

MY

REFUGE

MY

STRENGTH

MICHAEL YOUSSEF



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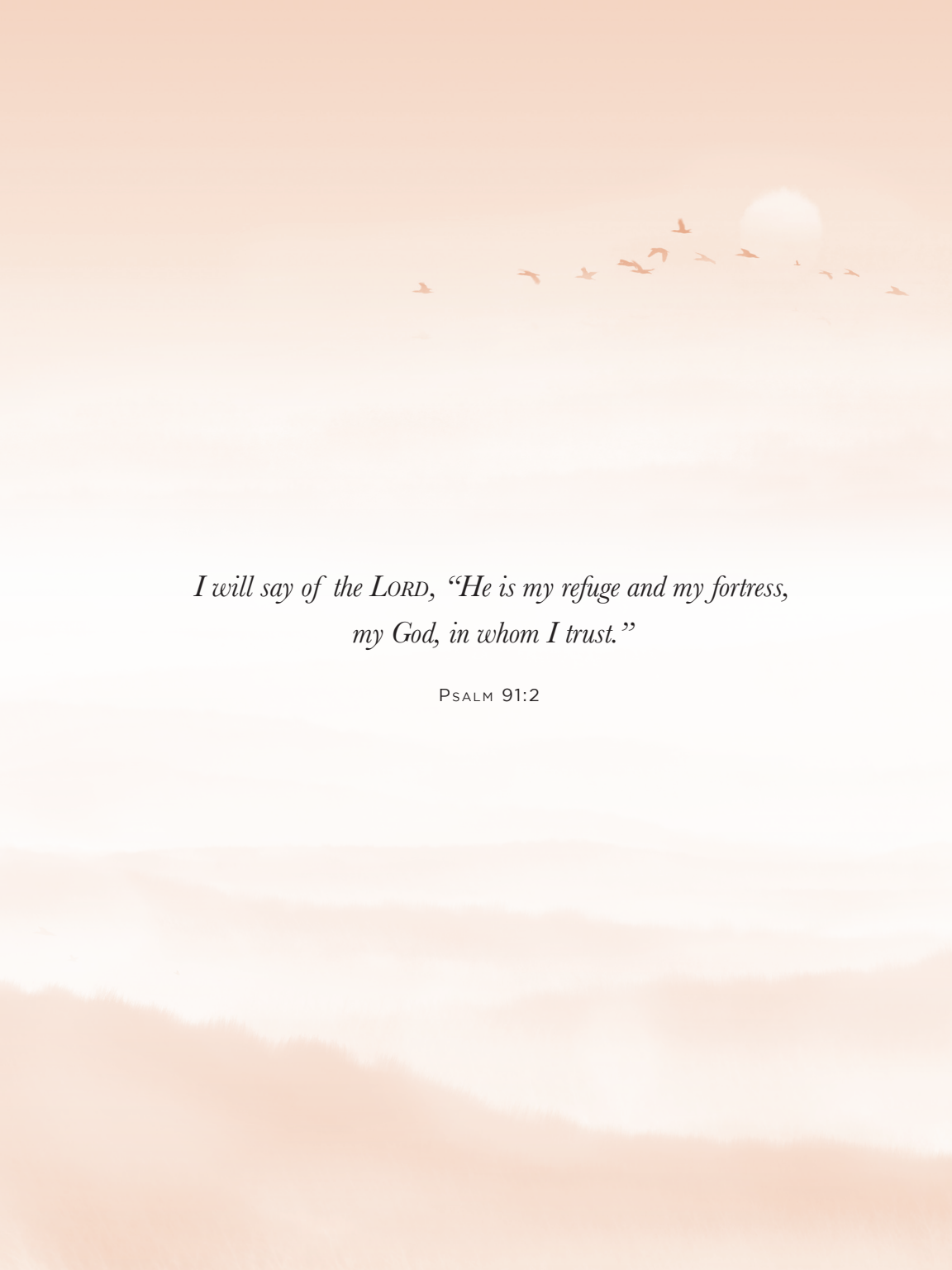
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The background of the page is a soft, warm-toned landscape. In the upper portion, a bright sun or moon is visible in the sky, surrounded by a flock of birds in flight. The lower portion shows rolling hills or mountains, rendered in a hazy, ethereal style. The overall color palette is a range of warm, muted oranges and yellows, creating a peaceful and contemplative atmosphere.

