmed, Abram is

whittling away at his own brave soul and his own sound decision-making abilities, just as we do to ourselves, on occasion, readers.

Also, he may have been ashamed and, therefore, questioned his own pride and bravado. When he denied the gift offered to him, he may have been questioning his own security and, in turn, the stability of his success and riches. Certainly, as a revered Old Testament patriarch, he could have used this material offering to better his family's position in a tenuous and difficult time. Remember, readers, Lot had chosen the fertile valley of the Jordon, and left Abram in danger of poverty at one time. His mighty herds and flocks would have quickly eaten every blade of grass that was struggling to grow in this rather desolate land, which was just recovering from a very severe famine. Yet, in spite of Abram struggling at this point to make ends meet and working towards his own riches, which he would one day achieve, he refuses to be bribed by the King of Sodom, which leaves him in a tricky situation—on the cusp of either success or total ruin. This might have caused Abram to move from faith to fear. It is, after all, especially modern day, a fear to even picture what might happen if you cannot provide for your family.

What is important to note here is that Abram had something outside of his control take confidence away from him and move him to fear. How many times do we, readers, do this in our own lives? And, in Abram's case, he had been promised riches and land and prosperity by God, yet he still doubted his future and his abilities. He felt that his decisions had been wrong, and he became traumatized by it all. And, we all know his story—that God intervenes again, and Abram does get the promised wealth, land, prosperity, and respect of family and friends. Do we know our own

stories, though? Do we understand that, given the right circumstances, we could soar above what we ever expected of ourselves. If we let loose with our own helpful natures and stayed faithful—even turned the other cheek, as Abram did, when others looked down on us or tried to restrict us, we might just do what God intended us to do, to live life to its fullest and to enjoy successes and challenges every day, able to meet each one head on.

Do we understand that, given the right circumstances, we could soar above what we ever expected of ourselves?



And maybe, given the same set of circumstance that Abram faced, we might react the same way Abram did. Abram must have gone into shock; he moved from faith and courage to fear and anxiety. He moved from being on the mountain to finding himself in the valley. He moved from believing to doubting, and we all have been there.

God did appear to Abram to help him with his fears, and, readers, as we've identified in this book, we can't always rely on direct signs to guide us to our intended path in life. We also cannot always expect an easy path. We need to stay grounded in faith, and we need to trust God. Beyond that, we also need to trust ourselves and take steps in our lives in order to be the best that we can be.

And, throughout this book, we have explored a number of heady concepts—some of them designed to keep us from losing confidence as

Abram did here. We learned that it is OK to have fallen on hard times or done things in life that did not make us proud. We learned that we have all felt rejection at some point in our lives, through divorce, bullying, or other types of exclusion. Through it all, we tried to tap into what did make us the best people we could be; we tried to identify issues in our lives that were within our control and that we could change, like credit card debt and careers with a dead-end. We learned, too, that there are things out of our control but from which we can rebound, like the death of loved ones or the failings of a friendship.

When we are faced with challenges and with deep-seated fears and find ourselves growing too needy or too dependent on our own excuses, we do need to reach out to others and to God. It is important that we do find a church and attend on a regular basis. It is also important that we learn a trade and keep ourselves on a path to improvement and success. It is also important to forge relationships outside our realm of comfort; we don't have to get married or force ourselves to do things that we don't want to do, like join clubs or add things to an already busy schedule, but we should try to keep our eyes and minds open to new things.

It is also important to forge relationships outside our realm of comfort.



God forgives a lot. He forgives addicts and thieves and those who have left behind friends and family due to difficult times in life. He forgives us all when we show that we can redeem ourselves, and we can take

care of ourselves and others. He wants us to love ourselves and to move past anything that is holding us back. In this book, I believe we have worked through some things that will lead us to more successful lives without restraints. If we apply a little organization and planning to a life in progress, we can accomplish great things. Knowing what we want and how to get there is half the battle, and the rest will fall into place once we focus in this way.

