

DOES ANYONE REALLY NEED ME?

TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE. . . . IF ONE FALLS DOWN,
HIS FRIEND CAN HELP HIM UP. BUT PITY THE MAN
WHO FALLS AND HAS NO ONE TO HELP HIM UP!

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-10

THE BIG IDEA



Can you imagine living completely alone? Not just alone in an apartment or house, but alone in the world? Several years ago there was a movie about a man who finds himself alone on an island after his cargo plane crashes in the South Pacific. While searching through packages from the plane, looking for anything he can use, he finds a volleyball manufactured by Wilson Sporting Goods. Lonely and desperate for companionship, the man draws a face on the volleyball, names it Wilson, and begins talking to it as if it were a person. A few years later, when he loses Wilson during an attempt to escape from the island, the man grieves deeply over the loss of his “friend.”

Everyone enjoys being alone sometimes, but you couldn't live long in this world without other people. That's because God created you and everyone else to live in relationship with one another. He made us to need each other, to love each other, to share our joys and sorrows with each other, and to help each other. Why do people have such a strong need for companionship? It's because we were created in God's image. Remember, God has never been alone. Before the world and before time, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit lived together in perfect harmony as the one true God. And so when God made people in His own image, He intended that we, too, should live in harmonious relationships with one another.

He created Adam and Eve to love one another unselfishly and to help one another. They were given the responsibility of caring for and ruling over the entire earth and everything in it. Of course, such a job was too great for two people to do alone. So God also commanded Adam and Eve to fill the earth with people through family and childbirth (Genesis 1:28).

RED SUN RISING

In 1927, the country of China became involved in a civil war that lasted for decades. On one side was the Chinese Nationalist Party, also known as the *Kuomintang* (pronounced KWOH-min-tahng), led by Chiang Kai-shek (CHANG kī SHEK). The Kuomintang had already been in power for several years. On the other side was the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Tse-tung (mou tsay-TOONG), who wanted to get rid of the existing government and put power into the hands of the poor people.

The climactic events of the war took place from 1947 to 1949, a period Mao later called the War of Liberation. During these years, Mao and his revolutionaries slowly took control of most of mainland China, forcing the former leaders to take refuge on the island of Taiwan. On October 1, 1949, Mao declared that he had won the war. He quickly set up a new government in Beijing and changed the name of the country to the People's Republic of China. Numerous Chinese posters, badges, and songs proclaimed, "Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts."

Once in power, Mao began to change the way the country was run. He arrested and executed many people who had stood against him or spoke out about his new policies, and he sent many others to labor camps or prisons. He set about transforming the nation's economy, including the way food was grown and shared, a plan he called the "Great Leap Forward." But Mao's changes caused huge food shortages, which led to the largest famine in human history. Between 40 million and 70 million people died because of Mao's decisions during the thirty-three years he was in power.

Today, China still follows some of Mao's ideas, and many honor him as a great leader. But it has taken China as many years as Mao was in power to recover from the consequences of his policies.



Then together, loving and serving one another, God's image-bearers would be able to fulfill all His commands for His creation.

Now as you know, God created Adam and Eve a very long time ago. But the work He gave them to do and the responsibility He gave them to serve and love one another still apply to us today. Just as Adam needed Eve to be his companion and helper, you and I also need others as companions to love us and help us do all God commands us to do here on the earth.

But in order to serve, you and I must be more concerned about others than ourselves. This is not always easy. After all, most of us like being served instead of serving. Yet Jesus said, "The greatest among you must be a servant" (Matthew 23:11, NLT). Indeed, God Himself showed us how to serve one another. He did this by sending Jesus to serve us. God's Son was the perfect servant—He cared more about us than even His own life. Once you understand Jesus' willing heart for serving others and you choose to follow His example, you can become the amazing person God created you to be!

WHAT YOU WILL DO

- » You will learn that God wants each of us to depend on one another.
- » You will recognize your calling to serve others as Jesus served.
- » You will learn to serve others in confidence, trusting that God will be with you.



DANGEROUS JOURNEY

As darkness fell over the Yuan (YWAN) River valley, the villagers of Kam Tin (KAM TEEN) all closed their window shutters in an attempt to make their homes invisible to enemy planes. Chang Ting carefully closed the shutters of her family's old, gray stone house, hoping to block out the turmoil of the outside world. Then she lit two candles, one for the kitchen and one for the children's bedroom.

"You may read until your father comes home," Ting said. "But do not open the shutters under any circumstances."

Chang Mei (MAY) and her little brother, Chang Li (LEE), giggled as they each chose a favorite book and climbed onto the bed to read. They enjoyed the coziness of a room lit only by one candle, although as the days grew longer and warmer, they often longed to light a lantern and open the shutters wide to allow the cool evening breeze into their room.

At the door there came a single knock, followed by three rapid knocks.

This told Ting that her husband, *Wei* (WAY), was home. She opened the door hurriedly, and just as quickly she closed it once he was safely inside.

“What did you learn, Wei?” she asked anxiously. “Can we leave? Oh, Wei, I’m so worried.”

“My precious Ting,” Chang Wei said in a hushed voice, not wanting to alarm the children. “The news is not good. I understand from Mr. Lee that the soldiers of the revolution have advanced to the outskirts of Tai Wai (TIE WHY). If Tai Wai falls, it may be only three or four days before Mao’s soldiers reach our village. I greatly fear that anyone who resists them will be . . .”



“Will be killed? Oh, Wei, we must leave, if only for the children’s sake. Did you speak to the mayor? Mr. Fong has always been a friend.”

“Yes, yes, I talked with him,” Wei replied. “He promised me he would do everything possible to arrange papers and passports for us by Friday.”

“Friday?” Ting asked with alarm. “But that may be too late. I saw two revolutionary soldiers in our market today. Are you certain you can trust Mr. Fong? How do you know he’s not working with the revolutionaries?”

“Dearest Ting,” Wei said as he put his arm around his wife, “there are some people you just know are good. You can read it in their hearts. Mr. Fong has faithfully served our village all these years. He cares nothing for his own safety but is concerned only for the children of Kam Tin. He told me not to worry about him, that he has plans of his own. But for now, it seems he is determined to arrange papers for our escape.”

“Papa!” cried Mei as she burst into the small living room. “You’re home! We’ve been very careful to keep the shutters closed and use only candles. Did you see any light coming from the windows?”

Chang Wei lifted his daughter off the floor, spun her around, and hugged her. “No, the house looked very dark. Now, tell me about your day.”

Just then, Li grabbed his father’s leg from behind. “I caught you in my trap,” he said, laughing. “It’s so dark in the house, you didn’t even see me sneak up behind you.”

“You are indeed sneaky,” his father said, trying to be cheerful. “Perhaps we shall all

need to be sneaky in the coming days.”

“What do you mean, Papa?” Mei asked.

Chang Wei told everyone to sit down at the kitchen table. As the candles threw pale, flickering shadows onto the walls, he began to tell his family of the dangerous journey they would be making two days hence. “Do you understand, my little ones, that we are not playing a game when we close the shutters and use only candlelight after dark?” he asked.

“Yes, Papa,” Mei replied. “We sometimes hear the planes, and we’ve heard bombs exploding far away. Is the war coming to our village?”

“I’m afraid so,” her father replied, making no attempt to hide his sadness. “And because your mother and I do not support Mao Tse-tung and his revolution, we must leave this place. But we must do so in secret. No one can know, not even your friends at school. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa,” Li answered. “But how can we leave without anyone knowing?”



“We shall leave late Friday night,” Wei said. “There is a new moon that night, so we will be helped by the darkness. We will cross through the rice fields north of town, then walk hidden among the trees beside the road leading to Mr. Wong’s house. He will have his hay wagon ready to carry us into Shan Teng (SHAYN TENG). There he has made arrangements for someone to give us food and a map and instructions for the next part of our journey.”