*I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust.”*

PSALM 91:2

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OUR EVER-PRESENT HELP

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.*

PSALM 46:1-2

Amid our troubles, when the world offers unsatisfying distractions and false spirituality, our hearts yearn for a sanctuary. We long for acceptance, love, safety, rest, and mercy. We search for shelter from the storms of our trials and watch for the light of hope to lead us.

We are created to respond this way, my friend, because in this life of difficulty *and* of blessing, our hearts hunger for the home they were made for—the presence of God. Join me for a journey...one that invites us to surrender our restlessness, move from discontent to contentment, and experience peace, healing, and a life of praising our Lord.

We get to know God's heart by reading His Word. We receive His comfort when we turn over our hurts to His care. And we experience His protection and power as we praise His name. My hope is that these devotions, biblical illustrations, Scriptures, and prayers will lead you to a profound intimacy with the Lord. As we embark on this journey together, I pray you will release your fears and worries and be filled with the abiding peace of Jesus. May you turn your heart and mind to the promise of God's ever-present help and enter the refuge of His strength and love all the days of your life.

*Trust in him at all times, you people;
pour out your hearts to him,
for God is our refuge.*

PSALM 62:7-8



LONGING FOR GOD'S PRESENCE

*He satisfies the longing soul,
and fills the hungry soul with goodness.*

PSALM 107:9 NKJV

*How abundant are the good things that you have stored up
for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all,
on those who take refuge in you.*

PSALM 31:19

Are you convinced that if things were different, you would be happier and more at peace? Are you gaining less contentment from the things that consume most of your time and energy? Is there a steady background hum in your life—the dull hum of dissatisfaction?

This deep-seated discontent is not limited to those who are struggling with life's hurts and tragedies. In fact, a sense of dissatisfaction with life is often more pronounced among people who—from all outward appearances—seem to have it made. One's level of success does nothing to minimize the symptoms of discontent. The nagging inner voice continues to insist, *"There must be more."*

What lies behind our drive to find contentment? Some observers place the blame on materialism. But there is a far deeper explanation—a spiritual explanation for our lack of peace. God's Word makes it clear that our lack of peace and loss of satisfaction are spiritual issues.

As we study the Scriptures, we see that the loss of contentment can either lead us down paths cluttered with false promises of fulfillment, or it can bring us to a place of turning, where the journey takes on a redemptive quality. Our search for contentment can ultimately lead us to the heart of God—which is the only place where we will find rest and a place of belonging. It is the only place we will find the safety, identity, hope, healing, and strength we desire. It's the only place that will quiet our hearts and restore our souls.

This first part of our devotional journey will give you new insight into the heart of the only One who can quiet your discontent. As you delve into stories from God's Word, submit your restless spirit to Him and experience the satisfaction that comes from an intimate relationship with the One who died on the cross to give you peace.

FROM RESTLESS TO RESTORED

Have you felt it? The rumble of restlessness or the disruption of discontent in your spirit? Try as we might to find our own way to peace, an underlying lack of peace keeps many people in a state of unrest. Even if we aren't aware of it, our search for contentment produces an inner agitation, which is fed by the belief that we'll never be satisfied with where we are and that the answer is just beyond the next bend, the next job, the next relationship.

It might seem odd that we would study an ancient Bible story to find the explanation for our modern disease of discontent. But a spiritual cause is the only explanation for our restlessness. In the book of Genesis, restlessness first appears when Adam and Eve sin against God. The shame they feel after their disobedience brings an uneasiness and an unsettledness to their life. Those traits become more than simply feelings when God casts them out of the Garden of Eden.

