



A ministry of Revitalizing Churches, Inc.
P.O. Box 30177 Phoenix, AZ 85046
www.stoptoprayer.org sara@stoptoprayer.org
602-992-8808

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A dear friend of mine recently lost her husband. Tears flowed freely as we talked about our journeys and God's faithfulness in our lives. I sent her **Surviving Widowhood**. I am so grateful my friend Sharon Ingram and her daughter authored this book!

The verse for January 27 in **There is Hope and Encouragement for Difficult Times** Hope cards --31 verses on a key chain which Gene created a month before his stroke is Jeremiah 29:11-13: *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

His plans were good on January 26, the day before he took Gene home, they were good on January 27 when Gene arrived in Heaven and they were good on January 28, the day I began my journey without my sweetheart. They were good yesterday, they are good today, and they will continue to be good tomorrow!



I also sent Janey **Choosing to SEE** by Mary Beth Chapman, wife of Steven Curtis Chapman, a well-known Christian artist. *Choosing to SEE* is about how God gave her His perspective over time. Their little 5-year-old Marie dashed in front of their 16-year-old son's car as he was pulling into the driveway, and she was hit and killed. Because she was so small, Will did not see her. I hope these thoughts taken from her book will encourage you.

"The truth is, I was born with a plan. I wanted life to be safe and predictable. My plan was to marry someone with a nice nine to five schedule and have a tidy, organized life---everything under control. Absolutely none of that came true!

And if it had—if I had lived the life I thought I wanted—I know I wouldn't have experienced the grace or the miracles of God in the ways I have. What I've found is that it's in the most unlikely times and places of hurt and chaos that God gives us a profound sense of His presence and the real light of His hope in the dark places.

I believe God can handle my heart, my questions, and my anger. It's okay to want Maria back. It's okay to be angry. The question is, what do I do with it all? What do I do with God? In the midst of such heartbreak, do I really believe that all things work together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose?

The answer to that question has come at a great cost. It has been agonizing to choose to see God at work through the tears of losing my daughter. I have, however, experienced the kindness, sweetness, faithfulness and redemptive heart of God. I believe none of my tears have been wasted. Even in this free fall of pain, I've landed on a solid foundation and my faith has held...on most days. I have learned that God is good. Always. Hope is real. I have found...even in the awful pain of tears and grief so intense you think it will kill you...that my family and I can do hard.

We'll never get over our loss, but we're getting through it. And so, I have prayed that our journey through the shadows of loss might be of some help to those who have experienced similar pain...that our stewardship of this story would comfort many. This journey is about God...and how He can comfort, carry, and change us on our journey, no matter how hard it is.

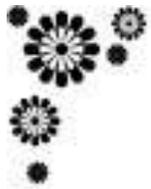
I hope whether you're in a good place, or in a place that's hard, sad, mad, or desperately hopeless...in the midst of it all, God really is with us and for us. I have found that even during those times when the path is darkest, He leaves little bits of evidence all along the way – breadcrumbs of grace that can give me what I need to take the next step. But I can only find them if I choose to SEE. Sometimes God's plans are a little...or a lot...different from ours.

Real success in the kingdom of God is not about being strong and looking good and knowing all the right answers. It's about continually yielding oneself to Jesus and determining to take purposeful little steps of obedience and the ragged reality that it's all about God and His grace at work in us.

I've never been on a journey where I really needed faith before. I could always see the path just fine. But with this, I truly don't know where the road will lead. I can only see enough by Your light to take the next little step. And the next...I'm willing to do this Lord...but I'm scared.

Somehow in that unthinkable moment it became clear to Steven and me that we were standing at the very door of heaven, placing our little girl carefully in the arms of Jesus, desperately trusting that she would be safe there until we could come and join her. Somewhere in the distance I heard Steven's voice explaining to those in the room that this was an eternal moment, and how everything in this life really comes down to this moment for each of us.

"As crazy as this seems right now, he said, the only thing I can say to honor the life of my little girl and our terrible loss at this moment is to ask you, please don't miss this...we will all stand here one day and face eternity. If you don't know the One who can give you eternal life, His name is Jesus...you need to meet Him and you really need to meet my little girl in heaven . . . she's amazing."



Trusting God with My What Ifs and Whys

by Linda Dillow

"Did you know there are spiritual diseases? Two of the deadliest are the "if" diseases, *What If* and *If Only*. These illnesses are fraternal twins, alike but not alike. Both lack the eyes of faith.

What If looks to the future and worries about what God might allow. *If Only* looks to the past and grumbles about what God has given. The first leads to anxiety, the second to anger.

How much time do we spend in self-pity, thinking, *If Only* my situation was different? Recorded in the wonderful little book *Green Leaf in Drought* is a saga of *If Onlys*.

When the Communists ordered all missionaries out of China in 1947, Arthur and Wilma Matthews had just traveled to a remote part of China and were prohibited from leaving. As all their colleagues escaped, the *If Onlys* plagued their hearts and minds. "*If Only* that letter had not come, inviting us here. *If Only* Arthur had not signed that petition for world peace, which angered the authorities. *If Only* . . .

Wilma became so distraught over their situation -- so paralyzed by the *If Onlys* -- that on Easter she could not sing "He Lives"! She felt that God had deserted them. Alone in her drab kitchen, she turned to a pamphlet by A.B. Simpson titled: "**The If in Your Life.**"

She read the account of Lazarus's death and how Martha had said to Jesus, "Lord, *If Only* You had been here, my brother would not have died." And Jesus could have been there; He was not far away. He knew all about it and He let Lazarus die.

Wilma realized a great truth: There's an *If* in every life—something God could have done differently *If* He had chosen to do so, He has all power, yet he often allows that *If* to be there.

