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Trusting God When You Don't Understand

Learning to trust God
can help you handle
those tough times.



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Trusting God When You Don't Understand

Learning to trust God can help you handle those tough times.



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Introduction

A Slice of the Pie

By Janine Petry



I grew up on Long Island, where the average distance between homes could be measured in pretzel sticks. We lived close to our neighbors, but that didn't make us close. Like most, we just kept our distance, maintained privacy, and kept the doors locked.

In contrast, when my family moved upstate, we needed binoculars just to see our mailbox. Distance and privacy were no longer issues; I'm amazed the house had locks. You can imagine my shock, then, when there came a knock at the door only days after moving in. On the other side stood a neighbor, of all things—a gray-haired grandmother who walked a country mile to deliver a homemade apple pie just to welcome us.



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I haven't quite gotten over it. But maybe that's because of what followed. You see, my child-like brain couldn't figure out why an elderly woman would walk to our home with a homemade pie just to say "Welcome." It just didn't fit anywhere in my head.

But then I figured it out: she was trying to kill us. Yep. Kill—as in *dead*. I mean, what else would a friendly-looking old lady with an apple pie be trying to do? I was no fool. I saw the movie *Snow White*. And I, for one, wasn't going to eat her poisoned apples.

My family tells me I missed out on the best pie ever made this side of heaven. They're still laughing about it. And I'm still sorry I missed out, but I'm thankful I gained a taste for something I needed much more: *trust*.

Isaiah 55:9 says, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Let me ask you: Has God ever come knocking at your door, delivering things beyond the scope of your understanding? Have you ever questioned his motives, fearing the absolute worst? Ever refused what he had to offer, convinced you had him all figured out? Well, you're not alone.





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In the following collection of articles, you'll read about the experiences of those who encountered God in the most unexpected ways, and live to tell of the goodness they discovered on the other side. May their stories encourage you to "taste and see" how good God is for yourself. You won't want to miss out on your slice.

Blessings,

Janine Petry

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Leader's Guide

How to use "Trusting God When You Don't Understand" for a group study.



Trusting God When You Don't Understand" can be used for individual or group study, but if you intend to lead a group study on this, some simple suggestions follow.

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the "Thought Provokers," be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.



The Gift of Doubt



How one woman's dark night of the soul led her to a better understanding of God.

By Camerin Courtney

Five years ago, Christian singer/songwriter Sara Groves just wanted to be left alone by the big scary world. And by God.

She'd given birth to her first child, a son Sara and her husband, Troy, named Kirby. And while the adventure into motherhood brought the usual joys to this now 33-year-old woman, it also brought fear, as did a series of tragic events that followed this milestone. In the midst of loss and pain, Sara sought iron-clad promises of safety for her child—and found none.



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And so began Sara's wrestling match with the big questions of the Christian faith. The result was a year-long tailspin, during which Sara rarely read her Bible and often felt mired in anger, bitterness, and fear.

"One day in frustration, I said to God, 'Jonah—what was *that* about?'" Sara explains. "'You chase the man down, and you get him swallowed by a fish. He doesn't want to go to Nineveh.' At the time, *I* felt like that. I was tired, filled with questions and fears. I felt swallowed up by a big tour bus. Sometimes I didn't want to go minister to people, either. 'Leave Jonah alone,' I told God. 'And, by the way, leave me alone, too.'"

This was a surprising turn of events for the "good girl" who had become a Christian at age four, released five critically acclaimed Christian albums, and had made a name for herself with faith-affirming lyrics on hits such as "First Song That I Sing," "All Right Here," and "How Is It Between Us."

Today, sitting at the kitchen table in her suburban Minneapolis home, sipping coffee from a pottery mug, Sara talks openly about that difficult season she now considers a gift. As Kirby, now five, and his younger brother, Toby, two, wander in and out of the kitchen quoting lines from Disney's *Tarzan* movie, Sara tears up. Her renewed passion for God's kingdom—and our role in it—is obvious. The lyrics on her sixth Christian album, *Add to the Beauty* (INO), released late last year, and the phrase on her T-shirt both hint at where she's landed two years after her "dark night of the soul": *Free to be you and me.*





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What happened after Kirby was born that triggered your questioning?

Several of my close friends and family members experienced tragic losses. Bringing my vulnerable baby into such a scary world terrified me. I was so worn out from a rigorous touring schedule, I had no reserves left to handle this struggle. I became paralyzed by fear.

Fear of what?

So many "what ifs." I worried about the end of the world and how bacteria are getting stronger and are immune to more antibiotics. I worried about computer hackers who could steal my identity and buy weapons of mass destruction with my Visa.

When I had Kirby, my worry expanded to include abductions, food allergies, and the pond in our backyard. I feared something would happen to him. I'd always told the Lord, "Your will, not mine. Take me, make me, break me." But when Kirby was born, it seemed impossible to say "Take *him*, make *him*, break *him*." I didn't trust God at that level. Death was the source of tremendous fear—not just my death, but my son's death, my husband's death.

I told a girlfriend, "If something happens to Kirby, I don't know if my faith will survive." I realized if I could envision a scenario in which my faith wouldn't survive, then it wasn't surviving now. Even with tough spiritual issues, I'd always said, "Lord, I don't understand it, but I trust you." But for the first time I said, "I don't understand it, and I want to know why. I'm not going to take your word for it anymore."





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Did you ever doubt your faith?

I never doubted God exists; I just wasn't sure about his character. It was difficult to understand his sovereignty in the face of awful things that happen in our world.

I kept saying, "I know you're God, and I know you're going to win, but I'm still frustrated." I had so many big questions: If God was sovereign, why *did* all these bad things happen? How much does prayer impact these situations? I was frustrated and afraid. I didn't even pick up my Bible for about a year.

What finally changed?

I got sick of myself, really. I realized the fruit of my anger, bitterness, cynicism, and fear is anger, bitterness, cynicism, fear, and *death*.

Once, in my frustration, I said to God, "You don't just give Job a second family and then it's all better." Soon after we had a substitute bus driver, Dick, for a 72-hour drive to a concert in Georgia. At one point, I chatted with him about his family. He'd lost his only son in a tragic accident. Dick and his wife eventually joined a ministry called Helping Hands, which brings terminally ill children from overseas here to get whatever medical treatment they need. Dick and his wife nurse these kids to health and send them home.

Eventually they adopted their son, Brandon. At the end of our conversation Dick said, "If I hadn't lost my son, I never would have met Brandon—and I can't imagine my life without him."





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That night, I felt God say, *Sara, you go tell Dick the second family doesn't cut it.* I realized Dick knew something about depending on his Maker I had yet to understand.

How did that conversation impact you?

I finally picked up my Bible again. I started reading in Job and flipped over to Psalms. I couldn't get enough. And I haven't stopped since. Something broke open inside me.

Soon after, I discovered I was pregnant again. I wanted to set things straight before this new child arrived. My brother-in-law Mick suggested we name the baby Toby, or Tobias, which means *the Lord is good*. I told my husband, "The birth of our first child caused me to start questioning, so I'm going to say this is finally over with the birth of our next child." I feel like I dedicated Kirby to the Lord, but I never really gave him over to God. At Toby's dedication, I gave them both to God.

Before, I was trying to create a perfect world for my children; now I want to introduce my children to the world we're in. I thought I wanted to be safe, but I realized I don't want my kids growing up watching me be safe. If that's my highest goal, then I'm not reaching out to the tax collector, I'm not surrounding myself with sinners, as Jesus did.

In the end, this journey has been a gift to me.

How so?

The Lord helped me gain, deep within my heart, a greater understanding of his nature. He is good. I know there will be questions and struggles in the future. I don't have all the answers, but I feel better equipped to handle the questions.





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Michael Card, in his wonderful book *A Sacred Sorrow*, says doubts are actually a profound statement of faith because they're a person saying she won't let go of a good God in the face of the profound evil she's seeing.

When I'd questioned God about Jonah, telling him to leave Jonah—and me—alone, I eventually felt God tell me to ask him about Nineveh. And I thought, *Well, Nineveh was an evil place.* God continued, *And what happens in evil places?* I thought, *Little girls get abducted from their own stoop. People are awful to each other. There's war and famine.* And God said to me, *That's why I sent Jonah. I was being personal to a little girl in Nineveh, to a hurting woman there. I was running to their rescue. But I need people to do that. I need you.*

I've come to see *that's* the good news. Despite our depravity and selfishness, God uses us to heal this broken world. That's pretty amazing.

What has healing our broken world looked like in your life?

I feel as though I've spent most of my life grooming my faith. It's been like a nice antique car I've been rebuilding and reupholstering. Lately I've felt, *If I don't get to drive this thing real soon, I'm going to explode!* I want to live out this faith I've been given instead of devote so much meticulous care to perfecting my worship experience and devotional life. I want to be God's hands and feet.





