

TUESDAY, JANUARY 1

"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed." Mark 1:35 (NIV)

MY HUSBAND J.R.'S SCHEDULE ALLOWS US several hours together each morning to share breakfast, talk about our day and then have Bible study. I look forward to that devotion each morning and feel my day isn't complete without that time. I wish I could say we started our days this way throughout our marriage, but we only began our morning studies together last year. Oh, we still studied, but we didn't set aside a special time each day to be intimate with our Lord. For twenty-four years we missed out.

Christ valued alone time with God. He sought it out and made it happen, in places ranging from mountaintops to fishing boats. Over the years, we've also learned the value of spending alone time with God. Our morning Bible studies are one way, but we also take one week each year to spend quality time with Him...on a Goldwing. Yes, a motorcycle. Every April, J.R.'s business travels to Orlando for the World Cheerleading Championships. It's a twelve-hour drive from our home. We could fly. We could drive our car. But we don't. Instead, J.R. plans the motorcycle trip to take us on back roads, past mountains, cotton fields, cattle farms, rivers, beaches and horse ranches. We are right there with God's creation, astounded by the natural beauty of the world He created. Our prayers are so special those days, because it's like we're standing (or riding, as the case may be) with God, in the bounty of his glory. It's breathtaking. It's beautiful.

Christ found His alone places with God. We found ours too, at our kitchen table each morning and on a Goldwing once a year. Isn't it amazing that we can find Him, feel Him, anywhere?

FAITH STEP: *Like Christ did, find a way to be with God today, whether at your kitchen table, on a motorcycle, in the car, on your porch, or wherever you may be.*

—Renee Andrews

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 2

"I, Paul, make my appeal to you with the gentleness and kindness of Christ. I'm the one who is humble when I'm with you but forceful toward you when I'm not." II Corinthians 10:1 (God's WORD Translation)

For the past eleven years I've mentored teen moms. Caring for them and encouraging them is easy. The hard part is when I need to talk to them about a wrong behavior—either something I've noticed in their parenting or their interactions with other teen moms. The apostle Paul felt the same way about confrontation.

Paul had a heart for the people of Corinth, but he also depended on his letters—not his direct confrontation—to share how to be a follower of Jesus. It makes me feel better to know that Paul wasn't as in-your-face in person as he appears in his letters. I'm also reminded that even the well-known apostle had to depend on the gentleness and kindness of Christ in order to find the right words.

Unlike Paul, Jesus knew what He wanted to say...and He said it. He didn't need to write letters to His followers in order to choose His words wisely. Instead, He said what needed to be said—perfect for that person, in that moment. And He spoke with the authority of His Father.

Do you need to offer words of discipline to someone you love? You may feel directed to write a note or to offer your words face-to-face, but one thing to remember is you can count on Jesus. As you seek Him—and contemplate His gentleness and kindness—Jesus will give you the wisdom and the words.

Faith step: Think about a loving confrontation you've been putting off. Consider Jesus sitting down with that person and speaking from His heart. What would He say? How can you share the same message in a loving, gentle way?

—Tricia Goyer

THURSDAY, JANUARY 3

“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” Genesis 2:2–3 (NIV)

I HANDED MY FRIEND A CUP OF TEA AND SETTLED ON THE COUCH. “I finally got the project turned in.”

“That’s awesome!” My friend toasted me with her teacup. She’d prayed for me during the weeks of work. “Now what are you going to do?”

My head spun with my list of next jobs. “Tomorrow I’m starting on a new edit job for a client.”

She shook her head. “No. I mean to celebrate.”

I stared at her blankly. Celebrate? My freelance projects popped up like whack-a-moles. Once I knocked one down, I immediately aimed for the next.

But she was right. I needed to pause. To look up. To thank God for His grace that helped me complete the task, rather than pounce on the next one. Although I tried to set aside a Sabbath day each week, I hadn’t thought of taking a small Sabbath moment during the midst of the week as well.

Jesus challenged the distorted rules that had developed around observing the Sabbath, but also affirmed a rhythm that includes rest. God’s call to Sabbath isn’t just another rule, but a gift from His hand. In Mark 2:27–28, Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

Rest isn’t just recovery. It’s celebration. An acknowledgement of work completed. God set the model for work and rest at creation, and Jesus declared His Lordship over this rhythm in life. Now we can embrace His example—and not only one day a week.

FAITH STEP: *Finish a difficult task, then practice a “mini-Sabbath” and find a way to rest, refresh and thank God for His provision.*

—Sharon Hinck

FRIDAY, JANUARY 4

“But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment.” 1 Timothy 6:6 (NASB)

I’VE OFTEN HEARD OTHERS COMPLAIN, “I wish I could do that! That person is so blessed!”

Women are notorious for comparing themselves to others. What happens sometimes when we visit a home that could grace the covers of *Better Homes and Gardens*? Every room sparkles with creativity. Every accessory coordinates perfectly. Even the yard could win the city’s “Garden of the Year” award.

And then we return home. Suddenly our painted walls look faded; the furniture seems shabby; and the colors? So outdated! And what are all those green shoots in the yard? Weeds, not flowers.

I’ve even done that in speaking. Matched with a popular keynote speaker, I began to question myself at one event. What do I have to say? Can I really add anything of value to this day? Jesus, why am I here, anyway?

The kind of person Jesus loves to choose—and use—is not always the ten-talent achiever, but the one with a heart for the Lord and others, one that is contented and grateful for opportunities God gives. It’s not their gifts—or lack of them—that matters most.

