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2015-2018 Evangelical Press Association Award of Merit

# LEADING HEARTS

EMPOWERING CHRISTIAN WOMEN FOR LEADERSHIP

## ♥ PEACE PURSUING THE CHRIST

♥ WHY YOU SHOULDN'T MAKE  
THAT NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION

♥ STRUGGLE BEHIND THE SCENES  
**TORI & RUSS TAFF**  
"I STILL BELIEVE"

♥ OVERCOMING  
WORDS THAT HURT

♥ YOUR KEY TO SUCCESS  
TOP LEADERSHIP  
TOOLS FOR 2019



Jennifer Tracy—

**Find the Courage  
to Keep On Moving**

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**JENNIFER KENNEDY DEAN**



Jennifer Kennedy Dean takes complex spiritual theology dusts it off and breathes life into truth to make it practical, inspiring, and useable for everyday living in a way that changes women in lasting ways.—*Pam Farrel, Bestselling author and speaker*

Jennifer Kennedy Dean is an amazing woman, passionate prayer warrior, and precious friend. She brings authenticity and wisdom to every event at which she speaks.—*Lysa TerKeurst, New York Times Bestselling author and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries*

Jennifer Kennedy Dean is a powerful communicator. Her knowledge of the Word of God combined with a passion for communicating transformational truth make her one of the leading Bible teachers today. —*Carol Kent, Bestselling author and President of Speak Up Speaker Services*

Learn more about the difference between *a prayer life* and *a praying life* and consider Jennifer speaking at your event [prayinglife.org](http://prayinglife.org)



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"A Prayer Life" and "A Praying Life"

## FROM THE PUBLISHER

*Linda Evans Shepherd*



### fresh paint in the hands of the artist

IF I HAD THE ABILITY TO PAINT THE FUTURE, I WOULD PAINT A LOVELY LANDSCAPE WITH BOLD STROKES OF PURPOSE.

I would color it with dreams come true and add highlights of amazing. It would be a picture I'd want to put on every day of my new calendar.

That sounds nice, doesn't it? Except for one thing. I'm not currently planning to spend the next 365 days in heaven where all things are already perfected by the glory of God. I'm hoping instead to spend this new year right here on planet earth along with trials and wars and earthquakes and yes, even more politics.

Yet the blank canvas before me is filled with hope and my pallet contains a variety of colors including the highlights of joy, peace and love, with the occasional shadow of pain and difficulties.

I would like to tell you I've discovered a prayer to pray that will make every day as perfect as a day in heaven, but such a prayer is not right for this season of life.

For I know there will be flickering shadows with shades of darkness. But God will use these shadows to create a depth to my painting that a pain-free life could never produce.

Through this process, I will learn to allow the Master Painter to take control of my paintbrush. As I do, He will turn the storms that wash across my canvas into

rainbows. He will paint my dark nights into dawns. In fact, the more control I give to the Master painter, the more He can do with my coming days.

My canvas will not be dull and gray, but alive with laughter and love as He teaches me that He can recolor sorrow into joy and rework fear into peace. That's when I'll discover the miracle of the Master's genius. As I trust His hand in my circumstances, He will bring a new life and purpose to my year.

Then, when this cycle of days is complete, I will step back and review what we created together.

I will gasp at the loveliness of the scene. For despite every dark difficulty, I'll see that God was moving in ways I couldn't have imagined. I'll see beauty I couldn't have accomplished without the Master's touch.

So what should I pray over the blank canvas before me? I will not pray a prayer to control the Master Artist. Instead I will pray a prayer of surrender, a prayer of commitment and trust.

*Dear Lord, my Master Artist,*

*I give you the blank canvas of this new year and dedicate it to you. Please paint your love on my every day. Turn every shadow of doubt and despair into joy. Cover every wrong with your love.*

*Teach me to trust you when the shadows deepen. Even on days when the enemy shatters my peace or crushes my dreams, I ask that Your hand paint light into the darkness and fill my canvas joy.*

*May this year be a year of beauty and hope fulfilled.*

*In Jesus' name.*

Love,

LINDA EVANS SHEPHERD

PUBLISHER, LEADING HEARTS MAGAZINE *LH*

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# LEADING HEARTS

EMPOWERING CHRISTIAN WOMEN FOR LEADERSHIP

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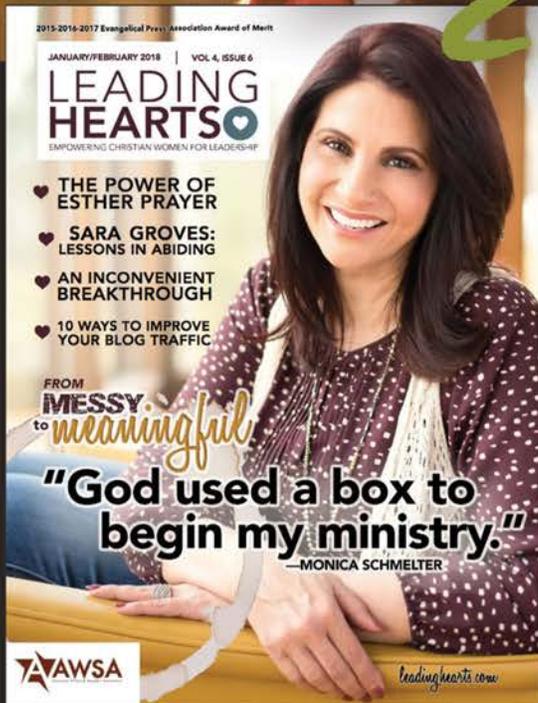
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FROM THE EDITOR  
*amber weigand-buckley*

it's beginning to smell  
a lot like Christmas

IF YOU DARE TO ENTER A  
YANKEE CANDLE COMPANY  
ANYTIME AROUND THE  
HOLIDAYS, you'll probably realize that  
Christmas is one of the smelliest seasons of the  
year, literally

Granted, the majority of Christmasy smells are  
memorably good, but if I have to be honest, most of  
the candle fragrances these stores sell aren't even  
real. They are "made up" smells.

Seriously, no one really knows what a Shimmering  
Star smells like, and the White Christmas candle  
doesn't smell at all like the white stuff that hits the  
ground in my backyard.

So, what gives? What are the qualifications that  
quantify a legit "aroma" of Christmas?

If I were building a theological system for approving  
a "Christmas" scent, I would say it should be —

1. Warming — inviting people in.
2. Comforting — creating a space where others  
feel at ease, where they can kick off their  
shoes and find solace.
3. Sweet — having appetite-building sweetness.
4. Memorable — leaving an unforgettable imprint  
of all good things.

5. Authentic — capturing a reflection of the  
natural and pure goodness of the season.

As Christ-followers, we are actually called to be  
the Christmas Yankee Candles to a lost and dying  
world.

Second Corinthians 2:15 says: "For we are to God  
the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are  
being saved and those who are perishing."

My goal as I close out this year and head into 2019?  
I am determined to share the aroma of Christmas  
even after the seasonal Yankee Candles have been  
ripped down from the clearance shelves.

My prayer is that all of us would mindfully carry  
the aroma of Christmas in words, deeds and every  
action ... everyday ... drawing people in to the  
source of it all! May we walk hand in hand with  
our Creator to such a degree that those around us  
sense His presence.

And this year I've determined to drink an extra  
peppermint mocha a day for good measure.

I hope this issue of *Leading Hearts* inspires you  
to focus on carrying the light and the aroma of the  
season into 2019.

Love,

AMBER WEIGAND-BUCKLEY  
EDITOR, LEADING HEARTS MAGAZINE



JENNIFER TRACY  
the courage  
that God provides

NOT VERY MANY PEOPLE CAN SUM UP THEIR WHOLE LIFE IN ONE WORD, BUT JENNIFER TRACY CAN. THAT WORD IS COURAGE.

From surviving an abusive childhood to losing her husband and daughter in a car crash, Jennifer has carried the courage God gave her throughout her entire life.

“From a young age I tapped into courage. I think that God just gave that gift to me,” Jennifer says. “The more you use that muscle the stronger it gets. I just wanted to feel like a warrior, I wanted to hear Him say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’”

This courage has been tested, though. Jennifer has lived through things that most people couldn’t even dream of. Her parents divorced when she was a child and she endured abuse. It was during this time that Jennifer would experience something that would help her through these trials and the many more to come. As a child, Jennifer got involved in a fanatical church whose ideas and practices strayed wildly from the Bible. After being

indoctrinated by this church for five years Jennifer had a series of dreams one night.

“God kept waking me in the middle of the night and giving me a memory of something that happened [at the church] and then a Scripture,” Jennifer remembers. “One by one, God demolished those lies.” Jennifer believes that this deeply imprinted His character on her heart.

“I was shown how Jesus really treated the broken, the stinky, the ugly, the imperfect, the outcast, the addict. So from a very young age my mission was to move forward, to treat people the way that Jesus treated people,” she says.

Following a hysterectomy, for two years Jennifer battled deep depression, which eventually turned her to thoughts of suicide. If that wasn’t enough, her husband, Brian, and daughter Brittany (pictured on page 11) were then killed in a car crash with a drunk driver that left her other two daughters permanently injured.

After Jennifer was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), she received another

“I was shown how Jesus really treated the broken, the stinky, the ugly, the imperfect, the outcast, the addict. So from a very young age my mission was to move forward, to treat people the way that Jesus treated people.”

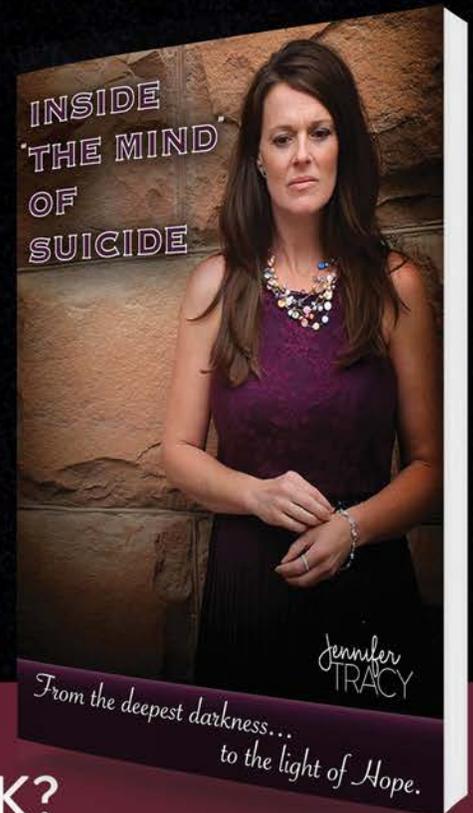
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AS FEATURED IN GOOD HOUSEKEEPING—

“For those two years I battled suicide  
it felt as though my mind  
was being held ransom.