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The process I went through changed my paradigm of what the kingdom of God is. It's coming—but it's also as real now as this chair in which I'm sitting. God has invited us to live in his kingdom in the midst of our regular existence. It's not a place of perfection. It comes when we speak respectfully to our husband, when we refrain from letting our anger spill out onto our kids, when we have the chance to gossip and don't, when we open our home, when we apologize, when we refuse to blame others for our problems.

How have you made an effort to live in that kingdom?

Besides being involved at our church, Troy and I volunteer with Teen Challenge, a Christian drug rehab program for people of all ages. One of their largest facilities is here in Minneapolis. Troy's my manager, and we do whatever they ask: fundraising banquets, chapel hours, a Christmas concert. I love hanging out with the Teen Challenge folks because I love being so close to stories of redemption.

Troy and I also got the chance to go to Slidell, Louisiana, right after Hurricane Katrina. A week before, I'd been in a prayer room at our church sobbing. I'd just read *Terrify No More* by International Justice Mission founder Gary Haugen, and watched the movie *Hotel Rwanda*. I was struck by the power of one person. I was inspired by Gary's challenge toward the end of his book: "When disaster happens, I've ceased to ask 'Where is God?' and begun to ask 'Where are God's people?'"





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What did you do in Louisiana?

Listeners from a local Christian radio station filled our tour bus with diapers and formula. We drove that down to a church a friend of ours attends in Slidell.

I witnessed a miracle of God's provision there. He assembled people from all over the country to raise up a whole warehouse of donated goods where there was nothing five days prior. Chris Tomlin's worship song "Indescribable" includes a line that asks who has seen God's heavenly storehouses. Well, I've seen one of them. It was unbelievable. So I keep looking for such opportunities to be God's hands and feet.

It sounds as though you've come a long way in the past two years.

I always said I'd never write an "it's going to be all right" song, because that seemed so clichéd and simplistic. But on my most recent album, *Add to the Beauty*, I finally wrote such a song, because ultimately that's what God told me: *In the scope of eternity, you're going to be all right. You're going to be beyond all right.*

And if what God's done in my life to this date is any indication of what he's going to do in the next world, then I can't even imagine how true that really is.

This article first appeared in the March/April 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.





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Reflect

- *Sara reflected that after watching several friend experience tragic losses, she began to be paralyzed by fear for her own baby. Can you relate to her struggle? Describe your own experiences with fear.*
- *What did Dick understand about depending upon his Maker that Sara couldn't grasp yet?*
- *Do you spend most of your time "grooming" your faith, "like a nice antique car"? Or are you ready to drive? Explain why.*



On the Threshold

What you can learn
from tough times.

By Virelle Kidder



Until the day I threw them in the trash, my trendy new tan shoes made me feel like a fashion plate. That is, until the fateful day I strode confidently across the wide New England street in front of Stockbridge's famed Red Lion Inn, beckoning my in-laws and our foreign exchange student to follow me. In an instant, the thick sole of my trendy shoe caught the curb and hurtled me into the air, landing me flat on my stomach on the sidewalk.

It was a moment frozen in time.



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My father-in-law stopped mid-street, bent over with laughter. Joining him was Alejandra, our Guatemalan student, who struggled to breathe between guffaws.

"Virelle, are you okay?" my mother-in-law's sweet voice brought me back to humiliating reality. "Oh, you poor thing! Were you hurt?" she said, helping me up from the pavement.

I straightened stiffly, then checked out my bruised knees and elbows. "I'm okay," I said, attempting a smile. "Guess all I hurt was my pride. I'll feel better after we have lunch."

But two hours later, when I climbed into the car for the ride home, a stabbing pain in my neck told me something had clearly changed. Within days, doctors confirmed two slipped disks in my back, launching me into the slow-motion world of healing.

For months I sat by the hour, head tipped forward in neck traction, sorting through the fragments of my once-busy life. *What was God trying to teach me in this down time?* I wondered, struggling with feeling sidelined. As I searched for answers in God's Word, I discovered God doesn't waste our struggles or our pain. He promises to make good things come from them when we put our trust in him. And the transitions that most frighten or frustrate us—or change our plans, as my accident did—often are the impetus for a new focus in life.





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No one could have convinced me of it at the time, but my extended period of healing opened the door to my life as a writer. Today I can say with certainty God's best doorways often resemble unwelcome, even forbidding, challenges. More than once I've dropped limp and exhausted in front of three common doors: perplexity, pain, and patience. If you're facing one today, a surprise may greet you on the other side!

Door I: Perplexity

We've all been there. It's a fork in the road with a big question mark over it. Where to go, what to do next when your job goes sour or doesn't even exist any longer? How to find the money to pay this bill or that? Perplexities in life are as regular as breathing.

When my husband, Steve, and I moved our family to Lexington, Massachusetts, several years ago, I loved every part of it: new house, great neighborhood, wonderful church, and a great school for our oldest daughter. But within a year of our move, to my dismay, Steve was miserable. Too much travel and pressure in his job made life with three small children pretty strained. We began to pray for a new job—in the area, of course.

Then one day Steve received a call from the State Education Department in Albany, New York. Would he come for an interview?

"We'd never move back to Albany, would we, Steve?" I pleaded. "It's the last place I would want to live." Memories of our college days on a dreary city campus were uninviting. Why would God move us from Lexington?





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Within a few days Steve was calling me from Albany at noon with stunning news: "Virelle, they've just offered me the job, and it will be much better for our family. I think this is where God wants me. Are you willing to move?"

"You're kidding, right?" I said. "Move from Lexington to Albany? Are you sure?" This was *not* the answer I'd expected to our prayers.

Although I couldn't understand why God would lead Steve away from the home I loved so much, I knew I had a choice: either give up my dream life and move, or make Steve and me both miserable. While I was confused, I also realized God was holding open a door and asking me to step inside.

So after hours of wrestling with what to do in my confusion, when my tears and last-minute bargaining prayers subsided, I reluctantly said, "I'll go."

That was 25 years ago. When I think now of what I would have missed had I refused to come—the best neighborhood imaginable in which to raise our children, the best friends we've ever known, a church family we love, productive years for Steve on his job—it's frightening to think I almost refused to follow because I couldn't understand God's purpose.

When we trust God to choose for us, his plans are always better than ours. Even when the journey is rough and things couldn't be worse, we can experience peace knowing Jesus walks through every doorway in life before us and reaches out a hand to help us through.





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Door 2: Pain

Well-known Christian author and apologist C. S. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone"—and for good reason. God gets our attention instantly when we're in physical or emotional pain. It's also our megaphone—the time when we shout the loudest back at him: "Why, God? Why are you allowing this to happen to me? Don't you care?"

Physical pain is no fun, but the worst pain by far I've ever experienced has been watching my loved ones suffer and being unable to change a thing. When my small son hung between life and death in an oxygen tent, or when my oldest daughter was diagnosed with lupus, I railed at God, begging him to take their suffering away, promising him anything if he'd just stop their pain. But often, pain is God's doorway to wholeness.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we knew the painful situation we now face would have a happy ending? What if it doesn't?

Etched forever in my heart is another day when another of my children faced a serious health crisis. I knelt by my bed, broken, and sobbed, "Even if you don't heal my daughter, I won't quit believing in you. You can have this child I love so much, and you might as well have me, too." And do you know what God gave me? He gave a peace that assured me my daughter was safe in his hands—no matter what happened.

That was more than 10 years ago. As I look back, I see how God not only allowed her to recover fully, but deepened her faith—and mine—through this painful experience. No one welcomes the door of pain, but when we walk through it with God, we find ourselves intimately alone with him, and nothing is quite the same again.





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Door 3: Patience

I once heard author and radio personality Warren Wiersbe say, "Unless a man (or woman) learns patience, he'll never learn much of anything else." How frighteningly true.

Patience has never been one of my stronger qualities. My father figured that out early in my life. I was less than five when he sat me down in a big chair by the front door and said, "Sit there, Virelle, for one hour without saying a word." It was all but impossible. Give me a spanking, take away food, anything, but don't make me sit still and be quiet!

God has sat me down countless times and said much the same thing. During my 15-month recovery from my back injury, I learned how to sit still and be quiet. With my head and jaw tilted forward and locked in neck traction, all I could do was read the Bible and listen to God. It took herculean strength, but I discovered I could wait thankfully, expectantly, worshipfully in God's presence.

Sitting in God's waiting room is nothing like the looming hallway outside the principal's office. We needn't sit there with our stomach in knots, dreading the guillotine drop of bad news. Rather, waiting on God is more like arriving early to a banquet hall. Something wonderful's about to happen! God will meet with us any moment now, and he's bringing exactly the nourishment we need!

It was a significant turning point in my life when I realized God's more interested in *who* I become than in *what* I do. When the dust settles on my life, I want more than anything to become a woman who honors God and brings him pleasure. He knows I need patience and faith to become that woman.





