



# WORDS TO LIVE BY

by Pastors Andy George and Daniel Messina



CROSSROADS  
FELLOWSHIP

*Words to Live By*

Copyright © 2020 Crossroads Fellowship

All rights reserved. No part of this book shall be reproduced, stored in retrieval systems, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, without the express written permission of the publisher or contributor, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (The Holy Bible : Holman Christian Standard Bible.), copyright © 2007 by Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Find more information about our ministries at [www.crossroads.org](http://www.crossroads.org).

## **- CONTENTS -**

Chapter 1 - Encouragement .....	1
Chapter 2 - Thankfulness.....	17
Chapter 3 - Generosity .....	31
Chapter 4 - Invitation.....	43

## Chapter One

### - ENCOURAGEMENT -

**E**ncouragement. Sometimes it is helpful to know that you are not alone. It is comforting to have somebody else around you and for you.

Let's explore what it looks like to live with encouragement in the face of discouragement. Our thoughts can hold us back, push us down and feed us lies, but they can also lift us up. The way we think about ourselves, about a situation or other people either lifts us up or brings us down. Is it time to change the way you are thinking about a situation, a person, yourself or maybe even about God?

Scripture contains many words of encouragement for us. As we examine these "*words to live by*" from the Bible and apply them in our lives, we will start to discover what God's purposes are.

I pray you will become an equipped and effective follower of Jesus and that this book will help you see God working in your life in an amazing way. As we examine the meaning of words, I hope you will feel truly encouraged.

## **We All Need Encouragement**

What in your life right now is encouraging to you? Perhaps you find encouragement in what other people say to you. Maybe you are bolstered by finishing a project or through hard work that results in getting a bid or promotion.

Some people are encouraged by studying and getting good grades; others find encouragement in athletics and the hard work it took to make a sports team. Perhaps you are encouraged by the way you look or how you feel. We can be encouraged in many different ways.

When life seems to be going well, it can be kind of easy to find encouragement. But what happens when life throws you a curve ball? What do you do when discouragement creeps in and begins to affect your thoughts and who you are? Can you still maintain encouragement when you feel attacked and all alone?

There are times when you have done everything right and have worked hard, yet there are still no results. Everyone else seems to be cheating or taking some slack, and life is falling into place for them. Meanwhile, you are doing things the right way and nothing is happening. How do you face discouragement then? How can you still feel encouraged in those moments when you've done everything you know how to do and still feel discouraged?

Even on your best days and in your best moments, you need encouragement. The people around you need encouragement from you as well.

## **Poison Water, Floating Axes and Defying Death**

Elisha was one of the greatest prophets in the Old Testament. An Old Testament prophet was a messenger and spokesperson

for God. God often used prophets to bring visions and to perform great miracles.

Elisha's ministry started when the former prophet, Elijah, handed him his cloak to signify that his time as a prophet was done. Elijah gave his cloak to Elisha, blessed him, and Elisha took the ministry from there.

In 2 Kings 2, we see the very first thing Elisha did after becoming a prophet - he parted the Jordan River! Elisha took Elijah's cloak, put it in water and the river split. How would you like to have that on your résumé as the first thing you did in your new career? That's a pretty awesome start. When I started youth ministry 24 years ago, the first thing I probably did was have a pizza party with Mountain Dew. Yet here's Elisha splitting water!

Parting the Jordan was just the first of the miracles noted in 2 Kings. Later, in chapter 2, Elisha healed water that had been poisoned. When a group of young men were taunting him, he cursed them in the name of the Lord and they were attacked by bears. Chapter 3 recounts the miracle of a valley being filled with water so the soldiers and animals could drink from it. Through Elisha, the Moabites thought they were seeing a valley of blood and were defeated by the Israelites.

Elisha's impressive track record continues in 2 Kings, chapters 4 and 5. He performed the miracle of the vessels of oil for the poor widow. Elisha gave a prophecy to a Shunammite woman that she would have a son. Several years later, when her son unexpectedly died, Elisha was summoned and returned to resurrect her son from the dead. That's pretty powerful! Elisha purified poisonous gourds and performed a miracle with twenty loaves of bread that fed a hundred people. He healed Naaman,

the commander of the king of Aram's (modern day Syria) army.

The list of miracles continues in 2 Kings 6: 1-7. Someone lost a borrowed iron ax head in the Jordan River. Elisha threw a stick in the water and the ax head floated to the top so they could retrieve it. Elisha was a powerful prophet.

## **Finding Hope through Elisha's Hard Times**

So, how does this relate to our need for encouragement in times of discouraged today? In 2 Kings 6, the king of Israel was at war with the king of Aram. God gave Elisha the ability to alert the king of Israel to move his armies away from the enemy army. Every time the enemy king and his military planned to move against Israel, Elisha prayed. God told Elisha where the enemy was going to be, so the Israelites were forewarned. The enemy king of Aram became incredibly angry and sent a massive army to capture one person, Elisha.

Elisha was taking a stand and doing powerful works of God. God was using him to perform miracles, raise people from the dead and to part the waters. Yet, suddenly there was an entire army out to get just him. There may be times in your own life, when you are doing all of the right things and walking in God's plans, yet you feel like the Enemy is still attacking. It is easy to feel defeated and get discouraged if you are not careful.

There are four things to do when you are discouraged:

### **1. Choose between right and easy.**

Doing the right thing is not always easy. In fact, it's often pretty difficult to stand up and do the right things. When everybody else is doing the wrong things, we have a choice to make. Are we going to do what is right or are we going to choose

what is easy?

**“When the king of Aram was waging war against Israel, he conferred with his servants, ‘My camp will be at such and such a place.’ But the man of God [Elisha] sent word to the king of Israel: ‘Be careful passing by this place, for the Arameans are going down there.’ Consequently, the king of Israel sent word to the place the man of God had told him about. The man of God repeatedly warned the king, so the king would be on his guard. The king of Aram was enraged because of this matter, and he called his servants and demanded of them, ‘Tell me, which one of us is for the king of Israel?’”**

(2 Kings 6:8-11)

Do you see what was happening in this chapter? Elisha was getting a word from God to warn the king of Israel not to go to a certain place, because that’s where the enemy was. In turn, the king of Aram suspected that somebody in his own ranks was telling Israel where they were going to be. He gathered them together and asked, “Which one of you is not for us? Which one of you is ratting out where we’re going to go?”

**“One of his servants said, ‘No one, my lord the king. Elisha, the prophet in Israel, tells the king of Israel even the words you speak in your bedroom.’ So the king said, ‘Go and see where he is, so I can send men to capture him.’ When he was told, ‘Elisha is in Dothan,’ he sent horses, chariots, and a massive army there.”** (Notice he did not send just a few people.



He sent a massive army to capture one person.) **“They went by night and surrounded the city.”** (2 Kings 6:12-14)

Doing the right thing is not always easy. There is a tremendous temptation to do what is right or what is popular. Part of doing the right thing is choosing to do what is right, even when you know it is not popular. The question is...*are you willing to take that chance and pay that price?*

This choice played out often when I was working with students. Our Student Ministry would have a fantastic weekend event. The students would be fired up to live for Christ. But what happened when they went back to school on Monday? Suddenly, standing up for the right thing wasn't popular. When they chose to stand up for their purity or for doing what's morally right, it often went against popular opinion. Soon, they weren't getting invited to things. Friends snickered behind their backs or they were being labeled by their peers. It became a much more difficult choice to make when the price they paid was so high.

