

Not Easily



Broken

Wisdom for Dating and Marriage
with Christ at the Center

Joyce *and* Steven Dinkins

“Marriage ‘advice’ can be helpful; however, marriage is ultimately an on-the-job training, build-the-plane-as-you-fly-it phenomenon—no instruction manuals included. Every now and then, a special resource comes along that guides those who are married (or desire marriage) with gentleness and time-tested wisdom, as most individuals entering into marriage do not have hindsight as a tool. *Not Easily Broken* covers these bases beautifully with authenticity and transparency. It is useful at any phase in the marital journey.”

—**Dr. Quantrilla Ard**, grief coach and lived experiences expert at *It’s All Grief to Me*

“I can think of no better and more loving couple to write this book on love, life, dating, parenting, and marriage, with JESUS at the center, than Joyce and Steven Dinkins, who are so in love, and so committed to God and one another. . . .

“Her femininity, his masculinity, and their authenticity are engulfed in God’s divinity as they share openly and poignantly. This is a must-read if you’re thinking about, interested in, about to be or are already dating or getting married.”

—**Rev. Dr. Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook**, 3rd US Ambassador at large for International Religious Freedom and author

“The biblical book of Proverbs exhorts us to be attentive to wisdom and to incline our hearts to understanding. As I read the eight ‘love stories’ that make up *Not Easily Broken*, I was reminded of that exhortation with each turn of the page. This work borne out of the hearts, minds, and relationship of Joyce and Steven Dinkins is filled with wisdom that any of us who are in dating or marriage relationships would do well to savor and apply. It’s a testament to their own enduring relationship, and an investment in the relational path their readers are on. Highly recommended.”

—**Jeff Crosby**, author of *The Language of the Soul* and *World of Wonders*

“I have been privileged to know Joyce professionally for the past decade. This moving collection of stories gives us a window into her and Steven’s lives, marriage, family, and much more. Their stories are engaging and transparent, elegantly capturing the highs and the lows of mature, Christ-centered love, romance, dating, and marriage. Moreover, this book stands out because it takes us to the next level, offering practical, biblically grounded principles for love and marriage that are built to last. It is a must-read for dating and engaged couples who want to do life, love, and marriage God’s way.”

—**Alonzo Johnson**, associate professor of theology, Dickerson-Green Theological Seminary; superintendent & pastor, Church of God in Christ; chief editor, *Standardized Ordination & Licensure Textbook*, Church of God in Christ

“There is so much to appreciate about *Not Easily Broken* that makes it a compelling and educational must-read for all—married and engaged couples, those considering marriage, and those working with couples. Beautifully written, filled with inspiring stories, and embedded with practical exercises, Joyce and Steven take us through the ups and downs of mature marital relationships (primarily theirs but also others), while demonstrating love and resilience in the context of biblical wisdom.”

—**Dr. Lee N. June and Dr. Shirley A. June**

“My husband Herb and I were so blessed to sojourn with the Dinkins in Birmingham, Alabama, and witness the authenticity of their words penned here. They have vulnerably ‘poured out their lives as a drink offering’ to edify married couples and families for God’s glory.”

—**Tondra Loder-Jackson, PhD**, professor and contributing author

“Marriages are built thread by thread and strand by strand, until, with God’s help, they become durable cords. Readers of *Not Easily Broken* will be inspired to strengthen the bonds of love, marriage, and faith through difficult times and tender times. Joyce and Steven Dinkins share their hearts, their truth, and their example to encourage a lifetime of love. They remind us that God keeps His vow to sustain a marriage long after the wedding ceremony is over. All we must do is give Him the threads of our love story.”

—**Karen Moore**, devotional author

“In their gentle, beckoning style, Joyce and Steven come up alongside to bring you closer to Jesus in your most vital relationships. Whether happily married or searching for what might be next, here is practical wisdom for you!”

—**Elisa Morgan**, speaker, author, co-host of *Discover the Word* and *God Hears Her* podcasts, and president emerita of The MomCo by MOPS International

“After more than fifty years of marriage, I deeply value Joyce and Steven’s transparency in sharing both their challenges and their joys, offering couples the kind of Christ-centered wisdom that strengthens love for a lifetime.”

—**Frances Murphy Draper**, D Min, retired AME Zion pastor and CEO of AFRO News

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Publishing®

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To Jesus Christ, who is Lord of our lives,
with love to our precious children, Loren, Steven, and David,
and with much gratitude to you, our reader

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Foreword

By Yulise Reaves Waters and Michael W. Waters

We first encountered the brilliant light that is Joyce Dinkins a decade ago. A professional freelance editor, Joyce served as the editor for Michael's first book, *Freestyle*. In the same way that her keen eyes and skill elevated that manuscript, her presence in our lives has lifted our family. She is a trusted friend, mentor, and prayer partner whom we love immensely.

As we continued to support and encourage each other professionally and personally, we were later blessed to meet Steven, break bread together, and bask in the blessing of their union. Any time we can glean the wisdom of faithful, Christian couples who thrive in marriage, we embrace it. Steven and Joyce's marriage is such a marriage, and we have learned much from their godly example. We continue to offer updates to each other on how God is present and at work in and through our families.

Concerning our own marriage journey, we met in college and quickly became friends. Beyond friendship, we did not pursue a relationship with each other. And many of our early conversations would ultimately center around matters of faith, the Bible, and discerning God's call for our future—a future we did not know at the time included one another. God was at the center of our friendship, and so, when we discerned God's call to marriage, God simply moved to the center of our union as well.

As is often the case for engaged couples on the road toward marriage, many offered us words of wisdom. Eager to learn from others' experiences, we would listen intently. But one piece of advice that some people offered perplexed us. On more than one occasion, we were told that "Love ain't enough." We grappled with those words. If God is love and love is God, and if God is the creator of heaven and earth, the omnipotent One, the One with whom *all* things are possible, the One who is over *all*, through *all*, and in us *all*, then love *is* enough. Two decades have

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now passed since we said “I do” on a beautiful, sunny August day. We have learned over those twenty years that God is not *just* enough. God is essential, and without God, no marriage can reach its full potential.