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Day by day, I realize now my biggest need isn't for food, or clothes, or money to pay the bills. It isn't even having all my prayers answered the way I want. It's being in line with God's purposes, walking with Jesus from one challenge, one adventure, one open door to the next, even if I do stumble headlong through a few.

Virelle Kidder, a regular TCW contributor, speaker, and author of numerous books, lives in New York.

This article first appeared in the November/December 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.

Reflect

- *Virelle writes, "Perplexities in life are as regular as breathing." What perplexities are in your life right now?*
- *"Often, pain is God's doorway to wholeness." Describe a time when God led you to wholeness through pain. Be specific.*
- *The author learned to be still and quiet before God through her unexpected "time out." What do you think God wants to accomplish in you during your wait for him?*



Radical Gratitude



What a dying friend taught me
about being thankful.

By Mayo Mathers

“**Y**ou need to visit Marcia,” said the woman I’d just met after learning we shared a mutual friend. “She’s not doing well.”

Marcia had moved to a neighboring town a few years earlier, so I no longer saw her as often as I once did. When I finally went to her home, Marcia’s skeletal appearance shocked me. A once-gregarious bundle of energy, Marcia came to the door in a slow, excruciating shuffle.



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"I've been diagnosed with systemic Scleroderma," she said, blinking back tears. "It's a fatal disease where your skin and internal organs harden."

On that first visit we mostly cried. On following visits we talked more, stopping frequently to pray. Marcia wanted to respond to her disease in a way that honored God, but forming effective prayers seemed impossible.

"Do I ask God to help me accept my diagnosis, or do I ask for healing?" Marcia wondered aloud one afternoon. I wondered the same thing. One prayer seemed to indicate a lack of faith, the other a lack of trust.

As I read the Bible to Marcia, familiar verses, when held against her bleak future, often brought more questions than comfort. One in particular raised harsh questions: "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18, NASB). Could it truly be God's will for us to give thanks even for Marcia's terminal disease?

Regardless of how illogical the command seemed, Marcia decided to do it, although she added one condition: "God, I've never lied to you before and I'm not going to start now. There's *no* way I can thank you for this life-robbing, painful disease or for the fact I'm not going to see my grandchildren grow up. But I will thank you for the things for which I'm truly grateful."





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With that brutally honest prayer, Marcia began experiencing an intimacy with God she'd never known before. And as I spent time meditating on that verse, I realized Marcia's conditional obedience to God's command wasn't presumptuous at all. The verse says *in* everything give thanks, not *for* everything. There's a big difference in those two little words. God would never expect our gratitude toward things he finds repugnant or evil. However, as our Creator, he knows an overall attitude of thankfulness frees us from the grip of fear, worry, or hopelessness.

From Doubt and Fear

Hebrews 13:15 says, "Let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God" (NASB). Setting aside our deepest emotions and speaking words of praise and trust—especially when we have doubts about what God allows in our life—are sacrificial.

My son has chosen to walk counter to God's call on his life. Despite this excruciating heartbreak, I anticipate the day when he recommits himself fully to God. However, I occasionally succumb to dark times of disillusionment and doubt. The only way I can dispel them is by sacrificing my urge to mourn what isn't and embrace what is: My son is not serving God; God is trustworthy in all things. Speaking words of trust takes an act of sheer will. But the reason God wants me to praise him is because he knows the pattern this forms in me. If I'm praising, I'm not doubting ... if I'm not doubting, I'm trusting ... when I'm trusting, I'm praising ... when I'm praising, I'm not doubting—and so on. A continual attitude of praise protects me against debilitating doubt.





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Attitude Readjustments

Recently my husband, Steve, made a huge career decision that affects us both without discussing it with me beforehand. My immediate desire was to lash out at him, but I managed, barely, to hold my tongue. Yet inwardly I burned with resentment and anger.

"Lord," I pleaded one morning, "take these feelings away. I don't want to wound Steve with my words, but I need relief from these emotions." In the midst of my prayer, God reminded me to "give thanks in everything."

The very thought of being thankful at that moment was galling. It was the *last* thing I wanted to do. But as I begrudgingly thanked my way around the circumstances of Steve's decision, my resentment slowly receded, and I became overwhelmed by a renewed confidence in God. The devastating comments I longed to hurl at Steve dissipated to the point where I actually could view his decision objectively!

Until this incident, I'd thought any time I held my tongue I deserved big pats on the back from God. Now I realized holding my tongue wasn't enough. Destructive emotions still swirled inside me, affecting my attitude. Only by forcing myself to speak words of thankfulness did I find relief from the deep wound Steve's decision had inflicted. Thankfulness changed my perspective so I could discuss our situation rationally and constructively.

Enjoying the Results

The last part of Hebrews 13:15 talks about "the fruit of lips that give thanks to [God's] name." God knows precisely the extent of the sacrifice involved in setting aside our natural inclinations, and he's quick to make it worth our while.





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Marcia is incredible evidence of this. She began pursuing an attitude of thankfulness while I was out of town for several weeks. When I visited her on my return, I couldn't believe the difference. Physically Marcia hadn't changed—still emaciated, the hardened skin on her hands stretched so tightly it pulled her fingers in toward her palms. She was on heavy doses of pain medication and rarely got out of bed. Emotionally, however, she was a woman transformed.

"What's happened?" I asked, scarcely believing the sparkle in her eyes.

Marcia smiled. "I've been thanking God!" she explained. First, she said, she'd begun with little things: the blue sky outside her window, the roof over her head, her wonderful husband. Every day she persevered in this task regardless of how much pain she was in.

"It's the most astonishing thing," she said. "The more I praise God, the more aware of his presence I become. In fact," she continued, "one morning as I was thinking of things I was thankful for, without even realizing it I heard myself say, 'God, thank you for this disease that's brought me so much closer to you!'"

I could only stare in astonishment. In her determination to be thankful, regardless of how illogical it seemed, Marcia had loosened the chokehold of terror in which the disease had held her. Marcia had switched her focus from her helplessness to God's holiness. No wonder God tells us to cultivate thankfulness in our lives! It's an attitude that empowers rather than debilitates.





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I saw it in the sparkle of Marcia's eyes. I felt it when my son called recently and made plans to meet us at church. Such tasty fruit has made me an avid believer in this illogical command that wields such power. And I will continue, in everything, to give thanks.

Mayo Mathers lives in Oregon. This article first appeared in the November/December 2006 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.

Reflect

- *Read Hebrews 13:15 again. How does a continual attitude of praise protect you against debilitating doubt?*
- *How can an attitude of thankfulness change your perspective during a tough time? Have you ever experienced this for yourself?*
- *How does a lack of thankfulness debilitate us in a difficult situation? How can a thankful attitude, regardless of whether or not it seems logical, empower us?*
- *Marcia changed her attitude by just being thankful for the little things. What little things are you thankful for today?*





When Good Things Happen to Bad People

Life isn't always fair...but here's what you can hold on to.

By Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse

Sometimes when I read the newspaper, I'm outraged. A pastor and his wife lose six children in a fiery car crash, while lawyers and a would-be actor gain wealth and fame from the O.J. Simpson trial. A child is wrested from loving Christian adoptive parents to be returned to birthparents who are virtual strangers. Whiny, spoiled athletes sign million-dollar contracts.





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I can't figure out why people who seem to live only for their selfish pleasures become multimillionaires—while some of my most faithful Christian friends live one paycheck away from homelessness. I'm confounded when people who engage in shady business practices never get caught—they only get richer; when people who lie and lust and gossip seem to go on their merry way.

Life isn't fair. I know bad things happen to *good* people. But it really bothers me when good things happen to *bad* people—or at least people who don't seem especially worthy.

It bothered the psalmist, too. Listen to his complaint: "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills ... This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence" (Psalms 73:3–5;12–13).

Sure seems that way, doesn't it? It's easy to wonder, *Where's the payoff? Does God even notice if I'm trying to be good?*

Some aspects of our faith seem so contrary to human nature. Last Sunday in our Bible-study class we discussed Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers who received the equivalent of a day's pay even though some worked since nine in the morning and others weren't even hired until five in the afternoon! Those who signed on the earliest "began to grumble against the landowner." After all, they argued, they'd toiled in the heat of the day. Why should these Johnny-come-latelies get the same deal?





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Our study generated a lively debate about fairness in human terms and in God's terms: "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matt. 20:16). Most of us accept that statement intellectually—yet I have a feeling we still don't quite get it.

We know it's wrong to begrudge others their good fortune, so what should our response be? How can we rise above the trap of envy, resentment, or scorekeeping? Here are a few ideas that have helped me and other women I've talked to.

When I asked one of my friends for her perspective on this question, she responded laughingly, "Boy, I have enough trouble worrying about myself! I'm so far off the mark, I can't even think about whether others deserve what they get."