—Jennifer Tracy

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AND ON AMAZON



## ARE YOU READY TO DISCOVER WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK?

Jennifer battled suicidal thoughts...

- a tragic family car crash that buried her husband and a daughter...
- a life-threatening brain malformation...

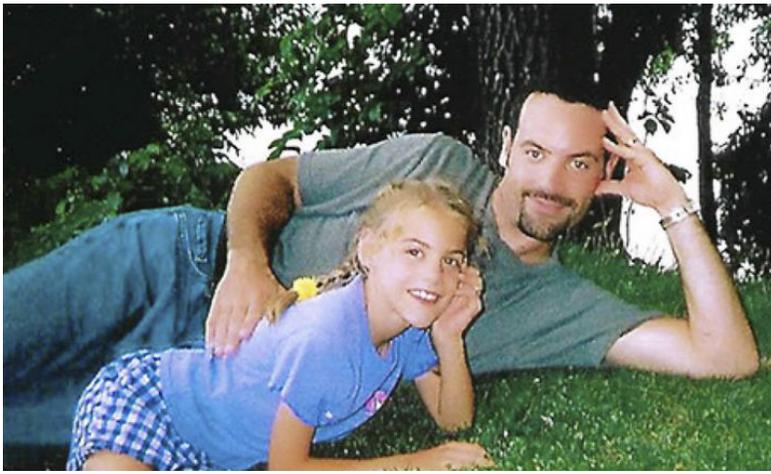
## FIND OUT WHAT KEPT HER GOING.

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INSPIRED by HOPE  
to FORGIVE & TRULY LIVE!



## -continued from p. 9-

more ominous health report — a life-threatening brain malformation. Her only choice was to endure excruciatingly painful high-risk surgery to attach a titanium plate to her skull. She spent many months in a wheelchair and had to regain strength to walk. Jennifer continues to deal with chronic physical pain and permanent nerve damage as a result.

This was when Jennifer's faith started to waver. "In my heart, I couldn't believe that a God who really loved me would allow me to experience such needless pain. That's when I lost the ability to trust God and unknowingly sought to control everything in my life."

It took a while, but because of God's faithfulness, many people continued to show up in Jennifer's life. Reluctantly, she began attending church services, and over the course of the past few years the Jesus she knew so well as a child won her heart completely over again.

She realized that having His Word so deeply written on her heart as a child was something that she had taken for granted. "Having that did not change my circumstances. It didn't make my life any easier. It didn't make my trials go away. It did bring me closer to Him," Jennifer says. "Having His Word is really what gave me hope".

She also credits another thing often not talked about in church circles. She sought help physically. She went to her doctor for assistance and found out that she had thyroid disease and virtually no estrogen in her body. She had not slept well in two years. Her doctor convinced her to go on medication for a while in order to help herself recover, and she went to therapy for years.

"Once we fixed that physical piece, all of a sudden my mind came back and I was able to tap into the spiritual side and find peace in that." Jennifer had to accept this. "I was willing to lower the barriers and look past the stigma," she remembers. "I didn't just come at it with one thing".

Jennifer uses her life and experiences to give speeches and lead workshops about courage, forgiveness, hope and motivation. She has forgiven the man who killed her husband and daughter and even advocated for him to get therapy and rehabilitation. Later, she gave her blessing for him to be paroled. She has also recently written a book entitled *Inside "The Mind" of Suicide*.

A verse that encapsulates her whole life is, "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Her mission is to help others be "Inspired by hope to forgive and truly live".



Jennifer still has struggles. However, she continues to face them with the courage and values that God instilled in her so long ago. She has recently moved from Colorado to Florida to help manage her pain. Not many people would decide to pick up their whole lives and drive across the country to a new state with no real plan, but Jennifer Tracy is clearly not most people. Some might call this irrational or absurd. Others call it courage. *JH*

by emily walton  
EDITORIAL INTERN





by karen porter  
WWW.KARENPORTER.COM

# a fresh slate for your team



## IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, I TOOK ALL THE ART CLASSES

OFFERED. I am not good at art or at drawing but I loved the feel of a new sheet of art paper or a blank canvas. I was in love with the idea of creating something on that bare space. In my mind and in my dreams, I could create a masterpiece with flow, movement and brilliant use of color. Unfortunately, my hands never got the messages from my brain and heart, and I usually produced a twisted mess. My shapes were malformed; my perspective was skewed; and my tints turned into a strange shade of mud.

That immediate failure was hard for me to accept and overcome until the teacher reached into her cabinet and handed me a new page of art paper — a new canvas.

Starting over offers optimism, hope, and joy — and beginning again promises another chance to get it right.

Perhaps you have experienced some failures during the past year. You wish you could erase the memory of some meetings or encounters. Participation in your organization has dwindled, and now you are feeling like my school-girl paintings — disorganized, overwhelmed, and bored.

I have good news! God has given you a new page, a fresh, blank canvas to begin again — 2019!

# INTHELEAD

Let's consider some new beginnings that we can implement now because, as T. S. Eliot said, "Every moment is a fresh beginning."

Repeat after me:

***"This year I will implement some of these clean-slate ideas as I lead my organization."***

## **PRAY.**

Study the craft and art of personal and corporate prayer. Commit to pray together as a team — that corporate communication with the Father is fresh and powerful. Memorize prayers from Scripture such as the prayer of Jabez (2 Chronicles 4:10), the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), David's prayer for deliverance (Psalm 3), or Hannah's prayer of praise (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

Build prayer lists that focus on the growth and development of your organization, saving those lists of sick relatives and world peace for a different agenda. Instead, name individuals and goals and desires for the ministry.

## **BRAINSTORM THE BENEFITS.**

Call your leadership team together with one specific goal for the meeting: To discover the benefits of your ministry. As the team discusses, guide them to stay focused on the individuals you serve. What do they need? Avoid talking about the preferences and passions of the team or what is easiest for the team.

What is most needed for the people you serve? Fellowship? Laughter? Connection or networking? Activities such as crafts or games? Service projects? In-depth Bible study? Inspiring speakers?

Consider sending a survey to the members of your organization asking about their desires. You may find gems of wisdom and fresh ideas. Write goals based on the benefits you can offer. After you've had time to contemplate these goals and benefits, call another meeting to write the plans for the coming year.

I have talked to many women's ministry directors who have built thriving organizations by thinking outside the norm when planning events. Here's a sampling of some of those success stories.

## **IDEAS FOR FUTURE BENEFIT-DRIVEN EVENTS**

**1. A share-your-passion event.** Find those women who are creative and industrious and give them the opportunity to teach others in the group. A demonstration on quilting. Another on scrapbooking. A plan for getting exercise in busy lifestyles. Cooking lessons, perhaps with a specialty like "crock pot meals" or "baking" or "healthy foods."

One woman showed others a system to preserve all those artwork and school project items from her kids. Hospitality ideas. How to stay organized. Bullet Journaling. A writer taught how to write your life story and save the cute stories and sayings of your family. Women love to share their enthusiasm and passion.

**2. A lunch-time event for working women.** Pick a location that is convenient for most women. (In large cities, you may need to pick two locations.) Let everyone "brown-bag" it and come together for fellowship and a short encouraging presentation.

**3. Community service.** Call local service organizations to discover ways your members can reach out to the community. One group filled inexpensive nylon backpacks with non-perishables so each woman could carry some in her car to give to homeless people or someone on the corner with a sign asking for help.

**4. Sports.** Would some in your group enjoy an adult softball or soccer team? Find those athletic gals and help them join or form a league. I know of two people who came to know Jesus because they joined a sports team and discovered how genuine and kind Christians can be.

**5. Book club.** The discussions that take place because of reading the same book are deep, rich, and fun. Contact the author who might be willing to send signed book-plates for each member or might send you a video of encouragement.

The new year is a blank page. What will you and your team create? *LH*



by *Jennifer Kennedy Dean*  
WWW.PRAYINGLIFE.ORG



# His gift of peace





Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

—LUKE 2:13-14

## WHAT ARE THE LYRICS IN THE ANGELS’ SONG OF SALVATION? A PROCLAMATION OF PEACE!

Peace that had never been available on earth was, in the presence of the shepherds, offered freely from heaven. This peace was something brand-new, never heard of before, never experienced in history — peace that only heaven knew, now offered to people on earth.

Surely the Father knew the great longing of the human heart. He knew what was missing and elusive — what no human heart could conjure for itself. The very centerpiece of His proclamation announced the greatest benefit of His Gift. Peace.

Until Jesus, no one could know true, lasting peace. The Old Testament, before the Incarnation, promises peace, but it is a peace that is not fully known until the Prince of Peace bestows it.

Peace was the highlight and the focus of His coming, and peace was the theme Jesus emphasized as He was preparing His disciples for His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension — when His presence with them would be through His Spirit and no longer through His physical body.

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

He said that His peace is not like the world’s peace. What do you think is the difference? The world

offers a cheap imitation of peace. It stays in place until the next disappointment arrives or hurtful memory surfaces or uncertainty presents itself. In other words, it is fleeting and shallow. It never stays put for long.

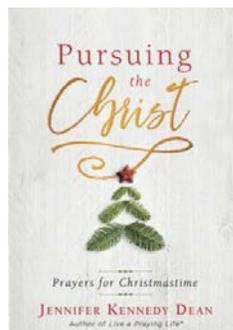
His peace is not like the world’s peace because His peace is anchored in eternal realities. He knows what we do not. His peace imparted to us through His Spirit puts down deep roots and grows stronger as time passes.