In marriage, you never stop saying “I do.” It is a daily practice, a daily commitment. As God’s mercies are made new with each rising of the sun, our commitment and covenant to each other is renewed daily. Over twenty years of marriage (and an additional five years of, as we like to say, “kicking it together”), we can attest that some days have been easier than others. But our “I do” has remained true and secure.

We are blessed to introduce this book that shares what God has done through and for other married couples. Like us, these couples have placed God in the very center of their unions, and they have learned the necessity of daily “I do’s.” They, like us, are not perfect, but theirs is a love that is being perfected by God. The stories and devotions contained herein represent the wisdom, peace, joy, and more God makes available to each of us. These stories from married, divorced, and remarried individuals give you an inside view of their experiences of joy and pain and encourage us to hope in God’s love above all.

As the Dinkins share, “God’s presence in our lives and divine direction sustain love—in married life that is not easily broken and remains sweet.” As you read the pages ahead, may you find strength, encouragement, and joy. And may God’s presence be clearly manifested in your life and at the center of your union, for as the writer of Ecclesiastes declared, “a triple-braided cord is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

Introduction

BEFORE OUR EVER AFTER

We gratefully share with you these love stories and devotions based on personal life events from before our marriage through forty years and counting. We pray you'll sense the Holy Spirit speaking through these Scriptures and stories, and find them encouraging evidence that married life can be glorious and lasting.

Though our marriage is all of that, hopeless moments have also shaped Steven's heart and mine—moments of unmet expectations and pain before the joy of our long-lasting love for one another. We each had a previous marriage that broke; our previous mates felt those marriages were unmendable.

We understand the shock of giving up on marriage; some rightly describe the end as a sort of death. But we also know God's powerful kindness and redemption. He gave each of us a new beginning—as single Christians. We share about those glorious years too. We would never have known this kind of supernatural love exists, but God kept and blessed Steven and me before we met. Then, in perfect timing, God orchestrated our meeting.

In this book we describe in detail what happened before our first meeting, long before our promise to one another and God to remain in this marriage “ever after.” We're sharing with you our upbringing, our twentysomething and thirtysomething selves, and how those backstories connect with our decades of devotion to our marriage. We pray all of these memories, feelings, and intimate moments reveal how *me* has become *we* in fruitful love.

The miraculous moment we met remains indelible. God's intervention in our lives is divine in every detail and decade, and He keeps and blesses us still.

INTRODUCTION

Of course, we're not the only ones kept in love. We've tucked in testimonies from others across generations and cultures about their marriage joys, fears, failures, and victories, including

Chelsea and Darius Jordan, loving and building together
for four years and counting;
Tamica and Rasool Berry, serving one another in sweet
love for a quarter century;
Xochitl and Alan Dixon, committed to their caring mar-
riage of more than thirty years;
Glenda and Wachira Ngamau, dedicated to one another
for more than thirty years;
Michael and Maria Westbrook, celebrating forty years
as we write; and
Arthur and Shirley Jackson, stretching toward their
sixty-year mark.

Through storytelling, devotions, poetry, and Scripture, you'll find this book to be part memoir, part self-help, and part devotional. With a group or on your own, you can savor each of eight sections one week at a time, or you might choose to read to the end in just a couple of sittings. No matter how you engage with this book, we pray our love stories and devotions tell far more than simple statistics and facts about marriage can report. We hope *you'll* experience the love God intends for you. He is central to a true love life, helping each of us overcome challenges, strengthen relationships, and deepen our love connections.

We cannot tell all we know about how redemptive God is in what He performs. What you'll read recalls highlights of the healing and the wealth of wholeness He is known to give. We also know we don't know it all, and we're not here to judge anyone. Marriage includes tough times for everyone. We share what we know from our perspectives. Divorce can happen despite best intentions and practices. A breakup can result from reasons we touch on and more.

By God's grace, marital success happens too. "Ever after" love happened to us. What God joined together has brought lasting hope, purpose, and fulfillment. He has orchestrated awe-inspiring milestones in our decades together and transformed what tripped us up into wisdom gathered from rocky times. The Scriptures woven into these readings witness to His love and confirm His wise plans for lasting marriage and loving family.

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Our all-knowing, all-powerful God is love. He is faithful in all He arranges and can rearrange.

A brief note from Steven:

“When it comes to marriage, people are looking for a “silver bullet.” There isn’t one. As believers, in everyday life we approach everything from a biblical worldview. We filter the entire world through the eyes and lens of Scripture. If it lines up with Scripture, we keep it. If it doesn’t, we let it go.

Loving marriage lines up with Scripture, and marriage endures when we attempt to love one another ever after by loving and seeking Him first.



Love Story 1

FIRST LOVE

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live
righteously, and he will give you everything you need.
Matthew 6:33

Have you heard these sayings about God?

He's a mother and a father.

He sticks closer than a sister or brother.

He's a doctor in the sick room, and a lawyer in the courtroom.

He may not come when you want Him—but He's always on
time.

He'll be with you in the valley.

He'll never leave you or forsake you.

Generations of individuals have historically proclaimed these statements because God *is* all of that. He provides and prevails.

God personifies Himself as the “husband” of His people:

“For your Creator will be your husband; the LORD of Heaven’s Armies is his name! He is your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, the God of all the earth. For the LORD has called you back from your grief—as though you were a young wife abandoned by her husband,” says your God. (Isaiah 54:5–6)

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There is nobody like the lover of our souls. For Steven and me, God has been our first love since we surrendered to Him more than forty years ago. He is the one who satisfies and makes our lives and marriage complete.

God saved our souls. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8 NIV). He also healed our broken hearts, satisfied us in our singleness, and has met our needs and provided for us, as He does for others. As Psalm 68:6 says, “God places the lonely in families,” and God placed us, Steven Dinkins and Joyce Wheeler, in our family. At a certain time, we each longed for a mate, and received in each other the exact person God had prepared.