When I read my Bible, here's the message I get: Because I've been saved by grace—meaning unmerited favor—my primary task is to become more Christlike through the work of his Spirit in me. As one of God's adopted children, he holds me to a higher standard, and it's a daily, humbling challenge to live up to that standard. In fact, it's often when I'm feeling proud of myself, thinking, *Hey, God, look at me! What a good servant I am!*, that God shoots off some reminder of my foolishness and dependence on him. When we're tempted to think of ourselves as worthy, Romans 3:23 provides a pithy corrective: *All* have sinned. None is "worthy" except God alone.





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So whenever I whine about the good fortune undeserving people seem to be blessed with while I muddle along, I'm being *less* like Christ. I've been helped by Oswald Chambers' no-nonsense observation: "Never waste your time looking for justice; if you do, you will soon put yourself in bandages and give way to self-pity. Our business is to see that no one suffers from our injustice."

Think Before You Judge

Appearances can deceive, causing us to hastily type people as "good" or "bad." But we don't always know what's going on inside a person—or behind the hedges of that estate we may admire so much.

When my friend Sue went through a difficult time in her marriage, she'd walk through the historic district of her town, feeling envious of the Victorian mansions she passed. "On the outside, the people who lived in these beautiful homes seemed to lead a charmed life," she told me. "Then I heard how one family was near bankruptcy because the husband had lost his job, and another family had lost a child. It taught me not to judge by externals."

We may *think* the wealthy have it made, that the wicked are "free from the ills common to man," but we don't really know the state of a life or a soul. That's God's business, and we can ...





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Trust God's Justice

Author Philip Yancey once quoted a man who had endured Job-like suffering as saying, "You can't confuse God with life." Our life here on earth is imperfect. Tragedy happens. The bad guys sometimes win. The world is not just, but God is. God *will* deal with the wicked: " ... for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). While we may not be able to trust in the world's scales, we can absolutely trust God's.

Remember What Matters

When we speak of "good things" happening to bad people, we often mean material reward, achievement, worldly success. But God has given each of us so much! We can acknowledge that intellectually, but there are times when we all feel decidedly empty-handed. My friend Vicki says she's been working on this in her own life: "I'm least happy with myself when I pay too much attention to what others have. It's almost as if dwelling on others' good things diminishes what God's given me."

So maybe we don't live in a rambling farmhouse on two acres, like the place I've admired just a few blocks away. I've been blessed with wonderful friends, and I love opening my modest home to those friends. Besides, the things of the world rust and decay. We have a much greater Treasure.

Remember WHO Matters

I have one friend I always think of when I hear the phrase "when bad things happen to good people." She isn't always cheerful and upbeat; she hurts a lot. But something she said once stayed with me. "How," she mused, "do people go through struggles without God?"





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How *do* people go through life without the Savior? Have you ever imagined not being able to sing praises like those of the psalmist, who after bemoaning the "success" of the wicked, turned away from the unworthy to the One most worthy: "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? *And earth has nothing I desire besides you.* My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:24–26, emphasis added).

The final, most important step we can take is to express our gratitude for God himself, to share those feelings of love, humility, and awestruck wonder that resound through the Psalms like echoes in a cathedral. So now, instead of being depressed about the injustices I read about in the newspaper or encounter in everyday life, I try to thank God for what I have—the reassurance that he is with me always.

And that's enough. More than enough.

Elizabeth Cody Newenhuyse is a TCW contributing editor, retreat and conference speaker, and author. Her latest book is God, I Know You're Here Somewhere (Bethany House).

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Reflect

- *Do you judge before you think? How can that lead to a faulty perception of yourself and others?*
- *What truly matters in your life? What things do you treasure?*
- *Read Luke 10: 41–42. Can you relate more to Martha or to Mary? What did Mary choose that was "better"? And how could it never be taken away?*



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Balancing Act

After burnout and ongoing struggles, here's the way to find peace.

By Camerin Courtney



Five years ago, when Christian recording artist Rebecca St. James moved into a house in a quaint Nashville suburb, she had no idea she was embarking on one of the darkest seasons of her life—or that the experience would spark the project that's garnered her the most mainstream attention in her 11-year career.





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At the time, Rebecca was 22 and already a six-year veteran of the Christian music industry. She had numerous number-one hits and industry and reader's-choice awards to her credit. Despite many years of "adult" responsibility with her music career, rigorous touring schedule, and numerous speaking engagements on her platform of sexual purity, the Australia native still lived at home with her parents and six younger siblings. Surely it was time to move out and claim some of the independence that comes with such a grown-up life.

So in early 2000, following a 13-month tour and a 2-month-long missions trip to Romania, Rebecca settled into her first solo home—and became utterly miserable.

In her 2004 book, *SHE: Safe, Healthy, Empowered* (Tyndale), Rebecca describes that difficult time:

"I experienced the most horrible time of my life in the quietness of that house. ... I grew desperately lonely. I felt disillusioned and unprotected. ... Even God seemed distant. I cried regularly and prayed in desperation. I remember lying on the floor calling out to him to show me how to escape that place of darkness and sadness. But I couldn't hear him say anything in return."





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The lessons Rebecca learned through that experience inspired her to write *SHE* with author and nationally syndicated radio talk show host Lynda Hunter Bjorklund. The book follows Rebecca's other successful projects, including her 2002 bestselling book about sexual purity, *Wait for Me* (Nelson); 19 top-ten singles on the Christian charts; a Grammy; and international sales of her eight albums in the multimillions. *SHE*'s unique take on what it means to be an empowered woman in the 21st century has earned Rebecca media appearances on MSNBC's *Scarborough Country*, CNN, *Fox News Magazine*, *Hannity & Colmes*, and the WB network's *The Daily Buzz*.

TCW recently caught up with Rebecca, now 27, at a trendy Nashville coffee shop, where she shared her thoughts about community, independence, feminism, and her continued passion for sexual purity.

Why were you so miserable when you moved out on your own?

I didn't understand the power of community. I bought into the feminist mentality: *I don't need anyone. I'm independent. I can do it all alone.* But all that facing the world on my own left me feeling excruciatingly lonely.

Plus, I was burnt out after the long tour and missions trip. And I'm so seldom at home anyway, it's already challenging to maintain deep relationships.

Did you talk to your family or friends about your struggles?

I talked to my mom a little bit about it, and when people asked me how I was doing, I replied, "Not very good. I'm really struggling." But I didn't invite their help or support.





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The irony is, I thought this was going to be an amazing time spiritually. I had romantic notions of just God and me in my little haven.

Where was God in this tough time?

I wasn't sure at first. He seemed silent. When I finally poured out what I was going through to my pastor, he asked, "Is God trustworthy?" When I answered "yes," he said, "Then trust him." It seems so simple, but I needed to be reminded that despite how we feel, God is always there for us. Sometimes we just have to hang on to what we know to be true.

When I eventually moved back home with my family in Nashville, I realized I'd been relying on myself too much. I wasn't leaning on God for strength, and I'd pulled away from my family and friends. I learned the hard way we weren't designed to be lone rangers.

I'm not saying people have to live at home with their parents until they're in their late 20s or until they get married. What I'm saying is that we need to balance striking out on our own with being plugged into a thriving community. That's my aim as I once again move into my own home soon.

What will be different this time?

First, I'll have a roommate. And I'll work at staying connected to others by being more vulnerable with family and friends. Because I'm in the spotlight, I'm especially susceptible to the temptation to put on the mask of *I'm OK and everything's fine*. But some of the most powerful times I've experienced with friends or in Bible studies is when the masks came off and people were real. We've got to get back to that in relationships. That's an underlying theme of my new book, *SHE*.





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SHE has been called a new feminist outlook. How so?

The feminist movement was positive in many ways by providing women with equal rights and equal opportunities. But it had a detrimental side to it as well, especially about beating men at their own game and not needing them at all. So Lynda and I wanted to sift through the bad parts, celebrate the good, and combine it with biblical principles.

Plus, Lynda and I had heard women crying out to us in our respective ministries about so many struggles. We boiled these down to nine areas—including boundaries, emotional healing, beauty, and finding purpose in life. We want to empower women with the truths that have helped us in these areas of struggle.

Which of these do you struggle with most?

Probably beauty and self-image. You'd think a woman who regularly does photo shoots for magazines and has the benefit of hair and make-up stylists would be able to look at some of those images and think, *Well, I look OK in this. I feel good about myself.* But I don't. Every single day I struggle with measuring myself against models and actresses, even though so many of these women are unhealthily thin. I know that stuff in my head, but translating it into delight in who God made me to be is hard. It's a daily battle.

A few years ago, I broke up with my boyfriend. It was a difficult time, so I didn't eat much. Consequently I became really skinny. Even then I wanted to lose more weight!





