

# Soul Strong

7 KEYS TO A VIBRANT LIFE

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 **NEW HOPE**<sup>®</sup>  
PUBLISHERS  
Imprint of Iron Stream Media  
Birmingham, AL

Before making any important decision, it's always smart to do a bit of research. Examine these Scriptural promises of love, noting which words, phrases, or aspects of God's love are most assuring and hope-giving:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments.

—Deuteronomy 7:9 NIV

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But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

—Psalm 86:15 NIV

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The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.

—Zephaniah 3:17 NIV

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For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

—John 3:16 NIV

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In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 8:37–39 NIV

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See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

—1 John 3:1 NIV

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Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

—1 John 4:7–11 NIV

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Think back over your own life and the human love you have sought and sometimes received. Perhaps it would be revealing to write down the name(s) and the takeaway(s) from that relationship.

Name	Kind of Love Received	How It Ended	My Takeaway

In His most trying hour in the upper room, Jesus revealed to His friends that one of them would betray Him. The passage says, “The disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him” and “leaning back against Jesus.” Most scholars agree this disciple is John, son of Zebedee, his closest and truest friend. What would it take for you to picture yourself *that close* to Jesus? Are there ways you can better dwell in His constant presence and draw near?

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No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father’s heart. He has revealed God to us.

—John 1:18

The Gospel of John tells us about Jesus—the unique One—as being “near to the Father’s heart.” How important is it for us to stay near to our Heavenly Father’s heart? To be quiet enough to hear His very whisper? Just as John emulated the closeness Jesus had with the Father, what steps could you take to live as one who is truly loved?

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## Becoming Soul Strong

What would it mean for you to daily see yourself as God sees you? As you think and pray about it, begin to write down some of your own goals as someone who is beloved. Imagine the unfolding of your life as a *soul strong* woman in the days ahead.

What might it look like for me to live loved?

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Think of a confident woman you know who appears to be comfortable in her own skin. What do you most admire about her?

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How do you feel when you are around her?

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Paul knew “It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for” (Ephesians 1:11 *The Message*). Our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer fashioned us uniquely and perfectly. “Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone” (vv. 11–12 *The Message*).

Consider what these verses in Ephesians 1 affirm about knowing who you are and who you aren’t:

Who helps me discover who I am?

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When did He begin to create me uniquely?

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And what were those designs for?

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Yes, use feedback from respected friends and colleagues, and use personality testing as a tool to help pinpoint strengths and weaknesses. But most of all use God's Word to solidify exactly who you are in Him.

Take some time to look up these key affirmations and jot down words and phrases that speak to who you are.

I am the salt of the earth. (Matthew 5:13)

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I am the light of the world. (Matthew 5:14)

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I am God's disciple-maker. (Matthew 28:19)

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I am Jesus' friend. (John 15:15)

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I am greatly loved. (Romans 5:8)

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I am God's messenger to the world. (Acts 1:8)

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I am a place where God's Spirit lives. (1 Corinthians 6:19)

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I am a new person with a new life. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

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I am God's child. (Galatians 3:26)

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I am spiritually alive. (Ephesians 2:5)

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I am God's incredible work of art. (Ephesians 2:10)

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I am created In God's likeness. (Ephesians 4:24)

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I am totally and completely forgiven. (1 John 1:9)

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Think back to the many faces you saw and voices you heard while growing up and consider how they may have affected the way you see yourself today:

When I think of my mother, I hear her saying this to me \_\_\_\_\_

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When I think of my father, I hear him saying this to me \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Teachers often referred to me as \_\_\_\_\_

My childhood girlfriends thought of me as \_\_\_\_\_

My first feedback from guys was that I was \_\_\_\_\_

When the pastor spoke to me, he communicated \_\_\_\_\_

My boss at my first job evaluated me as \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ encouraged me in this way \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ crushed my spirit in this way \_\_\_\_\_

When I think of my husband, I hear him saying this to me \_\_\_\_\_

I received the most encouragement from \_\_\_\_\_

in my younger life.

Those who need to know us will be put in our path by a sovereign God. You were not created to be her. Isn't that a relief?

In the following verse Peter—who certainly walked a rocky road to authentic living—strongly admonishes us to recognize that God gives all we need. As you read, make this promise personal to your own life:

By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence.

—2 Peter 1:3

What has God given me?

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What did I do to receive this?

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What action has He taken toward me?