Forty years later, we continue on a life journey that keeps confirming why we’re together and how we remain. We’ve seen God arrange our match and control our future supernaturally, so our confidence is in Him. Jesus is the center of our joy. Following the Holy Spirit is our highest priority, and we desire for God to align our decisions with His will as it is expressed in Scripture. Steven and I frequently say to one another, “After Jesus, you are the love of my life!”

Steven says:

“ We had to fall in love with God before we were ready to love each other. We didn’t approach our relationship with thoughts like, I need somebody to help me with the bills, or I want to have someone with a good job who can help me buy a house. I need someone to be a good parent to my child. I need someone in good health. The list goes on. These are not bad thoughts, but if each prospective mate doesn’t know Christ and keep Him as their first love, misunderstandings can result from the mismatch. Being “unequally yoked” produces difficulties.

Don’t team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever? (2 Corinthians 6:14–15)

This doesn’t mean that you can take all of the single Christian ladies and all of the single Christian guys, drop their names in a bucket, shake it up, and whatever the match is, you’re good

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to go. If two people are keeping God as their priority in life and asking God to then show them a mate, they are really asking for God's will. If it's God's will, oh, my goodness, you'll have sparks going up in heaven like Juneteenth and the fourth of July.

Steven's Past

Do you ever imagine how past generations in your family have influenced your present life? Our upbringing informs our perspectives. I lovingly call Steven "a country boy" because he learned from his elders to be an unpretentious, hardworking, skilled, disciplined, and wholesome lover of God's creation. He enjoys "the simple things." Here's a little bit about his past.

Steven grew up with his mother and his grandparents, Sam and Lula Taylor, on their farmland, along with his three younger brothers and, from time to time, an extended family of uncles, an aunt, and cousins. He enjoyed gathering black walnuts and maple syrup from trees; picking tomatoes, okra, greens, and more from their oversized garden; collecting eggs from dozens of chickens; feeding his Uncle Rufus's award-winning pigs; tasting the Empson family's blueberries next door; and connecting at friends' homes—European American, Indigenous, and Black families, all within walking distance. His grandfather had migrated to rural Michigan from Alabama in the 1920s after shoveling coal for a dollar a day.

“ Steven here. Granddaddy purchased the forty acres in the country where we all lived, learned, labored, and loved. It's where we're currently living our best life (more about the farm later).

Granddaddy's first wife had died when their children were young. As a college freshman, their daughter, Jessie, gave birth to me. My mom later met and married Kenneth Dinkins, a US Army officer. He left us when I was three years old, and traveled around the world. My mom raised me and my three younger brothers from her marriage on Granddaddy's farm with the help of my grandmother and my uncles Rufus and Martin.

My uncles would help my mom on occasion with her bills, Christmas and birthday presents, and more needs. My Uncle Martin would eventually pay all of my expenses for my first year in college and would be a continued source of encouragement and help.

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I remember the simple yet profound prayer we would repeat after our mother every night at bedtime when we were young children. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” As I got older and more mature in the Lord, this prayer had more meaning. Also, my mother kept me in Sunday school and church every Sunday, another opportunity to be around and have fun with my best friend, Gary Stokes, who happened to be the pastor’s son.

Me and my brothers were educated at the one-room schoolhouse set in the blueberry fields, walking distance on the gravel road from our home. All the neighborhood children, from first through eighth grade, studied together in one large classroom.

Our family was poor, and to purchase school clothes, me and my brothers labored at picking blueberries and strawberries. As the eldest brother, I had responsibilities. As a preteen, I paid bills, cleaned the house, watched over my brothers, and cooked simple meals before my mother arrived home from her workdays at a poultry plant. I was concerned about her health; she was a heavy smoker and suffered a stroke during my teens.

When my baby brother, Stanley, struggled with drug abuse and died at twenty-seven, my interest in Bible knowledge increased as I searched for meaning in life. Around the same time, I had also suffered a divorce from my first wife and was separated from my toddler son. Through that trauma, I became serious about my walk with God. I frequented adult Sunday school and fell in love with Scripture. I couldn’t get enough of reading the Bible and began satisfying my curiosity through additional biblical resources I invested in. Word studies in commentaries took my study to a different level.

I began working with youth when I was in my thirties. Shortly after that, Pastor Ben Johnson invited me to teach adult Bible study. I even considered attending seminary. Although I felt God calling me to teach, the more I studied, the more I realized how much I didn’t know. I was later recruited by a Christian publishing ministry where Bible scholars told me that no scholar achieves a complete understanding of Scripture. I chose to take coursework at Fuller Theological Seminary while continuing to prepare small-group studies for churches, co-workers, high school mentees, and prison inmates.

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Embedded in our relationship story is that upbringing and set of beliefs, not what Steven owned or earned. God used who he *is*, what he believes and hopes to be in Christ, to catch and keep my interest—not his physique. I came to love all of him as we describe in these stories, but God introduced me to Steven’s heart, his spirit, first. The handsome chocolate-colored skin, twinkling eyes, and warm humor are “icing on the cake.”

Joyce’s Past

My two older sisters named me Joyce Mary. The youngest of my brothers, Bud, was a year and a half older than me. My “big brothers” from my father’s first marriage—Bill, Jim, and Ted—were about twenty years older than me and sometimes visited with their families. When we were three and five years old, Bud slept at one end of our twin-sized bed, and I at the other. Our small bedroom was situated above the main kitchen in a ramshackle two-story rooming house where an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, were also tenants for a while. Our parents, hardworking servants and entrepreneurs, would years later own that property in south Glencoe, Illinois.