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

In Him, we can have peace in spite of any trouble we will encounter. Peace is on deposit in us

Fully rest your heart and life on Him. Give yourself fully to Jesus, and Jesus will hold you. Remember Jesus sleeping in the back of the boat as the storm raged? That’s the kind of peace He imparts. Peace that has its anchor in eternal realities rather than being subject to the moment.

Heaven’s brand of peace is now available to you because Jesus imparts His peace to you. It’s the centerpiece of salvation, the content of the heavenly birth announcement. Peace to you.



**Article adapted from Pursuing the Christ by Jennifer Kennedy Dean. Reprinted with permission.**

JH

A photograph of two women outdoors. The woman on the left is wearing a blue knit headband and a red sweater, looking surprised with her hands near her mouth. The woman on the right is wearing a white jacket with a fur collar and is whispering into the first woman's ear. The background is a blurred green landscape.

do the one thing  
that changes everything



by janell rardon  
[WWW.JANELLRARDON.COM](http://WWW.JANELLRARDON.COM)





No story offers entrance into the world of relationships like the greatest story ever told, the Bible. For centuries, these true stories reveal the power of real love working out in the lives of real people.

## OPEN THE PAGES OF ANY GREAT NOVEL AND ESCAPE INTO A WORLD FILLED WITH ENDLESS HEARTBREAK.

Whether traveling up the Congo River with Charles Marlow (*Heart of Darkness*), imprisoned in the red-room with Jane Eyre, meeting Victor Frankenstein in the icy Arctic (*Frankenstein*), or fleeing from a royal ball before the clock strikes midnight (*Cinderella*), novelists give words to our deepest fears, our deepest longings, and our deepest desires.

Somehow, the power of story transcends time, culture and history and wields an immense, uncanny power and ability, unlike any other medium, to grab our hearts; giving voice to the voiceless, life to the lifeless, and hope to the hopeless.

But no story offers entrance into the world of relationships like the greatest story ever told, the Bible — full of romance, conflict, betrayal and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. For centuries, these true stories reveal the power of real love working out in the lives of real people.

People just like me and you.

### A Tale of Two Hearts

Right when I needed it, I found a story in the Old Testament that literally changed my life. A profound

statement, yes, but very true. I've held my Bible close to my heart for decades, but it seemed to really come alive during this time. They say desperate times call for desperate measures. I needed this ancient text to speak, and it did. Deeply wounded by the hurtful words of a close, trusted friend and fellow church leader, my desperate heart needed hope.

From a quiet, often-overlooked chapter, a voice of wisdom called out. First Samuel 1 tells the tale of two hearts. If the cameras of Reality TV had been rolling in 1083 B.C., these two women would have been catapulted into stardom, starring in "The Real Housewives of Ephraim" or perhaps guest stars on an episode of "Sister Wives."

Meet Peninnah (whom I affectionately call "Penni"): the seeming antagonist.

Meet Hannah, the protagonist.

Imagine the frenzy social media would have had with this juicy storyline. Hannah's cover on *People Magazine* might read, "Poor Hannah. Unable to give her husband his beloved first-born son. Elkanah uses surrogate to give him children." Tweets might have read, "Motherhood is hopeless for Hannah. Bring on the next woman!" And if the shame of infertility wasn't enough, Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah, was not only fertile beyond fertile, she relentlessly flaunted her fertility success daily.

**-continued on p. 19-**

**FROM AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR & SPEAKER JANELL RARDON**



# Speak

**HEALING WORDS**  
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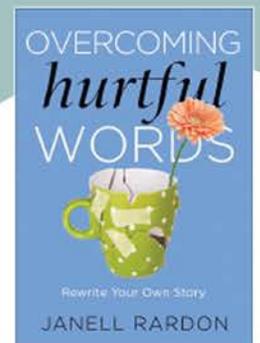
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*Learn nine practices that will add rich meaning to your life.*



**STRENGTHEN EVERY RELATIONSHIP IN YOUR LIFE.**

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-continued from p. 17-

## The Mystery of the “Mean or Well-Meaning” Question

For several years, I traced Hannah’s painful struggles with Penni. Hannah became someone very real to me, not just a Bible character on a page in an ancient book. Her story seemed to parallel my story. Her ability to overcome hurtful words showed me how to overcome my own hurtful words. And now I hope it helps you to do the same. Hannah had to overcome hurtful words — without the resources and tools available to us today, but she did it.

We can do it too.

We aren’t given much to work with, only 28 verses, so I turned to theologians and Bible commentators who also tried to figure this relationship out. With intensity and a very strong desire to see every angle of this relationship, I looked at Penni’s side of the story because it is important to be open-minded, to gain insights from the other person’s perspective.

This contentious relationship begged the hard question, “Is this woman, Penni, well-meaning or just plain mean?” We can only discern the mystery of these two thoughts, mean or well-meaning, when we look at the words inside the words. Place them side-by-side and see how very different they are:

Mean (adjective)	Well-Meaning (adjective)
Offensive, selfish or unaccommodating.  Small-minded [having narrow interests, sympathies or outlook — marked by pettiness, narrowness or meanness.]	Having good intentions.  What is an intention? An act or instance of determining mentally upon some action or result.

After careful consideration, I concluded, there was no sugar coating Penni’s unhealthy, hurtful presence in Hannah’s life. The evidence is clear, “Because the Lord had closed Hannah’s womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her” (1 Samuel 1:6).

Penni was “her rival.” She was not a nice person. None of us want to ever believe that someone is mean-spirited. We offer endless excuses for the mean behavior of others, sometimes at grave expense, desperately wanting to believe the best. But the truth of the matter, there are mean people in this world who hurt with their words. Sometimes we play a part in the scenario, sometimes we are just relational casualties.

What do we do, then, when we can’t escape or hide or get away from our antagonists? I believe Hannah’s responses to Penni’s relentless pounding shows us the hows, whys and whats of praying through and staying with all the perplexing pain of hurtful words.

In the midst of her very broken heart, Hannah had a decision to make:

- She could fight against Penni.
- She could be catty, i.e., deliberately hurtful in her remarks; spiteful.
- She could retaliate and verbally attack Penni as Penni had verbally attacked her.
- She could play the blame game and blame Penni for everything.
- She could gossip about Penni to the other women in her community.
- She could isolate herself and sink into a deep, dark hole of despair and possibly end it all.
- She could give it all up and run away from her life.

Instead, Hannah decided to do the one thing that changed everything. First Samuel 1:11 says it all. Hannah “was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord.” Never before has the conjunction and meant so much. Leave it out of this sentence and it reads: “Hannah wept.” Add it back and voila! Hannah wept and prayed much. It seems Hannah had two choices before her: stay in “the weeping state” and stay stuck in sorrow, or find her way to “the praying through and staying with state” and rise above the pain; eventually experiencing freedom.

Standing on the threshold of 2019, we, too, face the same two choices. Hear Hannah calling back: “Do the one thing that changes everything! You’ll be so glad you did!” LH



*by pam farrel*  
WWW.LOVE-WISE.COM



“WILL THIS MAKE ME, US, OUR LIFE, OUR FAMILY,  
OUR MINISTRY — STRONGER?”

# teaming up for wellness

MINISTRY CAN BE DEMANDING ON OUR BODIES: THE CONSTANT PUSH TO MEET DEADLINES, THE RUSHING AROUND TO HELP PEOPLE, THE CONSTANT MEETINGS OVER MEALS — many comprised of fast food; and the well-intentioned trips to the gym that seem to always get interrupted by someone else’s crisis. Ministry couples are so good at taking care of others, yet we often struggle with taking care of ourselves. That is where Bill and I found ourselves about 15 years ago.

## HIS CRISIS

My husband had been the picture of health; then suddenly his blood pressure went through the roof. This got our attention because his grandfather died of a stroke at age 47 and his father had a stroke that left him paralyzed and disabled at age 48. Bill was 45. The super productive husband I had known was going to bed at 6 p.m. and still seemed exhausted the next day. The doctors were baffled by his erratic BP.

At the time, Bill and I had achieved some measure of success as writers. *Men Are Like Waffles, Women Are Like Spaghetti* had hit the best sellers list. Bill was also the senior pastor of the largest church in our city, and we were completing a new building project. In addition, all our sons were teens with full schedules that impacted Bill too. One day,

we were traveling, and Bill wasn’t feeling well, so he went to the doctor. The physician asked about his life, “Got any stress?” When Bill described his mountain of responsibility and the “burning the candle at both ends” life pace, the doctor replied, “Bill, you are a people helper. What would you tell someone who came into your office displaying these symptoms?”

Bill replied, “You have some strategic decisions to make and some life change is on the road ahead.” Exactly.

## HER CRISIS

Each January, for the past decade, I attend a First Place 4 Health wellness week. And a couple years after Bill’s crisis, I was at one of these weeks when my blood tests results returned, and the nurse called with a negative report shook me to the core. Several things were unhealthy, but the worst was that I had moved from pre-diabetic to very dangerously high glucose levels.

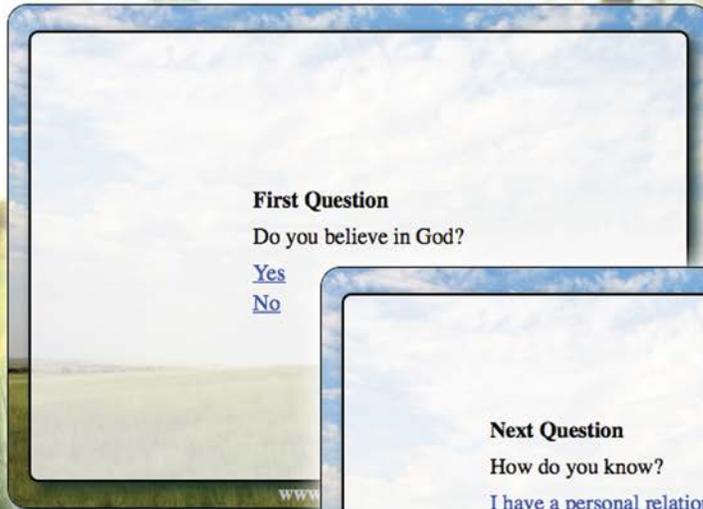
The issue was my apathy. I had begun my wellness journey with my husband but was not enthusiastic or committed — I was haphazard in following a wellness plan. I might exercise, then would think, I deserve a donut (or a few). As we traveled for speaking, there were way too many fast food meals and too few workouts. My weight was going up, and so was my stress, and I began to experience irregularities in my heartbeat. I was slapped in the face with the reality something had to change.