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Scripture clearly outlines the call of each person who is a follower of Christ. Look up each verse and write next to it your firm calling:

Romans 1:6

I am called to \_\_\_\_\_

1 Corinthians 1:9

I am called to be in \_\_\_\_\_

Colossians 3:15

I am called to \_\_\_\_\_

2 Corinthians 5:17–20

I am called to \_\_\_\_\_

Galatians 5:13

I am called to be \_\_\_\_\_

2 Timothy 1:9

I am called to be \_\_\_\_\_

1 John 3:1

I am called a \_\_\_\_\_ <sup>19</sup>

Every believer is called to the above. Which ones do you find the hardest to live into?

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But how do you discern your unique calling?

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**Record Moses's responses:**

God says: "You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt" (v. 10).

Moses responds: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (v. 11)

God says: "I will be with you" (v. 12).

Moses protests: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (v. 13)

God says: "Say this to the people of Israel: I AM has sent me to you" (v. 14).

Moses protests again: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (4:1)

God says: "If they do not believe you and are not convinced by the first miraculous sign, they will be convinced by the second sign" (v. 8).

But Moses pleaded: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (v. 10)

God says: "Now go! I will be with you as you speak, and I will instruct you in what to say" (v. 12).

But Moses again pleaded: \_\_\_\_\_ (v. 13)<sup>22</sup>

God will fill in all our gaps. But we have strengths too! Write down some things you love doing or things you do very well (as Frederick Buechner calls it, “your deep gladness”):

1.

2.

3.

List the talents and skills you possess that might be involved in the above activities:

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## *Becoming Soul Strong*

Most of us are very good at wearing masks and hiding our true selves. In an effort to become more authentic, take some time to reflect on how you could begin removing your own mask—that false self you occasionally present to the world.

How do you think people describe you?

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How do you wish people would describe you?

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What parts of your self are you hiding?

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What is your deep passion—that which compels you?

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What is something most people don't know about you?

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What do you try to portray in front of others?

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What is really true about yourself that you wish others knew?

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What happens when you talk and act in an authentic manner?

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How can you let go of fear of what others might think of the real you?

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How could you live today so that your public actions reflect your own values and vision for your life? What would this look like?

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Sit quietly for a moment and ask God to reveal the deepest desire of your heart. Jesus once asked blind Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51). Restoring his sight seemed like the apparent answer, but Jesus forced Bartimaeus to put his desires into words and a plea, “My Rabbi . . . I want to see!” (v. 51).

Jesus asks you today, “What do you want Me to do for you?” What is your answer?

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## Transformation

As you consider your own journey of going deeper with God, what are some transformational changes you have already seen in your life and behavior?

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Where are you still seeking God to transform you from the inside out?

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If you were to become a winged creature and soar, what would that look like?

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## Old Testament Names of God, Celebrating His Attributes and Character

*Adonai*: Lord (Isaiah 6:1–8)

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*Elohim*: Mighty One (Genesis 1:1–24)

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*El-Roi*: God Who Sees (Genesis 16:13)

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*El-Shaddai*: All-Sufficient One (Genesis 17:1)

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*Jehovah-Jireh*: God Will Provide (Genesis 22:14)

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*Jehovah-Rapha*: God Heals (Exodus 15:26)

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*Jehovah-Shalom*: God Is Our Peace (Judges 6:24)

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*Yahweh*: I Am (Exodus 3:1–14)

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**New Testament Names of Jesus, Celebrating His Attributes and Character**

Alpha and Omega: Revelation 22:13

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Bread of Life: John 6:35

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Good Shepherd: John 10:11

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I Am: John 8:58

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Immanuel: Matthew 1:23

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King of Kings: 1 Timothy 6:15

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Lamb of God: John 1:29

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Light of the World: John 8:12

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Lord of All: Acts 10:36

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Resurrection and Life: John 11:25

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Savior: Luke 2:11

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Way, Truth, and Life: John 14:6

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Word of Life: 1 John 1:1

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## *Becoming Soul Strong*

Do you have a plan or strategy for dwelling deep? Just as we carve out time for the priority appointments and responsibilities in our lives—perhaps even recording them in a planner or calendar—so we must do for our spiritual life.

Consider how you begin your day. When would be a good time to set aside for prayer and Bible reading?

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What location works best for you?

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What materials would you want with you at that time? (I carry in a basket my Bible, prayer journal, hymnal, devotional readings, pen, and handkerchief.)

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Which elements would you like to include in your own morning ritual? (Elements could include playing soft music, silence, singing a hymn, lighting a candle, kneeling in prayer, writing prayers in a journal, etc.)

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Now, as Saint Benedict says, "Always begin again." When will you begin this spiritual discipline?

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Write a prayer of commitment where you offer your intentions to draw deep with God each day on a regular basis.

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Who will you gift with a first-thing-in-the-morning-every-day prayer by name?