We were not churchgoers. I didn’t grow up in the traditional church, as was common among my Southern church-planting-and-meeting relatives, the Wheelers. When my parents were children, they had spent Sundays at church, dawn to dusk, in an era when the Black Church not only influenced behaviors among neighbors but also provided otherwise unavailable education and more, and engendered hope. My dad handed down legacy lessons about a great aunt who taught him to read, write, and calculate at one church his uncle and father—each born into slavery—had built during a Reconstruction era. When it was raining and crops couldn’t be tended, Dad escaped to school at the church his dad and uncle had built. My mother sometimes interjected stories about her great-great aunt, a great uncle, and her mother, Bertha Marshall Powell, who grew up on the Creek (Muskogee) Indian Reservation in Oklahoma, and was a poor, itinerant laborer supporting six children.

Mom said grace at our family’s mealtimes and got on her knees next to me for bedtime prayers. She made sure that we were dressed for Sunday school and sometimes walked alongside us to St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. When she sent us and stayed home, I bet she rested from her four children, ages five through eight (I was the youngest of my dad’s children). That church still serves the predominantly African American neighborhood in Glencoe.

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On a few occasions, Mom took us to a Black Baptist church in Evanston, a larger city on Chicago's northern boundary, and other religious institutions along the North Shore. We attended mass and catechism classes at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Winnetka. The nuns' discovery of my dad's divorce from his first wife precluded our taking Communion, so my dad stopped us from attending altogether. He took us to a Unitarian congregation for events where civil rights icons were keynote speakers, and on outings to see the Bahai House of Worship in nearby Wilmette.

I loved praying next to Mom. Before bedtime and at meals, she prayed. She often spontaneously repeated portions of Psalm 91 with conviction: "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High God . . ."

Though I never observed my parents reading a Bible, both Mom and Dad had inherited and often practiced "love your neighbor as yourself" living, without ever quoting the Old or New Testament (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37–39). They placed a small, black Bible on the bottom library shelf Dad had constructed at home. He favored sending me to read the encyclopedias and dictionary up high on the top shelf. Another top-shelf book I read and reread was the story of a Black man's escape from slavery.

Dad kept his history alive in us. Sharing remembrances about Georgia and its people, his Wheelers and their eras, he mesmerized us with memories of elders' church-planting days, his life from 1905 through Jim Crow, and how he migrated North. I was young, but listened closely as he orated history from African civilizations to Indigenous peoples, and about European immigrants on my mom's side.

Mom had a keepsake that appeared from time to time atop her bedroom dresser: a pamphlet with praying hands. She still had that booklet many decades later. After my father's death, when Mom came to live with me, Steven, and our children, I found the pamphlet packed with her belongings.

The following story about my mom is adapted from one I shared in the book *Blessed Is She*, compiled by Victoria Saunders McAfee:

Mom had a lifelong relationship with Jesus. He was her Deliverer—from childhood hunger and poverty, racism, and so many other harms, including assaults. She prayed sincerely, but sometimes, my dad's anger destroyed her prayer of grace. He cursed those churches that had supported his father's enslavement, as well as individuals who had used religion for personal gain and

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had preyed on his family. At dinner one night, I remember Dad slamming the white tablecloth with his great, hardworking, brown hand, making the silverware jump and clatter. “I put the food on this d—— table!”

He was my towering hero who had escaped Southern racism, migrating by every means necessary to new opportunities. He worked tirelessly. Protected and counseled us amid racism. But Mom was my beautiful heroine, who read to me on her lap and sent me to Sunday school with a dime wrapped in a white handkerchief for an offering.

I grew up divided. My parents had such different attitudes about the church and God. I learned conflicting thoughts about prayer. One Easter Sunday (one of the few days we might be in church), my mother took me to a local congregation. Teachers gifted me and each of the children present with a golden bookmark engraved with the Ten Commandments, along with sweet, gold-foiled chocolate shaped like coins. I read the bookmark and began to pray out of awe and fear, sensing God’s judgment of my wrongdoings.

Dad’s rants about White Christians who had favored slavery and hypocrites he experienced in his father’s Black church competed with my mother’s gentle prayers and efforts. Dad might sit quietly as Mom led grace, but he emphasized scholastic achievement, as that had been largely denied him. He raised my siblings and me to be savvy in the world’s eyes. Though Dad practiced integrity and showed compassion, I was ignorant of so much about God and impoverished in terms of intimacy with Him. The “gospel truth” my family prioritized was achievement. As the youngest, I felt a weight of generations’ expectations.¹

Love, Marriage, and the Lord

I married my first husband right after graduating from college with very high honors. We each grew in our careers: mine, journalism, and his, sales. We enjoyed our earnings; we satisfied our senses. We had no prayer life,

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Bible reading, or Christian fellowship. We were immersed in our careers and lifestyle. This was an insufficient, unstable foundation for building a lasting marriage and family. I dreamed that raising children and writing children's books would satisfy me. Seven years into our marriage, our daughter was born—and life changed. I became a stay-at-home mom.

One afternoon, while our twelve-month-old was napping, I sat alone in my living room. Though I had everything I had ever wanted, *something* was missing. My eyes rested on the single Bible in the house. I was moved to pick it up and finally read it. I began in Proverbs, “Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging: and whoever is deceived thereby is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1 KJV). I reflected: *This is written directly to us. This is our lifestyle and we're headed for trouble.*

That evening I underlined that proverb with red ink and showed my husband. Not many days or conversations passed before he left our home.

We never should have married in the first place without consulting God, though He blessed us with our daughter. We had not gone through any premarital counseling. We lacked an intimate relationship with God and any biblical guidance for our issues and problems. But when my first husband left, on my hands and knees, I literally called out, “God, help me!”

At the time, my older siblings showed concern as best they could with phone calls and visits. My parents, who were in their seventies, sought ways they could help me and care for my one-year-old. The horrendous stress of my life that seemed to have fallen apart provoked me to illness.

I needed to hear from God. Although I had no personal relationship with Him, I somehow felt God was able to lift me out of my crisis and give me a fresh start. My mother teaching me to pray as a child was a seed God had planted decades before to strengthen me.

I began listening daily to a Christian preacher on television. I heard his message inviting me to pray “the sinner's prayer,” to repent from my wrongdoings, and to surrender my life to God. I can't recall all of the details now, but I do remember asking Jesus to forgive me and to lead me forward in my life.