“But Shan Teng is already in the hands of the revolutionaries,” Ting said with some alarm.

“That is why we will arrive hidden in the wagon. And we will leave the same night on foot,” Wei explained, smiling, trying to keep everyone calm. “There’s an old trail that leads into the mountains, over the pass, and down to the sea. If all goes according to plan, a fishing boat will be waiting to take us across the channel to Lang Tin (LAHN TEEN) Harbor. That’s where we will board the freighter.”

“A freighter!” Li said excitedly. “You mean one of the big ships with a smokestack that can cross the ocean?”

“That’s right,” Wei replied, tousling his son’s hair. “A big ship with a smokestack.”

“But where are we going?” Mei asked, her dark eyes sparkling in the candlelight.

“On a very long journey, far away. We are going to America.”

“America!” Li squealed. “That’s where Uncle Ping lives!”

“That is right, Li,” his father replied. “He lives in San Francisco, as will we. Now off to bed, the two of you. Tomorrow you will help your mother pack.”

Ting carefully tucked Mei and Li into their beds, blew out the candle, and closed the door. “I am frightened,” she whispered to her husband. “How do you know Mr. Fong will have our papers and passports ready? I don’t trust anyone in our country these days. What if we encounter soldiers? And the children, what if—?”

“If we do not leave now, it may be too late. We must take the chance.”

Early Friday morning, Chang Wei hugged his wife and children. With grave seriousness, he said, “I’ll be back this evening just before dark. Have everything ready to go. And children, today at school, you must act as if nothing is out of the ordinary. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Papa,” Mei and Li replied together.

For Ting, the day was a frightful one as she gathered supplies for their journey while trying to avoid anyone who might ask questions. For Mei and Li, the day was a sad one because they knew they would never see their school friends again, yet they could not tell them good-bye.

That evening at just a little before eight o’clock, Ting and the children were relieved to hear the familiar signal—one knock followed by three rapid ones.

“Okay, I have the papers,” Chang Wei said as he closed the door behind him. “Mr. Fong has risked his own life to obtain them. Let us hope they open all the doors we must pass through in the coming days.”

After a simple supper of rice and dried fish cakes, Chang Wei walked one last time through the house. For five generations, the Chang family had lived within its walls. Mei and Li’s generation would be the last.



“Is everything packed?” Wei asked Ting. “The pictures? Grandfather’s watch?”

“Everything is ready.” Ting sighed as she looked around the house that held many of her most precious memories.

“Then let us go.” Chang Wei blew out the candle on the table and turned to open the door. “Now quietly, very quietly, children. Stay close to the buildings, out of the street. At the edge of town, we will take the canal path to the rice fields. We should be safe once we get there.”

Through the darkened village streets, along the canal path, and finally across the rice field Chang Wei and his family moved silently, never looking back. When they came to the road that led to Mr. Wong’s, they kept to the trees along the side of the road.

“Are we doing a good job at being sneaky, Papa?” Li whispered.

“A very good job, my bright one,” Chang Wei whispered back. “A very good job.”

An hour later they arrived at what they thought was Mr. Wong’s house. Ting asked apprehensively, “Are you sure this is the place? It’s so dark. It looks completely abandoned.”

“Wait here with the children,” Wei said quietly. “I’ve been told to tap on the window shutter by the back porch four times. If Mr. Wong is here and the plan is working, he will let us in.”

Wei moved quietly to the back of the old farm house. This could be a trap, he thought. What if Mr. Wong is working for Mao? He stepped lightly onto the porch and tapped on the shutter. The back door opened slowly, and he heard a gentle and reassuring voice from the darkness.

“Mr. Chang? Is that you?”

“Yes,” Wei replied. “Are you Mr. Wong?”

“Yes, but please come inside quickly.”

Wei signaled his family, who quickly and quietly emerged from their hiding place and entered the old farmhouse.

“Welcome,” Mr. Wong said. “You must be tired and hungry. My wife has prepared some tea and dumplings. Please sit down. We don’t have much time, so while you are eating I will get the wagon ready. We will depart in fifteen minutes.”

Mei asked, “Is this when we get to ride in the hay wagon, Papa?”

“Yes,” replied her father with a laugh.



“But you won’t be sitting on top of the hay—you’ll be underneath it! Now hurry and finish your tea and dumplings.”

The wagon ride was uncomfortable for the Changs, as the weight of the hay and the dust made breathing difficult. But they remained silent and uncomplaining as Mr. Wong drove the wagon through the darkened countryside toward Shan Teng. Just before midnight, at the edge of the village, the wagon came to a stop.

“This is far as I dare take you,” Mr. Wong said as he pushed aside the hay. “The village is occupied by revolutionary soldiers. There’s an abandoned barn over there,” he said, pointing away from the road. “Wait inside. Someone will come soon with food



and instructions for the next part of your journey. Now do hurry. And may you arrive at your destination safely.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wong,” Chang Wei whispered as everyone climbed down from the wagon. “We can never thank you enough for your help.”

Without further words, Mr. Wong turned his wagon toward home.

Inside the abandoned barn, Mei began to shiver. “I’m scared, Papa,” she cried. “And I’m cold.”

“Me, too,” Li said.

Wei took off his jacket and wrapped it around both children. “Soon someone will come with food. Now sit and rest and don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”

After about an hour, the faint sound of footsteps could be heard outside the barn door. Then all was quiet.

Chang Wei motioned for everyone to remain absolutely silent. Then the sound of footsteps was heard again, this time moving away from the barn. After several minutes, Wei stepped cautiously to the barn door and eased it open. On the ground just outside the door was a package, which he quickly picked up and carried back into the barn.

“What is it, Wei?” Ting asked.

“It’s food and a map. Whoever brought them did so at great risk. Now eat quickly

while I study the map and instructions. The next part of our journey will be the most difficult.”

Indeed, the journey was difficult. The weary family trudged up a low pass in the mountains. As they neared the top of the pass, Li began to cry. “Papa, I cannot walk anymore. I just can’t.”

Without a word, Chang Wei gave Li’s small pack to Ting and lifted his son onto his shoulders. “Do not worry, my bright one,” he said. “Papa will carry you. And you, Mei? How are you doing, my beautiful one?”

“I am well, Papa,” she said bravely, although she too felt she could not walk much farther.

Silently and with few stops for rest, the Chang family crossed over the pass and down the other side of the mountains toward the sea. Soon, as the family moved down the path toward the beach, they could see the dawn beginning to break on the eastern horizon. Just before the last trees of the forest gave way to the open beach, they stopped.

“There! Over there in the little cove,” Wei said. “Do you see it? It’s the fishing boat.”

As they approached the boat, an old fisherman climbed up from the lower deck, surprising the family. “Mr. Chang, we’ve been waiting for you,” he said cheerfully. “Welcome aboard the *Jinhai* (JIN-HI), China’s most luxurious ocean liner. I am your host—Captain Quan (KWON).” The old man bowed with a mock flourish. “Breakfast will be served in the Fish Hold Restaurant on the lower deck in five minutes. After breakfast, you will be shown to your Engine Room Cabin where your bunks are ready. Unless, of course, you are neither hungry nor tired.”

The captain’s sense of humor broke the tension for everyone, and Chang Wei laughed with relief. “Captain Quan, we accept your invitation to dine and cruise aboard the *Jinhai*. And we thank you for your gracious hospitality.”

Below deck, the stuffy little cabin reeked with the smell of fish and diesel motor



fuel, but no one complained. With great enthusiasm they quickly ate a fisherman's breakfast of dried squid, steaming rice, and hot tea.