Although Adam and Eve were allowed to remain near the garden, they constantly sensed their loss of intimacy with God. Their sin put distance between them and their Creator. And the same is true for us. Our sin moves us far from God and steals our contentment. To understand the implications of our sin nature, we must gain a clear picture of God's plan for humanity from beginning to end. In my view, this makes the first few chapters of the Bible critically important.

The Bible begins with creation. As God created matter out of nothing, He set aside a special place, Eden, where He fellowshiped with Adam and then with Eve. In this incredibly beautiful garden, Adam and Eve enjoyed unhindered communion with God.

But they forfeited their contentment and were banished from the garden when they disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree. This set in motion an ongoing quest to regain the peace that had been forfeited.

Since then, men and women throughout the ages have sought an end to their restlessness. In his memoir, *Confessions*, written in AD 400, Augustine recounts how he overcame his lustful pursuits and found peace. In a moment of truth, he realized that there is only one solution. Explaining humankind's inborn desire to seek God and to praise Him, Augustine wrote, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You."^{*}

Here it is in a nutshell: The place of ultimate rest is found nowhere else but in intimate relationship with the Lord. We are made in the image and likeness of our heavenly Father, and we all share an abiding need to be in close communion with Him.

Much happens after Adam and Eve leave the garden. And the journey through Scripture reveals not only the cause of our restlessness, but it also leads us to the perfect solution found at the end of the Bible and in another garden described in Revelation as the New Jerusalem, a magnificent garden city that will come down from heaven. God wants to restore us to a place of contentment in His love and grace, so He provides a place of peace, rest, and belonging where our search for contentment comes to an end.

Until our time in heaven, we can experience peace here and now because Christ, in a garden experience between Genesis and Revelation—the Garden of Gethsemane—agreed to the Father's will that He pay the penalty for the sins of all who would willingly receive Him as their Savior.

* Augustine, *Confessions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

Friend, God wants to refresh our souls—to replace anxiety with peace, to give us rest in place of weariness, to provide a place of belonging that will quiet our restlessness once and for all. Day by day, we can trust Jesus to keep leading us to His calm waters and a grace that redeems.



The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace.

NUMBERS 6:24-26

Lord, as I begin this devotional journey, use my restlessness to draw me close to You. Search my heart and reveal to me which longings may hold me back from embracing Your truths or walking in the path You have set for me.

As I experience this journey toward the New Jerusalem, may I believe and proclaim the good news of Calvary. May I live in the grace and salvation You alone can provide. In Your Word, Lord, You promise that when I seek You, I will find You. Help me to trust that You are the only source of true contentment. I call out to You and seek You for my restoration. You turn to me with Your grace, peace, and love, and You refresh my spirit. The blessings of relationship with You impact my today and my eternity. I'm so grateful I belong to You. Amen.

THE PEACE OF PARADISE

When God created Adam and Eve, they had perfect contentment. Why wouldn't they? They were in paradise, and they had communion with their Creator. As we look at our world, circumstances, and the restlessness of sin and then consider what they had in Eden, the contrast between our lack of contentment and the true peace God desires for His creation is shocking.

We can praise God today, friend, because He still has a plan for our peace. Wander these aspects of God's care in the first garden and discover how the merciful Lord continues to provide what we need for contentment until the day we regain residency in eternal paradise with Him.

Exquisite beauty. As God created every part of the universe, He pronounced it "good." But He unleashed the full extent of His creative power when He designed a garden home for Adam and Eve. For their enjoyment, He poured out beauty beyond comprehension.

Our word "paradise" comes from the Persian word *pardes* that refers to a garden or enclosed park. The same word also connotes a place of peace and protection—exactly what the Garden of Eden was designed to provide. Take time to consider how you personally experience beauty and the goodness of the Lord right now.

Abundant provision. The beauty of the Garden of Eden also was functional.

The trees were not only pleasing to the eye but also good for food. As part of God's plan of provision, He assigned Adam the job of maintaining the garden.