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Jesus set an example of daily prayer by praying during all kinds of circumstances. Read each passage and record His praying life in each situation:

Matthew 6:9–13

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Matthew 14:23

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Matthew 26:39

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Matthew 27:46

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Mark 1:35

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Luke 5:16

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Luke 6:12

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Luke 11:5–10

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Luke 18:1

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Luke 22:44

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Luke 23:34

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Luke 23:46

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John 6:11

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Unable to move anything in her body below her neck, Joni Eareckson Tada sought the only way possible to end her life: she violently wrenched her head back and forth, hoping to sever her spinal cord. It didn't work.

The next day she made a choice to face her new life, even as she heard God's whisper, "If I loved you enough to die for you, can't I be trusted with this?" Her decision was to trust a loving and all-powerful God.

What is your own pain?

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I already asked you earlier, but here's the same question. Because naming your pain is an important first step toward healing and hope. *What is your pain?* Take some prayerful time to listen in silence, and then write down those areas of desolation, affliction, suffering, woundedness, abuse, discouragement, or brokenness.

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—Psalm 69:1–3, 13

Now write your own version: *Save me, O God, for*

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—Psalm 69:16–18, 29–30

Your version: *Answer my prayers, O Lord, for*

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Look up these passages and write down the suffering that is named:

Joseph (Genesis 39:6–20) \_\_\_\_\_

David (2 Samuel 12:14–18) \_\_\_\_\_

Tamar (2 Samuel 13:10–15) \_\_\_\_\_

Widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:12) \_\_\_\_\_

Job (Job 2:7–9) \_\_\_\_\_

Jesus (Isaiah 53:3) \_\_\_\_\_



Woman with hemorrhage (Luke 8:43) \_\_\_\_\_

Prodigal Son (Luke 15:13–16) \_\_\_\_\_

Peter (Luke 22:56–62) \_\_\_\_\_

Martha (John 11:17–21) \_\_\_\_\_

Paul (2 Corinthians 12:7–9) \_\_\_\_\_

Faithful who persevered (Hebrews 11:35–39) \_\_\_\_\_

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Are there deaths (“minor crucifixions,” as author Karen Mains calls them) you need to bring to God today? Death of a dream, a hope, or even a relationship?

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Are you willing to obey whatever God says in order to seek healing or transformation? What steps could you take toward your next thing, as Naaman did? Write down your own response after each action step:

Recognize your need—something is wrong and needs fixing.

*My need is*

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Be open to receiving advice and direction from unexpected sources.

*Possible sources of guidance are*

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Begin a journey in the direction of where the help lies—possibly a spiritual quest toward the God of all healing or a medical or emotional path through professional help.

*I will seek help from*

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Trust God and do what He says, even if it makes no sense to you.

*I will trust God's words to*

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Thank God and proclaim that He is worthy.

*Thank You, God, for*

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What has been an unexpected pain or suffering in your own life?

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What are some of the lessons God is teaching you through this new reality?

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Be kind and compassionate to one another.

—Ephesians 4:32 NIV

What is one act of kindness you can deliberately choose to do this week for the following people?

That person living with you

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That child depending on you

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That colleague threatened by you

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That clerk at the long check-out line

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That voice at the other end of the phone who has kept you waiting

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That friend who needs you, perhaps too much

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That elderly neighbor

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That visitor to your church or Bible study

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That relative who doesn't understand

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That friend who received a devastating diagnosis

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That discouraged student

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That exhausted young mama

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That homeless person with a sign on the street

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That person in your mirror

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Some examples of *allelon* appearing in the Bible are below. Look up the specific Scripture reference, and then write in one way you could seek to live out that concept in your own life with other people. I find it most helpful when I actually insert a *name* (i.e., my husband) or *group* (i.e., my neighbors) on each line:

Love one another (John 13:34)

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Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10)

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Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16)

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Stop passing judgment on one another (Romans 14:13)

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Build up one another (Romans 14:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:11)

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Accept one another (Romans 15:7)

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Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)

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Bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)

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Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:2, 32; Colossians 3:13)

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Be patient with one another (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13)

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Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32)

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Comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18 AMPC)

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Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

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Stir up one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24)

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Pray for one another (James 5:16)

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Show hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9)

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## *Becoming Soul Strong*

Recall a situation recently where you found it especially challenging to extend kindness to someone. It might have been while reading a politically-charged social media post, encountering a stranger on the subway, hearing a disturbing conversation among other moms, or even responding to what seems an unreasonable request from a family member.

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What do you think was the precipitating action or emotion that made it hard for you to be kind at that time?

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How did you actually respond?

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And what was the result?

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As you reflect now, what might have been some more positive options for handling that encounter?