-continued on p. 23-

# How Well Do You KNOW God?

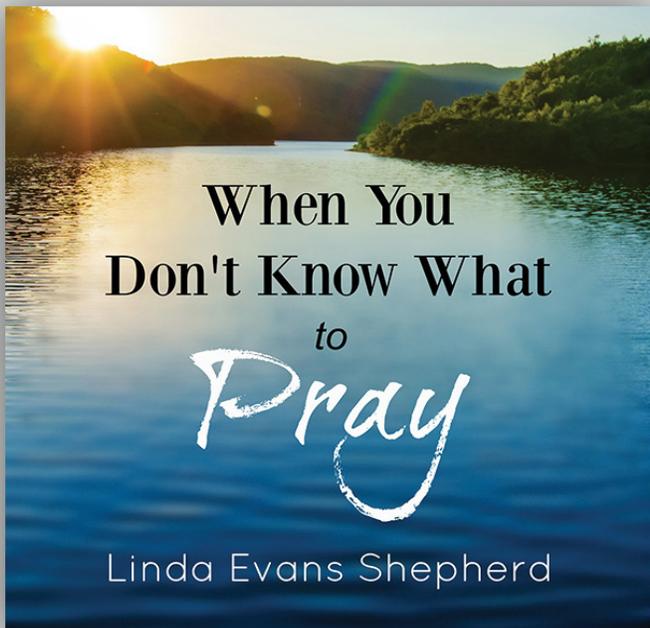
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## **-continued from p. 21-**

I went to bed and prayed something like: “Lord, you know how depressed I am. If there were any chocolate bon-bons here I would eat the entire box. I need some help here. Your Word says, “In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety” (Psalm 4:8, NASB). Please minister to me as I sleep, and when I wake up tomorrow, please provide answers so I might go forward and live long and strong for you.”

At 5 a.m. my phone vibrated, and I picked it up to read this text message devotional:

*Get up! God has set His alarm clock, and it is time to overcome every weight, every infirmity, every sickness, every bondage that has tried to strangle the physical, emotional, and spiritual life out of you. It doesn't matter how long you have been bound; stop hitting the snooze button and GET UP!*  
- Ron Parsley, World Harvest

So, guess what I did? I GOT UP! And I thought, *The definition of insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result.*

Something needs to change! What is it, God?”

I took my concerns to prayer:

*“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24).*

### **F.I.T. PARTNERS**

I phoned Bill and we prayed — and planned on how to get F.I.T.

### **FOCUS FOR FORWARD MOTION**

We decided to use our Word of the Year and Verse of the Year tradition we had been using our entire married life to kickstart our “get fit” year. We knew we needed to get and stay STRONG, and we posted Joshua 1:9 on our office walls.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Our motto was “Stay Strong” and we placed a small

weight on our desks as a reminder to work out together daily, either on a walk or in the gym. We used a clarifying question for all our decisions that year:

“Will this make me, us, our life, our family, our ministry — stronger?”

### **INFORMATION FOR INSPIRATION**

We knew we needed to change things up, so we decided to go to a new holistic doctor who ran extensive tests. This way, we would have a baseline for knowing how far off track we were, and to help set a wellness plan for each of us. We created an exercise plan that balanced four quadrants: core, stretch, weights and aerobics. We also met with a nutritionist, decided on how we would track our food intake and exercise. (I ordered a Fitbit tracker.) Our new physician adjusted our medicines and gave us more natural options. We also got outside accountability, so others were cheering us on (and so we wouldn't feel like each other's health police). We did our best to apply all the First Place 4 Health wisdom to our lives: body, soul, mind and spirit. We recaptured our desire to treat our body as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

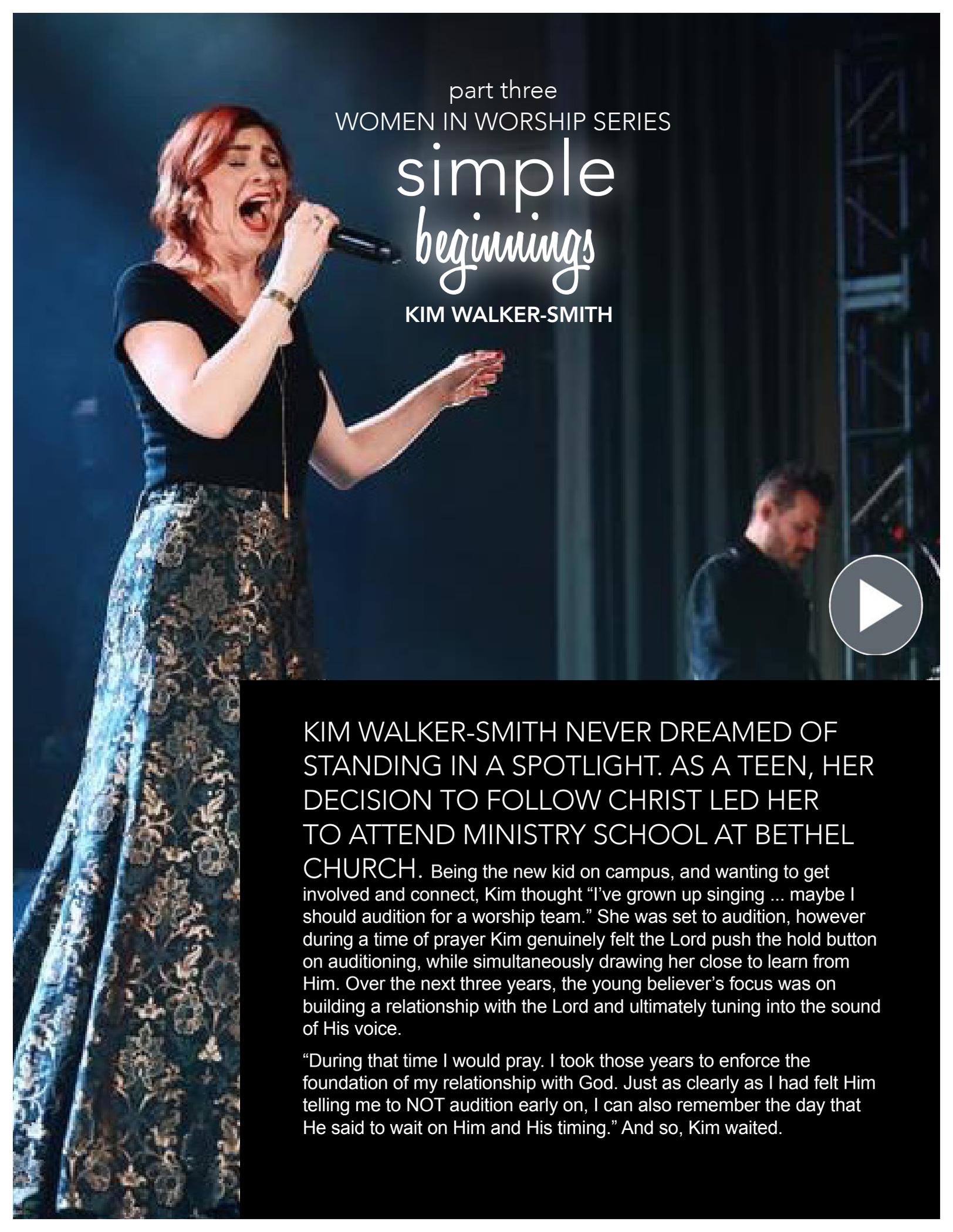
### **TEAMWORK FOR TRANSFORMATION**

We began to trade wellness articles and blogs; we shopped for groceries together, cooked together, tried new healthier food options, new restaurants and talked wellness strategies over meals together.

We took daily prayer walks, and found several sports we could enjoy together, with kayaking and biking being our two favorites. We committed to a new life style — for the rest of our lives together — and we prayed that we would have many more healthy years together on the journey ahead.

At the end of that year of getting “strong,” we both dropped weight (mine was a 50-pound loss). We got into the “healthy” range of our BMI, and our end-of-year blood test revealed that our vitals returned to the healthy range.

We were stronger, happier, sexier, and we have kept off the weight. We continue to enjoy the energy, enthusiasm and unity our teamwork produced then — and now! Today, we help others get F.I.T. and have fun on their journey to a healthier love and life. *LN*



part three  
WOMEN IN WORSHIP SERIES

# simple beginnings

KIM WALKER-SMITH



KIM WALKER-SMITH NEVER DREAMED OF STANDING IN A SPOTLIGHT. AS A TEEN, HER DECISION TO FOLLOW CHRIST LED HER TO ATTEND MINISTRY SCHOOL AT BETHEL CHURCH. Being the new kid on campus, and wanting to get involved and connect, Kim thought “I’ve grown up singing ... maybe I should audition for a worship team.” She was set to audition, however during a time of prayer Kim genuinely felt the Lord push the hold button on auditioning, while simultaneously drawing her close to learn from Him. Over the next three years, the young believer’s focus was on building a relationship with the Lord and ultimately tuning into the sound of His voice.

“During that time I would pray. I took those years to enforce the foundation of my relationship with God. Just as clearly as I had felt Him telling me to NOT audition early on, I can also remember the day that He said to wait on Him and His timing.” And so, Kim waited.



“When you make a drastic change, even if it’s the best decision, different thoughts make their way into your head like: ‘How are you going to live? How are you going to pay your bills?’ I would keep reminding myself that God is my provider.”

—*Kim Walker-Smith to Leading Hearts*

Just a few weeks later while standing in the back of the room, a pastor that led worship stopped, looked at Kim and asked, “Do you want to sing?”

And as simply as the question was asked, Kim answered “Yes.” She was instructed to sign up to sing background vocals the next time he was scheduled to lead.