Before the Fall, Adam and Eve didn't just lounge around all day—they had work to do. “The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). Adam and Eve had important work to do, but they were working inside the garden, in God's presence, and that made all the difference. They found fulfillment in the satisfying work God gave them. How is God providing for your basic needs as well as assigning work for you to do for His glory? Spend time in prayer and praise for the abundance in your life.

Complete protection. God sheltered Adam and Eve, guarding them from all danger. Within the garden's walls, Adam and Eve lived in an atmosphere of sweet harmony with each other and with God. While they enjoyed the protection in the garden, they fell for the serpent's deception and exposed themselves to danger. In the middle of the garden, God placed a special tree called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and God instructed Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of this tree. Their choice to eat the forbidden fruit took them out from under God's complete protection.

Praise the Lord that this is not the end of the story for God's children. Many years later, Jesus's perfect obedience led Him from the Garden of Gethsemane to the cross, making it possible for His followers to be forgiven of their sins and to once again be under His protection for eternity.

In the Garden of Eden, the first man rebelled against God. But in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus, the perfect God-man, agreed to obey His Father and sacrifice Himself on the cross. God revealed His perfect plan to give us victory over the sin that was born in the Garden of Eden and to reveal beauty, provide for us, protect us, and fellowship with us as we surrender to Him and live in His wisdom.

Consider today whether you are kneeling at the foot of the tree of temptation or at the tree of Calvary. It's your surrender at the cross that leads to your

hope in heaven, your hope in a return to paradise, and the assurance that your peace and contentment will be found in right relationship with God in the garden of your heart today.



Blessed are those who find wisdom,
 those who gain understanding...
 Long life is in her right hand;
 In her left hand are riches and honor.
 Her ways are pleasant ways,
 And all her paths are peace.
 She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
 those who hold her fast will be blessed.

PROVERBS 3:13, 16-18

Father God, give me strength to turn from choices that are leading me away from the paradise of Your love and provision. Even though Adam and Eve had to leave Eden, You continue to rescue the godly and bless them with beauty, provision, and protection. I pray to surrender my will to Your own and to kneel at the cross with a sincere and open heart. May my obedience in word and action reflect my devotion.

Thank You for Your everlasting love and protection. I know You desire to have a personal relationship with me. Show me how I can draw closer to You through Your Word. I want to walk in Your power with an obedient heart, mind, and spirit. Give me the courage and wisdom to have a Gethsemane heart of conviction and experience Your victory and a return to paradise to spend my eternity with You. Amen.

TIRED OF WANDERING

As soon as sin enters our lives, it influences and impacts more than one moment, one thought, one decision. It seeps into every aspect of life, including our families and our trust in God.

Adam and Eve regretted the break in their relationship with God. They owned up to their sin of surrendering to temptation in Eden, but their shame, grief, and regret did not protect their son Cain from falling into sin. And it was a grave, heartbreaking sin.

Despite his parents' conscientious teaching, Cain's disobedience far surpassed that of Adam and Eve. Cain's anger led to the murder of his brother Abel.

The sin grew in his heart because he was angry that God accepted Abel's offering while rejecting his own. Cain brought an offering to the Lord from his harvest. Abel also brought an offering, the firstborn from his flock. The brothers' offerings were consistent with their occupations: Cain tilled the ground and Abel raised sheep. Outwardly, both brothers seemed to be performing a righteous act. But Cain wanted to approach God on his own terms.

The Bible doesn't specify how either brother knew whether God accepted or rejected his offering, but it's clear they understood the outcome: "The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast"

(Genesis 4:4-5). We can imagine the anger and pride brewing in his heart. God knew what was happening inside Cain. And He could have left him to his anger right then, but God didn't want Cain to fail and surrender to sin. So He issued a stern warning, telling Cain that sin was lying in wait for him. God also offered mercy, making it clear that if Cain did what was right, he would be accepted (see Genesis 4:6).