"It's about four hours across the channel to Lang Tin Harbor," Captain Quan explained as they ate. "I suggest you try to sleep on the way. Once we get to the harbor, you will all need to be alert and careful. Many people are attempting to flee China these days, and the revolutionary soldiers are watching the port."

"But we have our papers and passports," Chang Wei said, trying to hide his concern from his family.

Captain Quan replied, "The soldiers are checking everyone, looking for people known to have made statements against Mao."

Ting looked at her husband anxiously, for he had been outspoken in his opposition to the revolution.

"Well, we have our papers," Wei assured Captain Quan. "I'm sure everything will be fine. Now, as you said, we should get some sleep. Thank you again, Captain, for your hospitality and for helping our family. You know we can never repay you."

"No need," said the captain. "I am an old man. What can they do to a simple fisherman like me? And unlike you, I have no children to protect. Now off to sleep, all of you."

The channel was anything but calm as fierce winds churned angry black waves over the bow of the Jinhai. Yet Mei, Li, Ting, and Wei were so exhausted from their journey that they slept soundly. They awoke only after the sound of the winds and the grinding of the engine had ceased, signaling their arrival at Lang Tin harbor.

"When we get to shore," Captain Quan said, "you will see a long line of people waiting to board the freighter. Have your papers ready. I'm sure everything will go well. At least, that is our plan and our hope."

"Thank you, Captain Quan. Thank you very much," Chang Wei said earnestly.

Wei and his family disembarked and joined the long line of people hoping to board the freighter. Soldiers mingled among the people, speaking harshly and demanding



to see papers.

“Stop!” An armed soldier had appeared from behind a large crate. He was pointing a rifle at Wei and his family. “In the name of the People’s Liberation Army, stop!”

Shaking involuntarily, Mei grabbed her father’s hand. Ting held tightly to Li.

“Are you Chang Wei?” the soldier demanded.

Wei stood stiffly and was silent.

“I asked you: Are you Chang Wei?”

“I am,” Wei said, trying to appear calm. “I have our papers and passports. You will see everything is in order.”

“You are under arrest, Chang Wei. And your family as well. Now walk ahead of me to the shipping office,” the soldier ordered, gesturing with his rifle.

“But we are due to board the freighter,” Chang Wei insisted.

“The shipping office, Mr. Chang,” the soldier commanded.

Drawing his frightened family close, Wei led them toward the office. The office was empty. The soldier closed the door behind them and locked it.

“Sit down,” he said. “Let me see your papers.”

After examining their papers, the soldier said, “Do you understand the charges against you?”

“I’ve never been charged with anything,” Wei answered. “But if you’re asking me if I support the revolution, well, my answer is no.”

“That, Mr. Chang, is why orders have been issued for your arrest. Your opposition to the Communist Party is well known, and word of your disappearance has spread. These are serious charges against you—charges that could result in your death.”

“I am not afraid to die for my beliefs,” Wei said calmly.

“Nor am I. That is why I have brought you here.”

“I do not understand.”

“Mr. Chang, forgive me for not introducing myself,” the soldier said, beginning to smile. “My name is Fong Gui (GWEE). You know my father. He is the mayor of your village.”

Chang Wei was stunned. How could the son of Mayor Fong, who had obtained all the papers and passports for the Chang family, be involved with the Communists? he thought. “Yes, I know your father,” Wei acknowledged. “I have known him for many years.



He is a good and honorable man. What I cannot understand is how . . .”

“How his son could join the revolutionary army?”

“Exactly.”

“There is no time to explain now. Just know that I am here to make sure you and your family board the freighter safely. If you had remained in line out there, you would most certainly have been arrested.”

Fong Gui then led the frightened family through the back door of the shipping office into a large warehouse filled with crates and baggage waiting to be loaded into the freighter’s cargo hold. He said, “Friends of mine will hide you in the cargo hold where you must remain until the freighter is out to sea. They will then come and show you to a small cabin where you will be safe. It’s no cruise ship, to be sure, but it will take you to America.”

“I still don’t understand,” Chang Wei said. “Why are you doing this? Why would a member of the revolutionary army help us escape?”

Fong Gui smiled broadly. “I am not a soldier. Please forgive me for frightening you. I had to act the part until I knew for sure that you were the family I was looking for. Now I must go. May God bless your journey and your new life in America. But before we part, I have a small gift for all of you—something to read on your long voyage.”

Chang Wei accepted a package wrapped in plain paper. “But what is this gift?” he asked.

“It is a Bible, Mr. Chang. Now I must say good-bye.”

“Good bye, Fong Gui,” Wei said. “And . . . thank you, my friend. Thank you for saving our lives.”

“There’s no need to thank me or my family.”

“Your family?”

“Of course,” Fong Gui said with a mischievous smile. “The man who hid you in his hay wagon—he is my uncle. And the woman who brought the map and food to the barn—she is my cousin Ai.”

“And do you also know Captain Quan?” Ting asked.

“Of course!” Gui laughed. “He is my grandfather.”

Then Fong Gui turned and disappeared among the crates and baggage.



A Chinese man distributing Bibles.

THINK ABOUT IT

- » In China, a person's surname, or family name, is said first. Why do you think the Chinese follow this custom? Who is honored when the surname is said first?
- » Why must the Chang family leave China, their homeland?
- » Why do you think Fong Gui gives the family a Bible to take on their voyage?
- » Can you remember all the people who serve the Chang family in the story? Why would so many members of the Fong family help people who are not Christians escape from China?
- » What kind of future do you think awaits the Chang family in America? Why?

SHIPPING OUT!

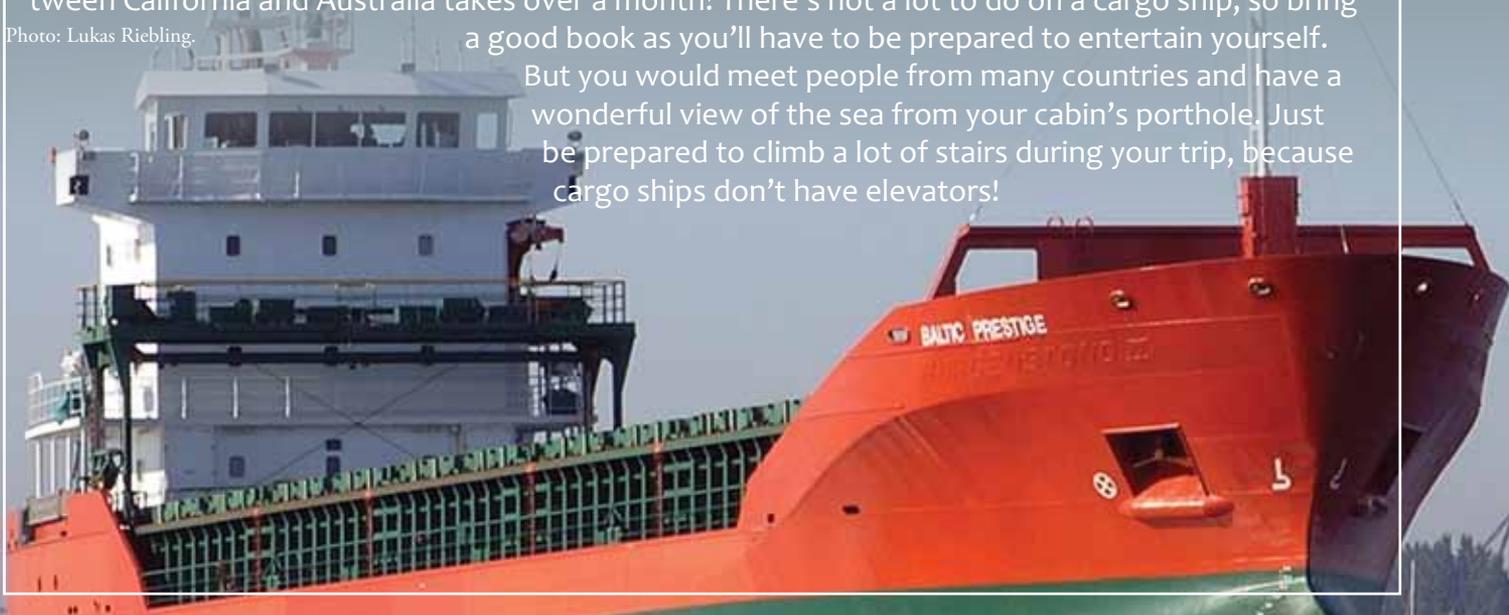
It's likely that very few of the products your family buys and uses are made in your home country. Massive ships called freighters, or cargo ships, transport oil, grain, electronics, and automobiles all around the world. Often this is the only way goods from one country can reach other countries. Without freighters, you wouldn't be able to go to your local grocery store and buy bananas from Chile, parmesan cheese from Italy, or coffee from Hawaii.