Even now, Kim marvels at the simple beginnings of her calling. “I knew that this was totally the Lord. I don’t know any worship leader that makes it a habit to just walk up to a stranger, not knowing if they can sing or not, and then lets them jump on the stage with them!” Kim made her way to the sign-up schedule posted at the back of the room, only to discover another confirmatory kiss from God: the next scheduled time for this particular Pastor to lead, was Kim’s actual birthday!

Kim continues to explain. “I’ve always felt that the best way for me to tell the story of how I began leading worship is to explain: I was really and truly trying to follow the Lord! I was just pursuing Jesus. One of my favorite verses is Proverbs 16:9. “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.” He led me into this. I never thought that this is what I’d be doing with my life. I’m thankful for His leading!”

During those early days of singing BGV’s, Kim was entrusted to take on roles of leadership. She began in the youth department by teaching the teen girls

to locate and sing harmonies. The youth pastor at Bethel Church and director of Jesus Culture, Banning Liebscher, soon asked Kim to lead worship for their upcoming Youth Conference. After the conference in 2005 Jesus Culture recorded their first album.

### **FOLLOWING THE CALL**

Kim has become an endeared voice, instrumental in catapulting the popularity of the worship music genre. While it’s difficult to truly measure the vast impact Jesus Culture has made since that first recording, there are a few staggering statistics worth mentioning: 10 albums with more than 20 solo artist albums, all selling more than 3.1 million albums worldwide; 300k people experiencing Jesus Culture worship at their local church in Sacramento, California, or abroad through conferences; and 4.1 million followers on social media.

The Jesus Culture team, has made it a mission to transform society simply by providing an atmosphere in which people can encounter God, and the numbers show their impact.

Kim continues to share her gift of song during an exciting time period. With Christian music recognized as a true genre, technology and social media have definitely stretched its impact and reach. But why is the genre itself so appealing? What is the Spirit of God up to?

**-continued on p. 26-**

## -continued on p. 27-

Kim shares: "We're living in this world of computers and social media. I think it's really incredible that I can put up pics of my kids so family can keep up with them! It's an amazing way to communicate. But I do believe there is a downside to it all. We can make our life appear to be whatever we want it to be. On the flip side we have a generation that's growing up in this who desire authenticity. They are asking 'What is real?' Especially, when it comes to God. Which is where we come in as the church, showing them that we care. Showing them real authenticity."

### LEARNING TO REST

In 2009 she married photographer and worship leader Skyler Smith. The couple has three children and often works collaboratively. While life is full of great blessing, the songwriter has shared openly about some of the more difficult and challenging moments.

Kim recalls, "A few years ago, there was a build up of things that began to weigh on me. I lost my Dad to Parkinson's disease; We moved to a new city as part of a church plant with Jesus Culture; We had two babies only 14 months apart, and I was diagnosed with Postpartum Depression. ALL of the stressors were going off!" Finding herself in a difficult season of many transitions, a decision was made to completely clear the artist's schedule, and concentrate on rest.

"When you make a drastic change, even if it's the best decision, different thoughts make their way into your head...Like, 'How are you going to live? How are you going to pay your bills?' I would keep reminding myself that, God is my provider. He will take care of us. In actuality my provider is not my job, GOD is my provider. I would combat the lies that came in with truths that I could hold onto."

On the practical side of things Kim says "You know, fresh air can do amazing things for a person! Yes,

there was and is the spiritual side of reading my bible, worship, prayer and writing songs... but there are also things that can energize us, and God uses those things to fill us back up, and connect us with Jesus. You know...going outside and playing games with my kids ...those things also feed and nourish my soul."

### NEW SEASONS

From the very beginning Kim chose to focus on her foundation with Jesus. In doing so she has found herself walking in her gifts, and embracing new adventures. Her newest journey includes another first: Authoring a book. Kim shares "The book is called *Brave Surrender*. It's just my story. I have never, ever, publically shared my story, in it's entirety. This is the first, so I am both excited and terrified! It's such a new world for me...So foreign and different than music and songwriting."

Kim's latest solo On My Side Live is available now! Be on the lookout for her book *Brave Surrender* (Zondervon Press) April of 2019. *JK*



WOMEN IN WORSHIP SERIES  
the art of  
collaboration

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**NICOLE HILL, WORSHIP LEADER, SHEFFIELD FAMILY LIFE CENTER, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI**

*Our church community is racially, culturally and economically diverse. We reach a wide spectrum of people, ministering to all ages. This is a picture of who we are. Our worship is unique, tailor made, and may look different compared to other churches. We use a variety of people to lead individual songs in any given service, because of what they bring both spiritually and vocally.*



**MICHAELAH WEAVER, WORSHIP LEADER AND SONGWRITER, BRIDGEWOOD CHURCH, CLARKSTON, MICHIGAN**

*We were created to worship and do life together, the coming together of our messy imperfect lives, choosing to love and serve each other anyway is what ministry looks like. It's where worship truly is, and where I believe, we look the most like Jesus.*



**SAM EVANS, CO-PASTOR AND WORSHIP LEADER, PLANETSHAKERS, AUSTRALIA**

*We often work together as a team to see everything creatively constructed and released to the world. We are blessed at Planetshakers with people who truly see the significance of working together as a family and in unity. Therefore, collaboration is a very easy process for me. In fact, it's fun and powerful and encouraging. We can celebrate each other's gifts and abilities and then celebrate together what God does through us all. I think the most incredible moments in God have been when we have all contributed and had that sense of unity.*

FIND MORE WOMEN IN WORSHIP DIALOGUE AT [LEADINGHEARTS.COM](http://LEADINGHEARTS.COM). *LH*

*by Lisa Burns*  
PROFILE CONTRIBUTOR



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## the big question

Q: I noticed the Christmas story includes angels. What are angels and what do they do?



with *cynthia l. simmons*  
WWW.CLSIMMONS.COM

### EXCELLENT QUESTION. ANGELS PARTICIPATED IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY FROM THE BEGINNING.

In the Gospel of Luke, God sent an angel to inform Zachariah that his elderly wife would bear a child, John the Baptist, who would prepare the nation for the coming of the Lord. Six months later, Gabriel informed the Virgin Mary she would also give birth to a son, who "...will be called the Son of the Most High." We can learn several things here.

First, angels serve as God's messengers. The word 'angel' means 'messenger' in both the Old and New Testaments. Gabriel told Zachariah and Mary the future and predicted events that required God's power. Further, the predictions came true.

Second, both Zechariah and Mary experienced fear when the angel suddenly appeared. Daniel reacted the same way. Note his description: "[the angel] was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning,

his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude." In each case, the angel said not to be afraid, but seeing supernatural beings would unsettle me too.

Third, angels have power. When Zechariah questioned how his aged wife could bear a child, the angel struck him dumb because he didn't believe. An angel gave Balaam's donkey the ability to talk. Angels also announce or inflict judgment like those who went to Sodom and Gomorrah. In Acts 12:23 an angel struck King Herod because he didn't glorify God, and Herod died. When Peter sat in prison, an angel released his chains and let him walk right past the guards.

Other passages fill in the gaps. Scripture mentions angels 265 times and reveals God created them holy with a higher rank than man. We know they live in the spiritual realm, and a third of the angels chose to disobey God. Those who fell now roam the earth as demons. Angels don't marry, and they are "... ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14).

And after Mary gave birth to Jesus, one angel appeared to lowly shepherds. Luke records "The glory of the Lord shone round about them." That must have been amazing! The angel gave his good news about the birth of the Savior and then a huge crowd filled the sky, "... praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men...'" Imagine what a dazzling celebration!

In conclusion, God overruled the laws of nature and invaded earth because He had a glorious message. He dispatched thousands of angels to sing. That never happened before. Fabulous news! Jesus came to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. *HL*



by robin luftig  
WWW.ROBINLUFTIG.ORG



# mason jar blessings

YEARS AGO, A SEASONED WRITER AND SPEAKER MENTORED ME ON HOW TO BUILD THE MINISTRY GOD HAD GIVEN ME.

We'd meet for coffee and discussed everything from adapting to different cultures to dealing with the zingers I'd get from posting God's promises on social media. I took notes, asked questions and basked in her wisdom. One December day she paused from talking, reached across the table, took ahold of my hands and looked me into my eyes. Then waited.

"What?" I asked.

She smiled. "You're doing wonderfully bracing for the unknown. But don't forget to ponder what you already know."

"Right," I said, eager to please my mentor. "I make it a point to read Scripture and do my devotionals every day. And I read what other women are doing in their ministries to further God's message. I'm seeking out ways to be a better servant." I thought I had given the perfect answer.

She took a deep breath and sighed, still holding my hands and looking intently into my face.

"What are we doing now — right now?"

"You're mentoring me. I'm learning from you how to be better at what I do." How could this answer be wrong?

She tilted her head and smiled as she let go of



## Blessings are all around. Every day. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Don't be too busy preparing your ministry not to see them.

my now-sweaty hands. "You've been a wonderful mentee. Your hunger for knowledge has been impressive." She leaned back into her chair. "Here's your last assignment. It's one of the most important lessons I've ever taught you. Do you think you're ready for it?"

My eyes widened as I leaned forward. "Am I ever!" I could hardly conceal my anticipation.

She smiled and spoke five words that changed my life. "Don't leave your blessings behind."

It was my turn to lean back into my chair. "I don't understand."

She folded her hands on the table. "Blessings are all around. Every day. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Don't be too busy preparing your ministry not to see them. Knowing God is blessing you every day is one of the biggest building blocks you will ever have." She bent down and reached into her bag beside her chair and pulled out an empty pint-sized Mason jar. "Here's a gift to go along with your assignment.

"A jar? I don't understand."

"Place this jar in a conspicuous place. Maybe on the counter in the kitchen ... on a table in the entryway ... or on the mantel in the den. But place it where you see it every day. Beside the jar, place a pad of paper and pen. When something good happens that day, make a note of it and put it in the jar. On New Year's Eve, pour out all the slips of paper and reflect over each good thing — each blessing — that happened to you."

We said our goodbyes and I took the jar home, wondering what I'd do with it. If it'd been a pretty jar, I wouldn't have had a problem with placing it out as she asked. But a canning jar? A clear glass jar full of nothing?

