

ELIZABETH A MITCHELL

Everyday Reminders of Hope

MORNING
Slate

CONTENTS



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INTRODUCTION



The Lord so often uses ordinary happenings to bring about extraordinary results. Only a gracious God could pull that off.

In the Scriptures we learn that Christ takes common water and produces first grade wine. Barley loaves in a boy's basket become enough food to satisfy a stadium-sized group of hungry families. With just a few familiar words, he transforms tumultuous waves into calm seas. Even something as mundane as the saliva he spits on the ground makes a blind man's eyes become ones that see.

That's the God whom we get to serve, to know and love.

Because we tend to be forgetful people, in the pages of MorningSide you will encounter everyday stories and messages that illustrate his power and his presence in the midst of our humdrum routines. The Lord meets us right where we are, in places we never intended to be. Each devotional is infused with his brand of hope to help us see that he is the source of endless possibilities and strength when a hundred different voices are calling out our names.

This volume holds reminders of his mercy when much is stacked against us and of his steadfast love when we are frantically running on empty. You will also be sustained with armloads of his compassion for seemingly endless scenarios where we see ourselves as having less than adequate supplies.

The vibrant promise from the prophet Jeremiah sums

up these daily readings: "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. 'The LORD is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him'" (Lamentations 3:21-24).

Every morning brings with it a fresh shipment of God's limitless love and mercy, specifically designed for us. No matter what challenges the previous day brought, or how desperately we needed his presence and power yesterday, the balance in our account is always replenished. Tomorrow we get to repeat the cycle and draw on his faithfulness once more.

Christ's capacity to love us is undeviating in its constancy. It is as firmly fixed in place as mountains that never move no matter what. God's love for us will never cease, will never come to an end, will never run out in the way the ocean never runs dry. His love for us will always be full to the brim and always more than enough on every conceivable level.

Through these pages I pray your daily lives intersect with the Lord's unwavering, endless, all-encompassing love as you run with arms outstretched to him.



PART ONE

Believe it

“But this I call to mind...”

(Lamentations 3:21)



ALONE TIME

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.” (John 15:4)

It was never designed as an entry in the have-to category, but we shoved it into that column, making it a chore rather than the grand adventure it was intended to be from the beginning. Spending time alone with the Father, carving out a sliver of the day to hear his voice and respond to his Word, should always be firmly fixed in the I-can't-believe-I-get-to-do-this frame of reference. Delight will trump duty every time.

Jesus set the pace for us, hunkering down on mountainside retreats, slipping away from demanding crowds, making time with the Father his highest priority. Somehow we imagine our hectic schedules should dictate the day. How foolish to suppose we are engaged in more pressing needs and dealing with weightier concerns than Christ had to balance as he made his way on earth. With his resolute choice to set aside the uproar for solitary time with God, Jesus models life in its perfect form.

An absence of time alone with God leaves me like a barren tree, plucked and bare, branches devoid of fruit. When hectic pressures rule and my day clobbers me with concerns that overrule, I am uselessly disconnected from my most vital resource. I become as invalid as a pen without ink, a

house with no roof, a pool emptied of all life-giving water.

We make it complicated. He wants a conversation—we turn it into scoring high marks and brownie points. He longs for intimate relationship—we accumulate a hundred excuses why we can't—and all the while he waits to give us more of himself, to grant us freedom with his truth, to shower us with the cleansing water of his Word.

We hesitate and procrastinate. He simply waits to give us everything we could possibly need for the day.

FIRST CALL

“Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love, for in you I trust. Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.” (Psalm 143:8)

At the outset, before I enter into conversation with another human being, I direct my three-ring-circus thoughts to you. Since you were known as the Word before time even began, let me begin this day by first listening to your Word to hear the strong sound of your voice in each line and phrase.

Before I check the status of responsibilities demanding my attention and dictating my schedule, I ask you to rearrange and realign my time. Before I begin to concentrate on what I must do, or should do, or can't possibly tackle today, I invite you to reschedule and direct my day.

Supersede my muddled thoughts with a keen awareness that you are brilliant truth and that you maintain precise order and alignment in this world. Win over my heart with an aim to please you, to seek you, to rest in the strength that you possess, especially when weariness is the primary color on my wheel.

Help me find delight in the ordinary portions of my day—the first sip of piping hot coffee; the landscape of greenery parading down my street; the line of children entering school, each one particularly designed with the capacity to transform his or her world.


Allow me to focus on celebrating your goodness in the overlooked snatches of my routine—the petite cardinal perched on the lamppost like a red-coated sentry at my door, the soggy pigeon-gray clouds waiting to drop their deluge, the attentive waitress carrying her workload in precise and regal fashion.