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It's awful to be constantly unhappy with how you look. Yet how many of us are guilty of that? I think we've got to make the best with what we have. Yes, we need to care for our body by exercising regularly and eating healthfully, but we can't let body-image issues rule us. And I'm guilty of letting this preoccupy my thoughts. It's something I'm seeking God about.

How do you combat these negative thoughts?

I keep reminding myself God cherishes me just as I am. I'm trying to build my self-image around what God thinks of me. Of course, this requires spending time with God regularly to allow him to fill me with his love.

Also, I've found it's key to have friends and family around who allow me to be honest with them and say, "Oh man, I'm really struggling in this area. Pray for me today because I'm obsessing about this."

I love the way actress Reece Witherspoon put this struggle into perspective in an interview I recently read. She said, "You know what? I'm never going to win the skinny race. I'm never going to win the successful race. I just want to be the best me I can be." I love that. *That's* my goal.

You've learned the importance of not putting too much pressure on yourself the hard way, haven't you?

Yes, at the end of 2001, I had a real scare when I got Bell's palsy, a stress-related condition.





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When did you first notice something was wrong?

I was at a restaurant with some friends and was having a hard time drinking out of my glass. My mouth felt weird, kind of numb. The next morning when I woke up, my mouth wouldn't work. I couldn't smile or raise my right eyebrow. My right eye drooped and wouldn't close properly, so I had to tape it shut at night. It was scary!

How do they treat Bell's palsy?

The doctor put me on a high dose of prednisone, an anti-inflammatory medication that made me lethargic and unable to sleep. I was on tour at the time, so I'd rest backstage before a show and during intermission. Right after the show, I'd crash. The first night I went on stage after I experienced symptoms, I freaked out because I couldn't smile at the crowd. I couldn't say my Fs properly, so when I sang "Wait for Me," it came out "Wait 'r Me." It was bad.

What do you do to avoid future burnout?

I now take annual three- to five-week sabbaticals. While that might sound like a lot of time off, the pressure of turning out an album every year or two, writing books, doing interviews, and touring is intense. I'm not necessarily going to the beach and doing nothing on these trips, either. Last year I spent a month studying in Switzerland at the L'Abri Fellowship Study Center. I need to get filled spiritually so I can do what I do well.

I know a lot of women can't relate to the sabbatical context, but I think you can reap many of the same benefits by taking mini-sabbaticals, like going camping or even taking a couple hours when the kids are napping to do something you enjoy.





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When I took my real first sabbatical a few years ago, one of the things God taught me was the importance of *being*, not just *doing* all the time. *Just learn to rest*, I felt him tell me. *I'm not requiring anything of you*. As Isaiah 30:15 says, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength."

What does the daily "art of being" look like for you?

Every day I try to spend time with God, which is like mini "being" time. I also like to go for walks, when I can listen to nature or stare into the sky. Sometimes I sit and read a book in a hammock at my parents' place.

The last two days I've been driving by a sign in front of a local church that says, "The world honors success; God honors faithfulness." When you think about it, our obsession with checking things off a to-do list is a worldly success thing. We feel successful and efficient when we cross something off our list. But I've felt God tell me, *Spend time with me, even though you're not being "efficient."* *Just love me and allow me to love on you*. That's faithfulness; that's real success.

For more information about Rebecca, go to www.rsjames.com.

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Reflect

- *Rebecca's pastor challenged her to simply trust God, since she knew he was trustworthy. How do we "hang on to what we know to be true" during tough times?*
- *Isaiah 30:15 says, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." What does this mean?*
- *Do you take time to be with God, even when it doesn't seem practical or efficient? Do you allow God time to "love on you"? Describe your thoughts about this.*



When God Seems Silent



What to do when life is dark and heaven's quiet.

By Verla Gillmor

Not too long ago, it seemed as though God had packed up, moved far away, and left me no forwarding address. I was unable to sense his promptings and overall presence as I searched for him during trying times. I felt abandoned, confused, and terribly alone.

The year actually had started out on an opposite note. In January, I'd realized a lifelong dream—the publication of my first book. The spring months were jammed with talk show interviews and a stepped-up speaking schedule. Blessings were everywhere. In the midst of it all, God gave me a vision to start a new ministry for Christians in the workplace. I was on a roll.



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With great excitement, I raced through all the open doors. My quiet times were rich, God's directions were clear, and all the lights were green. As long as God kept guiding, directing, leading, and blessing, I felt I could handle all the pressure and change.

Then, a recession in the summer of 2001 slowed my small consulting business. I was worried because I now had the added expenses of launching a new ministry. I hoped that by fall, everything would be back to normal. Little did I know the events of September 11 were right around the corner.

After 9-11, "bad-to-worse" took on a whole new meaning. The economy reeled. Clients stopped paying their bills and called off future projects. Speaking engagements were canceled. The stress caused my fibromyalgia to flare and a relentless cycle of pain, fatigue, and depression followed. To top it all off, my health insurance provider filed for bankruptcy.

Daily I approached God with growing concern. "Okay, God, I'm sure you've got a plan. Show me what I'm supposed to do here. I need you now more than ever. I'm a middle-aged woman on my own. I'm physically hurting, emotionally spent. How should I deal with this?"

The silence was deafening.

My prayers became more strident: "God, this is *not* the time to play hide-and-seek. I'm facing some serious anxiety here. Now would be an especially good time to hear from you!"





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For more than two decades, the Holy Spirit had filled my head and heart with comfort, encouragement, leadings, inklings, instructions—even in the rockiest of times. But for the next six months, God was totally mute.

What's going on when God's silence seems palpable? What on earth is he up to? The hard reality is, some things are best learned in the dark. Here's what God taught me through that tough time of his silence.

Silence Is Not Absence

I come from a long line of "talkers." When I was growing up, our house was quiet only when no one was home. I recall one time chattering to God about my endless litany of needs and wants, ending with, "Are you *listening*, God?" As clearly as if he were sitting next to me in the flesh, I heard him say in my spirit, *Yes, child, I'm listening. Would you like to listen for awhile?*

I got the message. Over the years, I practiced listening more to God's voice. But nothing prepared me for his silence!

On more than one occasion, Old Testament King David felt abandoned by God. But he knew that despite his feelings, he was never out of God's sight: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ... If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' even the darkness will not be dark to you" (Psalm 139:7, 9–12).

David reassures us that we are not alone. God is relentlessly faithful. So how do we convince our frightened hearts when life crumbles around us and God becomes silent? We enter into the silence *with* him.





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The spiritual opportunity: SOLITUDE. You have to feel totally accepted and comfortable with someone to sit with a person in silence. It can be intimidating. Silence shifts the emphasis of a relationship away from words and transactions to intimacy where no words are necessary. Are you that comfortable with God? Would you like to be?

Since I felt my many words were fruitless, I sat in my favorite chair, read a brief portion of Scripture, or listened to a worship tape to calm my heart. Then I'd simply say, "Lord, I'm here and I'm scared. Please let me feel your presence." And I would sit ... in silence. Sometimes I cried. Eventually my spirit calibrated to God's and peace settled over me—enough peace to get me through another day.

When all the racket of life stops and God's presence fills every molecule of space around us, our hearts grow calm and strong. Fear seems pointless. Circumstances lose their power over us. The silence becomes an opportunity to fall in love with the person of Christ, rather than the things he says or does for us.

Silence Checks Our Trust Level

There's not much trust required if someone stands beside us coaching us every inch of the way. It's like a parent running alongside a child who's learning to ride a bicycle. We want to know the parent is there because we have no confidence we can ride the bike alone. But we'd look pretty silly if we were 40 and mom or dad were still running alongside our bike.





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At some point in our journey with him, God may decide to take his hand off the bike, so to speak, to see if we remember what we've learned. It's preparation for the road ahead, which may be bumpy or difficult. It's God taking us to the next level, building our commitment and perseverance. It's also a way to reveal those things we're trusting in more than him.

For years my friend Esther prayed for a spouse, and God seemed to ignore her. "My heart's desire always has been to marry a preacher and to minister together," she says. "But when I hit 30 and there was no husband on the horizon, I kept asking God, 'Why am I not married? Is there something wrong with me?' There was no response. It hurt."

Then one day Esther had an "aha!" moment. "I realized I was trusting marriage and a husband to give my life meaning more than I was trusting God to do it. I had made marriage a litmus test of God's love for me."

The spiritual opportunity: SURRENDER. Esther surrendered her marriage agenda to God and gave him permission to do whatever he wanted with her life. Suddenly a whole world of opportunity opened for her. Today she travels the globe training pastors and children's ministry leaders.

"I'm doing exciting things now I couldn't have done if I were married. And I learned I didn't have to marry to do ministry. I haven't permanently said good-bye to marriage. God didn't tell me I'd never marry. But I had to learn God's plan for my life involved more than *just* marriage." Esther's breakthrough came as a result of God's silence.