It doesn't necessarily change when you are an adult either. As God changes your heart and leads you to becoming more like Him, you may realize that the popular way to talk and the popular way to do business might not be the Christ-like way. So, do you choose to act the “way it's always been done” or do you choose the right way? That is the tension we face pretty regularly.

Maybe you feel a bit like Elisha right now; you are doing the right things, but it feels like there is an army out to get you. The enemy is pressing hard. Perhaps there is someone who doesn't like the way you are living your life and they are out to ruin your reputation.

So, do you fold in or do what is popular just because it's easier? It is tempting to do the things everybody celebrates and says, "Hey, great. You're just like us," but Jesus calls us to be different. Being different means that you often have to choose between being right or being popular.

The reality is, we are going to face discouragement in life.

**"I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world."**

(John 16:33)

It all comes down to this: Do you really believe that Jesus is who He says He is and has already conquered the world?

I know this truth doesn't necessarily make the difficulties less painful. It doesn't make the trials easier or the arrows coming at you any softer. It doesn't mean it is not going to be hard, but it does mean that you have already won. Jesus, in His own words, says, "You are going to have peace. The only way you are going to have peace through suffering or be encouraged in the middle of discouragement is to really, truly believe and live like I've already conquered the world."

When you face tomorrow knowing that you are already a conqueror, it can change your week. You can face the pressure of popularity versus right and wrong because you can stand on something bigger than yourself. You can rest in knowing that you are His and He is yours.

## **2. Open your eyes.**

Be encouraged in the knowledge that those who are for you are more than those who are against you. There is transformation

when you really believe that the God who is for you is greater and bigger than anybody who's against you! Any demon, any devil, any issue, any discouragement, anything that comes against you – they all must bow before the God of the universe.

Be encouraged. You might *feel* alone and discouraged, but *you are not alone*. Your enemy, Satan, would love to make you think you are all alone. He would love to pull you away and start whispering in your ear that nobody gets it, nobody is following you, nobody is for you and that you are the only one who wants to do the right thing. He will try to convince you that you are going to lose your job if you make a statement or that you will lose credibility. You need to hold onto the truth that, **“...those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”** (2 Kings 6:6, ESV.) You are not in this fight alone.

Take encouragement from this passage and watch how the story unfolds.

**“When the servant of the man of God got up early and went out, he discovered an army with horses and chariots surrounding the city.”**

(2 Kings 6:15)

Imagine how you would feel if you were the servant. You have been serving Elisha, one of the greatest prophets ever. You have seen him do miracle after miracle after miracle. You wake up one morning, walk outside and are stunned to find you are surrounded by a massive army!

I can almost picture him walking outside and stopping in his tracks, then, sprinting right back inside the doors to find Elisha.

**“Oh, my master, what are we to do?”**

Haven't you often felt that way in your own life? You are discouraged. You're feeling the weight of all the responsibility on your shoulders. You don't know what the next step is. "What am I going to do?"

We have all had sleepless nights, where you lie awake at 3:00am because your mind is going and going and going. You lie there, staring at the clock, thinking, "What am I going to do next?" You have no idea what the answer is. You feel hopeless and alone.

That's exactly what the Enemy wants to do! He wants to surround us, show us how big and mean he really is, and get us to quiver and be afraid.

I am sure Elisha's servant was panicked and afraid, but Elisha calmly responded,

**"Don't be afraid, for those who are with us  
outnumber those who are with them."** (2 Kings 6:16)

I wish I could have witnessed this conversation. I imagine the servant probably said something like, "Hang on a second. I need further explanation. There are two of us, me and you. We are not with the Israelites. We're not with the army. What are you talking about?"

The Bible doesn't say Elisha got up to examine the army before responding. He didn't look outside and count, "One, two, three... Oh yeah, we've got this. Don't worry about it." Elisha could see things nobody else could see because of what he believed. He already saw it and was able to tell his servant,

**"Don't be afraid, for those who are with us  
outnumber those who are with them." Then Elisha**

**prayed, “Lord, please open his eyes and let him see.”**

(1 Kings 6:16-17)

My prayer for you is that the Lord would open your eyes and allow you to see where He is in the middle of your discouraging moments. In the midst of your trials, may God open your eyes so you can see what He sees. I imagine that if we saw what God sees, we would no longer be anxious or controlled by our doubts or fears.

I am not minimizing the pain that you may be going through or any future pain you will experience. I am not dismissing the heartbreak or discouragement that you may be carrying. But, do not allow the Enemy to rob you of your sight of a God who is bigger than all of it, a God who commands the armies of heaven. Open your eyes and see a God who loves you so deeply, He sent His son, Jesus, for you.

You are not alone! God, Jesus and the armies of heaven are on your side. How big does that Devil look now? How threatening does that person in the office next to you look compared to that?

**“...So the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he saw that the mountain was covered with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”**

(2 Kings 6:17)

When Elisha asked, “Lord, open his eyes so he can see,” the Lord opened the servant’s eyes and he saw the army of the Lord encompassed in fire around the enemy. This is what we need to see in our own situations. God, open our eyes so we can see.

How do we do this? First, we have to recognize that fear is a liar and that fear is not from God.

**“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment.” (2 Timothy 1:7)**

This is the God we serve. We cannot allow discouragement or fear to creep in when we have a God who tells us, “I am for you. I created you; I created the universe. I am for you, not against you! Do not be afraid.” Open your eyes and see.

**“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power...”**

(Ephesians 1:17-19)

We do not serve a God who has limited power. God doesn't ever look at you or your situation and scratch His head saying, “I don't know how I'm going to do this.” We do not serve a God who looks at the biggest giant and trembles in fear. You are a child of the God of the universe who has immeasurable power, and He wants you to know that. You are called to be a part of the greatness and power of God.

### **3. Live with authority.**

Not only do you need to see and believe, but you must also start putting this into action. Through God, you have authority over every enemy that comes at you. Watch this unfold:

**“When the Arameans came against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord, ‘Please strike this nation with**

**blindness.’ So he struck them with blindness, according to Elisha’s word. Then Elisha said to them, ‘This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will take you to the man you’re looking for.’”** (2 Kings 6:18)

What an incredible story! When Elisha prays, “God, blind the army,” God blinds them. Then Elisha himself walks down and says, “Hey, who are you looking for? Elisha? Oh, I know where he is. Follow me.” And they followed him. Put your mind around what’s happening here. Not only does he lead them, but he leads them to Samaria where the king of Israel and his army is waiting.

**“When they entered Samaria, Elisha said, ‘Lord, open these men’s eyes and let them see.’ So the Lord opened their eyes, and they saw that they were in the middle of Samaria.”** (2 Kings 6:20)

The authority Elisha had and walked with is the same power and authority you have today. Satan and the demons and everything else you may be up against have no authority or power over the one who is aligned under the covering of the power of Jesus. He has no power or authority over you. The only power somebody has over you, spiritually or here in this life, is the power you give them.

We serve a Jesus who has full authority and full power. There is no demon, there is no person, there is no situation that outpowers the Jesus you serve. The Bible says that this same power that rose Him from the dead, dwells in you. Let that sink in for just a moment. Don’t rush through it, “Yeah, I’ve heard that before.” Think about what that truly means.

The very power that raised a dead man from the grave after three days, that shook the rock apart, that tore the garments in two is the same power you have access to right now, today. You have authority, but you have to walk in it.

In Luke 10, Jesus chose 72 people, gave them a few instructions and sent them out in pairs to do ministry. They reported back to Jesus when they returned.