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And how can you prepare yourself to extend kindness when a similar situation arises in the future?

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You are not alone. God will give you both words and actions that reflect His grace and mercy if you will only yield to Him and pray for His indwelling when these situations occur. Write a prayer here:

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Whose stories have touched you? While these stories may be books you've read or talks you've heard, they may be stories that came your way in the ordinary course of life—people you met. Think back to different times in your life and important lessons you carry. Try to target some of your own early influencers. Though each of these life stages may not be applicable to your own life, use the ones that are as a guideline.

<b>When You Were</b>	<b>Story</b>	<b>Lesson Learned</b>
Young Teenager		
University Years		
Early Twenties		
Starting Work		
Early Marriage		
Motherhood		
At a Time of Change		
Recently		

## **Backstory**

In a book or movie, the backstory refers to the history behind the current situation—basically what happened before that sets into motion what is happening now. To share your story, it is important to process and understand your early life.

When did you last hear a story that spoke to your heart and caused you to make a change in your life?

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Who told it and when?

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What part of it touched you the most?

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Why do you think it caused this reaction in you?

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On a separate piece of paper, draw a diagram of the home you grew up in (if it was several homes, do the one you have the sharpest memories of). Where was your favorite place in that home, and why do you remember it so well?

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Describe the family you were born into (parents' ages and vocations, siblings, house/apartment, church and community involvement, socioeconomic status, etc.).

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What values were considered most important in your family?

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Are you aware of any long-ago family secrets? If so, what were they?

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What was your family's greatest strength?

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What was your family's greatest weakness?

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Complete this sentence: One of my happiest family memories is when

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Complete this sentence: An especially difficult time in our family was when

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What is your favorite Bible story and why?

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What is your favorite children's story or book and why?

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What is your favorite adult story or book and why?

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When was the last time you told someone a story that had a meaning you were trying to get across?

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What was the story, and who did you tell?

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Where were you, and what was the response?

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What part do you hope God will have in your life story?

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Is there a step you could take now to ensure that happens?

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Try writing your life story in five sentences. I know. I thought this would be so hard, but then I sat down and wrote. Here are my unedited answers:

1. I grew up in a small Georgia town with two sisters and loving parents who encouraged me to become all that God called me to be.
2. As a young adult, I earned several degrees, enjoyed a variety of friends, and traveled around the world twice before I was thirty—through my work in both journalism and Christian ministry.
3. Most of my adult life, even while struggling with a variety of issues, I used the gifts God gave me through communication—writing and speaking—to encourage others.
4. Marrying Mike and becoming a mama of four (three through adoption, one through birth) were both the greatest joys in my life and the calling that most required God’s grace, wisdom, and guidance.
5. Because of my many sins of both commission and omission, I live each day under God’s mercy and utter faithfulness through His constant presence, bountiful provision, and incomparable power in my life’s journey.

Your turn—write your life story in five sentences (you can do it!)

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

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4. \_\_\_\_\_

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5. \_\_\_\_\_

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Take a moment to list some of the important family legacies you would like to pass along to the younger generation.

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# Notes

## Chapter 1: Live Loved

<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *You Are the Beloved: Daily Mediations for Spiritual Living*, comp. and ed. Gabrielle Earnshaw (New York: Convergent Books, 2017), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Martin, *What If It's True? A Storyteller's Journey with Jesus* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing, 2019), 241.

<sup>3</sup> Lysa TerKeurst, *Uninvited: Living Loved When You Feel Less Than, Left Out, and Lonely* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2016), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1966), 135.

<sup>5</sup> It took almost a decade longer than I had hoped, but after God pruned me and sent me on all kinds of perilous adventures of learning how to trust Him, I did finally find the love of my life in my thirties. We have now been married thirty-six years and have raised four children who are truly remarkable humans. While ours is not a perfect love, may I encourage you from the bottom of my heart that it is always worth waiting for God's timing in all things, including relationships.

<sup>6</sup> George Herbert, "Love," in *The Life and Writings of the Rev. George Herbert: With the Synagogue, an Imitation of Herbert* (Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Company, 1851), 272.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Haley Barton, *Longing for More: A Woman's Path to Transformation in Christ* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Books, 2007), 36.

<sup>8</sup> William Temple, in *Classic Prayers for Every Kind*, ed. Donna K. Maltese (Uhrichsville, OH: 2017), 136.

## Chapter 2: Be Authentic

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth B., "Rachel Hollis and the Dangers of Curated Imperfection," *Houston Moms Blog*, December 11, 2018, <https://houston.citymomsblog.com/rachel-hollis-and-the-dangers-of-curated-imperfection/>.

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