God wanted to meet Wilma's *If* with His *If*, just as He had for Martha. Jesus told Martha, 'Did I not tell you that *if* you believe, you will see the glory of God?' (John 11:40 emphasis added). Martha wanted Lazarus to be delivered *from* death; Christ wanted Lazarus to be triumphant *over* death.

Two years later, Arthur and Wilma were allowed to leave China. Despite severe testing and horrible circumstances, they deliberately chose not to think about the *If Onlys* and to focus instead on God's loving sovereignty. As a result, they had internal peace, and God was glorified.

We cripple ourselves spiritually by going over and over the *If Onlys*. We "catch" the *If Only* disease when we dwell on what we don't have instead of on what we do have. We become discontented with what God has given us. When we contract this disease, we lose perspective."



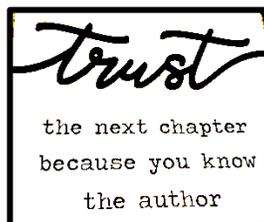
Chuck Swindoll's booklet, *For Those Who Hurt*, suggests three reasons why God allows suffering. (2 Corinthians 1:1-11).

That we might be prepared to comfort others
That we might not trust in ourselves
That we might learn to give thanks in everything

If you are going through a personal storm in your life right now, God will meet you wherever you are. . . He will meet you in your pain . . . He will Provide.

"God sees you and me in our pain and brokenness. His deep desire is for us, that we would know His love in these unexpected broken places and that we would know the truth and hope found only in his son Jesus, the Lamb, who never, ever stops reaching out for us, who cups our pain in His nail scarred palms and cradles our hearts close to His." – Katie Majors

Just like diamonds which are best displayed on black velvet, our message is sometimes best displayed on the backdrop of trials and storms. Anyone can rejoice when experiencing blessings but when we go through storms, people are watching to see how we respond and how we will react. Our message becomes a megaphone to the world and God will always take the route that brings Him the greatest glory.



Remembering the Deeds of the Lord

by Linda Dillow

We survive the packages of pain God allows in our lives by remembering who God is and what He has done in the past. When *If Only's* invade my mind, when anguish fills my heart, I return to one of my favorite Psalms – Psalms 77.

I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds. I will remember. This is the key to trusting God.

Andre Murray made a list "**to remember.**" His words put dark days and nights in perspective. In 1895, he was in England suffering from a terribly painful back, the result of an injury incurred years before.

One morning, while he was eating breakfast in his room, his hostess told him of a woman and wanted to know if he had any advice for her. Andrew Murray handed her a paper he had been writing on and said, *give her this advice I'm writing down for myself. It may be that she'll find it helpful.* This is what he wrote: *In time of trouble, say:*

"First, he brought me here. It is by his will I am in this strait place; in that I will rest."

Next, "He will keep me here in his love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as his child."

Then say, "He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons he intends me to learn, and working in me the grace he means to bestow."

And last, say, "In his good time he can bring me out again. How and when, he knows."

Therefore, say, "I am here (1) by God's appointment, (2) in his keeping, (3) under his training, (4) for his time."

Spring Fling "Faith, Food and Flip Flops" luncheon at Circle of Peace Church

What a blessing it was to be invited to speak at this luncheon. So many precious women, so much fun! Donna and Alva are co-leaders for the women's ministry. I am grateful the Lord allowed our paths to cross – they were such a joy to my heart!



Donna

Alva

Our first annual Spring Fling ended with an amazing message delivered by Sara. Sara was inspirational, delightful, and funny in delivering a very heartfelt compelling message about her life and how to stay connected with Jesus. Thank you, Sara, for inspiring me and the other women to stay in the Word! - Alva



What a blessing it was to listen to you speak. So many great compliments knowing you touched our hearts and lives. Thank you for sharing your story and ministry with us! – Donna

Cross in the Desert United Methodist Church Seminar: The Joy of Spending Time in His Presence



Ray

Mary Ann

Sharon

"Thanks again for your presentation Saturday. We enjoyed having you with us. Hearing about how God uses you in talking to complete strangers always quickens our faith. The session encouraged us to talk about our faith and faith experiences and to pray at all times and in all ways...always from the heart.



One of our members was so touched by the message that she wanted to take materials to send to her relative who is a pastor that he might use them in his church. Another member noted that you asked the question, do we love God, or do we love the blessings he gives us? Then you commented that love grows as gratitude grows." – Ray

I am grateful for Ray, May Ann and Sharon who serve on the Prayer Team. I was challenged by their commitment to prayer and helping others grow in their walk with Jesus!

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. I Corinthians 3:6



Connie Cyndee Jacqueline

Cindy

What a joy it was to celebrate Jacqueline's 60th birthday with these friends! Connie saw Jacqueline riding her bike to church one summer 4 years ago and approached her with a burden to come alongside her. Cyndee, her sister became involved in her life a year later. I've been touched by how faithfully they have reached out to her in love and just prior to her 60th birthday, Connie and Cyndee witnessed Jacqueline coming to faith in Jesus! They introduced me to Jacqueline about a year ago and I have been praying along with them for her salvation. Jesus changes lives!

A Prayer for Resurrection

Lord, I know you have power over life and death. I give you the dead in me: The lost dreams, The hopelessness, The lack of vision, The faith frayed and worn so thin, the relationships shattered and broken. You make all things new. Resurrect my faith. Renew joy. Restore hope. You Conqueror of death and the grave, can do all things. I trust in You. – Heather King

May we experience the power of the resurrection in our lives each day . . . because the tomb is empty!

Christ is Risen! God kept His promise!

Sara