**“The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.’”** (Not in the name of your church, not in your individual name, but under the name of Jesus all every thing bows.) **“He said to them, ‘I watched Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Look, I have given you the authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy; nothing at all will harm you.’”** (Luke 10:17-19)

Then he put it in the right perspective. **“However, don’t rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”** (Luke 10:20)

Ultimately, our goal is to glorify Jesus and keep our eyes on eternal life in heaven. If we lose perspective about who it is all about (Jesus), then that is when fear and discouragement start to overwhelm us. When we lose perspective, failure and trials start to win. Jesus refocuses their joy, “I’m glad you’re excited. I’ve given you all authority, but don’t lose perspective that it’s all about eternity.”

#### **4. Listen to the right voice.**

You cannot allow the opinions or the lifestyles of others to



influence your calling and your life. You cannot allow others to drown out the voice of God. It is not going to be easy.

Sometimes those other voices are good and encouraging. Sometimes they are not. You cannot allow the opinions and choices of other people to start dictating your choices. If you live with fear, you will give into the voices of others. If you live with discouragement, then you will be tossed back and forth. You have to live in authority and listen to the right voice.

**“When the king of Israel saw [the Aramean army], he said to Elisha, ‘Should I kill them, should I kill them, my father?’”** (2 Kings 6:21)

The Aramean army was the very army that had been trying to destroy Israel for a while. Israel finally has them outmaneuvered because God revealed to Elisha where to go. At last, this enemy is now surrounded by Israel. You can almost imagine everyone with their hands on their swords, ready to go.

The king of Israel looked to Elisha and asked, “Shall I kill them all?” Elisha’s response is absolutely amazing,

**“Don’t kill them. Do you kill those you have captured with your sword or your bow?”** (Customarily, they did not kill people who surrendered or were captured.) **“Set food and water in front of them so they can eat and drink and go to their master.’ So he prepared a big feast for them. When they had eaten and drunk, he sent them away, and they went to their master. The Aramean raiders did not come into Israel’s land again.”** (2 Kings 6:22-23)

The Aramean soldiers left there with their lives and never came

back. I encourage you to apply this lesson to your own life. Do not lower your standards to match the world's standards. Don't lower your morality or your convictions to operate the same way everybody else is operating. Do it God's way, and allow God to fight for you. Allow God to take care of your battles. The Bible says the battle is the Lord's, you just have to stand. Stand on His security and on His authority.

### **Won't, Can't, Shouldn't**

When being interviewed about playing baseball, former football Heisman Trophy winner, Tim Tebow, said, "You are always going to have critics and naysayers and people tell you that you won't, that you can't, that you shouldn't."

What about you? Have you heard that negative voice in your own life? It could be the voice of other people or it might be your *own* voice telling you, "You can't do this. You won't do this. You won't accomplish it. You shouldn't do this."

Tim Tebow continued, "Most of those people are the people that didn't, that wouldn't, that couldn't."

What a great perspective! Do not allow the opinions of other people who don't, who wouldn't, or who can't, influence what you should or should not do. We cannot allow the voice of people around us to drown out the voice of God.

You need to ask yourself if you are trying to please people or trying to please God.

**"For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."**  
(Galatians 1:10)

Are you living for yourself or are you living for God? If you are living for the applause of others and pats on the back, then you will be persuaded to live just for popularity. If all you care about is what people think of you, you will eventually end up doing the popular thing, rather than the right one. It isn't easy. Yet, we have the God of the universe who is so desperately in love with us, who thinks the world of us, to the point that he gave his Son as a ransom for us. Don't listen to the wrong voices. Be encouraged. He that is for you is more than anybody against you.

God is the God of the impossible and a God of immeasurable power and greatness. Find encouragement in knowing that you are loved by the God of the universe.

## Chapter Two

### - THANKFULNESS-

Let's explore the word *thankfulness*. Out of all of the books of the Bible, the book of Psalms talks about thankfulness the most. As a side note, the Old Testament book Jesus Christ mentions the most is Psalms. It holds a special place in the heart of God.

**“I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness; I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High.”** (Psalm 7:17, ESV)

**“I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.”** (Psalm 9:1, ESV)

**“Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.”** (Psalm 95:2-3, ESV)

One of my favorite chapters is Psalm 100:

**“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth!  
Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his**

**presence with singing! Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving...**” (There’s that word, “thanksgiving.”) **“...and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”** (Psalm 100:1-5, ESV)

### **Thankfulness to God is always accompanied by praise.**

Psalm 100 focuses entirely on thanksgiving and praise and is a great segue into Psalm 136. Psalm 136 is recited in many Jewish festivals including during the Jewish Passover on the eighth day. It is referred to as the *Great Hallel* and is where we get the word *hallelujah*. Hallelujah means “*Let us praise Yahweh.*” So, when we say or sing, “hallelujah,” we are invoking the praise of God. Psalms 113-118 are actually a group called the Hallel Psalms.

I find it very telling that the very last verse of Psalm 118 is the very first verse of Psalm 136, verbatim. It says, **“Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!”** Psalm 136, which is also a psalm of praise. It is connected to Psalm 135. The very first word of Psalm 135 in Hebrew is *Hallelujah*. So, these psalms are telling us there is a praise that God deserves which belongs to God and God alone, and it is fueled by thankfulness.

Psalm 136 begins, **“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good....”** If you grew up in church in America, you probably have heard the phrase “God is good all the time; and all the time, God is good.” That comes from this Psalm.

**“Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever....”**

(Psalm 136:2-3, ESV)

We can learn a great deal from just these first three verses. First, *the object of our thankfulness is God. The means of our thankfulness is praising God for who He is.* He says He is Lord, He’s God of gods, and He’s the Lord of Lords. Finally, *the reason for our thankfulness is his steadfast love that endures forever.*

Author J.I. Packer stated, “We need to discover all over again that worship is natural to the Christian, as it was to the godly Israelites who wrote the psalms, and that the habit of celebrating the greatness and graciousness of God yields an endless flow of thankfulness, joy, and zeal.” How would life be if you embraced “a habit of celebrating”?

Now, if thankfulness is always accompanied by praise, *how is your worship life?* When you gather to worship God with others, is your heart and your mind filled with thankfulness to God or are your prayers characterized mostly by petition? In other words, are you thanking God or just asking God *for* things?

There’s nothing wrong with asking God for something, but I believe that in order for us to really, truly worship God, we first need to develop a heart of thankfulness. If you have a hard time answering these questions, perhaps you have yet to understand who God is, you have yet to discover that worship is fueled by thankfulness, and perhaps you have yet to discover that God is worthy of praise simply because He is who He says He is.

