

INVITING GOD TO SEE OUR HEARTS AND SHAPE
THEM FOR HIS GLORY.

MATTERS *of the* HEART



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1. THE SURRENDERED HEART

"I AM THE LORD'S SERVANT,' MARY ANSWERED. 'MAY YOUR WORD TO ME BE FULFILLED.' THEN THE ANGEL LEFT HER." LUKE 1:38

Several years ago, friends of ours felt God calling them back to their home country. This was a major life change, impacting their entire family. They spent considerable time in prayer, seeking the best way to share this decision with their children.

The news did not sit well with their youngest son. He was sad about leaving behind everything he knew. A few days later, they revisited the topic, and he responded with a tone of resignation, "I've accepted my fate!" When our friends shared this with us, we found it endearing, and it still brings a smile to our faces. It wasn't what he wanted, but he recognized that surrender was, given the circumstances, his best option.

His words were profound. He was expressing his peace with this new chapter and his willingness to follow his parents. Shortly after the move, he had fully adjusted and was thriving, enjoying wonderful new experiences. Imagine what he would have missed had he resisted his parents' decision!

Surrendering isn't always easy, especially when it's not what we had in mind. When it comes to surrendering to the Lord's will, Mary's example is particularly inspiring. The biblical account shows her natural human reaction: she was initially frightened by the angel Gabriel's visit, who reassured her, telling her not to fear.

He then revealed the incredible news that she would conceive and bear the Son of the Most High. Mary's reply was simple yet powerful: "'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her" (Luke 1:38).

Mary's response is a source of inspiration, an attitude we can mimic in our daily lives. May the Lord grant us the serenity and courage to surrender to him and have his plans to unfold in us, so that his name may be glorified.

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. Do you find it challenging to surrender? What makes it so difficult?
2. Think of a time when you surrendered and the outcome was positive, even if unexpected. What did you learn from that experience?
3. What small step could you take today to practice surrendering where you're currently feeling resistant?

2. THE PURE HEART

“BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART,
FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD.”
MATTHEW 5:8

I wanted to see God. As a 6-year-old girl who received Jesus as Savior and Lord, knowing God became my life pursuit. And I knew that in order to have an intimate relationship with God, I needed to embrace having a pure heart. Oh, the faith of a child!

In my innocence, I didn't understand that the cost to know God comes with the pain of having your heart purified. The Father takes us through the furnace of affliction in order for the impurities in our hearts to be burned away. In the testing, we face what we hold dear in our hearts, our treasure, and God reveals if what we hold there is an idol. Do we hold it as having greater value than God? Who and what is our first love?

The light that comes from being in God's presence and hearing his heart and voice is also the light that reveals our own human depravity. To see ourselves as God sees us is essential in our path to maturity. It is necessary to understand our sinful nature in order to appreciate the amazing gift of Jesus being our ransom who has taken us from death to life. We experience the mercy of the Father when he looks at us and sees Jesus' righteousness rather than our sin!

We can't just seek to be pure in heart. This is a work that God does in us as we pursue knowing him. Without God, our efforts at seeking purity simply become legalism as we try to please him by following the rules. But God graciously invites us to cooperate with him in our spiritual formation. When we work with him, he can direct us in what to refrain from in our thoughts, motivations, words and actions. Gladly we can accept James' call to "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:8).

Pure water is refreshing for more reasons than just the absence of impurities. It also involves benefits to your health that are life-giving and enriching. Just as God wants undesirable things to be removed from our hearts, there are also many beautiful things that God wants us to embrace. The Father calls us to imitate his life-giving godly qualities of righteousness, faith, love and peace. He longs for us to develop the fruit of the Spirit in our hearts.

Friends, when we cooperate with God and embrace the clarifying work of the Spirit in our lives, God can create in us pure hearts that hold him above all others and allow us to see him!