Cain refused to heed God's warning. Instead, he enticed his younger brother into a field where he beat him to death. Unlike Adam and Eve, who first tried to make excuses for their sin in the garden, Cain denied his sin. When God confronted him, Cain said he knew nothing about his brother's murder. As punishment, Cain had to leave the land of Eden and became "a restless wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:12).

When we revisit this well-known story, we clearly see the trail of bad choices made by Cain. His disobedience is glaring. His complete denial of his sin is shocking. You might think, *I would never commit such a sin!* It's true you're not likely to murder your sibling, but if you examine your life, you might see a time when you made a series of decisions that led you to be ruled by sin instead of obedience to God. And maybe recently you avoided your opportunity to confess a sin. Instead, you chose to ignore it, deny it, hide it under a series of good deeds, or conveniently omit it from your time of prayer with your heavenly Father.

People today are running from God. Perhaps they are not even aware they are wandering spiritually. But running from God will never alleviate the guilt of sin. Only one remedy exists, and that is found in facing up to our shortcomings. The way to deal with sin and guilt is through confession and repentance.

Like Cain, you and I are given the opportunity to do what is right and stay in God's presence. Are you facing a challenge? A temptation? Pause and dwell on God's Word before choices are made that could leave you wandering, running, and even hiding from the Lord. Whether you feel pulled toward sin by

pride or by the tension of difficulties, stop to seek God. In His mercy, He waits for you. Go to your Father. He welcomes you and your willing heart.



Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

PSALM 51:1

Lord, there have been times when I have run from You. I have hidden from You because of my sin and guilt. But I am tired of living apart from Your love and protection. You have pointed out my transgressions and the areas in my life where I have walked to the edge of what is right and either entertained or given in to sin.

Help me to pause and pray when I encounter temptation or strong emotions that can cloud my focus on what is right. I will listen to the words You place on my heart and those You have given to me in Scripture. I believe You are eager to receive me and accept my sincere offering of prayer and this life I live. I pray for the wisdom to stop wandering aimlessly and, instead, run with intention toward Your unfailing love. Amen.

AT HOME IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Most believers can probably look back on a time when they veered away from a particular path God was calling them to walk with His guidance. Maybe the choice was related to a job or a relationship. Maybe it was a moral or spiritual dilemma. Some people of faith may take a short detour before coming to their senses and getting back on course in time to avoid doing grave damage. But there are many who stay on the false trail far too long, and it isn't until catastrophe strikes that they look behind them with regret at all the chaos and debris in their wake and get on their knees to repent.

No matter how our path of sin began or where we are along the detour, when we seek God, our refuge and strength, we are redeemed. But the one who continues to wreak havoc and who refuses to turn back to God and surrender becomes hardened, distant from the voice of the Lord, and entrenched in his way.

Cain was such a man. He was given a chance to repent, but he chose instead to reject God's mercy. He tried to run from God and built his own city, and each generation of his descendants living in that city achieved a new level of wickedness. The city was filled with lonely, hard, arrogant, self-seeking people. This is because choosing a self-directed life instead of obedience to God always leads to loneliness and isolation.

Contrast this with the Garden of Eden. Fear and anxiety didn't exist there because God was Adam and Eve's Protector. There was no possibility of economic collapse because God was their Provider. God intended for His people to live in this unspoiled, safe environment, but man chose to wander from God and build a city.

In a large city you can find masses of people, though many feel a deep sense of loneliness. Uncomfortable being alone, people tend to gather in groups and yet remain disconnected and full of discontent. Most people concentrate on their own concerns, hardly think of others, and fail at intimacy. Even husbands and wives can feel like strangers. Sometimes we are too afraid to look in our own hearts, let alone share our thoughts and feelings with another person. Being intimate means opening up to one another and being vulnerable, and that's a risk many of us are not willing to take.

This is not the way God meant for us to live. He designed us to need one another. In the garden, Adam and Eve fellowshiped with God, enjoying each other's company and sharing the wonder of their environment.