## **Thankfulness to God is enriched by our understanding of the nature and character of God.**

When you look at Psalm 136, you will notice that the second stanza of each of the verses is the phrase, “His love endures forever.” Some versions say, “steadfast love.” To really grasp this, you need to read Psalm 136 aloud:

**“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.**

*His love endures forever.*

**Give thanks to the God of gods.**

*His love endures forever.*

**Give thanks to the Lord of lords:**

*His love endures forever.*

**to him who alone does great wonders,**

*His love endures forever.*

**who by his understanding made the heavens,**

*His love endures forever.*

**who spread out the earth upon the waters,**

*His love endures forever.*

**who made the great lights—**

*His love endures forever.*

**the sun to govern the day,**

*His love endures forever.*

**the moon and stars to govern the night;**

*His love endures forever.*

**to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt**

*His love endures forever.*

**and brought Israel out from among them**

*His love endures forever.*

**with a mighty hand and outstretched arm;**

*His love endures forever.*  
to him who divided the Red Sea asunder  
*His love endures forever.*  
and brought Israel through the midst of it,  
*His love endures forever.*  
but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea;  
*His love endures forever.*  
to him who led his people through the wilderness;  
*His love endures forever.*  
to him who struck down great kings,  
*His love endures forever.*  
and killed mighty kings—  
*His love endures forever.*  
Sihon king of the Amorites  
*His love endures forever.*  
and Og king of Bashan—  
*His love endures forever.*  
and gave their land as an inheritance,  
*His love endures forever.*  
an inheritance to his servant Israel.  
*His love endures forever.*  
He remembered us in our low estate  
*His love endures forever.*  
and freed us from our enemies.  
*His love endures forever.*  
He gives food to every creature.  
*His love endures forever.*  
Give thanks to the God of heaven.  
*His love endures forever.*



Why is it important to read it aloud? I want you to really hear how this psalm tells us that thankfulness is rooted in the steadfast love of the Lord. The Hebrew word used is *checed*, which refers to God's covenantal faithfulness to His people, specifically to us.

### Breaking it Down

I believe this chapter of the Bible can be divided in five different parts. Part One is being thankful to God for who He is. He is the Lord. He is the God of gods.

Part Two (verses 4-9) focuses on being thankful to God for what He has created.

Part Three is being thankful to God for His care for us as His people (particularly Israel in this context.)

Part Four is being thankful to God for caring for our individual needs. Verse 25 says, **“He gives food to every creature.”** God provides for us even in the minute details of our lives.

Part Five is being thankful to God for His sovereign control over everything.

Psalm 136 has what is called an *inclusio*; it begins with thanks and ends with thanks. Psalm 136:1 says, **“Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good...”** and the very last verse, 26, says, **“Give thanks to the God of heaven...”** In light of what we just uncovered, do you think we have reason to be thankful? Do you think we can exemplify a life of thanksgiving to others? I believe we have more than enough reasons to be thankful.

### Our Problem with Thankfulness

However, we have a problem with being thankful. Most of the time our thankfulness to God is conditioned by our present circumstances. Here's what I mean by that.

We often don't realize how much we should be thankful for something that is valuable to us until it is gone. Someone dies. You move away. There's a major change in your life, and then you realize that you should have been more thankful for a person or a situation, etc. Stale routine is the enemy of thankfulness. Don't get in the routine of being stale in your praise and worship to God. Praise Him for even the small things you have in life. That's the secret to being thankful.

We also tend to forget to be thankful when God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want Him to answer. We pray for a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a car or a house or a new job or a million other things. We keep praying over and over again, but God seems like He doesn't care. He's not answering our prayer, so over time, we create an attitude of unthankfulness to God because He didn't answer our prayers the way we expected.

But, Psalm 136:1-3 says God is the God of gods. He is the Lord of Lords. He is Lord Almighty. That does not mean He is going to give you everything you want, because He is also a loving God and He knows what's best for you. Now, most of the time, we are not thankful to God because our thankfulness to Him is conditional. If things are not going well in my relationships, I tend to be less thankful to God. If I am not content with my present circumstances, then I tend to be less thankful to God.

If others are persecuting, harassing or harming me, I tend to be less thankful to God. If my security and my safety or my character come under attack, I tend to be less thankful to God. The psalmist is trying to remind us of this powerful statement: *ki l'olam chasdo*. He says, **"...for his steadfast love endures**

**forever.”** It’s not just for now. It’s forever. The phrase *his steadfast love* is repeated numerous times. Do you believe that His love endures forever?

Notice that the very first three verses begin with imperative verbs. **“Give thanks to the LORD...” “Give thanks to the God of gods...” “Give thanks to the Lord of lords...”** Why? Because we are commanded to praise Him because He is simply who He says He is, and that should not be conditioned by our circumstances.

## Unconditional Thankfulness

In 1636, amid the darkness of the Thirty Years’ War, a German pastor named Martin Rinckart was said to have buried 5,000 of his parishioners in one year. They had an average of 15 funerals a day. His parish was ravished by war, by death and by economic disaster. In the heart of that darkness, as he heard the cries outside of his office window and as death was looming over that church, he sat down and wrote this beautiful poem:

*Now thank we all our God  
With heart and hands and voices,  
Who wondrous things hath done,  
In whom his world rejoices;  
Who from our mother’s arms  
Hath blessed us on our way  
With countless gifts of love,  
And still is ours today.*

Notice the focus is on thankfulness and, finally, on God’s love. You see, Rinckart knew what it meant to be thankful to God no matter the circumstances and no matter what was going on

outwardly. He understood that when we are rooted in the love God has, thankfulness is an outflow. God's faithfulness is an outflow of His loving character and His person, and it endures forever. It is not conditional on our state of affairs. It is not conditioned by our circumstances. It is not conditioned on how good we are or how well we behave. It just *is*.

### **A Lesson in Gratitude**

According to Harvard Medical School and positive psychology research, gratitude actually is consistently associated with greater happiness. Two psychologists, Robert A. Emmons of the University of California and Dr. Michael McCullough of the University of Miami, did a little research on gratitude. In one study, they asked all participants to write a few sentences each week focusing on particular topics. Group One wrote about things they were grateful for that occurred during the week. Group Two wrote about daily irritations or things that annoyed them, and Group Three could write about anything.

After ten weeks, those who wrote about gratitude were more optimistic. They felt better about their lives, they exercised more, and they visited a doctor less, because they were not focusing on their sources of aggravation.

You have heard it before, ***gratitude determines attitude***. Though this research indicates that gratitude or thankfulness truly is good for us, we still have not answered what the key to thankfulness is. My contention is that the key lies in the person of God and in remembering who He is.

**Thankfulness to God materializes when we remember who He is, what He has done and what He does.**

The psalmist who wrote Psalm 136 communicates this to us by:

- ***Acknowledging who God is.*** He is the Lord. He is the God of gods, and He is the Lord of Lords.
- ***Remembering God's creative acts.*** Some translations may say "his wonders." What are God's wonders? They include the making of the heavens, spreading out the earth, and making of the great lights, like the sun and the moon and the stars.
- ***Recalling God's care for his people through redemptive history.*** The psalmist recounts the deliverance from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, overthrowing Pharaoh, and God taking care of His people through the wilderness and protecting them from enemies.
- ***Recognizing God's personal care.*** He acknowledged God's care for them individually by not forgetting about them and by God providing protection and food.

If you are a believer, do you remember what God has called you out of and what God has called you to? Do you remember the moment when you realized your sinfulness before a holy God and you received His forgiveness and redeeming power over your life? Do you remember how faithful God has been throughout your journey with Him? We often forget, don't we? I believe many of us suffer from Christian amnesia; we forget about God.

## Don't Forget

Let me share a personal story about how God really showed up in my own life. After my first year in college, I didn't realize that I still owed the school \$500. I came from Brazil, and had many restrictions as an international student. I had to pay that money, but at the time the currency exchange rate was 3:1, so essentially I was paying triple the actual amount of \$500. It was far too much money for my parents to help me at that time.

I had worked really hard all throughout that year. I worked in the dean's office doing office work, I worked in the cafeteria, and I was cleaning floors and cleaning bathrooms. (Which could be really nasty at times.) The point is, I was doing whatever I could just trying to make ends meet and pay for college. I was busting it, but at the end of the semester I still owed \$500.