Freighters vary in size, but the largest of these ships can transport up to 500,000 tons of oil. Of course, the bigger the ship, the fewer places it can go. Some cargo ships are too big to navigate man-made shortcuts like the Panama Canal, so they are forced to sail all the way around the southern tips of Africa and South America to reach their destinations. Most cargo ships have a set route of ports they visit, like neighborhood buses. But some small freighters, called tramps, are more like taxis, hauling special loads of cargo wherever they need to go. Freighters can dock only at ports that are equipped with special cranes and machines to load and unload their bulky cargo.

If you're feeling adventurous and want to spend some time at sea, you could book a trip as a passenger on a freighter. This takes much longer than traveling by plane—a round trip between California and Australia takes over a month! There's not a lot to do on a cargo ship, so bring a good book as you'll have to be prepared to entertain yourself.

But you would meet people from many countries and have a wonderful view of the sea from your cabin's porthole. Just be prepared to climb a lot of stairs during your trip, because cargo ships don't have elevators!

Photo: Lukas Riebling.



WORDS YOU NEED TO KNOW

- » **Social:** Needing and enjoying the companionship of other people
- » **Triune:** A word meaning God exists as three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—who live in perfect harmony as the one true God
- » **Interdependence:** A relationship in which two or more people help one another and depend on each other for help
- » **Servanthood:** Building a relationship of harmony with others as we serve them in love
- » **Trusting God:** Having complete confidence that He will always do everything He promises

HIDE IT IN YOUR HEART

Serve one another in love. (Galatians 5:13)

Trust in the LORD and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires. (Psalm 37:3–4, NLT)

WE WERE MADE FOR EACH OTHER

God made people to be **social**, meaning we need and enjoy the companionship of other people. Indeed, contemporary health studies clearly show that our relationships matter. Time and again researchers have concluded that strong connections to friends and family are absolutely vital to a person's emotional and physical well-being. In fact, for many who live alone, a lack of regular human contact can be as harmful to their health and longevity as the regular use of tobacco or alcohol.

Let's face it: We are happier and healthier when we are surrounded by people who know us, take an interest in us, and actively participate in our lives. An abundance of these kinds of relationships gives us a sense of security—they make us feel safe, knowing there's always someone to turn to in times of difficulty. They also influence the way we see ourselves—it's easier to feel good about yourself when others feel good about you.

True, we don't always get along with the people in our lives, whether it's the neighbor next door or the brother or sister in the next room. Even the simplest of human relationships can be complicated because they involve imperfect people who don't always know or choose the best way to express their thoughts and needs and feelings. And yet these same relationships, when properly cared for, can bring amazing growth, joy, and contentment to everyone involved.

The fact is that we are better together than we are apart. A family, a neighborhood, a church, or a country is more than just a collection of what each person brings to the group. Together, we enrich each other's lives through our individual interests, gifts, and talents. And only when we live and work and play together can we become the kinds of healthy, balanced, purpose-filled people God created us to be.

Why did God make us this way? Why can't we all just go our own way, do our own thing, and ignore the rest of humanity? If we are truly to understand why people need one another, we must first look back at something important we've already learned about God. As we discovered in this series, God has never lived alone. Despite the fact that He created everything and everyone and without Him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:3), God has always lived in relationship. How is this possible? Because He exists as one God in three Persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We call this the Trinity.

A word we use to describe God's nature is **triune** (TRY-YOON). This word combines the prefix *tri-*, meaning "three," with a Latin word meaning "one." The word *triune* means God exists as three Persons who live in complete harmony as the one true God. Each member of the



An anonymous painting from an altarpiece showing the Trinity.

Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is fully God, with all His attributes. All live eternally in perfect unity. Although each of these Persons has special responsibilities, not one of them does anything without the full cooperation and support of the other two.

You see, God has always lived and *will* always live in harmonious relationship. Relationship is part of His very nature. So when He decided to create human beings in His own image, He also made us to live

in relationship. We were meant to enjoy among ourselves the kind of harmony, fellowship, loyalty, and unity that the Trinity has always known. We see this from the very beginning of the world. When God created the land and plants, the sun and moon and stars, and all the animals, He said they were good. Then He said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of





The Creation of Adam and Eve in Paradise from an old Bible.

the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

But after He created Adam, God said something was not good. He didn’t mean that Adam was not good; He meant that it was not good for Adam to be alone:

The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” (Genesis 2:18)

First, God brought all the animals and the birds to Adam so that he could name them. So he gave names to all the animals, but no suitable helper was found for him among the animals (Genesis 2:20). Did God make a mistake when He created a man first before He created a woman? Was He surprised that none of the animals was a sufficient companion for the man? Of course not. God already knew that He was going to create Eve to be Adam’s helper and wife. But He also wanted us to know that people made in His image were never meant to live in isolation.

So God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep; and while Adam was sleeping, God took one of Adam’s ribs and made a woman from it. And only when God finished creating both Adam and Eve did He say it was “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

You see, people were made to live and work and play together, to experience relationships, because we were made in the image of a triune God. Therefore, the more we learn about what it’s like to live in relationship, the better we will understand God’s nature.

MAKE A NOTE OF IT

Popular books, movies, and television series have been made about children befriending dogs, horses, dolphins, lions, seals, and even a 650-pound bear! What kind of animal would you like to have for a friend? Why do you think Adam’s ideal helper could not be found among the animals?

THE BUDDY SYSTEM

Have you ever heard the saying that “two heads are better than one”? That’s the idea behind the buddy system, in which two people function together as one, encouraging each other, helping each other, and keeping each other out of trouble. Perhaps you’ve participated in the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts, where participants are taught never to go hiking or swimming without a partner. Maybe you’re part of a large family that uses the buddy system, where an older child is assigned to help care for a younger brother or sister.

Think the buddy system is just for kids? Think again. One of the first lessons scuba divers learn is never to go into the water without a dive buddy to help in case of an emergency. Every firefighter knows never to enter a burning building without another firefighter, and they don’t come out until they come out together. A good fighter pilot never leaves his wingman. And in the army, soldiers are taught never to go into battle or enter unfamiliar territory without their buddy, even when they’re off duty. Why? For several good reasons:

- » Two people working together can accomplish significantly more than one.
- » There is safety in numbers—a person alone is more vulnerable to an accident or attack.
- » An extra set of eyes can provide a clearer perspective in a difficult situation.
- » One can help prevent the other from making a bad decision.
- » One can provide medical attention or go for help if the other is injured.

The buddy system is a biblical principle we see implemented throughout the Scriptures. When God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand that he free the children of Israel, God sent Aaron to go with him (Exodus 4:14–15). When Jesus sent His disciples to go ahead of Him into the towns and villages, He sent them out in pairs, “two by two” (Luke 10:1). The apostle Paul was accompanied on his missionary journeys by various companions including Barnabas, Timothy, and Titus.