In truth, there are things that we would all change about ourselves or improve upon. And, unfortunately, life is not fair, and it is full of challenges; we talked about how the recent recession affected us all. Often, it is not our own doing when we are forced to bounce back from something, and, while we explore here how outside people and our own self-doubt can limit us as well. It warrants noting, at this opportune time, that none of this will help us if we don't take the initiative to facilitate positive change in our lives or stay the path in faith, God, and discipline. If we take the simple steps every day to make sure that we are praying in the right way, with homage to God, and thoughts for our self and others, and if we stay in service to others in our church and community, and we learn to forgive ourselves and tap into our own talents and interests, we will remain happy and strong. If we can stay the path to self-enlightenment, God will reward us, as He rewarded Abram, and will allow us to see that the sky is NOT the limit, but that there are no limits to what we can accomplish in this life.

# Final Session

## REVIEW AND REFLECT WITH DR. JAZZ

After reading this book, friends, surely you have a to do list running in your heads regarding what you might change, organize, improve, or alter in your lives. Here, I would like you to number those items, prioritizing your tasks as you go. I'd like you to make your first list short term (for example, stop using credit cards, take a class, get more involved with the church, etc.), and the second list I would like to be more long term (for example, get rid of all credit card debt, finish a degree, improve and expand interpersonal relationships). For each item on your lists, I'd like you to provide one detail regarding how you might proceed in your endeavors (for example, under get more involved with the church: Call ministry managers and find a fit – or – Take my cooking skills into helping with the ministry that provides meals to families who need them).

### Short Term List

_____

_____

## Long Term List

Now, friends, I'd like you to go through all the chapters and detail in one line (below) what you got from that chapter, in your own words, and what you might take into your everyday lives after reading the chapter:

Chapter One: _____

Chapter Two: _____

Chapter Three: _____

Chapter Four: _____

Chapter Five: _____

Chapter Six: _____

Chapter Seven: _____

Chapter Eight: _____

Chapter Nine: _____

Chapter Ten: _____

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Jasmin "Jazz" Sculark, The Daughter of Thunder, is a native of the Island of Trinidad and Tobago. Dr. Jazz is the Senior Pastor of Jericho City of Praise in Landover, MD and the Founder and President of Dr. Jazz Ministries.

Nationally and internationally, she is known as Pastor, Teacher, Author and Evangelist that God has chosen to use to do a mighty work in this 21st Century. Her preaching invitations include: Shaw University, Howard University's School of Divinity, Dillard University and the Hampton Ministers' Conference. She has preached in the United Kingdom, Nigeria, West Africa, the Bahamas, and her native, Trinidad and Tobago, to name just a few. In the summer of 2013 she was invited to be a speaker for Bishop TD Jakes' world renowned Mega Fest Conference, Dallas, TX and again at Woman Thou Art Loosed 2014 Atlanta, Georgia.

In September of 2014 Dr. Jazz was also installed as the Senior Pastor of Jericho City of Praise in Landover, MD.

One who "shows herself to be approved," Dr. Jazz was licensed to preach the Gospel in 1992. Seven years later in 1999 she was ordained at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio. She is a graduate of the

Practical Bible College in Vestal, NY, and the Washington Bible College in Lanham, MD. She received her Master's in Theological Studies from the Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio and her Doctor of Ministry Degree from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

Dr. Jazz is the recipient of numerous awards and recognitions including her nomination by the African American Pulpit Judson Press Publication as one of the "20 to Watch Young Preachers in the New Millennium". In 2010, Dr. Jazz received the Gardner C. Taylor Distinguished Preaching Award, and was featured in the Gardner C. Taylor Distinguished Preaching Series.

Dr. Jazz's life goal and mission is to encourage, equip and empower the world through the written and spoken Word. True to her name sake, "Daughter of Thunder," Dr. Jazz's preaching and teaching ministry makes a thunderous sound in the earth and in the minds and hearts of those who come in contact with her ministry.

Dr. Jazz published her first book, Dancing with Broken Bones, which was a best seller. Finally Me: From Pieces to Peace is her sophomore book release. Dr. Jazz is looking forward to all that God has in store for the ministry that lies within her. Dr. Jazz serves as a 21st century Esther: a woman for such a time as this!