I remember walking into the financial aid office and hearing, "Daniel, in order for you to come back next year, you need to pay \$500." But, I honestly did not have \$500 and could not envision a way to come up with that money. At that time, if I didn't pay, I faced the possibility of being deported. I could be sent back to Brazil because I didn't comply with all of the regulations.

For a moment, I felt utterly defeated. I remember leaving that office, and walking to the Student Center thinking, "What do I do?" It was about a five-to-ten-minute walk, and I prayed the entire time, saying, "God, you know what? You brought me here. You have a purpose for me being here, so I'm going to trust in you. I don't know what to do."

I walked into the Student Center, went to my mailbox and opened it. And, inside that mailbox Uncle Sam greeted me. I had a \$501 check for a tax return! I seriously could not make up

a more perfect answer. I was praising the Lord, “God, you’re so good. You’re so awesome.” I had \$1 left over. I don’t even know what I did with that dollar. I think I bought some chocolate to celebrate! Chocolate is my weakness.

As I was reflecting on that story, I realized that we often *do* forget how God has shown up in our lives, don’t we? I’m sure many of you have stories of God’s provision in your life, times where you can look back and say, “God has been so good to me.” Yet, sometimes we let our present circumstances overwhelm that memory. We forget God’s wondrous works. We forget that He is for us, not against us. He holds all the power of the universe. We forget that He’s intimately acquainted with every single detail of our lives and that He provides. *Remember. Don’t forget.*

We also forget how blessed we are to live as Christians in America today. The average life expectancy in the US is right now is eighty years old. For comparison, in the 1900s, life expectancy was 45. We are blessed to live in these days. We have the Word of God translated in our language and we have different versions of it. We have numerous Christian resources available and we have everything at our fingertips.

We don’t often have to think about the reality of death either. We have food on a regular basis and we have resources. Around the world, in poorer countries, the reality of death is constantly on people’s minds.

We have plenty of reasons to be thankful, yet we are not. As broken and sinful human beings our default mode is to be negative. The truth is that it is easier to criticize than it is to praise somebody.

The key to being thankful is not more sex, more money or

more power. It's not more materialism. In fact, studies show that suicide rates are higher in richer countries than in poorer ones. See, we are not satisfied.

I believe the key to finding satisfaction is Jesus. The key is finding thankfulness in God. If you focus on praising Him for His goodness, the natural outflow is that you will become a thankful person.

Do you know how you know someone is unthankful? Let me give you some characteristics. An unthankful person has a hard time saying "Thanks," whether it is at the grocery store, at home, at work or even when walking into church.

An unthankful person is constantly critical of others. They are not fun to be around. They speak in negative terms most of the time. Also, an unthankful person has an inferiority complex. They walk around with an attitude of, "Everybody else is better, so I can never get there." Also, an unthankful person covets what others have.

When you spend your time comparing your life to other people, you may find it difficult to be thankful and praise God for a victory that person has had, because you want it for yourself. That's our human nature. Listen. I am speaking about myself here as well. Sometimes when I see people posting successes on social media, there's part of me that says, "How come I didn't get that?"

We all struggle with unthankfulness at some level, but the cure is to be grounded over time. Do not forget to remember the person of God and His steadfast love that endures forever. Maybe the cure to your depression is thankfulness. Maybe the cure to your marriage is thankfulness. Maybe the cure for



your financial stress is thankfulness. Maybe the cure for your heartache is thankfulness.

The final question we need to answer is, “How often should we be thankful?” The Bible is clear. It says *always*.

**“In every thing [every circumstance] give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”** (1 Thessalonians 5:18, ESV)

Many people have come to me throughout my years in the pastorate asking, “What is the will of God for my life, Pastor?” Well, here it is, “Be thankful always. When you are, everything else is taken care of.” Jesus said, **“Seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Everything else will be added unto you.”** Quit worrying about it. Be thankful. Paul also wrote:

**“Rejoice in the Lord always.”** (Philippians 4:4, ESV)

I looked up the word *always* in the Greek. Here is what I discovered: the word *always* always means *always* no matter what the language.

So, how often are we to be thankful? **Always.** When we are thankful, God can come over us, rejoicing in praise. Joy will flow and ooze out of us, and the world is going to wonder, “What is wrong with you?” “The Lord is what is ‘wrong’ with me. I live in this thankfulness, and I worship Him, because he’s worthy of it.”

There is nothing that the world is offering that is nearly as good as the Lord and God of the universe and what He has to offer us. So let us not kid ourselves. Let us develop, as Paul said, an eternal mindset. Think of the things above, not the things on earth. When we do, we truly will discover that thankfulness is life changing.

## Chapter Three

### - GENEROSITY-

What does it mean to be generous? How can we live our lives in a way that is truly generous, not just in one area, but in all areas of our lives?

This series was created to help you really drill down and examine your thoughts. Sometimes your thoughts can be the very things that are pushing you down, holding you back and feeding you lies. Yet, the words you speak also have the power to lift you up, as well as the people around you.

As we examine the *words to live by* found in Scripture, we see how they shape our lives and can align us with God's purposes. By lining up with the purpose of God, we pray that you will truly be equipped to be an effective follower of Christ. We want you to see God working in your life in amazing ways.

Seeing a book chapter on *generosity* may make you want to skip ahead. Typically, whenever someone wants to talk about generosity, all they really want to do is talk about your money.

But honestly, generosity is not just about your money. It is about your *entire* lifestyle. Sure, it does include money, but it also touches on many other areas.

For many of us, it feels like money is always disappearing. If you have teenagers, it may feel like the only time they really talk to you is when they want something, “Oh, he came home. He must want more money.” If you have college kids coming home, it feels like your money immediately goes out the door the moment they arrive. Vanished into thin air! Sometimes I feel like money is just flowing out of my bank account.

For others, God may be blessing you financially. You are *receiving* money. It is flowing in and you have to figure out how to harness it.

Whether money is coming or going, the way we use our money speaks volumes about where our heart and our *trust* lies. Essentially, generosity comes down to trust. Do you trust that you actually serve a God who is generous? That one statement, and how you respond to it, sets the stage of whether or not you are going to be generous and have a lifestyle of generosity. Do you truly believe God is generous?

One of the most well-known verses, John 3:16, speaks to this generous God. **“For God so loved the world...”** He loved you and he loved me. **“...that he gave...”** You see His love and generosity woven all through Scripture. We serve a God who loves to give. But do you believe that? Do you believe you can trust who He says He is and what He says He will do? It really comes down to a trust issue.

## The Big Picture

There are several areas to consider in generosity. The first area, obviously, is our *money*. When it comes to generosity, we have to trust God with our money. How we use our money speaks to where our trust is. But it goes far beyond money.

In many cases, I think *time* is our most precious commodity. How you spend your time and where you give your time also speaks volumes about your heart. When your children are little, they are not impressed by your bank account. What they value is having Mom and Dad home and spending time with them. Where you put your time and how generously you spend your time will speak much more deeply to your heart level than how you act on the outside.

Our *gifts and talents* also reflect our generosity. Everybody has a talent and everybody has a gift. Now, your gift might not be playing the guitar or singing on stage. But your gift could be hospitality. You might be one of the nicest people in the room.

Your gift might be cooking. It could be networking. Your gift might be writing or reading. Whatever your gift is, here's the question, "Are you using it for the kingdom?" You have a gift for a purpose and a reason. It's not just to make money or have a career. Could it be that God has given you a gift and a talent for you to generously share so He could use it for His kingdom?