But my friend had always offered wisdom and I was determined to trust her on this as well. On New Year's Day I placed the jar on the table inside the entry by our front door. And waited for opportunities to fill the jar. Week after week I looked for goodness and blessings to scribble on a note and slide into the jar. I was determined not to have an empty jar at the end of the year. Soon ideas to put on notes began to come to mind. Projects were completed around the house. That was a blessing. My husband went on a bike ride across the country and made it home safely. Another blessing. My kids came to visit for a weekend. A wonderful blessing.

My jar began to fill with reminders of blessings throughout the year.

On New Year's Eve, my husband and I have a tradition of pulling out our calendars and laying out our schedules and setting our goals for the upcoming year. But this year, I brought my jar to the table as well.

He cocked one brow. "A jar full of paper?"

"No, much greater," I said, tipping the jar so slips of paper poured out. "It's a jar full of blessings. Let's plan our year as we usually do, but let's take some time to remind ourselves how good God has been to us over the year. We mustn't leave our blessings behind."

Every January since then, I place an empty Mason jar on my entry table and watch as the pile of papers grow. Family and friends visiting ask about the plain glass jar sitting there. It's a wonderful opportunity to talk about God's blessings all around us — many of them unnoticed. I now make it a point to seek them out, because they truly are there.

This year, however, I'm going to do it differently. Instead of an empty pint-size Mason jar, I'm going for a quart! *LH*



## GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER by penelope carlevato

[WWW.PENELOPECARLEVATO.COM](http://WWW.PENELOPECARLEVATO.COM)



### EVERYTHING WAS READY FOR OUR FAMILY CHRISTMAS

**DINNER.** The dining room table was set, the roast in the oven and the Christmas tree lights twinkling in the living room. Everyone was to arrive in a few minutes. Then my cell phone chimed — a new text. The message was from my crazy uncle who was on his way. He wasn't invited, because he always caused problems. What should I do? Set another place?

Oops! I am not supposed to have that attitude. I write about opening my home and sharing the love of Christ with whoever walks in. How did I get to be so nasty? How did I let this attitude subtly slip into my thinking, especially when God has called me to the ministry of hospitality — not entertaining?

So when my "Crazy Uncle" came to dinner we set another place at the table, prayed like crazy, and loved on him. That Christmas dinner went amazingly

well. We set boundaries and God took over.

When we get overstressed and put too much on our plate, we often forget what hospitality is. In her book *Still Living by Faith*, Annie May Lewis shares:

"Entertaining says, 'I want to impress you with my beautiful home, my clever decorating and my gourmet cooking.' Hospitality says, 'This is not mine. It is a gift from God, and I'll use it as He desires.'"

We can quickly forget what biblical hospitality really is. It places others above our selfish desires, and we are able to focus on them first. Preparing our heart for the event gets lost in the busyness of life.

So, how do you and I react when things don't go the way we planned? How do we respond when someone doesn't R.S.V.P. and just shows up? Or when a guest brings a friend who wasn't invited? How do we treat the "difficult" members of our family who need to be with us on holidays?

First, I have to realize, above all, God is in control. He brings those neighbors and friends He desires to our home. I want to be a conduit to others and a blessing. It's pretty simple ... I need to be me, be authentic.

Those "difficult" people God brings into our homes need love and encouragement. We may be the only Bible they ever read, so love them ... but set boundaries.

How can we keep our hearts right and share our homes with Christian hospitality and avoid the trap of entertaining?

*Here are some tips I find very useful:*

- **Pray, Pray, Pray.** Ask God to help us be there for Him; to be His hands and feet to neighbors and family. To share with those who are strangers to us.
- **Plan, Plan, Plan.** Get an early start and do a little every day. Make a list of everything that needs to be done ... recipes, dishes to use, linens to wash and iron, food to buy, etc.
- **Make a list of guests to invite after prayer.**
- **Keep it Simple.** Make recipes used in the past and can be made ahead. Collect recipes that are simple and inexpensive, perhaps on Pinterest. Buy premade items and serve them on a pretty plate. Use prepackaged mixes.
- **Keep family meal times easy and quick** before your gathering to have enough time to plan and prepare.
- **Plan for unexpected interruptions** ... and treat them as divine interventions.
- **Allow others to help.** When someone asks to bring food, let them.
- **Focus on your guests, not on your house.** Let God's idea of hospitality free us from having a perfect and clean house.

By serving others in our home, we serve Christ and help spread the gospel of God's truth. We can make heaven more crowded!

*"And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'"* Matthew 25:40 (NIV).

This is a simple meal my friend Sue, who was very influential in our decision to follow Christ, served to my husband and me many years ago.

It's a quick and easy meal with a packaged green salad and hot garlic toast. And my favorite part is, with this on the menu, you have more time for planning and preparation.

### CHICKEN SPAGHETTI

3 cups cooked chicken, chopped or shredded (Costco rotisserie chicken is great)

1/2 large onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced

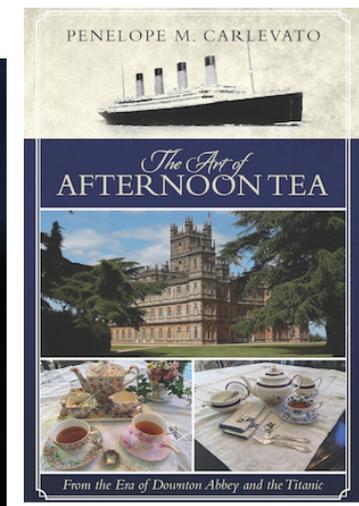
1/2 green pepper, chopped

16 ounces spaghetti, broken into thirds



- 1 can cream of chicken soup
- 1 can Rotel Diced tomatoes and green chili
- 1 small can sliced mushrooms
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 tsp oregano
- 1/2 tsp rosemary
- 1 tsp basil
- 2 cups cheddar cheese or 18 ounces Velveeta Cheese, cut into cubes

Sauté onion, garlic and green pepper in 1 Tablespoon of olive oil. Cook spaghetti until al dente and drain. Mix together the sautéed vegetables, chicken and remainder of ingredients. Stir until the cheese is melted, then add the cooked Spaghetti. Enjoy! Serves 6 to 8. *LH*



Find great recipes like this in

Penelope's book:

The Art of Afternoon Tea: From the Era of Downton Abbey and the Titanic.

Available autographed from PenelopeCarlevato.com



## TOP LEADERSHIP RESOURCES FOR 2019

by *edie melson*  
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### I WAS EXCITED TO BE ASKED TO WRITE THIS ARTICLE

In my life as an author and ministry leader, I come across hundreds of resources that I love to share. Fortunately, before I let my enthusiasm run away with me, I took time to pray and ask God to weigh in on the best ones to mention. I expected Him to give me some insight into how to narrow the list down to five, but His answer left me reeling:

**“The most important resources you need as a leader lie in Me, and I dwell in you.”**

Taking a mental step back, I pondered those words. Did I truly have everything I needed as a leader? When evaluating a new thought, I did what I always do. I took out pen and paper, along with my Bible,

and began to work my way through this concept. Turns out, it was God I heard. And here are the resources I discovered.

### TOP 5 RESOURCES FOR LEADERS

1. **The Holy Spirit.** It’s almost a cliché — and a Sunday school answer. Because it’s so obvious we overlook and discount the foundational necessity of this resource. By not looking to this Helper as our first resource, we miss the most powerful asset we have as a leader. Only God knows what is beyond the horizon. When we go to Him first, He can give us the insight we need before the need arises.
2. **The power of quiet.** We are identified as leaders because we get things done—and we motivate others to get things done. The flip side

of that gift is the tendency for overwork. If we're not working in the Spirit, we can find ourselves exhausted as we try to power through just one more project. Times of quiet renew our strength, fill up the well inside us so that we have the energy to work from.

- 3. The gift of prayer.** Yes, prayer can happen in the quiet. But prayer is a conversation with God, and that can — and should — happen anywhere. The Bible reminds us that if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God (James 1:5). How often do we evaluate a situation and act before we ask God for His input? Taking time to pray can give us the insight we need at the moment we need it.
- 4. A foundation of the past and a vision of the future.** God has allowed each of us to travel a unique path. This individual journey has been used by God to equip us to become more like Christ and to help others along the way. The lessons we've learned aren't meant to be discarded. They're given to us to be used as currency — a savings account of wisdom through experience. Each of us must have a vision of the future. It may or may not contain details, but we must have a goal to work toward.
- 5. Wise advisors.** We all know it is a foolish leader who fails to heed the wise counsel of others. It's important to build a team and surround ourselves with those we trust. This community isn't meant to be used as a chorus of agreement or affirmation. No, we need those who will speak the hard truth with the voice of love. Then, in the midst of our planning and execution, we must take time to stop and listen to what they are saying. Sometimes it takes some digging to get to the heart of what's being said, but it's always worth it when we hear the advice of others we trust.

God also works through others to give leaders what is needed to lead. It's up to each of us to find the external resources that best fit what God has called us to do. Here are some places and types of things to look for.

## TOP 5 EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- 1. A topical Bible verse website.** There are many out there, but my personal favorite is [www.openbible.info](http://www.openbible.info). When I need a starting point to find out what God's Word has to say about a certain subject, this website is where I turn.
- 2. A method of organization.** God has designed each of us differently. Some of us resonate with spreadsheets; others prefer handwritten lists. But as a leader, we must have a system that helps us monitor progress, people and resources. Beyond that, this system should ideally work well with a team. Personally, I use the Bullet Journal™ system by Ryder Carroll, [www.bulletjournal.com](http://www.bulletjournal.com). For my team, Evernote is an excellent resource, but so is Dropbox and Google drive.
- 3. A prayer team.** Early on in my ministry I was advised to assemble a team of people who would pray for me and what God had called me to do. I truly don't know what I would have done without this group of godly intercessors.
- 4. A place of inspiration.** For some of us that means certain blogs and websites that encourage us. For others, that means devotional books. A couple of my places of inspiration are [www.AriseDaily.com](http://www.AriseDaily.com), [www.MarcandAngel.com](http://www.MarcandAngel.com).
- 5. A plan to keep growing.** I make it a priority to continue to grow as a leader. I attend seminars, workshops and conferences. I read books and I'm part of a leadership mastermind group that challenges and equips me. My resource for all this is the Advanced Writer and Speaker Association, [www.AWSA.com](http://www.AWSA.com). Whatever branch of ministry God has called you to, you should also consider a professional organization to help you stay equipped. The world is moving too quickly to go this path alone.