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. What treasures do you hold most dear in your heart?
2. What fears do you face in submitting your treasures to God?
3. What are your feelings regarding the path of confession, repentance and forgiveness that God has given us?

3. THE CONTROLLING HEART

"IN THEIR HEARTS HUMANS PLAN
THEIR COURSE, BUT THE LORD
ESTABLISHES THEIR STEPS."
PROVERBS 16:9

"You are afraid of surrender because you don't want to lose control. But you never had control; all you had was anxiety." This quote by Elizabeth Gilbert says so much about our human nature.

Somehow, we delude ourselves into thinking that we can control the circumstances around us. It might be the case that we plan our days as if we had total control over them. We carefully consider each detail as if there would never be any unforeseen events. Another scenario we might consider is one in which we prepare for the most common setbacks so that nothing takes us by surprise. Our schedules seem flawless, until the unpredictable happens! It's then that we realize we have no control over anything, just a good dose of anxiety.

I'm not suggesting we abandon structure and planning; I love both. Thoughtful planning facilitates a smoother life and demonstrates prudence. However, the ultimate truth remains: only God has dominion over all things! As Proverbs 16:9 states, "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." Daniel 4:17 reinforces this: "The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of the world and gives them to anyone he wishes; he even sets over them the lowliest of people."

When you feel agitated because things have gotten out of your apparent control, may I encourage you to present all your concerns to the Lord through prayer, echoing the psalmist: "LORD, all my longings lie open before you; my sighing is not hidden from you" (Psalm 38:9). After you've done that, meditate on the encouraging words of Psalm 37:3-5: "Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this."

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. What is your first reaction when plans get out of your control?
2. Can you identify any area of your life that you are trying to hang on to control?
3. How have you seen the Lord's sovereignty when your plans have fallen apart?

4. THE REFLECTIVE HEART

“SEARCH ME, GOD, AND KNOW MY HEART; TEST ME AND KNOW MY ANXIOUS THOUGHTS. SEE IF THERE IS ANY OFFENSIVE WAY IN ME, AND LEAD ME IN THE WAY EVERLASTING.” – PSALM 139:23-24

After a long, tiring day I stood at the kitchen sink holding an encrusted plate. Because no one had washed the plate right after dinner, the grime on it had hardened and become stubbornly difficult to remove.

O friend, sometimes our lives look like that plate, don't they? God longs for us to regularly come to him and ask him to reveal the ways we have grieved him, so that we can confess our sin and receive his forgiveness. If we do not, our hearts get harder and a bit crustier. Without reflecting on our lives and asking the Spirit to show us where we have wandered away from him, our bad habits and wrong thought patterns can get embedded and become difficult to remove as well.

I have a heart problem. I guess we all do. Our hearts are prone to wander from God and his ways. People are always surprised when I say that one of my favorite gifts of God is the gift of repentance--the grace we need to see our sin as sinful so that we can turn to God and receive his forgiveness. I love this gift because, with God's forgiveness, we are washed clean by the blood of Jesus, set free of what bound us and restored in our fellowship with him. What a gift to us!

Our relational God calls us to love him and those around us, but unconfessed sin strains our relationship with God and all of our other relationships as well. Regular reflection on our lives with the Holy Spirit helps us become aware of our sin so we can immediately ask forgiveness. There is such healing and hope in reflection, repentance and forgiveness!

But reflection also helps us see and receive the gifts that God has given us in each day so that we can express our gratitude to him. It enables us to understand God's Word in a deeper way and put it into practice. And best of all, reflection enables us to see where God is revealing himself so that we can respond to him.

Dear friend, reflection can take many forms: journaling, noticing, using creative arts, music or contemplation. Can we humbly bring our hearts before God asking him to do the deep work within us that he desires by making reflection a regular part of our lives?

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. What are some tangible ways that you can incorporate reflection into your everyday life?
2. Where do you see God reaching out to you right now—with his love, compassion, guidance, graceful rebuke, forgiveness...?
3. How are you responding to Him?