As children of God, we could all use a “spiritual buddy,” someone we can count on in times of need. It’s easy to get yourself into trouble when you try to go it alone when dealing with unpleasant emotions, a difficult decision, temptation, or a sin you’ve committed. One of the reasons the army uses the buddy system is so that soldiers will lift up and inspire one another to act with honor, integrity, and courage. Likewise, leaning on a brother or sister in the Lord in tough times—or lending a shoulder to someone in need—can help you both to “be all that you can be” in Christ.



WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO OFFER?



Photo by Bo Nash.

In the world of NASCAR, the famous stock car racing circuit, millions of dollars are spent each year in the research and development of automobile engines that go faster and last longer. A top-quality V-8 engine can cost up to \$80,000 to build, and one team may go through dozens of engines in a single racing season. To achieve top speeds in excess of 200 miles per hour and give the driver a fighting chance at victory, these engines must consistently produce about 850 horsepower for distances of up to 600 miles during a race. This subjects the various parts of an engine to intense heat—about

2,000 degrees Fahrenheit—and enormous pressure—about 1,500 pounds per square inch, or more than a hundred times the normal air pressure we feel around us every day.

True, engine parts in a race car are bigger, stronger, and thicker than those in your family car. However, every piston, valve, and sparkplug must work together in perfect synchronization, or the engine is vulnerable to breakdown. If just one tiny valve spring breaks during a race, if just one of the eight cylinders fails to do its job properly, the engine will begin sounding “sick.” Soon the engine will “blow up,” spewing oil all over the track and rendering the car useless for the rest of the day.

Like the parts of an engine, God made us to depend on each other. This is called **interdependence**. An interdependent relationship is one in which two or more people help one another and depend on one another for help. Within a family, a church, a nation—in fact, any social or business organization—every member brings a unique set of talents, skills, and experiences to the mixture that enrich the group and make up for what may be missing among the other members. This is true even if the group is just two or three in number. Ecclesiastes 4:9–13 tells us:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. . . . A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

In order for the group or organization to function at its best, every member must contribute to the best of his or her ability while working toward a goal agreed upon with the other members. If the members cannot agree or do not work together efficiently, or if one of the members is not doing his or her part, the group is vulnerable to breakdown just like a car with a sick engine.

Despite the fact that we were made to depend on one another, it's not unusual to sometimes feel like you're not holding up your end of the bargain. When things aren't going

your way, when you're having a bad day and you're feeling sorry for yourself, when all your friends are busy and you're left alone, you might begin to wonder if you have anything of value to offer the world. After all, if you were prettier, smarter, funnier, and more fun to be around, people would be beating down your door to spend time with you, right? Wrong. But when you sit around focusing on yourself and your problems, it's easy to wallow in feelings of worthlessness and uselessness.

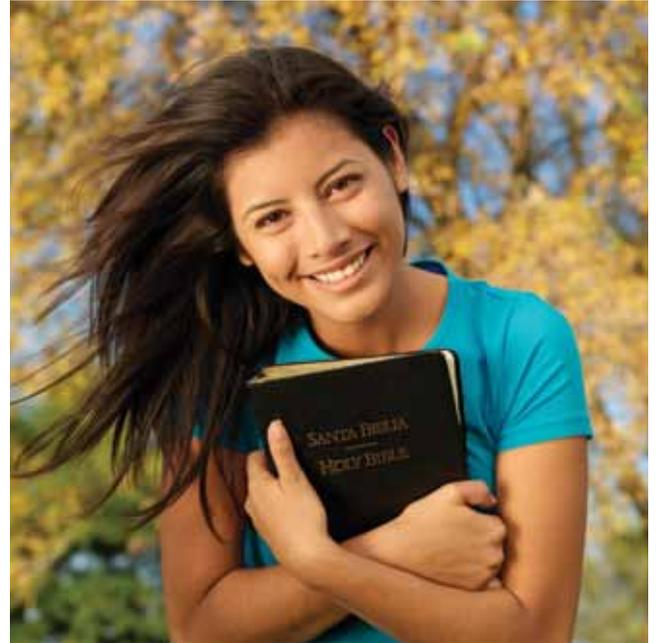
However, these feelings are nothing more than lies from your enemy, the devil, who wants to keep you from recognizing your true worth in the grand scheme of things. Remember, as you learned earlier in this series, your emotions are notoriously unreliable and you can't always trust them to tell you the truth. So whenever you find yourself becoming overwhelmed by your feelings, turn to the one place you can always find the truth, the Bible, and read what God says about you.

Consider the following: If you have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, you have been adopted as a child of the Most High God (John 1:12–13), with all the privileges and purpose that come with the position. Therefore, you have unrestricted access to the throne room of Almighty God (Hebrews 4:14–16). You can go boldly before Him and ask anything in His Son's name according to His will, and it will be done for you (John 16:23). Every day you encounter several people with needs that you can bring before your heavenly Father in prayer. Are you ready to move heaven and earth with your prayers?

As a child of God, you have been filled with the Holy Spirit. God literally lives inside you, working in you and through you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases Him (Philippians 2:13). The Holy Spirit not only helps you understand and remember God's Word (John 14:26), but He also equips you to tell others about God and show them His love through acts of kindness and goodness (Galatians 5:22–23).

These are not just *random* acts of kindness. *You are on a mission from God.*

You have been made new in Christ Jesus to do good works He planned for you long, long ago (Ephesians 2:10). You have been specially chosen by Him for this mission, and He has already equipped you with the tools and skills you need to see it through to completion. From the time you were born, God has provided you with a special set of gifts—your talents, your personality, your experiences—which no one else possesses. And God has been placing you in specific situations and introducing you to specific people who need your help.



MAKE A NOTE OF IT

Think of a time when you felt lonely. Perhaps you were sent to your room for disciplinary reasons. Maybe you wanted to be part of a group or activity but were not included. Maybe you were the new kid in Sunday school and didn't know anybody in your class. Besides loneliness, what other unpleasant feelings did you experience? Think of a person who might be feeling the same way—someone you can bless simply by being with that person and talking with him or her.

YOU ARE HERE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The apostle Paul wrote, “When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more honor to others than to yourselves. Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of others” (Philippians 2:3–4, NCV). God created you to glorify Him by showing love to others through your words and actions, just as Jesus did. According to 1 Peter 2:21 (NLT), Jesus is your example, “and you must follow in his steps.” This means that you must set aside your rights as a son or daughter of the Most High King and make yourself a servant to others:

In your lives you must think and act like Christ Jesus. Christ himself was like God in everything. But he did not think that being equal with God was something to be used for his own benefit. But he gave up his place with God and made himself nothing. He was born as a man and became like a servant.

(Philippians 2:5–7, NCV)

Speaking of Himself, Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served. He came to serve others” (Matthew 20:28, NCV). Indeed, He was the perfect example of servanthood. Jesus loved the people of this world more than He loved His own life, and He “died a criminal’s death on a cross” to pay the penalty for our sins (Philippians 2:8, NLT).

Now, you may never be called to give your life to save another’s, but you are called to die to selfishness and “do good to all people” whenever you have the opportunity (Galatians 6:10). In this way people will see the Father’s love in action, and perhaps they will be drawn to God’s grace and come to know the joy and peace and life



Crucifixion of Christ by Botticelli.

that you have. That's what **servanthood** is all about: building relationships of harmony with others by showing them God's love.

The truth is, God did not call you "out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9) just so you could rest secure in the knowledge that you will someday spend eternity with Him. He did not give you the Holy Spirit just so you would have peace, patience, and self-control. He did not give you special talents and abilities just so you could earn a living when you're an adult.