Give me appreciation for the tiniest drops of joy you sprinkle like confetti on the tabletop of today. Catch me off guard with a fresh sense of wonder for the small surprises wrapped in ordinary packaging that you will reveal at various points throughout this not-very-special day. Help me to not overlook your gifts because I am consumed with keeping pace, increasing my stride, and arriving at a destination you never called me to reach in the first place.

“On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased” (Psalm 138:3).

GLORIOUS COMPARISON

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Romans 8:18)

equestered in the pediatric cardiac ICU of Boston Children’s, Miami Children’s, or Shands Children’s Hospital for what seemed like an interminable period, we were consistently amazed at the remarkable and profound expertise of the medical personnel attending our son James. The brilliant surgeons, physicians, and nurses were superheroes who ensured their patients had the best possible care and categorically earned our complete respect.

It crossed our minds that their parents and professors had played a huge part in their success and undoubtedly deserved some of the accolades. But it was obvious that these men and women had sacrificed endless hours, had endured incalculable sacrifices, and had spent invaluable money, energy, and resources to overcome the myriad of obstacles poised against them in their formidable years of training. Families like ours are the grateful recipients of their dedication and sacrifice.

Their example jumps to mind when I consider that God asks us to also endure rigorous lessons in life. Time and again, the apostle Paul reinforces the truth that the “heavy weight” of our struggles is not worth being compared to what God is producing through them. Through the

arduous courses designed to refine and transform us, God is equipping us to serve him in glorious ways that defy our present understanding. From God’s perspective, the sacrifices he asks us to endure, the hardships and the difficulties we face, will all count for something enormous. For now, though, we might not understand.

Our gracious God reminds us that he will use the strenuous course work and the challenging trials to bring about a great good that we cannot even conceive as possible. Bent over their manuals, the medical students could not imagine the many precious children they would one day help to save or the perplexed parents they would infuse with hope. Bent beneath the weight of our own loads, we are also unable to see how God is fashioning us into instruments of healing and hope for others who are unmistakably precious in his sight.

“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:17–18).

JUST A MINUTE

"I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry." (Psalm 40:1)

Waiting patiently for the Lord means we don't try to cajole an answer out of him or force our wants and wishes on the Creator of the universe. It means we do not act like unruly children unaccustomed to hearing the words "no" or "just a minute" or "I have a better idea if you would just allow me to show you what it is." Waiting patiently for God to answer means we don't pry the answer loose from other souls and entice them to our way of thinking as if their solutions could somehow be a strong substitute for God's.

As we wait on the Lord, we are to realize he is at work in unseen ways not apparent in our limited perspective. We can only see dimly; he has the entire plan meticulously laid out. His ear is bent in our direction like a father giving undivided attention to his child. He is perfectly attuned to the sound of our cries and asks that we wait for his perfect way to be realized without grumblings or anxious rumblings erupting from inside. Waiting is what he routinely asks his children to do.

Other strategic verses tell us to be still, and know that he is God, ultimately in charge of all the nations on earth and of our ordinary realms. Being still is wrapped up in the call to wait. When our minds are occupied with him, waiting

becomes part of the process. A. W. Tozer reminds us that, "As God is exalted to the right place in our lives, a thousand problems are solved all at once." Stillness requires that we relinquish our restless agitation and make God our main agenda.

Joseph waited a long while within those dungeon walls and learnt the secret of being content while chains bound his feet and the stench of brotherly injustice permeated his tumultuous life. Before him, his great-grandfather Abraham was asked to wait a long while for the arrival of his promised son; later Hannah would agonize as she looked to God to hear her lament for a son. The gospel records that Simeon and Anna waited at length before the assurance that they would hold the Christ child materialized. Even in Jesus' storytelling, the prodigal's father turned his aching heart to the horizon for long stretches of days and nights as he awaited his son's return.

We are not the first to be asked to wait. Apparently, the Lord does some of his most brilliant work in the waiting stretches of our lives. Certainly, he knows precisely what's ahead when he asks us to wait awhile for him to work out the details in this season where we find ourselves just now.

STORING UP

*“They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.”
(1 Timothy 6:18–19)*

My mother grew things well. Cranberry-colored ginger lilies with their coordinating green leaf ensemble wrapped exotic arms around the perimeter of our patio; periwinkle-blue morning glory blooms cascaded delicately across the entire length of the backyard fence; multicolored Gerber daisies commandeered six flower beds across the front lawn beneath the shade of giant fir trees and bougainvillea blooms. I still picture my mom after a long day at work, standing in her garden with the hose in hand, sprinkling the flowers with her special dose of care.