Have you ever considered that you must also be generous with your *forgiveness and kindness*? There's so much evil this world. There's so much fear, hate and violence. I am pretty certain that the world could use a little more kindness and people could use a little more forgiveness. So, how generous are you with the forgiveness you need to give somebody? Offer forgiveness. Offer grace. Offer kindness.

Are you generous in your *love for one another* or do you withhold that love? I would love for us, as a church and as believers, to be known as a generous people. We should be known as the kind of people who serve, the kind of people who love, and the kind of

people who give, not just inside the walls of the church, but in our community and in our world.

When people hear that you go to Crossroads Fellowship (or any church), one of their first thoughts should be, “Those people at Crossroads are generous. They really love people. That’s the church that is always serving. That’s the church that is always at the school doing things. That’s the church I hear about all the time because of their heart of generosity.” Wouldn’t it be incredible to be known as being a generous person?

I have known some pretty selfish people in my lifetime. I’ve also personally been selfish at times. I would much rather be known as being generous than selfish. This requires an understanding of what it truly means to be generous. We need a good understanding of what God means when He tells us to be generous and we need a lifestyle that reflects that generosity.

### **Sowing and Reaping**

This vital, yet straightforward, life principle is not just about your dollars; it’s about your life.

**“The point is this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously.”**

(2 Corinthians 9:6)

Jesus spoke using familiar terms that His listeners, who farmed, could comprehend. It really is a simple principle. The more you plant, the more you harvest.

The idea is the more seed I put into the ground, the more harvest I should produce. Right? That’s a basic principle. Now take this same principle and run it through all areas of your

life. The more I give (plant), the more I'm going to get. It's a simple thing. In theory, the more forgiveness you give, the more forgiveness you get. The more patience you give, the more patience you get. And on and on it goes, including our finances. The more we put in, the more God gives.

This principle applies to all areas of our lives...in our time, in our talents, in our treasures. As I sow, I reap. This verse makes it very clear. If you sow sparingly, you are going to reap sparingly, but if you are generous, you are going to reap generously.

Once again, it comes back to that original trust question. Do you believe we serve a God who is generous and who loves to bless? If He is a God who is saying, "Hey, if you do *this*, I'm going to do *that*," do you trust Him to actually do it?

**"Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you."**

(Luke 6:38)

So, what is your generosity measurement? How are you gauging your interaction with the people around you?

**"Who among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him."**

(Matthew 7:9-12)

This verse very clearly speaks to our humanity. There's no hidden meaning behind it. If we who are sinful, broken people

know how to give gifts to our kids, how much more can a loving God give to you. We serve a God who loves to give. Do you actually believe that?

If we believe we serve a God who loves to be generous in all things, then our lifestyles should match that belief. God is saying, “In order for me to pour out my generosity to you, my expectation is for you to be generous. When you give, I can give exponentially.”

## The Heart

All of this comes down to a heart issue. Every area of our generosity reflects what is truly happening in our hearts.

**“Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver.”** (2 Corinthians 9:7)

God loves it when we are generously joyful. He wants us to be excited about the ability to give of ourselves to the people around us. When your neighbor calls and needs you, do you reluctantly think, “Oh boy. Now I guess I have to go help my neighbor”? If our hearts are aligned with God, we can joyfully give of ourselves when we have the opportunity to serve.

The goal of this chapter is not to get more money out of our wallets or more of our talents and time; the goal is to get greed out of our hearts.

Envision holding a \$20 bill. Isn't it amazing how this one little piece of paper and all it represents (our work, our relationships, our stuff) can have such a hold on us? This one paper can have such a grip on who we are.

When we live our lives holding onto money so tightly, it produces nothing but fear. If you are afraid of losing it, you grip on and live in fear. The decision to give depends on my heart, not my abundance. To give of my time is not exclusively about whether or not it works on my calendar. To give of my gifts and talents is not just, “Do I think I’m good enough?” To give of my money is not just “Do I have enough extra to give?” It really comes down to, “Am I afraid to let go of what I have?”

When you remember that money is just a simple piece of paper, isn’t it amazing that it is still one of the leading causes of divorce? Couples come apart over money, not having enough or somebody overspending. We try to keep up with the Joneses, or we lose a job, and there’s so much stress in our lives. We can’t agree on finances. We can’t agree on what to spend it on.

If you don’t get a grip on it, money will master you, but it will master you out of fear. The alternative to living with your hands clenched in fear, it to live life with your hands wide open. Living clenched produces fear and stress. Leaving it open...is where it gets fun. This is where generosity gets exciting and your attitude changes to, “I don’t *have* to; I *get* to.”

Isn’t that a different mindset? When you think, “I don’t *have* to give of my time; I *get* to give of my time,” or “I *get* to serve” or “I *get* to give and bless someone,” is a completely different mentality.

So, what kind of mentality do you have? Do you give with the mentality of, “I *get* to join God in something bigger than I am, and it’s exciting! I am doing it joyfully and cheerfully,” or do you face it reluctantly, dragging your feet? Where our heart is determines a great deal about the direction of our lives.



**“Don’t store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don’t break in and steal.”** (Matthew 6:19-20)

You may be familiar with the next verse:

**“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”** (Matthew 6:21)

What you hold on to most tightly, shows where your heart is. It could be your job, it could be other people, it could be relationships, it could be your stuff, and it could be money, but where your heart is drives your actions.

If your sole focus is on making and keeping everything here without a thought toward eternity, then the Bible says you have already received your reward here on earth. However, the truth is, life on earth is only “Act One”; “Act Two” lasts for all eternity.

So, is money bad? No. Is having money bad? No. People say, “Money can’t buy happiness,” but not many people want to test that theory. Money is not bad. Having a nice car, a great job or a beautiful house is not bad. None of it’s bad, until it begins to dictate your entire life. It doesn’t get bad until you hang on so tightly that life is lived out of fear and that opening your hands to be a blessing is completely forgotten.

## **Blessings**

People often ask me, “Am I allowed to pray for the Lord to bless me?” Think about what the answer is to that question as you read the following verses:

**And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work.**

(2 Corinthians 9:8)

The verse says that you will have everything you *need*. Don't you wish it said that you would have everything you *wanted* and desired? It doesn't. It says everything you need. What you *need* might not be what you *want*, yet the American dream is to go after what you want. This is where it begins to rub. Do I trust God for everything I need or do I allow greed and discontent to dominate and go after what I want?

The emphasis here is that God's grace overflows in everything you need in order for you to excel in every good work. What does that mean? God overflows everything you need, not so that you hoard it and never use it, but so you can do good things with it. God has given you gifts and talents, not just so you can say, "Wow! I'm talented." It is so you can use your talent for the kingdom. So, how do you use these gifts for the kingdom?

**"As it is written: He distributed freely; he gave to the poor; his righteousness endures forever. Now the one who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will also provide and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness."**

(2 Corinthians 9:9-10)

The God who gave you gifts, time, or money will keep adding to you as you give it away. God provides the "seed" (whether it's your talent or you money) and He will give you more as you sow

it. You must remember, God doesn't need you to give Him your money; He already owns it and everything it represents. The incredible principle of this verse is that as you generously give what God has given you, He will give you more exponentially. That's just how it works. As I give, God will give me.