Cain did just the opposite as he deliberately put distance between himself and God. If we follow Cain's example, seeking refuge apart from the presence of God, we will never find peace. The peace we yearn for can be found only in the garden of God's grace.

Which direction have you been going in lately? Are you journeying away from or toward the Protector and Provider? The condition of your heart and mind will let you know. If your first thoughts and first worries are about you or concerns of the world, chances are you have gone some distance from the presence of Jesus. If your thoughts turn quickly to prayer and your inclination is to release the burden of your fears and needs to Jesus, then your heart is drawing near to Him.

The refuge of God's presence awaits. It does not need to be the place you crawl back to after the world has broken you down. This refuge is meant to

be your home base where you enjoy His company, draw from His strength, and are empowered for all that is required of you as you make your way *with* Him in this world.



Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

PROVERBS 3:5-6

No place of refuge apart from You, Lord, will satisfy my restless heart. No other person, relationship, or situation will bring lasting peace into my life. Help me walk away from the false promises of the “city of man.” I want my home, my refuge, to be in Your presence so I will remain under Your protection and provision all of my days.

Show me what is in my heart that leads me away from intimacy with You. Show me how to put my trust in who You say You are and who You say I am. Reveal to me the areas of my life that displease You so that I may repent and be restored to fellowship with You. It is a privilege to be known fully by You, and it is a blessing—and a great relief—to trust Your understanding and direction for my life. Amen.

THE HOPE OF EDEN

It's been a long time since Eden was home for God's children. In fact, it's been so long that the idea of a place without violence, selfishness, pain, anger, and destruction seems impossible, doesn't it? After Adam and Eve had to leave paradise, they still had a strong memory of what it was like to live in constant fellowship with their Creator. Imagine their sense of loss, regret, and separation as they realized life would never be the same.

While some descendants strove to repair intimacy with God, others were drawn to the offerings of the city of man, where pride and arrogance ruled and there was no accountability to anyone, least of all God. In such an amoral climate, violence runs rampant and justice is perverted. The freedom found in a "to each his own" culture fosters an entitlement to harm others—a license to destroy to get what one wants regardless of who or what is in the way.

Such heartlessness is echoed in a song by the vengeful Lamech. With a demeanor of invincibility and a desire to build his power and image, he boasts of inflicting violence on his enemies: "Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times" (Genesis 4:23-24).

In the Hebrew language, these words come across as defiance against God.

Lamech might as well have been saying, “God does not run the world according to my preferences, so I have decided to take things into my own hands.”

Lamech’s boasting would not sound unusual today in a culture that tries to overthrow all vestiges of authority—especially God’s authority. One doesn’t even have to seek the company of those who spew defiance to be exposed to harmful rhetoric. It’s all over social media and the places we gather our information.

And it never goes unnoticed by the Lord. That’s exactly what we see in Scripture:

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them” (Genesis 6:5-7).

What a shocking proclamation—the annihilation of all living beings! Yet God is not without mercy. The very next verse says, “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD” (Genesis 6:8).

We’re familiar with the story of Noah’s building an ark and loading it with his family and two of every animal. While God brought judgment on human wickedness, He also preserved a faithful remnant and even made gracious provision for the animal kingdom. His wrath turned to a merciful act to save His creation.

We don’t have personal memories of the beauty, safety, and peace of Eden... or of what the floodwaters destroyed, but God’s Word reminds us of His mercy *and* His might. And our present longing for God’s refuge reminds us to keep looking to God alone as our Guide, our Lord, and our Savior.

Consider how you find favor with the Lord. Are you faithful? Do you

express His mercy and love to others even when they don't deserve unconditional love? Step into your day with God's heart for those you encounter and for your own circumstance. You may not be in Eden, but you can hold on to the hope God had for His children in the beginning and the hope He still has for you as your Provider and Lord.



I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.

GENESIS 9:15

Lord, forgive me for the times I have boasted about living life on my terms and filling my longings with things of the world. It's clear to me that there is no peace in the "city of man." There is only eternal restlessness there. I want the desires of my heart to reflect those You have for me, and I want to be like Noah, faithfully walking with You.