She labored beside my father in the family business, matching his passion and looking after their staff of ninety like a mother hen with a brood of chicks. Together they nourished the company, saw it prosper and expand, and knew the satisfaction that comes from overcoming obstacles and setbacks. When their store burnt to the ground for the second time and the smell of smoke and cinders became an unwelcome addition to our home, my mother rallied my father's spirits and reminded him of their dream. Together they built their store back better than it ever had been before. Mummy lived out this truth: “An excellent wife who can

find? . . . The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life” (Proverbs 31:10–12).

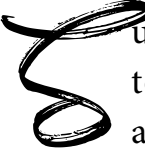
My mother's gift of hospitality caused the college ministry of our church to flourish, and every Friday night for a decade or so, a hundred students gathered in our home. My mother made certain everyone had a plate full of delicious food to go with the nourishment of the Scriptures. All five of her children were expected to pitch in to make these Friday nights successful. Along the way, we learned what service looks like on the front lines. Within each of our hearts, Mummy planted the desire to serve; that garden is still bearing fruit.

My mother loved people well—all sorts of people, people others hardly saw. The grocery store clerks wept at her funeral. The garbage men who hauled our trash away on Monday mornings always enjoyed the food she carted out to them when their trucks rumbled by. They mattered. Everybody who came anywhere near her was served a slice of her kindness.

My mother left school early and never earned a college degree. She married at the tender age of sixteen, did very little traveling, and never saw her role as one that was particularly important. But she was unparalleled in the business of making lives flourish. As a young mom, she turned to the arms of the Savior and grew in the humility and grace only he provides. He poured himself through her, even through the difficult years when a stroke robbed her mobility. From the wheelchair, and maybe especially from there, she became a willing vessel to accomplish

TWENTY-SEVENTH TIME

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1)

urrounded by a dreary haze, I falter. But what is that to you who emanates incandescent light, luminous and lasting? Black mists disintegrate in your brilliant glow; you overtake and overturn the dread of darkened places. Light of the World, you force nightfall to lose its powerful hold. Evidently, when I am surrounded by your presence, daylight slips through somehow.

Sinking, I reach for your extended right hand. The waters submerge with savage force bent on suffocating. But you are rescuer, pulling me out to stand on sturdy rock that will not shake or crumble. You cradle my exhausted frame; hidden within the protection of your arms, I am safe from harm.

Fears approach to bully me with derogatory taunts and menacing glares. Fists are pressed into my chest and blinders mask my eyes. But you intercede and mediate with words like steel that counteract their insults. “Courage, child,” you say, in a hundred different ways. Your Spirit breathes and brandishes unseen weaponry for the fight. Your voice supersedes, and fears scatter in retreat. I wait and watch you work it all out for great good. The scariest of places are still yours to command.

Slipping fast, I stumble near jagged cliffs. But you are guardrail and sturdy fence that will not give way. You are harness, strong rope, and safety net. You navigate the precipice; I hold to your saving grace and draw breath anew. Adversaries in enemy attire block my path, threatening to assail and overwhelm. But you cause them to stumble and fall in a foolish heap; bending your bow, you chase them off the field. You are frontline defense and rear guard; I pass through.

In response, I sing. Free from the restraint of despair, my strengthened soul leans into you. I am made aware of your peace in the midst of this chorus of praise. Beloved God, you rescue and save. Shouts of deliverance ring out loud and clear.

“And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around about me, and will I offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD” (Psalm 27:6)

APPROACH

“But I call to God, and the Lord will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.” (Psalm 55:16–17)

At times we approach the Almighty fearful that we might be a bother. God might be too busy with more important details, and we are unworthy to petition for his assistance. Somehow we erroneously conclude that his resources are limited and we are locked out of the storehouse of his supply. At other times, we swagger forward brazenly with the audacity to bargain, presuming we may negotiate a fair trade if God would only do his part.

In either case, we are mistaken. He is sovereign King, and we are humble subjects who appeal to his gracious, benevolent hand. The golden scepter of the cross is outstretched toward us with its clear invitation to come boldly. His words to the prophet Jeremiah are for us as well: “Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known” (Jeremiah 33:3).

He welcomes us as his children, completely aware of our deepest needs, embracing us with a father’s unconditional love without treating us as our sins deserve (Psalm 103:10). We wait like a servant before an understanding master to listen for clear instructions, confident God will enable us to accomplish the tasks designed specifically with us in mind.