Within a few days, I met a couple in the grocery store, of all places. They invited me into their home as well as their church in Chicago. On my first Sunday visit to their church, I heard the full message of the gospel preached. The pastor hammered home God's good news: salvation by grace (Ephesians 2:8–9). He explained that God is holy, Jesus is the Savior of the world, and that Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross brought

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God's mercy. God made me realize Jesus died for *my* sins, and by placing my trust in Him, I was saved from the punishment of those sins.

The same couple continued to encourage and mentor—to disciple—me in their home, and phoned me daily to pray. They took me to buy my first Bible. The coffee-table King James Version had been simply on display in my home. Now I chose a modern translation I could understand. Consulting with trustworthy teachers also provided me with new insights, and I began to grow in wisdom, understanding, and in my spiritual practices as a single Christian believer and mother.

I prayed alone and with my young child at the beginning of my life as a new believer in Christ, and then with trusted prayer partners from my church. As I read, studied, and listened to trustworthy Bible teachers daily, I could see how God was ordering my steps and circumstances. My pastors' preached messages became a significant source of encouragement for several years. Then a new senior pastor was voted in at my church home.

One Sunday morning, I had to test the interpretation of Scripture that the newly installed pastor at my home church began to teach. During his messages to the congregation, he began to expound on what he termed "a new teaching" on 1 John 5:15 (NIV): "And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." The pastor emphasized: *It is according to God's will to give us whatever we ask.*

But I read the preceding verse, 1 John 5:14: "And we are confident that he hears us *whenever we ask for anything that pleases him*" (emphasis mine). My belief: God determines answers to our prayer requests in accordance with *His will*.

I asked for a private meeting with my new pastor to ask about his teaching, and he repeated what he had preached from the pulpit, saying God's will is to give us whatever we ask. But I read to him from my *New American Standard Bible*, emphasizing "His will":

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.

I was deeply disappointed in my pastor's interpretation of those two verses. As a newer Christian, single, thirty-four-year-old mother of a young daughter, I felt that my pastor and church were essential guides.

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A New Friend

I searched the Scriptures prayerfully. Then, I consulted a new friend, Steven Dinkins, a Christian believer who was a deacon at his church. We had met recently in what I believed to be a “divine appointment.” (We share the details of our introduction in *Love Story 2: Second Chance*.) I told Steven what my new pastor was preaching about 1 John 5:15, and I found Steven’s response enlightening.

“You have to read what the apostle John wrote in verse fourteen,” Steven said. He turned to it:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him. (1 John 5:14–15 NIV)

“This scripture informs us that God answers our prayers according to His will, not ours.” Steven pointed out that even Jesus, on His way to the cross, prayed according to His Father’s will, not His will, saying: “If it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39 NASB).

Steven and I each disagreed with the pastor’s interpretation that God gives people whatever they will and desire. Rather than expecting God to give us everything we want, we ought to be seeking God’s will at all times.

The church became embroiled in conflict over this new pastor and his messages. Now, the “home” where I had grown under the leadership of the previous, interim pastor, Tom Moore, was radically different. The “family” I had joined along with my young daughter, where we had served and worshiped for several years, changed.

Conflict revolved around this new leader’s teaching and lifestyle. Eventually, years later, the congregation removed him as their pastor.

During that unsettling time in the life of my “first” church, I began visiting other churches in the area where I lived, and eventually Steven’s church. He provided thoughts, prayers, and encouragement, and our relationship continued to grow. How each of us viewed our relationship with God would be pivotal in seeking His will in our relationship with one another.

Marriage has always been a spiritual matter first. When God created Adam and Eve, He designed two distinct genders to be in a union,

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a relationship. “So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Fast-forwarding forty-two generations from Abraham and Sarah to Mary, the virgin pledged to Joseph, we see God’s perfect plan unfold.

Mary was in the relationship she and Joseph were pledged to fulfill, according to God’s plan. God explicitly preserved sexual intimacy between a man and woman within the bond of marriage, according to His Word. Though some have diverse ideas about sexual mores, God’s will, clearly expressed in Scripture, reveals His plan from the beginning for glorious sexual intimacy.

Steven and I were not *literally* virgins when we first met. We each had offspring with our previous mates. But we were committed to understanding God’s commands about remarriage and the gift of sexual intimacy within the bounds of marriage. That meant seeking repentance and reconciliation after our previous marriages ended. That meant not practicing what people decide is acceptable and make common practice.

As thirtysomething singles desiring to keep God at the center of our lives, we committed to remain celibate while dating. We communicated the boundary to reserve giving ourselves away to be one with each other. We held each other to practicing God’s standard of abstinence, and God upheld that desire, as we could not do so on our own; our attraction to one another was at times intoxicating. We’ll share a bit later about how “the third person,” as King Solomon named Him, kept us celibate in our relationship.

The Gospels reveal to us God’s perfect plans. He fulfills them all by His grace and power. Consider the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, as the prophets swore hundreds of years before the miracle happened:

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. (Luke 1:26–27)

It was God’s *will* for Mary and Joseph to be married. “Mary responded, ‘I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.’ And then the angel left her” (Luke 1:38). And her betrothed, Joseph, did not divorce her nor did he come together with her sexually, and he served her before and after Jesus’s birth. He, too, was

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surrendered to God's plan; it was not about what Joseph desired in the flesh but about God's Spirit.

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child!
She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means 'God is with us.'"

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18–25)

The divorce Joseph considered was legally allowed. Divorces in cases of adultery were permitted then, as they are today. Though Mary was no adulteress, adultery occurred in my previous marriage and in Steven's. Adultery is not a "make-it-break-it" sin, though there are serious consequences. Yet, we can repent, ask God's forgiveness, and forgive our mate and ask for forgiveness. There is forgiveness when love is rooted in Jesus. Like any sin other than rejecting Him and the salvation God offers us by His blood, God forgives adultery, though the sin itself comes at great cost. This is what Jesus said: "Moses permitted divorce only as a

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concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended” (see Matthew 19:4–8).