Don't misunderstand—these are good things, to be sure. But if you choose to keep God's gifts to yourself, then you will never complete your mission. If you hide yourself away from the world, content to live out your days quietly and uneventfully until the Master returns, then you will fail to become what God always intended you to be: a blessing to the world.

You are here to make a difference.

You are here to change lives.

You are here to change your community.

You are here to change the world.

"Change the world? But I'm just a kid," you might say. "What can I do?"

That's what this book is about.

WHAT SHOULD I DO?



The Agony in the Garden by El Greco.

It's easy to let our fear of the unknown keep us from loving others or doing good or sharing the gospel. We may be afraid that people will laugh at us, mock us, or even become angry because of what we believe. Or we may worry that someone will hurt us by taking advantage of our love. But Jesus showed us in the Garden of Gethsemane that we can endure such hurts with grace and obedience, always trusting God to deliver us.

In the hour before He was delivered into the hands of those who would torture and crucify Him, Jesus prayed to the Father and asked if there was any other way to accomplish His purposes. Jesus knew what the coming day held for Him, and His soul was "crushed with grief to the point of death" (Mark 14:34, NLT). The emotional distress was so great, so agonizing, that His "sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood" (Luke 22:44, NLT). There was nothing easy about going to the cross; the pain would be incomprehensible.

Three times Jesus prayed that this "cup of suffering" would be taken from Him

(Matthew 26:39–44, NLT). Yet He trusted God’s plan and knew that the Father would raise Him up when the work had been accomplished. So Jesus said, “I want your will to be done, not mine,” and He endured the cross without complaint.

Trusting God means having complete confidence that He will always do everything He promises. Even your favorite people will sometimes let you down, but you can always count on God. He will always be there for you:

“The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.” (Deuteronomy 31:8)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.
(Proverbs 3:5–6)

Trust in the LORD and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart’s desires.
(Psalm 37:3–4 NLT)

God promises that He will be glorified by your obedience to serve others rather than be served (Matthew 5:16). He promises that when you speak His words they will succeed in doing what He intends them to do (Isaiah 55:11). And He promises that if you have faith as small as a tiny mustard seed, you will move mountains in His name (Matthew 17:20).

MAKE A NOTE OF IT

Whether it’s joining a club, playing on a sports team, starting a new job, or getting married, people often feel both excitement and fear about becoming part of a group. Write about or draw a picture of a group you want to be part of someday. What kind of positive and negative feelings might you have about joining this group? Do you ever worry about not being allowed to belong to a group or being rejected by a group? Why?



A PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for the relationships in my life. Thank you for all my family and friends. Please give me the heart of a servant so that I may give you glory by showing your love to the people around me. Help me to follow your example and consider others before myself. Help me not to be afraid to love people but to trust that you are always with me. I ask these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.



ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS

THE WEDDING FEAST

In 1897, an American minister named Charles Sheldon published a novel titled *In His Steps*. The main character of the story is Rev. Henry Maxwell, pastor of the First Church of Raymond, who is deeply moved by his encounter with a destitute vagabond. The following Sunday, Maxwell challenges his congregation to not do anything for an entire year without first asking themselves, “What would Jesus do?” Nearly a hundred years after its first publication, Sheldon’s novel had a resurgence when WWJD bracelets became a popular item among young people. Today *In His Steps* ranks as one of the fifty best-selling books of all time.

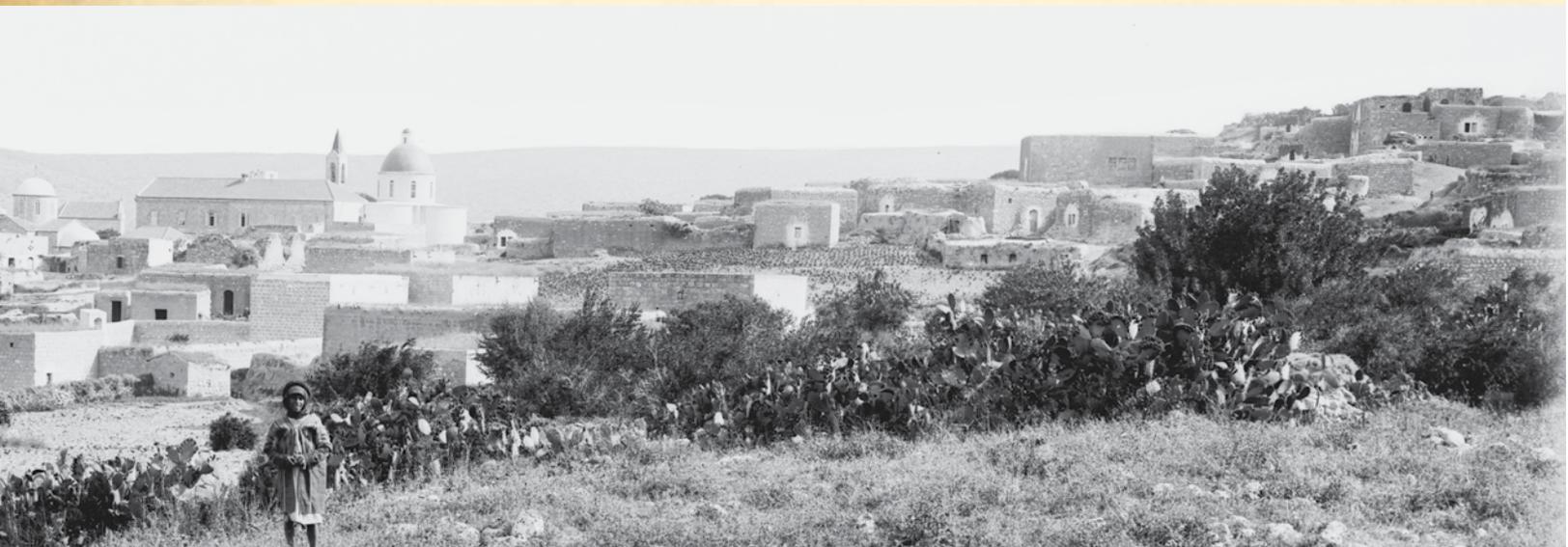
The question “What would Jesus do?” is not just a slogan or meaningless platitude. It’s a question you and I should be asking ourselves every day. During His time on earth, Jesus took everything to God in prayer, studied the Scriptures, and allowed Himself to be led by the Holy Spirit. He is our example and we must follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21). As God’s image-bearers made new in Christ, we are to “reflect the Lord’s glory,” becoming more like Him every day (2 Corinthians 3:18). Therefore we should do the things Jesus did, touching lives the way He did with compassion, mercy, gentleness, patience, and kindness. As Christ suffered unjustly without complaint for doing what was right, so we must respond with love to those who hate us and say false and unkind things about us (Matthew 5:44). And we are called to minister to this world by the power of the same Spirit that raised our Lord from the dead (Acts 1:8; Romans 8:11).

If we are to know what Jesus would do, we must first know what Jesus did by exploring the Scriptures. Throughout the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we see Jesus responding to the needs of men and women from all walks of life—children and adults, wealthy and poor, widows and prostitutes, soldiers and lepers, Jews and Gentiles. Sometimes Jesus sought out the persons in need or even called them by name. Sometimes these people interrupted Him during His travels, during meals, even while He was teaching!

Near the end of each lesson in this book, you will meet one or more persons who encountered Jesus during His time on this earth. You will see how He showed God’s love to them in their time of need and how each person responded differently. As you will see, not

everyone accepted what Jesus had to offer. Yet the lives of most were changed forever by their meeting with the Man from Galilee.

First, let's meet a young bride-to-be who is about to encounter Immanuel—God with us—in her hour of need.



Cana in the early 1900s.