I'm grateful that my longing leads to Your presence. You guide me away from my restless pursuits and bring me to a place of contentment and purpose. You don't ask that I earn these blessings. You ask only that I trust You as the source for them. Fill me with Your mercy and Your might so I can confidently share about Your love and find favor in Your eyes. I will praise Your name all my days from now to eternity. Amen.

BUILDING FOR GLORY OR GOD

What you build with your time, energy, and resources reflects your priorities as well as the state of your spirit. Is the business, reputation, house, legacy, family, or life you are constructing something worthy of the blessings from God you are using to create it?

While we spend the first part of this devotional journey together looking at some examples in Scripture of how man avoided or pursued relationship with God, several stories shine a light on how man tries to replace God or build legacies apart from God. One of the most familiar examples is the Tower of Babel.

Many people know the story of God's confusing the languages at the Tower of Babel, but what is less familiar is the rebellion that motivated the tower's construction. The Bible tells us that Nimrod was a proud and powerful king who couldn't comprehend serving anyone. He attempted to prove that he had no need of God by devoting his life to building a civilization in opposition to God's authority. He built the famed Tower of Babel as a symbol of human effort in trying to find contentment apart from God.

Nimrod's tower was, in many ways, the next step in a progression of human rebellion against God. Adam and Eve sinned but settled near the Garden of Eden, remaining close to God's presence. Cain murdered his brother and then ran from God, settling in the land of Nod. Nimrod took this progression

of sin several steps further, establishing an entire civilization in opposition to God. His desire was for the top of the tower to reach the heavens for the worship of the heavenly bodies—not the Maker of those heavens.

It was from Babylon that astrology—the belief that the stars and planets influence human affairs and events on earth—was passed on to the entire world. That belief continued on. After 400 years of slavery in Egypt, even the Hebrews had begun to practice astrology. When the Lord brought them out of Egypt, He warned them against worshiping the stars (see Deuteronomy 18:9-13).

Although Nimrod's tower was constructed in ancient times, it might surprise you to know there is a Babylonian revival in our own time. This pagan revival has fostered a host of popular practices, including tarot cards, horoscopes, and psychic hotlines. The price tag of this growing interest in pagan spirituality is astronomical in both its financial and spiritual impact, as many people have destroyed their lives by acting on advice from psychics and shamans. If they had sought God's counsel instead, they could have been spared untold regret.

Every disease and sickness, every heartache and pain, is the result of original sin. Many people reject Christ's sacrifice that can bring salvation, choosing instead to try to conquer sin's consequences on their own terms. The arrogance that led Nimrod to construct the tower is no different than the arrogance that continues to rule those who refuse God's authority. Many believe that given enough money and time, we can do anything. We place our trust in science and supercomputers. Technology has become our god. When people claim their success came only from their effort, genius, or authority, they have abandoned the knowledge of God and dependence on Him.

Today, take a moment to consider what you are building to be certain it is not more about your desire for recognition and influence than it is about following and praising God. We can innocently create something that initially serves others and is pleasing to God, but, in time, as momentum or power builds, the original intention fades.

Friend, when God gives you the desires of your heart, always remember the Who behind your heart, its desire, and the fulfillment of that desire. Only then will whatever you are building endure as a testament of your faithfulness and His.



Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and he will establish your plans.

PROVERBS 16:3

Father, You know my heart and my mind. Is there anything I am building with a hidden desire to make a name for myself rather than to glorify Your name? Show me where I have shifted the focus from You to me, from Your promises to my popularity. When I serve and minister to others, give me a humble heart. When I create, may I praise You for ideas and for the privilege of cocreating with You.

If my investment of money, attention, abilities, and effort is for personal gain, lift the veil of that pride and redirect my focus so I am tender toward the priorities and people You want under my care. Lead me, Lord. May I build a tower above my human limits so in all that I do, I point to You and Your strength alone. You are my lasting foundation. Amen.