“ And that’s the key—what God has joined together—not what we want to join together; not our will but His will, and His way.

During our single years, seeking God’s will regarding remarriage, we desired to keep Him first in our decisions, waiting for Him to confirm what would happen next. Forty years later, we remember all of His faithfulness.

From
Our
heart
to
Yours

Devotions to reflect on your own
love story or story to be

Remember

A cord of three strands is not easily broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:12 CSB

On cue, guests silenced their cell phones and Ingrid Brown sang. Our daughter walked to the altar where Steven stood smiling and waiting for me with his eldest son (my son by marriage). Pastor Cedric Brown officiated our twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 2013.

Our ushers, Sunday school youth, distributed a photo-filled program to guests. The program cover read: “Three Strands: Praising God for 25 Years.” Inside it said:

With Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and first love, we prayed and waited—and then God led us to one another as friends, then prayer partners, and finally, mates in marriage. We gained in each other the one who could love God first, and who would love us, our children, and be the persevering partner in God’s mission.

Taking hold of God’s faithful promises, we committed in Christ to stick together until death parts us. We celebrate twenty-five years of this fruitful partnership today and give God all the glory for what He has done. By His strength and grace alone, we stand, and our unconditional love for one another continues to deepen daily as we look ahead to what God has planned for good. As we promised in May 1988, we promise today: “As for me and my family, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

In lieu of gifts, donations toward our Haiti mission trip are appreciated.

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In the summer of 1988 when Steven and I first said “I do,” my daughter and Steven’s son had been eight and six years old, respectively, and were bridesmaid and best man. We selected them for these honored positions to help them transition to the new marriage. Our “reception” at a friend’s farm featured horseback riding. Steven and I then entrusted our children to their babysitter to eat wedding cake, and we left to spend our wedding night at a local hotel. The next morning, the babysitter brought our children as well as her own kids to splash in the hotel pool. Then Steven returned his son to his mom’s home, driving some three hundred miles to Ohio.

By the time we celebrated our 25th anniversary, our two offspring from our previous marriages were in their thirties. Their younger brother, David, born fourteen months after Steven and I married, joined us. At the height of our renewal ceremony, we interlocked Steven’s fingers with mine, wrapping a gold, a purple, and then a white cord around our clasped hands to symbolize the Spirit unifying us. “A triple-braided cord is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

An *Africa Study Bible* scholar remarks, “Companionship improves our lives . . . loving God and other people will end loneliness.” Another scholar remarks that Solomon’s words in this verse advise us how to have meaningful lives in spite of challenges.

While Steven and I failed in our first marriages, failure led us to draw close to God, and with His help, we stood back up again. His wisdom has provided good consequences. *Our* story points to God, who has given our lives together special meaning. *Our* strength surpasses either individual’s power to weather challenges. With God as our central focus, we have joy.

As we departed the recommittal ceremony, our hearts welled with joy-filled recollections during a medley of silky lyrics: *I Believe in You and Me*,² *Let’s Groove Tonight*, *September*,³ and more favorites.

Love songs stir our hearts. But more than lyrics and feelings keeps couples through life’s storms. In God’s plan for marriage, a third person is engaged: Jesus Christ. While many promises are made in love songs and at wedding ceremonies, only God’s promises come true in real life as we embrace the day-to-day work that a marital relationship requires. Our friendship with God and one another makes for a sweet surrender to Him and His ways. We remember that His Spirit guides us through starlit nights and cloudy days.

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How do you keep God at the center of your life and relationships?

Are you a good friend to the person you love?



Holy One, thank You for Your tender mercies today. Like Hagar confessed in her lament, “Jehovah Rohi” (the God who sees me) when she was left in the desert (Genesis 16:13), help me to see You as the One who sees each of us, who cares for and blesses each one. In Jesus’s name, amen.

scripture reading

ECCLESIASTES 4:9–12

Pruning to Grow

Remain in me, and I will remain in you.
John 15:4

The gardening websites we visited during spring advised pruning practices, including what's known as *deadheading*. The removal of older blossoms allows fresh beauty to emerge so annual plants can achieve lush growth through warm seasons until late fall. Deadheading also prepares perennial plants for health through seasons of dormancy. I read all of the websites' detailed instructions and shared them with Steven.

We scouted out a new garden shop overflowing with a variety of plant species, and selected butterfly bushes, Spikenard, pink Bleeding Heart, English lavender, Foxglove, and fuchsia-colored celosia. We chose a set of speckled-blue ceramic pots for plants we wanted to maneuver into and out of the sun, and shoveled up planting beds for others to live near our home's foundation. We mixed soils with fertilizers for those plants requiring extra food. Once the new plantings' blooms were spent, deadheading encouraged flowers to keep sprouting so plants could remain healthy, as the websites had promised.

Ongoing care includes daily monitoring for particular pests. It never ceases to amaze us how plants attract bugs by color, smell, and taste. Cutworms love our African celosia roots. We dug up and pitched those pests. The results were strong, vibrant flowers almost beyond belief. We used clean, sharp shears to cut other plants to avoid damage and disease, and discovered that mulching protects our plants' roots through winter.

Steven and I benefited from "pruning" to blossom afresh in remarriage and establish ourselves in a new season following the coldness of divorce. My hairstyle, makeup, and attire revamp were simply new preferences for outward appearance. Steven and I also changed social practices. We cut ties with some of our old "running buddies," set our sounds and sights to Christian content, and kept a Bible in clear view atop the

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television (this was before flat screens). We fed on Scripture. God's care transformed us into committed Christian believers.

Jesus is able to change us radically from old, dead ways to new. "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). God tells us, "You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you" (John 15:3-4). In that passage, God continues to promise that *in* Him we will grow and be fruitful *for* Him.