5. THE FEARFUL HEART

HE SAID TO HIS DISCIPLES, “WHY ARE YOU SO AFRAID? DO YOU STILL HAVE NO FAITH?” MARK 4:40

Every day, thousands of people around the world experience a common feeling: fear! Fear is a universal human experience, ranging from the trivial to the truly debilitating. Think of the many things that can trigger fear: from everyday anxieties like public speaking or insects to deeper fears such as illness, loss, failure or the unknown.

We do not always know how to deal with the fears that knock on our door. We are afraid of being misunderstood or judged if we tell someone how we feel.

Fear is an old, undesirable companion of many. The disciples struggled with it as well. It all started when Jesus invited the disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee. During their voyage, a violent storm arose, threatening to capsize the boat. The disciples were extremely agitated and thought they were going to die.

In the midst of all this turmoil, Jesus was sleeping. Imagine that! Terrified, the disciples woke Jesus, crying out, “Master, don't you care if we drown?” (Mark 4:38). Their question revealed not only their fear but also a sense of abandonment, as if Jesus was indifferent to their plight.

Isn't that how we feel when a situation causes us fear? It seems that God doesn't care about what we are experiencing and feeling!

However, the story doesn't stop with the disciples' question. The account tells us that Jesus immediately stood up and revealed his power and love by rebuking the wind and saying to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” The wind calmed down, and there was complete calm.

After calming the sea and the winds, Jesus asked his disciples, “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” The disciples were terrified and amazed when they realized that even the wind and the sea obeyed Jesus and said, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:35-41).

The disciples were not fully aware that Jesus is Emmanuel. Just as Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, he can calm the storms in our lives. He is “God with us,” intimately aware of our struggles and capable of bringing peace to our troubled hearts.

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. What are you afraid of? Think of specific examples, both big and small.
2. How does this fear impact your life? Does it paralyze you?
3. How do you try to cope with fear?

6. THE BRAVE HEART

"BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS, BECAUSE YOU WILL LEAD THESE PEOPLE TO INHERIT THE LAND THAT I SWORE TO THEIR ANCESTORS TO GIVE THEM. ONLY BE STRONG AND VERY COURAGEOUS!" JOSHUA 1:6-7

Brave people inspire respect. They neither mean to call attention to themselves nor to impress anyone. They simply act naturally when faced with challenges, tackling them one by one. They seem to have a wealth of experience in the matter, even if they are going through that situation for the first time.

We find a number of amazing brave people in the Bible. The book of Joshua offers us a beautiful account of a dialogue between the Lord and Joshua after the death of Moses. The Lord said that he would fulfill the promise he made to Moses and would take them to a special land.

Joshua was then appointed to lead the people. This immense responsibility was accompanied by God's reassuring promise: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you!" (1:5) The Lord assures Joshua that he'll be with him every step of the way, and he promises to give him wisdom and offers a precious instruction: "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous!" (1:6-7)

You'll notice that in such a small passage we see the same instruction twice. God, knowing the challenges ahead, essentially tells him how important it is for him to follow the Lord's commandments and emphasizes that being brave is key: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

As we read stories like Joshua's, we are so encouraged to see God's power being manifested. The Lord, who knows the future, had instructed him more than once to be strong and courageous. It is as if he were saying: "Joshua, the armies will scare you. You will face difficult situations. Do not let fear rule over your heart. Be strong and courageous, for I am with you as you face every obstacle."

He says the same to us today: "Do not fear, be strong and courageous for the Lord, your God, is with you every step of the way."

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. Do you consider yourself a courageous or fearful person? Why?
2. Describe one or two specific instances where fear has influenced your decisions or actions. What were the circumstances, and what was the outcome?
3. How do you seek courage to face challenges?