Miriam rested her chin in her hands, elbows propped on the low wall surrounding the flat roof of her family's home, and breathed in the cool morning air. From up here she could look south toward the town of Nazareth, larger than her own small village of Cana, or southwest toward Galilee's busy capital of Sepphoris, gleaming like a faraway jewel. This was Miriam's favorite way to start the day.

Her younger sister Rachel came up behind her, wrapped an arm affectionately around her waist, and rested her chin on Miriam's shoulder. "So," she said dramatically, "today we lose you forever to Shimon. Maybe Mama will let me be the grown-up daughter of the house now that you will be taking care of your new husband and his family."

Miriam squeezed her sister's hand. No matter how much she might joke, Miriam knew Rachel was sad to see her leave. "You know I'll be over here as often as I can. Besides, with Shimon's mother gone, I'll be the sole mistress of his house and will need lots of advice. And since Mama can't leave her bed right now, she can't exactly come to me."

Rachel sighed, her breath visible in the moist cool air. Their mother had been ill for months, so the two girls had taken over most of the household chores. When Miriam left, seventeen-year-old Rachel would have to carry the full burden of cooking, cleaning, and caring for their four younger siblings.

“I wonder when Father will get an offer for my hand,” Rachel mused. “You weren’t much older than I am now when Shimon and his father asked for you.”

Miriam smiled a bit at the mention of her bridegroom. Although both families had lived in the same town for years, Miriam had spent very little time with Shimon. He was five years older than she and always seemed to be busy doing a man’s work. And when his mother had died in childbirth three years earlier, he and his father had taken up the tasks normally left to the women of the house. “Don’t worry, Rachel, your turn will come,” she said.

Twelve months ago, Shimon and his father had approached Miriam’s father to ask for her hand in marriage. Within a few weeks, she had been betrothed to Shimon, legally bound to him but not living as his wife until he had built a house for them and she had prepared goods to fill it. A whole year of preparation had led to this day, one every Jewish woman dreamed about as a girl and looked back on as a woman.

“Miriam, are you sad to leave?” Rachel asked.

Miriam snuggled closer to her sister. “Of course I’m sad to move away from you, even if it’s just to the other side of the village. But I am excited to start a life with Shimon. I know he will always work hard to provide for me, and he is kind to everyone around him. After all, Papa trusts him enough to give him his first-born daughter!” Miriam paused in thought. “But it’s more than that. I can really make a difference there. His younger brothers and sisters all miss their mother terribly, and I can help ease the pain of their loss.”

Rachel smiled. “I’m sure it doesn’t hurt that he’s tall and handsome.”

Miriam blushed. “He is handsome, isn’t he?”

Groaning, Rachel pulled her toward the steps. “Let’s go back in the house before you get lost in your dreams!”

Already, bundles of clothing and household articles lay about the courtyard, ready to be moved to Shimon’s house. And the last of the food the family was preparing for the wedding feast would be ready well before dusk. Just about the only thing missing were several skins of special wine Miriam’s father had ordered from Jerusalem, delayed by heavy spring rains and flooded rivers. The etiquette of Jewish weddings took the sacred duty of hospitality to new heights, and running short on wine was an offense few guests would overlook.



Typical home similar to what would have been found in Cana.

Looking about her, Miriam shook her head, trying to banish the fears that threatened to overwhelm her. She knew Shimon would be coming to claim her sometime after sunset, but she didn't know exactly when, so everything had to be ready for his arrival. The list running through her head seemed longer every time she stopped to think about it.

Out-of-town relatives would arrive throughout the day. Among the first to appear that morning was her Aunt Mary from nearby Nazareth. Running to greet her at the gate, Miriam threw her arms about her favorite aunt. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you! There are so many last minute details to take care of, and Mama's fretting that she can't leave her bed to help."

Mary returned her niece's hug, then held her out at arm's length. "Blessings on your marriage, dear one. May you be like Rachel and Leah, bringing fruitfulness and honor to your husband's house. Now, let me get a good look at you." She pretended to look Miriam up and down carefully. "Yes. I think you look all grown up. Maybe taller too."

"Well, if being grown up means handling too much responsibility, then I think you're right!" Miriam said through a worried smile.

Mary laughed. "First, let me wash the dust off and I will go see your Mama. We'll see if I can help ease her mind a bit."



Miriam took a clay jar and filled it from the clean water stored in large stone pots next to the entrance. Then she knelt in front of her aunt and poured the water over her dusty feet, wiping away the last traces of dirt with a cloth. "Much better, my dear," Mary said, slipping her clean sandals back on. "Now I'll go sit with your mother for a few minutes, then I'll meet you back at the kitchen and together we'll take care of everything."

Miriam joined Rachel near the round brick oven where she was removing freshly baked loaves of barley bread and setting them into baskets to cool. Rachel wiped beads of sweat from her forehead. "Good thing we only need to make half the bread for the feast," she said. "Otherwise, we might both miss the wedding."

Miriam poured clean water over her hands, then started kneading the next batch of dough. "I haven't seen this much food since last year's Passover when we hosted Papa's cousins on their way to Jerusalem." Separating the dough into equal pieces, Miriam shaped it into loaves and scored lines along the tops so the bread would tear easily after it was baked.

She handed the loaves to Rachel, who put them carefully inside the hot oven to bake. Miriam wiped the flour from her hands and began setting out food for the midday meal—

warm bread, pickled olives, dates, and raisins. With Rachel's help, she moved the food up to the roof, where the baskets and bowls were set out on a colorful rug in the shade of a canopy.

On her way to the roof, hands full, Miriam stopped and watched another group of guests being greeted by her father. Among them was her cousin Jesus, Mary's son. She hadn't seen him in a long time, but to Miriam's eyes he looked almost gaunt, as if he had just endured a great trial. Yet his eyes seemed to shine with an inner brilliance. Miriam also recognized one of the men who were with him, Shimon's friend Nathaniel who had grown up in Cana.

Miriam was strangely drawn to Jesus. There was something unusual about the way he looked at a person, almost as if he knew everything—good and bad—that you had ever done or said and accepted you anyway. She watched him interacting with his friends and noticed that they treated him with the respect due a great rabbi, rather than a simple carpenter with calloused hands. Jesus looked up and caught her watching them. Miriam only had time to give him a welcoming smile before Rachel passed her with another basket headed for the roof. “Come on, silly, or everyone will think you have fluff for brains!” she teased.



Miriam deposited her armload on the roof and took a last look around, making sure everything was in order, before walking back down to the courtyard and giving her father a nod. He smiled back, then ushered their guests up to the roof for the midday meal. Miriam met Rachel and Mary back in the kitchen. They would wait until the men had eaten their fill before taking food themselves.

“My, the day certainly turned out warm, didn't it?” Mary remarked.

Miriam nodded. Clear skies and sunshine had burned away all traces of the cool dawn she had enjoyed earlier. She hoped that the good weather would allow the wine caravan to arrive before the feast.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of hurrying feet, busy hands, and bundles and baskets going to and fro.

As the sun started to set, Mary shoed Miriam and Rachel into their mother's room. “You need to stop being the mistress of the house now and go be a bride,” Mary said with a smile. “This is a moment you will treasure all your life.”

Tears springing to her eyes, Miriam gave her aunt a hug.

Shut away from the pleasant chaos, Miriam enjoyed a cooling bath. Then she sat on

her mother's pallet while her mother worked her long dark hair into an intricate braid, dotted with the first almond flowers of the season.

By the light of the first lamp of the evening, her youngest sisters rubbed scented oil into her clean skin, filling the room with a light fragrance. Rachel helped her dress in the carefully embroidered robes Miriam had been stitching for months and wrapped a soft blue sash around her waist. When she was ready, Miriam, Rachel, and their mother sat in anxious anticipation, waiting for the shout that signaled Shimon's approach.