Whether we're single, engaged, married, divorced, widowed, or remarried, God remains with each of us who love Him and empowers believers with His Spirit. Our results are dependent not on our marital status but on our relationship with Him. In Christ we are rooted, connected, and cared for.

Divorce does not end life. Despite the losses, God gave Steven and me each a new beginning in life and in marriage. Not only has there been pruning but also repair, and new growth in the process of His care. He prunes us and brings out the most beautiful fruit. He never abandons us; His work with us makes us flourish.

What pruning might you be experiencing?

How do you plan to be fruitful not only in this season but also in the coming seasons of your life?



Father God, we trust that remaining in You will yield fruitful living for us. Thank You for the care You use to enliven us, so that our lives flourish and reveal the beauty of Your faithfulness. In Jesus's name, amen.

scripture reading

JOHN 15:1-8

Hot Tea and Forgiveness

But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father
will not forgive your sins.
Matthew 6:15

I had let everything go, moving in with relatives to care for my toddler. My evening prayers that year ended, “God, please provide a job, a new home, a good school for my daughter, a church home, and a pastor.” God provided the job, and then the pastor and more.

Tom Moore had read publicity about me in Chicago newspapers when Thomas F. Seay Real Estate, Thirty-Five East Wacker Drive, hired me as their marketing director. Our offices were right off Chicago’s Magnificent Mile, in the same building and on the same floor as Boeing. Imagine my surprise when Tom Moore, unprompted, introduced himself to me on the elevator.

“Hello, I’m Reverend Tom Moore. I work at Boeing, and my church has been praying for you. Your brother-in-law, Doug, is a member of the church I pastor in Wheaton, and asked for prayer for your marriage. I hope you will come visit us.” He handed me his card.

That same day, my sister and her husband, with whom my daughter and I were living temporarily, reported they would be selling their home and moving to Wheaton due to a job change. My sister-in-law Sharon recommended I buy a new condominium that was within my budget and among those being constructed nearby. Prayers answered—and exceeded!

I discovered Reverend Moore’s church was a seven-minute drive from my new condominium construction, and a private school nearby had an opening for my daughter. Reverend Moore also invited me for a cup of hot tea and a conversation about forgiveness.

I knew that receiving Christ as my Savior meant receiving God’s grace.

God saved [me] by his grace when [I] believed. And [I] can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation

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is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

But as I reflected on God’s grace for me, I knew I had not forgiven my former husband for his part in the divorce. I had not extended grace. Tom reminded me that the forgiveness I received required me to forgive. Pastor Moore encouraged me to pray for that and joined me in my prayer. Over time, the Holy Spirit helped me to forgive my former husband, releasing him to God and asking God to bless him.

Christians are to practice forgiveness and repentance. Jesus died forgiving each one of us. “But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8). One of Jesus’s disciples asked how many times believers should forgive one another. Jesus said “seventy times seven,” communicating an infinite number of times. We should always be open to forgive (Matthew 18:21–22).

Reverend Moore became my daughter’s and my pastor. When we moved into our new home and began attending our new church, he and his wife, Debbie, baptized me, and later, my daughter. Reverend Moore preached what I needed to respond to. He and Debbie were the witnesses I needed to observe. Even in their times of need, their faith in Christ and their marriage remained unbroken.

Long before Steven and I met, God forgave our sins and fixed our hearts. He redeemed, restored, provided, and then prepared us for one another.

“ A lot of times, people break relationships and marry others, carrying old baggage, including unforgiveness, into that new relationship, or marry and divorce multiple times. The truth is, we are all flawed. Confessing our salvation can happen in an instant; submission to God is fulfilled over a lifetime. Sometimes failing, we’re constantly striving to do all we can to please God.

Forgiveness pleases Him.

Who or what do you need to forgive in order to be in right relationship with God?

How has forgiveness changed your life?

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*God, thank You for providing Your Son for my forgiveness.
Please help me to practice forgiveness with others in my life. In
Jesus's name, amen.*

scripture reading

MATTHEW 6:9-15

Dunes, Discovery, and Delight

Now the man and his wife were both naked,
but they felt no shame.
Genesis 2:25

It was the first time we explored a new place to go on a date, and we were also checking each other out in this new relationship territory. Neither of us had been dating since our divorces years before. Steven had gone out for a meal here and there with a few different women from his church. I had only recently been introduced to a new acquaintance who worked at a college near my home. We had a meal and saw a movie, and I had no intention of pursuing anything after that.

I drove and parked at Steven's apartment, and we transferred my picnic cooler to his car's trunk, where a toy sand bucket and shovel, along with a colorful kite and cord, were stored. *These are for his visits with his little boy*, I thought. I had seen a photo of them playing in the sand.

I laid back while Steven drove, relaxing on our way to a place neither of us had ever been—the Indiana Dunes. We crested the top of a towering sand dune and saw the bluish lake edging beige mounds all around. Excited, we locked eyes, smiling.

As we parked and unpacked our belongings, including the kite, we began to let down our guards and open up to each other to share our individual interests and personalities. We stripped down to our tank tops, swim shorts, and bare feet, and walked across warm sands to relax in the wide-open beachfront.

Getting to know one another went well beyond seeing our physical appearance. We realized God had arranged our relationship, and that gave us such a sense of calm about being together. Like Adam and Eve in the garden before Satan and sin showed up, we were emotionally “naked” before one another and unashamed, believing that God had blessed us with an opportunity for true friendship. Both of us intended to

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wait on and trust in His timing and plans as we got to know more about each other. There was no hint of phoniness or deceit; we just wanted to enjoy the day with each other and God.

“ I can remember challenging Joyce to a footrace along the shore. Though I had never really run in sand much, I had competed in national boxing championships and the Olympic trials. Joyce would look at me and say, “You’re strong!”

He was very fit, but soon discovered I was a serious runner as well as a cross-country skiing competitor. He looked at me with surprise as we ran neck-and-neck several hundred yards up the beach. I reveled in his fitness as he took a sharp turn and ran up a high dune, leaving me in the dust.