7. THE WEARY HEART

“COME TO ME, ALL YOU WHO ARE WEARY AND BURDENED, AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST.”
MATTHEW 11:28

We are a weary people. The frantic pace of life wears us down and we find ourselves stressed, overworked and sleep deprived. Can you relate? Why are we running like this? Friends, can we stop long enough to hear Jesus calling and look to him for the rest that he offers our weary bodies and hearts?

Our hearts become weary when we see ourselves through the warped mirrors of performance and others' expectations of us. Perhaps our fear of rejection pushes us to try to produce and accomplish things that we think will make us acceptable in other people's eyes. So we work harder and push ourselves more.

But our self-worth does not come from what others think of us. The only person who has the right to define our worth is our creator. He desires for us to see ourselves the same way he views us—as having our identity in Christ rather than from what we accomplish or from others' opinions.

And there is hope in Jesus! When we come to faith in Christ, as Ephesians 1:3-14 tells us, we have been chosen by God. The Father not only wants us and sees us as valuable but also has adopted us. In addition, he has redeemed us, purchased us with the blood of Jesus and forgiven us, and he has sealed us with his Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our future life with him. God walks with us in this life and is now in heaven preparing the place where we will be with him forever. Encourage your weary hearts with these truths!

The Father extends an invitation to all of us to find real rest in him. This is more than ceasing activity, watching television or scrolling endlessly on our phones. There is a difference between godly rest and human relaxation. God calls us to embrace Sabbath with him, a time to cease working and rest in God's care for us. Sabbath may look like corporate worship, time away with God in solitude and silence, celebration with friends or reading and praying, being renewed in his presence. What Sabbath activities bring life to you and nurture your soul?

King David understood the source of rest as he wrote, “Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him” (Psalm 62:1). God is our rest. As we come to him, lay our burdens down, quiet ourselves and trust in him, we will find rest for our weary hearts.

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. As you reflect with God, what wrong thinking are you believing that is causing you to become weary?
2. When you are exhausted, what are the ways that you seek rest?
3. What have you found that refreshes your soul and mind?

8. THE PERSEVERING HEART

“CONSIDER IT PURE JOY, MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS, WHENEVER YOU FACE TRIALS OF MANY KINDS, BECAUSE YOU KNOW THAT THE TESTING OF YOUR FAITH PRODUCES PERSEVERANCE. LET PERSEVERANCE FINISH ITS WORK SO THAT YOU MAY BE MATURE AND COMPLETE, NOT LACKING ANYTHING.” – JAMES 1:2-4

Some of God's words are hard to receive. It is only through understanding the Father's heart of love for us and acknowledging that he is a good Father that we can embrace the verses above for ourselves with courage and hope. The Father desires us to become like Jesus, to grow and mature as we learn to trust him in all things. And the way that he usually does this is through challenges in our lives. James 1:3 says that the testing of our faith produces perseverance. But it only does this if we don't run away from the difficulties, but rather, allow the pressure of the circumstances to mature us.

If God wants us to have persevering hearts so that we can become more Christlike, what do we need to understand and embrace for this to happen? Friend, what hope can we cling to as we walk through difficulty?

We are called to stand firm. This is a deliberate act of our will to choose not to give up or run from our time of testing. Paul shares in Ephesians 6:13, “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” We stand firm on God, our solid rock, using the truth of the Scriptures just as Jesus did when Satan tempted him in the wilderness.

We don't need to fear, for we are not alone. Trials in life are hard, but God tells us that we will not face them alone. Just as he told Joshua, he tells us, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). We can be comforted and strengthened because we know that God promises to walk by our side. (Isaiah 43:2)

We place our faith in Jesus who understands our trials. Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested. (Hebrews 2:18) Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, and is now interceding for us. Friends, as we stand firm through difficult times with God by our side, let's call out to him, "so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. What is your view of the Father's heart towards you?
2. As you reflect on times in your life when you have persevered and other times when you have not, what has made the difference?
3. Who can you turn to when you need someone to remind you of what is true and to help you stand when life becomes difficult?