We approach like a bride entering the chamber of the

bridegroom with the realization that we, as his beloved, are tucked safely in the circle of his strong arms.

During battle when forces rage against us, we come as soldiers in need of directives from our strong commander. We stand our ground in enemy territory outfitted with his weaponry, conscious he will supply everything necessary to ensure our victory.

When we are frail and broken, God is the Healer whose hands pour out mercy and grace. With confidence we wait on him, aware he is completely capable and altogether willing to mend and restore.

Ultimately, we first come as sinners recognizing our need for forgiveness and restoration, longing for reconciliation with our Creator. For that problem, there is only one cure: “This Jesus... has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11–12).

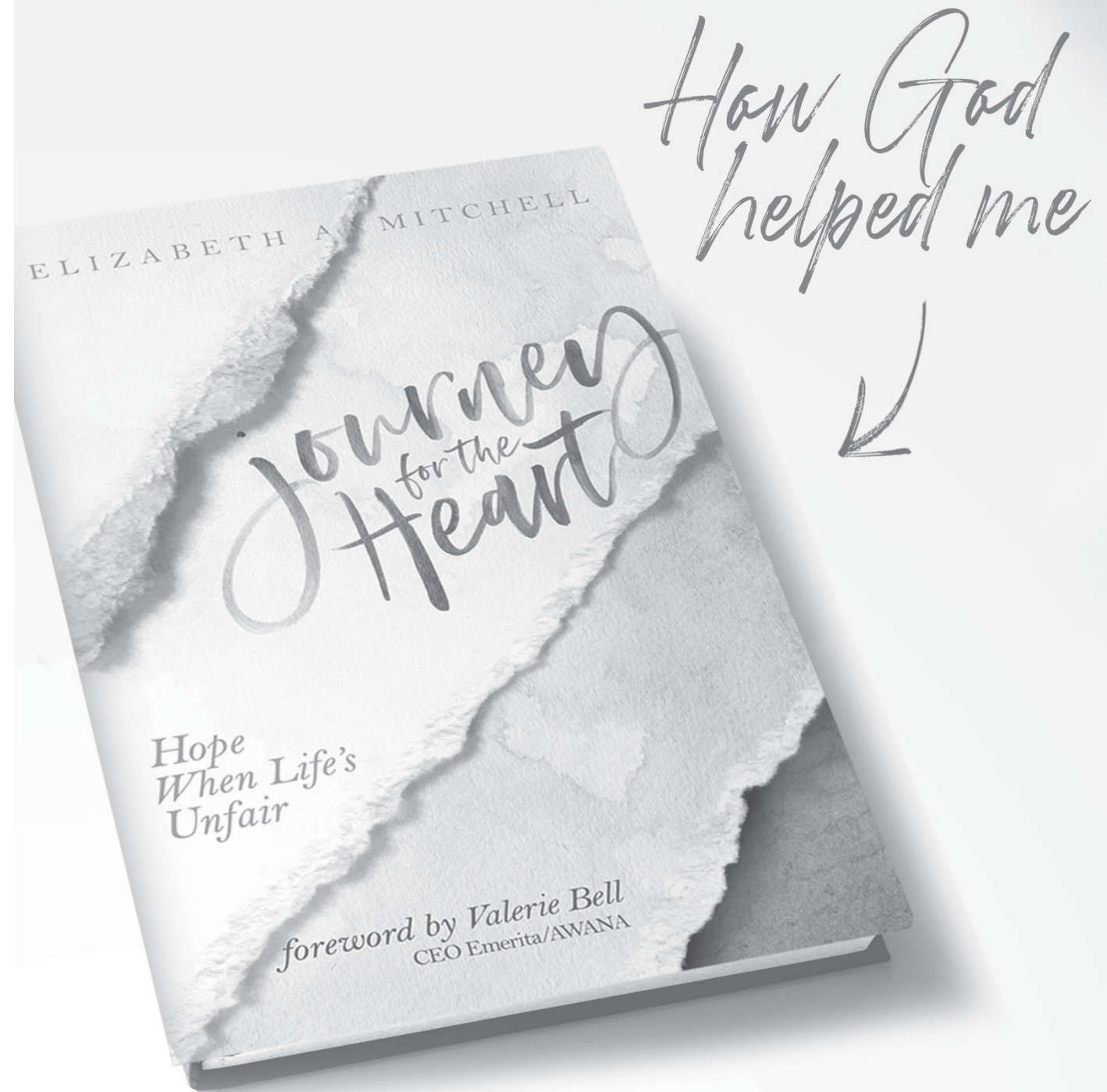
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