Leadership can bring great joy, but it's also a burden. We must learn to lay that burden at the feet of the one who issued the call. When we let Him carry the weight and manage the path, great and mighty things can happen. *LN*



## IMPACTFUL PLANNING by karen whiting WWW.KARENWHITING.COM



**THE FOUNDERS OF AMERICA WROTE DOCUMENTS** they hoped would establish the course of our country for centuries to come. They looked beyond their lifetimes to build a lasting future. A dream that stretches beyond one person's life creates a legacy. Your work becomes part of a bigger picture.

This coming year, look toward the legacy you will leave and your role in God's eternal plan.

Ask God for a verse or word to guide you this year. Let that set your direction. Dream big. Consider what you want to achieve. State the dream as a goal. What can you do to work toward that goal? How does it fit within a larger ministry or movement? How does it fit with God's larger plan for all people? Those questions connect your plans to a legacy.

Also look toward what you are called to do this year in the limited weeks and months ahead.

Check your priorities and consider what needs to be completed. List any deadlines and leads or requests to follow up on. That will start filling your calendar.

Add your dreams. What is the next talk or book you want to pursue? What are the first steps to making your dream a reality? Schedule dream time to work on it.

Consider your weaknesses to decide where to invest training or marketing money into your work or ministry. Consider when to hire outside help that will strengthen your platform.

Choose a time for self-care by scheduling some down time, vacation, retreats, family time and other breaks that will revive you monthly.

Be accountable. Find an accountability partner or team who will help you stay focused and encourage you to persist. You will also keep that person on track, so you can both move forward. There's synergy with encouraging one another.

Do a reality check of what's possible with funds, time, abilities and your reach. Make changes to enlarge the possibilities with added income, increasing your network or connecting with people who can help you reach your goals.

Be aware of your impact. Alfred Nobel changed his life when he read his obituary written by mistake when his brother died. He invented dynamite and read how his work brought wealth at the expense of the deaths of other people. He chose to look to a brighter future and left his fortune to establish and fund the Nobel Prize. Consider what you are doing that is meaningful both now and in the future.

Be a mentor to people who share the same desires and dreams. Encourage their ideas and engage them in your work and ministry.

Commit to your plan and post it. Read it weekly. Modify it as needed. *LH*



Typical New Year's resolutions are fear-based, shame-based, or doubt-based. They feed on our insecurities and tell us we are not OK in our present state.

5 tips to avoid  
*the resolution trap*



*by saundra dalton-smith*  
WWW.ICHOOSEMYBESTLIFE.COM

-continued on p. 38-



**-continued from p. 37-**

## DID YOU FULFILL YOUR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS LAST

YEAR? Since only one in ten people keep their resolutions, I'm guessing your answer is no. Resolutions, like losing weight or getting more exercise, are easy to make but difficult

to maintain. Our good intentions are met with real-life situations that edge out our desires with daily challenges to overcome. You can only face defeat so many times before you start feeling like a failure.

The reason most of us don't keep our New Year's resolutions is that there is no joy in the process. When all you can see surrounding your new year is work and striving, it's easy to understand the push to give up.

Typical resolutions are fear-based, shame-based, or doubt-based. They feed on our insecurities and tell us we are not OK in our present state. These types of resolutions extract the joy from the journey and focus heavily on the mechanics of the process.

I have been reluctant to start another year with a list of resolutions, but this year I've decided to make a new kind of resolution. I resolve to embrace the journey to being the best version of myself. Not necessarily a thinner version, although that may occur as I make better choices about the foods I eat

"I'm committed to spending this year focusing on five concepts that will help me find value in my current situation while leading me closer to being my best."

and the exercise I enjoy.

I'm not even referring to a happier or more successful version of myself. I am not focusing on a specific end result, but on the blessings I can glean from the journey. I'm committed to spending this year focusing on five concepts that will help me find value in my current situation while leading me closer to being my best. Even if you hate making New Year's resolutions, this one is worth considering.

**1. Utilize what is currently available to you.** If on Monday I decide I want to go to the gym for 30 minutes every day, by Wednesday I will already have at least two excuses why I don't have time. For me the gym requires extra energy that I simply am not willing to use, but I've found I'm much more willing to take a walk around my neighborhood.

Why? Because I have no excuses against something so readily available to me.

No commute time is needed. I don't have to buy cute exercise wear to fit in with the gym

crowd. I don't have to worry about figuring out how to use the equipment.

There is more available to you than what you are utilizing. Take a look the resources around you. Are their opportunities to be more active? Is there anything healthy in the freezer you could cook instead of having fast-food? What about chances to use a gift or talent that's currently lying dormant? Don't waste time thinking about what you don't have, and use what you've got.

**2. Find the lesson to be learned in the process.** A few years ago, I found myself having daily back and neck pain. I would wake up with headaches and knew a part of my problem was due to the amount of stress I was under. I had numerous deadlines piling up around me with no margin or downtime in my schedule. That path was leading me to burnout and exhaustion.

I learned taking time for myself is not selfish, but necessary. I was able to make course corrections

# HEALTHTRACKS

to restore my health by learning the lesson in the process. Failure to learn from your journey opens the door to making the same mistakes over and over again. It keeps you from making forward progress toward something better.

Let's not spend another year avoiding the scales for fear of what number will display, and find the lesson to be learned. Is the lesson to learn how to find comfort in God and not food? Is the lesson to learn how to trust God enough to rest? What lesson are you currently learning?

**3. Own your right to say yes or no.** Are you a people-pleaser? This is a title I've worn for most of my adult years. I don't like conflict. So when faced with a decision that may disappoint someone, I would rather give a reluctant yes than a heartfelt no. This situation would always lead to me feeling as if others were taking advantage of me and further complicated my life. Embracing my journey required a hard look at the reasons why I feel compelled to say yes.

The best version of me is one that is not overwhelmed with activity, but overflowing with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This requires a healthy ratio of both yes and no. This also applies to other choices I make like when to say yes to dessert and when to say no. Understand the power of every yes and no, look at the effect it has on your journey, and then make a choice that takes you closer to your desired outcome. How will you use your right to say yes or no today?

**4. Show kindness to those on the journey with you.** None of us are in this alone. Don't forget to acknowledge those who are a part of your support system. This includes praising and worshiping God as well as extending kind words of gratitude to your co-workers, family and friends. In our self-focused culture, taking the time to esteem others will help you remain humble on your journey. You may not

feel very accomplished or successful, but I promise you there is someone who is a few steps behind you longing to be standing in your position. Extend a hand back to help them progress forward. Look for ways to be light in darkness and love in a world filled with hate. Find friends to randomly bless on social media with an edifying post. Send a love note text to your spouse. Pack a lunch for the homeless. Surprise someone with a needed hug. Who do you know that could use a little encouragement today?

**5. Don't compare; instead, share.** Comparing journeys is a quick way to become discouraged. There will always be someone who appears to have more of everything you are seemingly missing. Resist the temptation to let another's success drain your joy. Replace comparing with sharing.

Encourage those who have reached a level of success you admire and tell them how inspiring their story has been for you. Share their story with others. Let their journey fan the flames inside

you to see what is possible. Then share your story with others, including both the ups and the downs. Authentic sharing unlocks the hard places of the heart and invites in community. Don't underestimate the power of your story and how God can use it to empower others.

What would 2019 look like if you resolve to embrace your journey? *LH*





"Arise, Shine..."

the glory of the LORD  
rises upon you."

-Isaiah 60:1 (niv)



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PSALM 107:1-41

They sacrificed unto the idols of Ca-na-an and the land was polluted with blood.  
39 Thus were they defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions.

God's Wrath and Mercy

40 Therefore was the wrath of the LORD kindled against his people, insomuch that he abhorred his own inheritance.  
41 And he gave them into the hand of the heathen: and they that hated them ruled over them.

Their enemies also oppressed them, and they were brought into subjection under their yoke.  
Many times did he deliver them; but they provoked him with their counsel, and were angry for their iniquity.  
Nevertheless he regarded their affliction, when he heard their cry.

And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies.

He made them also to be pitied of all those that carried them captives.

Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us again among the heathen: to give thanks unto thy name, and to triumph in thy praise.

Blessed be the LORD God of Is-ra-el from arising to everlasting, and let all the people say, Amen. Praise ye the LORD.

BOOK V

Psalms 107--150

PSALM 107

God's Redemptive Power

GIVE thanks unto the LORD, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.

Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy.

And gathered them out of the lands, from east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south.

They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in.

Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them.

Then they cried unto the LORD in their affliction, and he delivered them out of their distress.

And he led them forth by the right way, whereby they might go to a city of habitation.

On that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men.

For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness.

Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron.

Because they rebelled against the words of the LORD, and contemned the counsel of the most High.

Therefore he brought down their heart by labour; they fell down, and there was no one to help.

Then they cried unto the LORD in their affliction, and he saved them out of their distress.

He brought them out of darkness and the

shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder.

15 On that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men.

16 For he hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder.

Deliverance from Transgressions

17 Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted.

18 Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death.

19 Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses.

20 He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.

21 Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!

22 And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.

Deliverance from Storms

23 They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters;

24 These see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep.

25 For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof.

26 They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble.

27 They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end.

28 Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses.

29 He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still.

30 Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven.

31 Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!