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Jesus understood this principle. The most significant events in his life took place in the dark when all he saw was God's back. Yet his instructions to his disciples were unwavering: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me" (John 14:1).

Every day God calls us to keep trusting—to get out of bed and spend another 24 hours washing dishes, doing laundry, loving our family, believing he has everything under control—even when he seems silent.

Silence Doesn't Mean Nothing's Happening

Ever try to watch a seed grow? The problem is, you can't. It remains hidden under the dark garden soil until the seedling's ready to break the surface and appear. Sometimes things buried in *us* need to surface, but they'll only do so after we sit still long enough to let them break through. Perhaps they're deep issues that have undermined our lives for years. Silence forces them to emerge.

One of the old issues that surfaced for me was a fear of financial meltdown. When I was a child, my father had more financial ups and downs than a roller-coaster ride. So my precarious circumstances triggered my preoccupation with feeling financially insecure. I was looking for quick answers to calm my fears, but God wanted me to wrestle with a much bigger issue: Who, exactly, was my provider? Was it my clients—or God? Of course God expected me to work hard and do my part. But if I was doing the best I could, what could I expect in return?





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The spiritual opportunity: SCRIPTURE MEMORIZATION.

God's silence and my situation drove me deeper into his Word to search for what I could expect of God in circumstances such as my own. In spiritual desperation, I had to break a sweat and dig. I selected comforting promises, recorded them on 3x5-inch cards, and taped them everywhere—on my bathroom mirror, on my dashboard, over the kitchen sink. And I prayed the promises back to God: "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread" (Psalm 37:25); and "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. ... Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6:25, 26).

When I thought nothing was happening, God, in fact, had me in training. You pay more attention when you're lost in a wilderness. I'd only been interested in quick fixes. But God was building my character and making me more effective for the kingdom. He can do the same for you.

Silence Forces Us to Get Real with God

My friend Mikki had been married 13 years when she sensed a growing chasm between her husband and her. "It was as though someone put a glass wall between us," she says. "I could see my husband and hear him, but I couldn't feel him." Her husband denied there was a problem.

For eight years Mikki asked God to reveal what was going on and to make her the wife her husband needed. While God related to her deeply and intimately about every other thing in her life, he was totally silent about her marriage.





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"It was a torturous time," Mikki says. "But it brought me to a place of brokenness before the Lord. I couldn't *make* God tell me what was happening to my marriage. I couldn't *make* him fix it. I believe he was teaching me to give up control and submit to his timing and plans."

Eventually her husband's eight-year-long affair came to light and he filed for divorce. When the truth was revealed, Mikki snapped in anger at God. "I thought if I was faithful, surely God would restore my marriage," she says. "I remember throwing my Bible on the shelf and saying, 'I'm done with you, God. Stay out of my life!' Sometimes you have to get raw and real with God. If something hard has happened, it's okay to be honest with him."

The spiritual opportunity: AUTHENTICITY AND COMMUNITY. To my friend Mikki's surprise, getting real with God brought her closer to him. Almost right away Mikki was able to confess to God she was sorry for blaming him. After all, he was the only one who had ever loved Mikki unconditionally. Christian friends then came alongside to see her through the hard part of rebuilding her life. They reminded her repeatedly of what was true and false about her and about God. But mostly they loved her, listened to her, and gave her the gift of their presence.

"I remember sitting on the floor crying at a friend's house. I said, 'I'm trusting you to trust the Lord for me for now—to have hope until I get mine back.' The verse I clung to was Psalm 119:50: 'My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.'"





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When God falls silent, how long will the silence last? It takes as long as it takes—and it will seem dark and lonely the whole time. But in the same way dawn always follows night, so, too, your darkness will end.

For me, the silence ended as unexpectedly as it began. While waiting to hear from God, I noticed my prayers became less about getting answers than about connecting with God himself. I remember when I first realized I was receiving a fresh word from God—the first word I'd heard in a long time. One day as I was journaling, I felt the Holy Spirit gently ask whether scaring myself about all the "what ifs" had done any good other than to scare me. He reminded me I'll have everything I need to live the life he's called me to live. If a need isn't met, then maybe it wasn't a real need, or something I wasn't supposed to be doing in the first place.

The message was a precious sign God *had* been at work—shaping me even when he seemed far away. And so the two of us began again the daily conversations that would see me into the future he had planned for me.

If you let God's silence do its work, you will come out the other side knowing that you're not alone, that God longs for deeper intimacy with you, that he's worth trusting for the journey, and that you're stronger than ever.

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Trusting God When You Don't Understand When God Seems Silent

Reflect

- *Read through Psalm 139. What does this teach you about God's care for you? Which verses speak to your heart the most? Why?*
- *How might a period of silence from God teach you to surrender to him?*
- *Think back on times of confusion or trouble in your life. What does it mean that "dawn" always comes after the "darkness"? Have you experienced this in your life?*



Finding Purpose in Pain

Evelyn Husband shares about God's healing hand.

By Corrie Cutrer



A love note is still visible on Evelyn Husband's makeup mirror in her bathroom. The words were written with a bar of soap by her husband, astronaut Rick Husband, shortly before his departure as commander of the space shuttle Columbia on January 16, 2003. It reads, "I love you Evey, love Rick." It was only meant to appear there temporarily.

"Of course I can't wash that off," Evelyn says.



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It's been nearly a year since Evelyn stood with the other families of the space shuttle Columbia's crew at the landing site in Cape Canaveral, Florida, waiting for her husband to return home. The shuttle was just minutes from landing when NASA's Mission Control lost contact with the Columbia crew. The next few moments were a blur of events: video images of Columbia breaking apart over the Texas skyline, NASA officials scrambling to move the family members away from view of television cameras. Evelyn remembers looking at the faces of her son, Matthew, and daughter, Laura, then 7 and 12. Matthew turned to his mother.

"He said, 'I guess I'm not going to be in Indian Guides with Dad at the YMCA anymore.' It was the first thing that hit him," Evelyn says.

Laura also was trying to process this new gap in her life. "Who's going to walk me down the aisle one day, Mamma?" she asked, teary-eyed. "Who's going to help me with my math homework?"

"They were instantly aware we were a different unit," Evelyn, 45, says of her children.

So began the Husbands' painful journey of loss. In the months following the accident, Evelyn, a committed Christian, spoke openly about how the faith she found as a 13-year-old girl had sustained her. Two days after the accident, she appeared on the *Today* show and shared how she was trusting in God to give her strength through this difficult time. As Evelyn recited the words of Proverbs 3:5–6, the show's producers flashed the verses on the screen.





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That was the beginning of Evelyn's efforts to deliver a powerful message: Even in the midst of intense suffering, God is faithful. In recent months, she's told her story to tens of thousands of women across the country at Women of Faith conferences.

"Most of you aren't going to lose the person you love most on national television," she told an audience of women in California last summer. "But every person will face big tragedies and little everyday crises. Your only consistency is Jesus Christ."

Where did this incredible strength in the face of pain and loss come from? For Evelyn, it was partly from experiencing God's comfort in the past.

"Deep inside, I knew God was going to walk me through this somehow," she says. "I knew it because he'd walked with me through other crises earlier in my life."

One of those crises began shortly after Texas Tech University sweethearts Rick and Evelyn were married in 1982. They'd been trying to start a family without success. During the couple's first five years of marriage, Evelyn miscarried twice and began infertility treatments.

"After the second miscarriage, I went through depression," Evelyn says. "I prayed, 'God, take away my desire to be a mom if it isn't your will, because this is just so painful.' I had to let go and trust God with my future."





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That experience helped Evelyn deal with the loss of her husband. "The past year I've had to take hold of God's hand and step out in faith into absolute blackness," she says. "I've gone way beyond the polite stages with God. I've yelled and cried out to him with a deeper, gut-wrenching cry than ever before. But he's proven to me he's there, holding my hand as I take each step forward. That's why when you walk through a crisis, it's so important to have a foundation of faith already established. Because you have to know *whose* hand you're holding in order to step into the darkness of an uncertain future."

The moments when she's been overwhelmed with unexpected grief have been hardest to bear. "I remember one day shortly after the accident when we'd run out of milk," Evelyn says. "I walked in the grocery store and saw a magazine with a picture of Rick on the front and a headline that read, 'The last seven horrifying minutes for the space shuttle crew.' I saw Matthew looking at it. By the time we checked out, I was a hysterical, sobbing mess.

"Going to the grocery store is still one of the hardest things for me to do," Evelyn adds. "Rick used to buy this weird non-fat peanut butter that he loved to put in smoothies. And he loved to eat almonds. I go down the aisle now and think, *I don't need to get those things*. It's so painful."

The same pain that makes mundane tasks such as grocery shopping so draining has become the catalyst for Evelyn to reach others who suffer or who are struggling with their faith.





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Women of Faith President Mary Graham says conference attendees love listening to Evelyn because she's honest about her imperfections and has a wonderful sense of humor. She's also the image of a survivor to women facing uncertain times.