As we look back, those hours together were like wading into a different world, stressless. We floated along in a rubber raft that Steven blew up and pulled through the water with me inside. We enjoyed the sunlight and fellowship, simply having fun at the beach, getting to know each other, and finding out that we both like making a kite soar. Of course we talked about our children and how much they would love the Dunes experience. We quickly agreed to a follow-up visit with them soon.

To this day, simple things like time in the sun, a run together, flying a kite, and being with our children please us.

What innocent pleasures and pastimes do you enjoy with loved ones?

What memories together do you treasure?



God, thank You for creating each of us so distinct and at the same time, planning to match us as couples together and give us families. I praise You for being so considerate. In Jesus’s name, amen.

scripture reading

GENESIS 2:18–25

A Toast to Love

Love is patient and kind.
1 Corinthians 13:4

At the store, Steven handpicked each vegetable, fruit, and herb with care. Unpacking and placing them in an orderly fashion on his kitchen counter, he proceeded to clean, cut, and prepare them for his juicer. He was creating a special recipe for our drinks while telling me how much I was going to love the taste. Adept, meticulous, and creative, he combined flavors, colors, and textures based on his experience in food service. He had achieved that college degree from Ferris State University in Michigan, along with a business degree. And he has a knack for “selling the sizzle,” that is, pointing out the benefits of what he’s offering. (Once a five-star chef at the Culinary Institute invited Steven to attend the chef’s school in New Haven, Connecticut, after tasting the food he prepared and seeing how Steven engaged and served customers.)

During our date, Steven began juicing, making my mouth water. He finally handed the tall concoction to me, saying, “You’re going to love this!” I took a sip. *This is delicious!* I thought as Steven continued juicing his drink.

“ I heard this slurping sound. Joyce drank almost all twenty ounces of her drink before I could even pour mine. I said, “Joyce! Wait—! You’re supposed to wait for me so we can sip our drinks together and have a conversation.”

I was finishing my drink, though he had yet to begin his. We still enjoyed our time, but it was obvious we were experiencing the moment differently while also learning *our* differences. Steven kindly overlooked my faux pas so I would not feel too embarrassed, which I appreciated.

We were on a journey to discover our compatibilities while understanding and being gentle with one another’s individual characteristics and behaviors. We were earnestly seeking God’s will, and were looking not only at our outward appearances, eating habits, and social etiquette.

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The most important factor for us was seeing our hearts for God. Compatibility comes when you give it to God to put you together—with your differences—and embrace what He provides.

Similarly, the apostle Paul spoke to the Corinthian church about accepting diversity in the body of Christ, seeing and appreciating one another for the way God has designed our distinct gifts. In the final analysis, the most excellent way of doing togetherness is to love one another in the church, and in marriage, differences and all.

We continually sought God's discernment while we were dating and learning how to best work together. While considering the possibility of marrying, we observed each other's character traits. We learned that working together is not automatic. We didn't want to get enamored with each other's good looks, educational background, income potential, and so on.

If we were not surrendered to God and careful, we could have gone down a rabbit hole of money, looks, and culture. With that thinking, the first time a hiccup, problem, or difference occurred, we might have said, "I'm out of here."

“ God's foresight revealed that Joyce and I are different in many ways, but the two of us are meant to be one. This means we need to always be patient and kind, loving one another God's way. Each of us has flaws, and God's Spirit of love recognizes and acknowledges them and helps us.

What are your priorities when it comes to loving a mate?

What are some differences between you and your mate that you both can celebrate and love?



Heavenly Father, thank You for creating us to be diverse, with different gifts and experiences, and for helping me to enjoy my loved one's individuality. In Jesus's name, amen.

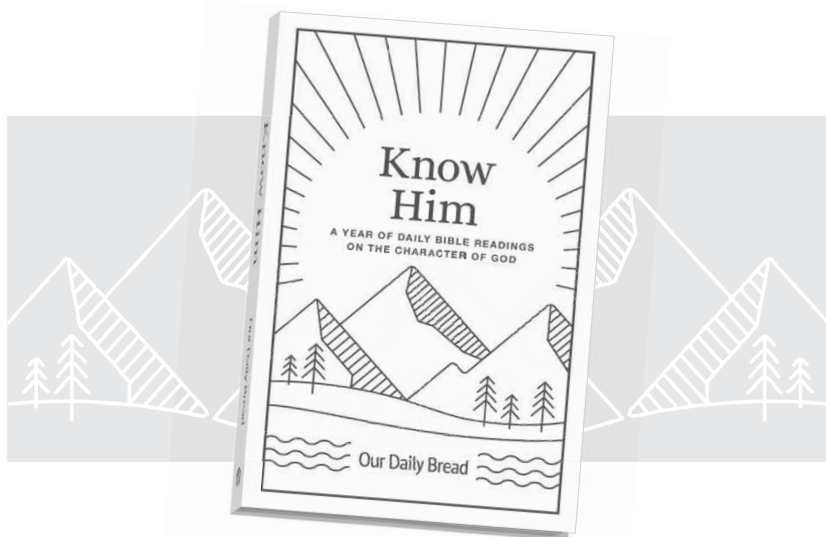
scripture reading

1 CORINTHIANS 12:14–18

Psalm 40:1-5

I waited patiently for the LORD to help me,
and he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the pit of despair,
out of the mud and the mire.
He set my feet on solid ground
and steadied me as I walked along.
He has given me a new song to sing,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see what he has done and be amazed.
They will put their trust in the LORD.
Oh, the joys of those who trust the LORD,
who have no confidence in the proud
or in those who worship idols.
O LORD my God, you have performed many
wonders for us.
Your plans for us are too numerous to list.
You have no equal.
If I tried to recite all your wonderful deeds,
I would never come to the end of them.

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Joyce Dinkins has been a professional writer and editor for more than 50 years, and **Steven Dinkins** has served as a chaplain in various ministries, as well as a Bible teacher and church planter. Together, they love and lead their extended family and enjoy each other’s company on their 40-acre property near South Haven, Michigan.

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