At long last, the cry spread through the house that the bridegroom was nearly here. Miriam kissed her mother good-bye, then fastened on her veil with trembling fingers and emerged into the courtyard. Surrounded by friends and relatives, she waited at the gate for Shimon to come claim his bride. Miriam looked around at the faces of the people who meant the most to her, trying to memorize the moment: The look of beaming pride her father gave her. Rachel's fingers clasped tightly in her own. Her aunt Mary, surrounded by her children. And Jesus' wise, serene face.

When Shimon arrived, he looked magnificent, wearing robes suited for royalty. Holding out his hand to Miriam, Shimon led her onto the road that pointed to her new life. Everyone gave a triumphant shout and followed in a merry, chaotic party. It seemed like the whole village of Cana, torches in hand, had turned out for their wedding celebration! Miriam had never felt more special or more alive. Propelled along by the enthusiasm of the crowd, she fairly floated along the streets.



Peasant wedding in Palestine, early 1900s.

By the time they reached Shimon's home, the first stars were shining brightly. Miriam followed him through the courtyard into the room he had built for them. In the presence of her father and his, the rabbi officially married Shimon and Miriam, placing crowns of greenery on their heads. Then the men left them alone to enjoy their first private moments as husband and wife, while they saw to it that the hungry and thirsty guests outside were served the best food and wine they could afford.

An hour or so later, Shimon led Miriam to the place of honor reserved for them under a special canopy on the roof. From her perch overlooking the festivities, Miriam looked around in amazement. The courtyard had been transformed, with colorful rugs stretched

from wall to wall, laden with bowls of food, baskets of broken bread to serve as utensils, and clay cups and jugs of wine.

The guests were gathered in small groups around the food, sharing jokes and stories and shouting blessings for the bride and groom. Everyone appeared to be enjoying the fellowship. Miriam took a deep breath, inhaling the smells of fresh bread and olive oil mingled with the aroma of meat roasting over a fire. Miriam's father had pledged to provide the wine, while Shimon's father had purchased several sheep to feed the guests. The thought of juicy roasted meat instead of the usual evening meal of boiled fish made Miriam's mouth water.

Reaching for the cup she would share with Shimon, Miriam took a sip of wine and coughed in surprise. This was not the fine wine her father had ordered. This was inexpensive, everyday wine, highly diluted. Her breath caught in her throat. If all they had to serve was the plain wine that should have been reserved for the very end of the feast, then the skins of wine from Jerusalem must not have been delivered.

She managed to catch Rachel's attention and beckoned her closer. "Didn't the wine arrive from Jerusalem?" she whispered frantically.

Rachel shook her head. "And the regular wine is almost gone too."

Miriam's concern turned to panic. Running out of wine was disastrous—her neighbors would never let her live this down. She rubbed her forehead, trying to think faster than the headache that was starting to roar in her ears. She was married to Shimon now—sole mistress of his father's household—so she didn't have a mother-in-law to turn to. And her own mother was at home in bed.

Miriam gripped Rachel's arm and pulled her close. "Go tell Aunt Mary. Maybe she knows of a guest that brought some wine as a gift." Rachel nodded quickly and hurried down the stairs without appearing to hurry, trying to keep up the illusion that everything was fine.

Miriam watched as Rachel pulled Mary aside and explained. Mary's smile disappeared, and she looked up at Miriam for confirmation. Miriam nodded. Forehead wrinkling, Mary said something to Rachel before leaving the courtyard. Miriam waited in agony as Rachel slowly made her way back up to the roof, bringing a basket.

"What did she say?" Miriam asked as Rachel appeared under the canopy.

Rachel added more bread to the supply at Miriam's elbow. "She said that no one brought any wine as a gift, but not to worry. She had another idea." Chewing on her lip, Rachel cleared a few empty bowls and left.

Unable to sit quietly, Miriam rose and walked to the far edge of the roof. She felt her reputation crumbling and with it the honor of her husband's family. A wife was supposed to honor her husband, not ruin his good name hours into the marriage. It didn't matter that the wine being delayed was a circumstance beyond her control—she blamed herself for not ordering it earlier or providing for a backup just in case. She sneaked a look at Shimon, who was currently listening to a story being told by his uncle who had been appointed steward of the

feast. Neither of them seemed alarmed or aware of any problem.

Heart pounding, Miriam closed her eyes and murmured a prayer of desperation to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “Creator of the universe, the One who provides, please hear my plea. Grant your servant your favor and do not let this circumstance harm the honor of my new husband or of my father.”

Unable to find the words to strengthen her plea, Miriam opened her eyes. Below her, near the entrance to the courtyard, stood Mary with Jesus and his friends. The hired servants stood nearby. Mary had her hand on Jesus’ arm, seemingly caught between question and answer. Jesus responded carefully, his tone gentle but firm as he removed his mother’s hand. Mary stood silent for a moment, watching his face, then gave the servants a quiet command before stepping back into the chaos of the feast.

Both the servants and Jesus’ companions seemed perplexed, looking to this man to tell them what to do. After a moment’s pause, Jesus gave the servants an order that sent them scurrying for jars. Miriam watched as they slowly refilled several nearby water pots—huge stone vessels that could hold enough for several baths—with clean water from the well, right to the brim. She was confused. They had plenty of water; what they needed was wine!



Marriage at Cana by Veronese.

When they were finished, the servants waited expectantly. At Jesus’ command, one of the servants dipped his jug into the water, filled it, then took it away. Miriam watched in horror as the servant climbed the stairs and headed for the steward of the feast, who was responsible for tasting the wine. Hand over her mouth, Miriam held her breath as the steward took a long gulp from the cup the servant had poured for him.

The steward’s eyebrows rose in surprise and he turned to Shimon. “This wine is superb! Most men serve their best wine first and save the cheaper wine until the guests have had too much to drink. But you have saved the best for last!” Shimon just smiled. The steward laughed and held out his cup to be refilled. “Servant, make sure that everyone’s cups are

refilled immediately!”

To Miriam’s eyes, the servant looked pale, scared even. But he said nothing and hurried to comply.

Shimon beckoned Miriam to come and sit next to him. He leaned and whispered in her ear, “Your father’s special wine must have arrived just in time.”

Miriam sat stunned as the enormity of what had just happened washed over her. It had clearly been water that the servants poured into the stone vessels. She reached for Shimon’s newly refilled cup and took a tentative sip. The best wine she had ever tasted flowed over her tongue.

With tears in her eyes, she realized that her prayer had been answered, and in a much greater way than she could ever have imagined. The wine in those huge stone jars was enough to supply half a dozen weddings! Cup in hand, she stood and searched the crowd for Jesus, but he and his friends were nowhere to be seen. Then she spotted her Aunt Mary laughing and talking with friends. For a brief moment, Mary looked up to where Miriam was standing and gave her a knowing smile before returning to the conversation.

As she slowly sat down again, Miriam knew that this day truly would be impossible to forget.

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

- This story is a fictionalized account of an actual event from the life of Jesus. We have imagined the wedding day from the unique perspective of one of the participants while providing cultural details to help you better understand what is happening in the story. Now read the biblical account of the wedding at Cana in John 2:1–11 and compare it to the story you’ve just read.
- Why was Miriam so distressed that the wedding party was running low on wine? What might people have said if the wine had run out so early in the festivities?
- According to the apostle John, this was the first of the miraculous signs Jesus performed. So why did Mary come to Jesus with this problem? What do you think she expected Him to do? Why?
- Although the time for Jesus to reveal Himself to the world as the Son of God had “not yet come,” He chose to turn the water into wine. Why do you think Jesus made this decision?
- How did Jesus serve this young bride? What need did He meet? Whom else did He serve through this miracle?