"Evelyn didn't make it through this by turning out the lights and crawling under her bed, but by taking one tiny baby step of faith at a time," Mary says. "When women hear her stand up and say, 'I can make it through this crisis because what I believed about God in my head now has proven true in my heart,' then they think, *I can trust him with my everyday dramas, too.*"

Evelyn recounts her story of loss in *High Calling: The Courageous Life and Faith of Shuttle Columbia Commander Rick Husband* (Thomas Nelson). In it she describes Rick's faith and how God was at work in the moments leading up to the tragedy, providing precious memories for her and the kids to share with Rick before his mission.

Before he went into quarantine to prepare for the mission, Rick videotaped devotionals for the kids to watch every day during his trip. "Now they have on tape an hour-and-a-half of their dad talking to them about God," Evelyn says.

Rick also left Evelyn a journal he started for her in the weeks leading up to his mission. She keeps it by her nightstand.

"He wrote in it every single day until he left," she says. "It was very unlike him, but God was at work in his heart. Rick ended up giving me an account of the last days we had together."





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On February 1, the one-year anniversary of the tragedy, Evelyn and her kids will travel to Washington, D.C., to dedicate a memorial to the Columbia astronauts in Arlington Cemetery. Standing next to the site is another memorial already established for the Challenger crew who perished in 1986.

"Three years ago, I went with Laura's fifth-grade class on a field trip to D.C., and Laura and I visited the Challenger memorial," Evelyn says. "I remember standing there with my arm around Laura begging God, *Never let it be us.*

"In light of what happened, you'd think I'd be disillusioned with God. But strangely, it hasn't been that way at all," she says. "I've learned Jesus was a man of sorrows who's well acquainted with my grief. He knows how deeply I'm mourning. And he's been with me every moment. He's also given me a real chance to honor him through this situation. That's what I'm trying to do."

Corrie Cutrer, former TCW assistant editor and now a regular contributor, lives with her husband in Illinois.

This article first appeared in the January/February 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

Finding Purpose in Pain

Reflect

- *Evelyn comments, "You have to know whose hand you're holding in order to step into the darkness of an uncertain future." Be honest: whose hand do you hold onto when times are uncertain? Why?*
- *Evelyn talks about "how God was at work in the moments leading up to the tragedy." Reflect on a difficult circumstance in your life. How have you seen God at work to prepare you or provide for you in the moments to follow?*
- *How has God given you chances to honor him through your difficult times? Are you taking those opportunities? Why or why not?*





A Brave New Worldview

How we can live confidently in uncertain times.

By Ruth E. Van Reken

For one who grew up with the well-deserved nickname "Worrywart Ruthie," I find living in today's world can be pretty scary. It's hard not to feel anxious while watching the nightly news. What will the repercussions be from America's war with Iraq? When or where might Al Qaeda strike again?

Sometimes my worries become more personal. Could I, or someone I love, become the victim of some sniper attack while going about our daily routines? Can I keep my grandchildren safe from the child abductors who seem to lurk everywhere?



Trusting God When You Don't Understand

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Life that once seemed relatively safe now appears up for grabs, making me wonder: *How can I live God's way in a world that often feels not only out of my control, but out of control, period?*

I've come to believe there is a way to live with confidence—but it's not a confidence based on the worldly arrogance that somehow I can control my own destiny. Rather, it's a Christ-centered confidence, the kind the Bible calls "an anchor for our souls" (Hebrews 6:19, NAS).

The apostle Paul wrote from prison to his dear but struggling friends at Philippi: "Being confident of this very thing, that *he* who hath begun a good work in *you* will *complete* it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6, AV, emphasis added).

In that passage, Paul revealed three reasons why he could live with absolute confidence. They're the same reasons we can be confident, too—no matter what our personal, national, or global circumstances are.

We can live confidently because we know who God is. Paul's entire reason for confidence is rooted in the character of God himself—not what Paul did or didn't see going on around him. He's absolutely certain of one thing: God is in control. Period.

This, of course, is a great mystery to us. How does God take into account Satan's fierce, evil opposition, along with the free will he gave humans, and still promise he can work everything together for good?





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I have no idea. God never promises I'll understand him, but he does ask me to trust him. Believing that God is sovereign is vital for confident living. It means that when I've begged him to spare the life of a 24-year-old single mom struggling with Hodgkin's disease and she dies, or when he appears so horribly silent as suicide bombers attack once more in the Middle East, God's still in control. And he already knows how he's going to use these evil situations for his own purposes—even if it looks as though Satan's victorious now.

We know from all his writings that Paul trusted not only that God is sovereign, but also that his character is faithful and good (1 Thessalonians 5:24). It's critical for Christians to believe this, too. Why?

Because without these additional attributes, we could view an absolutely sovereign God as a potential big bully. If I can't trust that God is always good and faithful, then God goes on trial with each particular circumstance of my life. I become the doubter who's like the waves of the sea, always being tossed about (James 1:6).

Of course, it's easy to say I'm confident God's faithful when I've escaped a negative situation, but is he still faithful when the friend I've lifted up in prayer for more than 30 years has never returned to faith in Jesus? Or when I was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago and had to face chemotherapy? The truth is, either God is faithful and good in all these situations, or he's faithful and good in none. How we decide between these opposite choices determines whether we live with confidence (and peace) or anxiety.





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We can live confidently because God knows us personally.

Sometimes it's easier to trust in God's sovereignty when we consider the mega-events of life rather than the small but challenging moments we experience every day. Is he in those as well?

A comforting, confidence-building truth is that the same creator God who controls the flow of history also knows how many hairs I have on my head (Matthew 10:30). When God says I'm his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that he's already planned for me to do (Ephesians 2:10), that means every event of my life is part of his plan to shape me for the role he's designed for me to fill—even those events or situations I don't understand.

All my life, I planned to be a nurse. In fact, I became one. Yet, through a series of events, many of which confused me at the time, I've ended up spending most of my time helping internationally mobile families deal with issues they face while raising children cross-culturally. I couldn't have prepared for this because I didn't even know it was a topic! Yet through the circumstances of my life—growing up as a missionary kid, then becoming a missionary myself as an adult and raising my children abroad—God prepared me perfectly for this one tiny niche in his kingdom.

This is why I can be confident for others I love as well. All the unlikely twists and turns of their particular journeys are part of God's shaping and directing of them. I know he'll work with them until the day of Christ's return, just as he has and does with me. That confidence allows me to walk with others through difficulties because I know God's at work, even when I have no idea how a particular situation may turn out.





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We can live confidently because we know the end of the story. Paul had no doubt about the end of the story. Whatever God allowed to happen to the New Testament church or allows to happen to us—persecutions, false teachers in the church, adverse political situations, conflict between fellow Christians, or personal tragedies—his work never will be left undone in or through us. If we never understand the circumstances of our lives before then, things will make sense at last when we see Jesus face to face.

Because there's no question about the grand finale of our lives or even history itself, Paul gives his final, practical instructions for how we are to live God's way—even in a world that feels out of control: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! ... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:4–7, NAS).

The result of living this way? "The peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:8, NAS).

*Ruth E. Van Reken is a speaker and coauthor of **Third Culture Kids: The Experience of Growing Up Among Worlds** (Nicholas Brealey/Intercultural Press).*

This article first appeared in the July/August 2003 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

A Brave New Worldview

Reflect

- *According to the author, why is it critical for Christians to believe that God's character is faithful and good?*
- *When you walk with others through their difficult times, do you have confidence that God is at work, shaping and directing them? How do you see that happening?*
- *Would you describe yourself as confident when it comes to handling difficult times? What are you confident in?*



kyria

In God We Trust



*Experts share how to face the future
with confidence.*

*As Christians, we have every reason to face the future
with hope, not fear. So TCW asked several prominent
Christian leaders how believers can be confident in the
midst of uncertainty. May their words help you face
your year—and whatever it may hold—with greater faith
and hope.*





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

In God We Trust

Max Lucado

Jesus, the Ultimate Example

How did Jesus endure the terror of the crucifixion? He went first to his Father with his fears. Do the same with yours. Don't avoid the hardest times of life. Enter them. Just don't enter them alone. And while there, be honest. Pounding the ground's permitted. Tears are allowed. Do what Jesus did; open your heart and pray to God. Be specific. Jesus was. God has plenty of time for details. He also has plenty of compassion. And he knows what you need.

Max Lucado, best-selling author. Adapted from his most recent book, Traveling Light (W Publishing)

Fern Nichols

Powerful Comfort

Memorizing Scripture's a wonderful way to dispel fear. Try Psalm 118:6–7: "The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper." Or Psalm 4:8: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." If you can't sleep or are having nightmares, these great promises will comfort you. God's Word is a powerful weapon against fear. We can boldly proclaim, "[I] will have no fear of bad news; [my] heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. [My] heart is secure, [I] will have no fear" (Psalm 112:7–8).