9. THE ANXIOUS HEART

“SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND ALL THESE THINGS WILL BE ADDED TO YOU. THEREFORE, DO NOT WORRY ABOUT TOMORROW, FOR TOMORROW WILL WORRY ABOUT ITSELF. EACH DAY HAS ENOUGH TROUBLE OF ITS OWN.”
MATTHEW 6:33-34

Are you an anxious person? If your answer is yes, know that you are not alone. Anxiety is considered one of the greatest evils of the 21st century. It is a kind of permanent state of expectation, as well as alertness, worry, fear and tension. It can creep in gradually, taking root in our thoughts and hearts, especially when we face the unknown.

We allow our minds to come up with several scenarios of everything that could happen. We picture all that could go wrong, and before we know it, anxiety becomes our best friend. The pandemic years amplified feelings of uncertainty, providing fertile ground for anxiety to flourish. COVID-19, with its unpredictable nature, became a focal point for our fears. The fact that it affected individuals differently created a sense of pervasive insecurity. The mere possibility of testing positive was a source of distress for many, highlighting how disease, in general, can trigger profound anxiety.

Beyond specific events like the pandemic, the uncertainty of the future is a constant source of anxiety. Charles Spurgeon's statement says it all: "Anxiety does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows, but only empties today of its strength." Jesus addressed this tendency toward worry directly, reminding his disciples that anxiety adds nothing to our lives. (Matthew 6:27)

He also encouraged them by saying that the heavenly Father knows everything we need and added, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:33-34).

Our God knows the concerns of our hearts and invites us to not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present our requests to God, so that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, may guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7) May we all learn to embrace this invitation to trust in him, living each day in complete dependence upon his grace.

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. In what situations do you usually feel anxious? Think of specific examples.
2. How does anxiety impact your life?
3. How do you try to cope with anxiety?

10. THE ABIDING HEART

“AND GOD RAISED US UP WITH CHRIST AND SEATED US WITH HIM IN THE HEAVENLY REALMS IN CHRIST JESUS.” EPHESIANS 2:6

There are so many truths within the Christian life that are both mysterious and amazing. One of those truths for me is that God's Spirit dwells within us and that we dwell “in Christ” in the heavenly realms. (Ephesians 2:6) God has invited us into this most intimate and holy relationship with him! This is true of us. Yet, in order to walk in the power of this reality, we need to choose to actually believe this and live it out.

Because we are “in Christ” having access to everything that Jesus' blood purchased for us, we have all that we need to live a godly life. (2 Peter 1:3) When we embrace living “in Christ,” we are acting on the truth that God lives us in and we live in him. Jesus describes this life in John 15 as “abiding in him.” He told his disciples that as they abide in him and he in them, they would bear much fruit, bring the Father glory and show themselves to be his true disciples.

As we abide in the Father, Son and Spirit, his characteristics develop in us--his power to live a godly life is available to us. As we draw near to him, surrendering and purposefully choosing him and his ways, God's power can mold, shape and mature us to be transformed into his image.

The abiding heart is one that is living in God, obeying him and reaching out to others in love. Everything in our lives is viewed through the perspective that we dwell in God and he dwells in us.

Friends, can we ask ourselves, “Is my heart abiding in God?” and “What difference does it make in my everyday life knowing that God and I dwell together?”

My heart changed when I learned to see my sin as a personal offense against my God who was present with me every moment. Also, my faith was bolstered when I learned to view his promises and truth as coming from the God who was right by my side. God is not some far away father. His presence and power are with you, calling out for you to engage with him. Does that change the way you think or act? I know it did for me!

As we embrace truly abiding with God, being “in Christ” and being united with his Spirit, it can change everything. Can we embrace this truth and ask God to develop in us a heart that abides with him?

REFLECTION QUESTION

1. Is your heart abiding in God?
2. How can you practically live out this reality that God lives in you and you dwell with him?
3. What difference does knowing this make in your life?



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WOMEN
OF **HOPE**