Now let me push "pause" here in case you think I am going in a wrong direction. This is not a prosperity gospel. This is not a "name it and claim it" and "blab it and grab it" message. Trust me. There are plenty of churches and preachers who love to preach prosperity, typically for their own good. This is not that message. Generosity is all about the heart and the why behind your giving.

So, back to the question, "Am I allowed to pray, 'Lord, bless me'?" Here's the answer: Yes. Don't you feel good about that? Yes, you are allowed to pray, "God, bless me." However, *why* do you want God to bless you? That's the real issue. Are you asking it just so you can say God blessed you? Or do you pray and ask it so that you can use it to be a blessing to someone else?

Here's the heart. I would love for us to become a people who are blessed by God so that we can be a blessing to others. I pray that God blesses you in a way that absolutely rocks your world. I hope He blesses you so you can be a blessing to somebody else and that you can use whatever God gives you for the betterment of His kingdom. Here is one of my favorite passages:

**"Jabez was more honored than his brothers. His mother named him Jabez and said, 'I gave birth to him in pain.' Jabez called out to the God of Israel: 'If only you would bless me, extend my border, let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm, so**

**that I will not experience pain.’ And God granted his request.”** (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

The name Jabez means sorrow or trouble. This is the only time in Scripture that we hear about him. When people knew heard the name Jabez, they associated it with sorrow and trouble. His own mother named him out of her pain. Yet Jabez boldly asked, “Lord, that you would bless me indeed, that you would expand my borders, that your hand would be with me, that you would bless me, that I might not be harmed.” The Bible tells us that God granted his request.

Why do you personally want to be blessed? I pray your desire to be blessed is so that you can be a blessing.

Is there an area in your life you are wrestling with on whether you trust who God is? What is God doing in your heart? Truly, we are blessed when we realize how thankful we should be for all that God has already provided to us. We should be blessed when we are generous with our time, and we are blessed when we honor God in our giving.

Our generosity in giving plays a tremendous role. The following verse is the only place in Scripture where God says to test Him:

Malachi 3:10 says to bring the entire tenth into the storehouse (the church.) **“...Test me in this way,’ says the Lord of Armies. ‘See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure. And see that I will not open up the windows of heaven and bless you so that it’s overflowing.’”** The Lord invites you to, “Test me in this way.” The only place in Scripture where God tells you to test Him is about your money. Generosity comes

down to trust. Do you truly trust that God is who He says He is and that God will do what He says He'll do?

## **The Challenge**

I want to challenge you in all areas of your generosity, in your time, your gifts and with your talents. I want to challenge you in your generosity in your forgiveness and your kindness, and I challenge you in your giving.

If you're not giving and not tithing, my question is, "Why not?" I believe that if you honestly think about, somewhere there's a trust issue. Somewhere in the mix, we don't trust God. And, when we don't trust Him, we don't do what God says to do. So if you are not giving the way God tells you to give, then you need ask yourself, "Well, why aren't I?"

You can make a bunch of excuses and give reasons why. At times, I am sure we all have. But the bottom line comes down to just one word. Trust. If you trust Him, you'll do what He says. Is God who He says He is? Will you trust Him?

## Chapter Four

### - INVITATION -

As we consider the word *invitation*, we need to recognize that there are two parts to an invitation. There is God's invitation to all of us, and there is also our part to invite others.

We have been given tremendous opportunities. We *get* to share the gospel. We *get* to share the kingdom. We *get* to invite people to join in what we're doing, whether it is at church, in your neighborhood, at your workplace, or wherever. Let me say it this way, God didn't come just for you alone. He came for you, for me, for your neighbor and for the whole world. We are called to invite people to join into relationship with Christ and for us to experience that together.

What I love about our church family is that I can say with 100 percent confidence that everyone is welcome here. It doesn't matter what you look like or where you came from. Whoever you are and no matter what scars you bear, I sincerely hope every person feels welcome here at our church.

#### **It's Personal**

What a privilege it is that God has given us an invitation to have a relationship with Him! I am so grateful. The God of the

universe, who spoke everything into existence, has personally invited you to join Him into a relationship.

There is a big difference between a relationship and a religion. Often we start to slip into a religious mindset in our thinking and even in our actions. If we are not careful, we can step over the line into religion instead of resting in the relationship God has called us into.

For example, religion says, “If I’m in trouble, then I need to hide from God.” Religion says, “If I do something wrong, sin or if I make a mistake, then I need to hide it.” But a relationship says, “If I’m in trouble, I should run to God!”

When we make mistakes, the Enemy would love for us to hide from it or feel shame and guilt. Yet, no one is perfect; we all make mistakes. Sometimes the shame and guilt from a mistake makes you feel like you want to hide from God. However, because we are in a relationship, we are safe. God is not going to crush us when we go to Him with our faults. Instead, He is going to welcome us.

Religion also says, “If I follow all of the rules, God will finally accept me.” I know a lot of people feel this way. I’ve been caught up in this feeling before as well. “If I just check off all of the boxes and do all of the right things, then God will finally accept me.” A relationship is the opposite of needing a checklist for approval. A relationship with the Lord is God coming to man to accept us. That’s such a difference!

Religion says, “I have to work *my way* toward Him.” God, in a relationship, worked *His way* toward us. I came across a humorous illustration of this idea: A religion is a guy sitting in church thinking about golfing, but a relationship is a guy out

golfing thinking about God.

Now, I love to golf, and the true test of my mindset is, what do I think of when I golf? A relationship with God goes beyond thinking about Him only when I am in church or when I am actively talking about Him. When I am not in church, do I still think about God? What do I share with others?

Think about your relationship with a person you are dating, or your spouse, or with a really close friend. Even when you're not with them, you are thinking about them. You wonder what they are doing and you look forward to the next time you see them. That's what a relationship with God is like too.

If we are not careful, religion will tell us, "If I work hard enough..." This is probably the biggest trap people fall into. "If I work hard enough, I can earn it. If I work hard enough, God will finally notice me. If I work hard enough, I'll deserve and work my way into a relationship." That's what religion says. A relationship says, "I can't earn it, but I can receive it freely."

That's the complete opposite! But, I still have to be aware of how easily I can slip into trying to please God instead of just trying to be *in* God. If I get focused on pleasing God and doing everything I'm *supposed* to do, it really becomes about me, doesn't it? Whereas resting in a relationship with God, I am just me...but I am me *in* God.

**Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace.** (Romans 11:6)

"Now if by grace..." Meaning, if we are accepted and saved by grace. "...then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace." If it was about works, then we wouldn't need grace. Why would we need Jesus to go to the cross for us if we could



just earn it? But we cannot *earn* salvation, so God offered his Son, Jesus, who paid the ultimate price *for* us. This wasn't so we could just mark off the boxes on our "Christian" checklist or live in fear. Jesus died for us so that so we can walk in the confidence of our freedom and in our personal relationship with Him.

**"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!"** (2 Corinthians 5:17)

You are new creation. Religion doesn't make you new; it just makes you live out of fear. Accepting the invitation for a personal relationship with Jesus is what makes us new. The old you has gone and the new, forgiven and free, you has come. I don't know about you, but I personally am so grateful that I am not the person I used to be before I knew Christ.

Also, spiritually, I hope that I am a better person today than I was last week. I hope that I am better than I was a year ago, and I hope that I will be better tomorrow than I am today. Because I am a new creation, God is constantly making me new.