Fern Nichols, founder and president of Moms in Touch International





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

In God We Trust

Shirley Dobson

Control in the Chaos

The future will always be uncertain. While we may enjoy the illusion of safety, even in those moments, we're only a heartbeat away from eternity. That's why we must place our trust in God, knowing "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

God hasn't lost control of our circumstances. He's our shield and defender—even when chaos rages around us. Isaiah 41:10 says, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Now, more than ever, we should pray for and encourage each other *daily*. The writer of Hebrews reminds us, "let us not give up meeting together" (10:25). We need to be nurtured spiritually through our churches and other fellowship groups.

We can find comfort in Scripture's promise that our heavenly Father cares about every detail of our life. In Matthew 10:29–31, Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." How can we not be confident about the future when we have this wonderful assurance?

Shirley Dobson, chairman of the National Day of Prayer Task Force





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

In God We Trust

Anne Graham Lotz

Eternal Security

When my three children were young, I did everything I could to ensure their safety. But then they grew up, went to college and to other homes and cities where I couldn't supervise them. Yet because my children have accepted Christ, I know that regardless of what happens to them in this life, they're eternally secure. That's because God promises that when we accept Jesus as our Savior, we will not perish, but will have *eternal* life (John 3:16).

Once you've ensured *your* eternal safety, ask yourself what you've done to help ensure others'. It's a privilege and responsibility to tell others about God, about their own sin, about their need to claim Jesus Christ as their Savior so their sins will be forgiven, about heaven and how to get there. So pray, trusting God for the safety he'll one day provide you, and ask him to work on behalf of those who don't know him yet.

Anne Graham Lotz, founder and president of AnGeL Ministries, daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, and author of Heaven: My Father's House (W Publishing)





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

In God We Trust

Thelma Wells

Keep the Faith

In this changing world, the security we took for granted has been shattered. Now's the time to turn to God and ask him for guidance as you:

- Keep believing. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).
- Teach your children right from wrong. Tell your kids evil does exist, but that it won't go unpunished.
- Show empathy. It's our duty to heal those who hurt, comfort those who are lost, restore those who've gone astray, love those who are embittered. As you show your faith through love, people will find hope.
- Take comfort in God's Word. Study it now more than ever. Psalm 119:105 reminds us that the Bible is "a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."
- Look for God in everything. See God's hand in the spiritual hunger we see ignited in our nation.
- Let your light shine. Without becoming obnoxious or pious, be a light to nonbelievers. Speak tenderly about God's mercy, faithfulness, and plan for our lives.
- Give thanks. God's promises stand firm even in the face of pain: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). God always keeps his promises!

Thelma Wells, author, Women of Faith speaker, and president of A Woman of God Ministries





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

In God We Trust

Carol Kent

Confidence-Builders

When your confidence is shaken, the following steps can help you gain new perspective:

—Acknowledge your emotions. Do you feel powerless or angry because something or someone has robbed you of the ability to control your life? These feelings are normal, and God isn't threatened by them. He welcomes your honesty.

—Realize God brings good out of every trial, even if you don't see it right away. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. ..." (Romans 8:28).

—Internalize these truths: *God is for me. He's on my side. He loves me.* If you lack confidence, pick up his Word and read encouragement: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

—Tell the Enemy to get lost! Satan has no power over Christians, and you can—with authority—tell him to leave you alone (Luke 10:19).

Carol Kent, president of Speak Up Speaker Services and author of numerous books, including Becoming a Woman of Influence (NavPress)





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

In God We Trust

Mike Nappa

A Day at a Time

Throw yourself into the nail-scarred hands that hold your true, eternal hope. Admit you don't know what the future holds, yet still be willing to trust God who holds the future (Jeremiah 29:11–12). And determine to let his love remove your temptation to fear tomorrow. After all, tomorrow has enough worries of its own. Your responsibility? To be faithful in serving Christ today, and to let him worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:25–34). May God give each one of us grace to do just that.

Mike Nappa, author of The Courage to Be Christian (Howard Publishing) and Who Moved My Church? (RiverOak Publishing)

Lisa Beamer:

"God Is Good—Always"

September 11, 2001, started out as a normal Tuesday for the Beamer family. Todd, 32, sprinted to the shower at 5:45 A.M. while Lisa stayed in bed. Thirty minutes later, Todd dashed out the door to catch United Flight 93 for a business trip to San Francisco.

When Lisa, 32, pregnant with their third child, got up, she started some laundry, dressed their boys, David, age 4, and Drew, now 2, and fed them breakfast. Then at 9:15, her friend Elaine called to tell her about the World Trade Center attacks. Lisa turned on the TV to see the devastation, then discovered two other planes had crashed—one into the Pentagon, and one in a field in





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Pennsylvania. Flight 93 went down 80 miles southeast of Pittsburgh—and Todd was on it. His in-flight conversation with a GTE Airfone operator documented that he and other passengers, knowing they'd be killed, had decided to try to thwart the hijackers. After reciting The Lord's Prayer with the operator, Todd turned to the other passengers on the plane and said "Let's roll"—a phrase he'd used frequently at home to motivate his boys.

Her life suddenly altered, Lisa says, "This is *not* what I wanted for myself or my children. God knew that. But I'm beyond questioning why God allows some things to happen. I can honestly say my faith wasn't shaken—it grew stronger. I don't understand why this evil happened, but I know God can make something good come out of it."

Lisa faces a challenging new year as a single mom with two toddlers and a baby due this January. She says, "The other night, I was overwhelmed as I helped the kids put on their pajamas. I thought, *How am I going to do this every night?* Then I realized: *I just have to do it tonight.* God will give me the resources I need, as I need them. Before, I'd think, *Todd will be home in two hours; I can make it.* Now I pray, 'God, do what you need to do to help David obey right now because I really need help.'

"Fear comes from feeling I'm out of control. But, the reality is, I never know what will happen to my children or me on any given day. I just didn't realize that. Now I do. And since God is who he says he is, I can trust him. I'm less concerned about earthly things now; I focus more on eternity."

Lisa sees faith over fear as a calling for all Christians:





Trusting God When You Don't Understand

In God We Trust

"Todd isn't a hero beyond epic proportion, and I'm not a woman of super faith. We're just regular people who do regular things. This situation simply shows what God can do through ordinary people."

—*Reporting by Patricia Souder*

This article first appeared in the January/February 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.

Reflect

- *Which of these words of wisdom and encouragement meant the most to you? Why?*
- *What would you contribute to this list for those who struggle with trusting God in uncertain times?*



Additional Resources



Courageous Faith: Trusting God When Times Are Tough

by Keith Bower (Hensley Publishing, 2003; 288 pages).

As you watch Esther and Mordecai's story unfold, you will learn how to recognize God's hand as He rules over the circumstances in your own life. You'll gain fresh insights into His faithfulness. You'll become emboldened, encouraged, excited, and expectant.

Just Enough Light for the Step I'm On: Trusting God in Tough Times

by Stormie Omartian (Harvest House Publishers, 1999; 200 pages). If you're experiencing life changes, facing major decisions, or new to the Christian faith, these devotional meditations will help you find the faith to follow God's lead---no matter what the circumstances.

Trusting God by Jerry Bridges (Nav Press, 1991; 215 pages). Bridges uncovers three essential truths about God: he is completely sovereign; he is infinite in wisdom; and he is perfect in love. Building on these three rocks, Bridges shows how we can learn to trust God, even when we don't understand what he is doing.



Trusting God When You Don't Understand

Additional Resources

Trusting God (Discovery House Publishers, 2006; 128 pages). Millions of people turn daily to the pages of *Our Daily Bread* for guidance in their daily walk. Now, in this beautifully designed and conveniently sized book, readers will have 60 days' worth of devotional and inspirations on the topic of trust.

Trusting God in Times of Adversity by Kay Arthur and Pete DeLacy (Harvest House Publishers, 2003; 120 pages). With this inductive Bible study, readers will be able to follow Job through his amazing journey from prosperity to pain--and back again. Kay Arthur's proven approach to understanding God's Word will help Bible students observe, interpret, and apply the message of Job to their own lives.

What Happens When Women Walk in Faith: Trusting God Takes You To Amazing Places by Lysa TerKeurst (Harvest House Publishers, 2005; 160 pages). This new edition from Lysa is filled with stories, Scripture, and encouragement for readers to discover the deeper truths of God. As a bonus, Lysa has provided a special Bible study section to help readers apply the principles they learn in this book.

Why? Trusting God When You Don't Understand by Anne Graham Lotz (*Thomas Nelson, 2005; 144 pages*). Drawing keen insights from her own life and from the familiar story of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in the Gospel of John, Anne shows how God can use your most agonizing, baffling trials for your growth and His glory...and how, in the meantime, you can find comfort in His presence.



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