Throughout the Bible, Jesus treated people as individuals with their own heavenly blueprints. By the very uniqueness of His methods and approach to others, Jesus said to them: “There is no one else like you.” There is never a reason for comparison, but always a need for contentment. The believer who is secure in himself and his Maker is free to focus outwardly, not inwardly.

My focus that day—and all the other times I’ve spent in useless comparison—was completely wrong. Jesus reminds me often that what matters most is a surrendered and contented heart, one that overflows with gratitude to Him for everything He has given.

FAITH STEP: *Write down three things you do well. The next time you feel like comparing yourself or your gifts to others, stop and thank Jesus for making you unique.*

—Rebecca Barlow Jordan

SATURDAY, JANUARY 5

"I'm telling you these things while I'm still living with you. The Friend, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send at my request, will make everything plain to you. He will remind you of all the things I have told you. I'm leaving you well and whole. That's my parting gift to you. Peace. I don't leave you the way you're used to being left—feeling abandoned, bereft. So don't be upset. Don't be distraught." John 14:25–27 (MSG)

MY HUSBAND CAME HOME GIDDY last evening. He's been part of a men's group two mornings a week. He loves the spiritual growth and camaraderie as they discover together the more to life that Jesus offers. More fulfillment, more purpose, more meaning beyond merely going through the motions of making a living. It's been a good thing for several months now. But to hear him say yesterday that their forty-five-minute discussion that morning was life-changing—the most influential of these meetings so far—filled my own heart with greater hope and faith.

"For forty-some years I've been missing the fact that I have Jesus' spirit with me as my best friend. How many of us believers realize we have all His gifts all the time?"

His excitement has stayed with me this morning. How often do I take for granted that Jesus is still with me in Spirit? His own Spirit is in me, ready to help 24/7? Not here merely to tell me when I'm doing wrong, as was my primary view of Him growing up. Jesus introduced His spirit as our friend, our helper to comfort and guide, and to offer peace and reminders of salvation. Jesus transcends time to be with us still, to show us His character, to help grow our hearts to be like His and to live like He did.

Thirty-five years after accepting salvation, my husband received a new gift from Jesus yesterday: fresh insight. Jesus always has new inspiration to share with us through His spirit. Our Savior is with us even though His body left this earth long ago.

What a Savior still!

FAITH STEP: *Ask Jesus for fresh inspiration today.*

—Erin Keeley Marshall

SUNDAY, JANUARY 6

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" II Corinthians 9:15 (NASB)

THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE CERTAINLY DIDN'T MATCH MY MOOD that afternoon. But the ice I saw out the car window was nothing compared to the iciness in my manner. My husband, children and I were returning home from our Christmas visit with our families. The gift-giving was over, and I was feeling a little bit sorry for myself. My sister-in-law had received an onyx and diamond ring from my brother. At my in-laws' house I had admired another sister-in-law's gift of a sapphire and diamond ring. I'm a hard-working wife and mother, I told myself. Don't I deserve exciting, extravagant gifts, too?

As we sped down the interstate, my eyes lit on a beautiful sight. The bright sunlight reflected off the ice-encased tree branches, and the result was nothing less than dazzling. Who else but the Lord could transform winter-bare trees into living sculptures of sparkling light? Gazing at the spectacular display, I understood how petty I'd been. I sheepishly thanked Jesus for the beauty He places all around me. I asked Him to help me be open to seeing His gifts rather than fixated on material desires.

I'd like to say that my attitude changed permanently that long-ago winter afternoon. Truth is, I still sometimes neglect to notice the good things that daily come from God's hand in the beauties of nature, the joys of a relationship, and most importantly, in Jesus. Nothing on Earth can compare to the precious gift of a Savior Who died for my sins, loves me unconditionally, and is preparing a heavenly home for me. My husband occasionally surprises me with a lovely gift of jewelry, but I still cherish that memory of seeing the diamonds in the trees and being reminded that the best gifts come from above—especially the indescribable gift of Jesus.

FAITH STEP: *Ask God to open your eyes today to see every good gift that comes from His hand. Spend a few minutes telling Him how much His most precious gift means to you.*

—Dianne Neal Matthews

MONDAY, JANUARY 7

“So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for people under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their work all the days of the life God has given them under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 8:15 (TNIV)

I AM ABOUT TO HIT THE BIG FOUR-OH. It seems like such a huge milestone, especially because I don't feel forty years old.

People keep asking me what I am going to do. They've suggested party themes, like a pirate party or a seventies party. Some people have suggested places I could hold my birthday party, like Disneyland or an upscale video and arcade game restaurant. Other people have suggested activities I could arrange to do with my friends, like zip lining or skiing or hiking.

But with each idea, I become more stressed about choosing what to do for my big day. I'm not excited about any of the options.

Then I began reading Ecclesiastes and how everything the Teacher did was meaningless. The only thing that had meaning was doing your work and enjoying the life Jesus gave to you.

Jesus never did what people expected Him to do. He had little children gather around Him and he blessed them in a time when the adults thought the children were just a nuisance. I think He did it because He enjoyed the company of the children; He enjoyed blessing them.

I realized, after reading the passage, that I should do what I enjoy for my birthday. Jesus has given me the blessing of writing for my living, and I've always wanted to go to England to research a book I want to write. So instead of a party, I am planning to be in London on the day I turn forty years old. It's going to be a blast!

FAITH STEP: *What has Jesus blessed you with? Are you enjoying your work and your blessings? Take a moment right now to list as many blessings as you can, and then thank Jesus for them.*

—Camy Tang