### **You've Got a Friend in Me**

This is what I love about having a relationship with a personal God. Listen, God didn't just invite you to a relationship; He calls you *His friends*. Do you hear this? The God of the universe, who spoke the world into existence and who created you, is not some God who sits up high somewhere making you work your way to Him. God calls you His friend.

I don't know what that does to you, but that does something in my heart, my mind and in my entire being. I am able to breathe a little more deeply and rest in Him a little more freely. I do

not have to get so worked up about life, my “To Do” list or my circumstances. God literally calls me His friend.

**“One with many friends may be harmed, but there is a friend who stays closer than a brother.”**

(Proverbs 18:24)

This friend who sticks closer to you than a brother is God. I have two brothers, and we are close. But I know God is closer to me than anybody else. This is the God who says, “I’m not going to leave you, and I’m not going to forsake you,” and actually means it.

**“No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends.”**

(John 15:13)

Think about your closest friends for a moment. Would you lay down your life for your friends? Initially, I think my response to this question is, “Of course I would.” But then when I really think about it, the answer gets much harder. I truly love my friends, but I also don’t want to die.

When Pastor Daniel and I were talking through this, I thought, “Well, what if it was quick? What if I could just trade my life for his and there was no pain involved?” If that was the case, I could move up from a “no” to a “maybe.” But the moment they’re strapping me to a wood stake and pulling out the whip, I doubt I would have the strength to go through with it. If torture is involved, I’m an immediate “no.”

Now you can sit there and judge me, but you know it is probably true for you as well. Yet, consider what Jesus went through for us. Jesus didn’t just give His life for mine. The Word of God says He endured suffering, He was severely beaten and

then He was nailed to a cross. So when you read this verse that says, **“No one has greater love than this: to lay down his life for his friends...,”** God didn’t just say it; He actually did it. It wasn’t just lip service. We can all say, “Sure, I would do that,” but when faced with the reality of suffering and death, most of us would shy away.

Just before Jesus was taken, Peter also bravely proclaimed that he would stand by his friend. Yet, it turned out much differently. When Jesus told his disciples, “They’re going to take me away and I am going to die and rise again in three days,” His friends didn’t really know what He was talking about. Peter boldly said something along the lines of, “I’ll die with you,” yet Peter was probably one of the first people who ran away. In fact, all of the disciples, but one, abandoned Him.

But Jesus lovingly gave up His life for you and for me. Isn’t it overwhelming good to know that you have a friend who not only sticks closer than a brother, but also gave His life for our lives?

**“I do not call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn’t know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you....”**

(John 15:15-16)

The Scripture says that even while we were sinners, even while we were far away from God, He chose us. He decided to come to you when you didn’t even know who He was. That’s more than a relationship; that is a true friendship. It’s not just somebody you know. It’s a friendship. The God of this universe invites you to be His friend.

## Accepting the Invitation

When you accept God's invitation to experience His friendship, you are invited to a life of freedom. Maybe you are wondering, "What exactly do I need to be freed from?" Well, the Word of God says that we have all sinned, every one of us. Nobody other than Jesus is excluded from that verse. We have all sinned. Therefore, we need to be freed from that sin.

It doesn't matter whether you think you are a good person or not. Your sin condemns you. What matters is whether or not you belong to Jesus. You see, we have all made mistakes. We have all stumbled and done things we probably wish we wouldn't have done. These are the things Jesus came to free us from. But even more than freeing us from what we have done, Jesus also relieves the burden of the weight those mistakes carry in our lives. The Bible tells that Jesus not only forgives us of our sins, but He also removes our shame and guilt.

It is one thing to be forgiven, but it's another thing to be freed from the guilt of what we did. It's another level to be freed from the shame you feel because you made that mistake. I meet a lot of good people who are doing the best they can. They have asked God to forgive them, but they are still carrying around the guilt and the shame from 10 years ago. They are still looking for the freedom that they have already been given!

I will be transparent with you. There are things I did when I was a teenager that even 20-plus years later, I still feel guilty about if I don't keep in mind that Jesus has already freed me from that shame. I'm 45 years old now. When I get caught up dwelling about things I did 26-plus years ago when I was a teenager, it's not God who brings my guilt back to my mind.

The Enemy hates it when people are free in Christ, so he would love for us to forget that freedom and be shackled again. You are free from whatever sins and mistakes you have given to God. Don't keep picking them back up and taking them on again. I think we all struggle with doing this. I know I do.

There are moments when I go to God and pray, "God, here's all the stuff I'm dealing with. Here are my burdens and my heartache. Here are my hopes and dreams," and I know that Jesus welcomes all of it. I sense His love and freedom and think, "Oh, I can breathe again. God loves me, and He has forgiven me." Then a week later, I realize I am dealing with the same things all over again. It is a struggle to let things go.

So, once again, what do we need to be freed from?

**"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.** (Romans 5:23)

**"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life...."** (Romans 6:23)

We have all fallen short. Nobody is above or beyond anybody else in this category. Yet through God's great gift, we are freed from death we deserve.

God is not just freeing you *from* sin and from shame and guilt. He's freeing you *to* experience Him, to enjoy Him and to walk in Him not only right now, but throughout eternity. Romans 5:8 says, **"But God proves his own love for [me, Andy] that while [Andy was still a sinner], Christ died for us."**

It is so easy to read this verse and just zip through it. But, how does this verse change if you put your name in there? Try it and say it aloud. God proved His own love for you, that even when

you were still a sinner, Christ died for you.

When you place your name in that verse, it suddenly becomes more than just a verse. It becomes more than just a statement; it does something to my soul. It does something to my heart to say that God had to prove His love to me because of *my sin* and *my shame* and *my guilt*. His forgiveness doesn't give me freedom to live how I want to live; it gives me freedom to be able to walk in Christ. It's not just freedom from the shame and the guilt; it's also freedom from the stress and worry and doubt. These are the incredible things a relationship and a friendship with God brings to our lives.

## **The Ultimate Invitation**

Finally, we are invited to eternal life. The ultimate prize you can be given is life eternal. Let me ask you a really blunt question, not as a fear tactic, by any means. I just want you to really think about this: If today was your final day on this earth, where would you spend eternity?

The Bible says we are not guaranteed tomorrow. We are not even guaranteed another minute. If this was your last moment and you closed your eyes here on this earth, where would you open them? You *will* spend eternity somewhere. You don't just go to sleep and disappear. You don't just go to the ground and that's it. Your soul will spend eternity somewhere, and it's either heaven or hell. There is no between. There is no purgatory for you to get prayed out of. It's either heaven or hell. Where will you spend eternity?

If you don't know with certainty, my encouragement and plea to you is to make sure you know.

**“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** (1 John 1:9)

He is faithful and just and will forgive us of all of our sins. All... not just part, but all of them.

**“The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.”** (2 Peter 2:9)

God desires no one to perish but for everyone, including you and me, to have eternal life with Him. There is not a particular statement you have to pray word for word for God to save you. It's a condition of your heart.

All you need to do is confess that Jesus is Lord, that He is who He says He is. Simply recognize that He is God, and you are not. If we confess to Him that, “Yes, I am a sinner who needs to be forgiven, and my forgiveness was the price of Jesus going to the cross,” the Bible says He will forgive you. It is immediate; you cannot earn it or buy it. You cannot work your way toward it. That is what grace is. Good people are not the people who go to heaven; saved people do. There's a big difference.

There are a lot of good people on this earth doing a lot of good things, but a personal relationship with Jesus is above all else. There is a God who is so desperately in love with you that He came and pursued you and He is inviting you into a relationship with Him.