32 Let them exalt him also in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

God's Power Over Nature

33 He turneth rivers into a wilderness, and the watersprings into dry ground.

34 A fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein.

35 He turneth the wilderness into a standing water, and dry ground into watersprings.

36 And there he maketh the hungry to dwell, that they may prepare a city for habitation.

37 And sow the fields, and plant vineyards, which may yield fruits of increase.

38 He blesseth them also, so that they are multiplied greatly; and suffereth not their cattle to decrease.

Deliverance Comes from the Lord

39 Again, they are minished and brought low through oppression, affliction, and sorrow.

40 He poureth contempt upon princes, and causeth them to wander in the wilderness, where there is no way.

41 Yet setteth he the poor on high from affliction, and maketh him families like a flock.



# pray off every weight



I WAS ONCE TOLD NOT TO DRAG MY PAST INTO MY

FUTURE. But, wait, isn't my past part of who I am today? And while there are plenty of things from my past I wouldn't care to repeat, including hard times and heartaches, there were also wonderful times and even joy. Yet, I can see there are emotional weights I should stop dragging around, including worries, problems, burdens, failure, regrets, shame, grief and despair.

So instead of letting these weights sink my future, I've decided to shed every weight by putting each of them into a gift box with God's name on it.

Not only is God a problem solver; He is also a miracle worker who longs to see us let go of all that would hold us down. Let's pray:

Dear Lord,

*It's time to take off every weight. I give You each of my worries, problems and burdens including (fill in the blank), and present them as a gift to You. Thank You for taking them. I feel lighter already because You can carry, resolve and turn them into miracles.*

*I also give You my failure, regrets and shame, including (fill in the blank), and lay them at Your feet. Please turn these weights into healthy seeds of miracles.*

*In addition, I give You my grief, despair and disappointments, including (fill in the blank). In the name and the blood of Jesus, I also come*

*against the spirit of trauma and self-pity that would overtake me. In exchange, please give me peace as I learn to trust You more.*

*Lord? May I also present my disappointments, fear and hopelessness to You, concerning (fill in the blank)? Even if the enemy of my soul brought these burdens and weights into my life, You can cover them with peace and give me hope as well as a future. Help each of my former weights become stepping stones into a brighter future.*

*And finally, Lord, I give You my anger, malice, self-loathing and bitterness concerning (fill in the blank). Set me free from these prisons, even if it means I must forgive You for allowing the difficulty, forgive another for introducing it, as well as forgive myself for causing or adding to it.*

*Lord, You want me to do the impossible, to forgive, even when I do not have the strength to do so. You want me to forgive even when I cannot justify the offender. You want me to forgive so I can be free in You. So I choose to forgive, not in my strength, but in Yours.*

*Lord, to sum up this prayer with a paraphrase from Hebrews 12:1 — Lord, I ask that You help me lay aside every weight and sin, which clings so closely to me. Help me to run with endurance into the new year You have placed before me.*

*Thank You that I am free!*

*In Jesus' name, Amen. LH*



**"When God Calls the Heart at Christmas"**

# Lights for Christmas



*by michelle s. coy*  
[WWW.JUST18SUMMERS.COM](http://WWW.JUST18SUMMERS.COM)

THE SNOW BEGAN FALLING ON DECEMBER 17. IT WAS BEAUTIFUL AS IT COVERED EVERYTHING IN A BLANKET OF PRISTINE WHITE. The trees in the woods around our house looked as if God had sprinkled powdered sugar on them.

Yes, it was gorgeous, but the flakes continued to fall ... and fall ... and fall. The wet snow began to weigh down the branches of the trees, and soon loud cracks were heard as limbs started snapping.

We'd been through this before, so we knew there was a good chance that we'd be without power

before too long. We quickly began our snowstorm prep, gathering lanterns and candles, and carrying firewood in so it would be dry. Sure enough, just as we finished our preparations, the power clicked off, and the cheery lights on our Christmas tree went dark.

The first day without power wasn't too bad. Even the second day wasn't too uncomfortable or dreary, but as day after day without power went by, our spirits began to droop. By this time, the food in the refrigerator and freezer had thawed and spoiled, and food choices were becoming more and more limited.

All of us were a bit aggravated. We had places to go and things to do. After seven days without power, I called our electric company on the morning of

Christmas Eve to see if they had any idea when everything would be back to normal. The news from the other end of the phone was not what I wanted to hear as the employee said it would likely be at least three more days.

Three days? That meant we'd have to cancel our Christmas plans. There'd be no opening gifts by the light of the Christmas tree and no big family holiday meal.

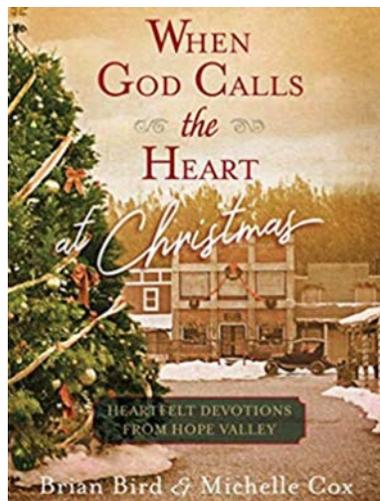
I was devastated. This was our first grandchild's first Christmas. I'd had such big plans for our family. When a friend from my speaker's group called to check on us, I asked her to send a message to our prayer loop to pray that the lights would come back on soon. She said she'd do that right away. I started getting phone calls from those dear ladies, telling me they were praying.

Forty-five minutes after that prayer request went out, I heard something unusual. I opened the front door so I could listen, and then I realized it was the sound of big truck engines. Moments later, a stream of trucks from our electric company drove through the neighborhood, and an hour later, we had power

again.

We had just enough time to get to the grocery store before it closed, and we returned home with a ham and everything else we needed for our big family Christmas dinner.

And that night, as our loved ones gathered and we enjoyed our beautifully-lit tree in a warm house, I looked around the room with tears in my eyes—grateful beyond words for the Christmas when prayer turned the lights back on. LH

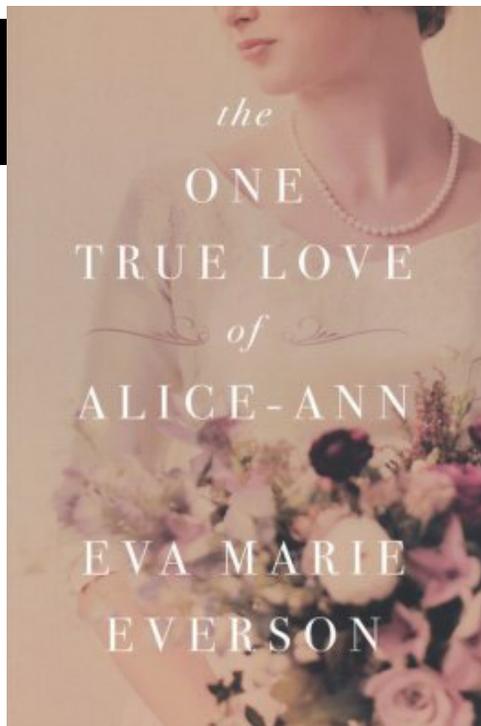


*When God Calls the Heart at Christmas* — Heartfelt Devotions from Hope Valley, by Brian Bird and Michelle Cox, is inspired by the Hallmark series, “*When Calls the Heart*.”





# BOOKSTOREAD

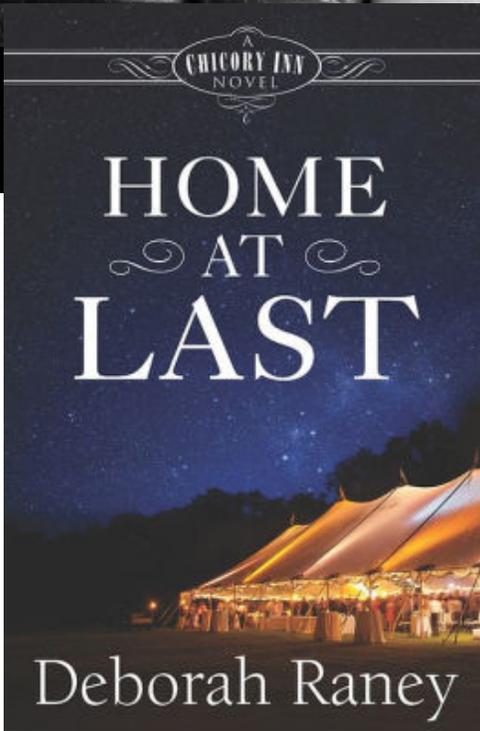


## THE ONE TRUE LOVE OF ALICE-ANN by Eva Marie Everson

Eva Marie Everson's *The One True Love of Alice-Ann* is a triumphant novel about ordinary people finding themselves in the will of God for their lives. When the novel opens, Alice Ann is turning sixteen and vows to reveal to her brother's friend Mack that she secretly loves him. War has just broken out, and America decides to get involved after the Pearl Harbor attack. Her small town is suddenly immersed in issues and tragedies they had not previously faced.

As the story unfolds, Alice-Ann discovers God's answer to all of her prayers is not exactly what she pictured. Her joy comes in small things each day until she realizes the purpose of her life and the insignificant gestures that she makes that leads her to her destiny.

We cheer with Alice Ann as she makes this transformation, and are inspired that as we make small daily choices, God is leading us right into His will for our lives. — *Melissa B Rice*



## HOME AT LAST by Deborah Raney

In Home at Last, the final installment in the Chicory Inn Series by Deborah Raney, Link is the only remaining child of the Whitman family who has yet to get married. Since he is now 29 years old, he feels there is not much hope of a wedding in his future as he's pretty certain he hasn't met the right woman.

Shayla Michaels, an African American woman, is 33 and pretty certain she will never marry, that is, until she meets Link. As an interracial couple, Link and Shayla face hard lessons they must learn to overcome. I think the author handles the many issues this book addresses well and weaves together a heartfelt novel that doesn't whitewash the truth or the story's tensions. Raney sets out the issues for you to wrestle and ponder as she helps you think through any prejudices you might harbor in your own life that you might not have even noticed. —William D. Curnutt



## CHASING SECRETS by Lynette Eason

Professional bodyguard Haley Callaghan has been a survivor all of her life, accepting both heartache and accomplishment with an amazing amount of compassion. Underneath her admirable composure and proficiency, troubling images flash in intermittent nightmares, surfacing anew when her life is threatened during a heated encounter with a known criminal. The professional bodyguard is now guarded by a host of protectors, one of which is a very handsome detective Steven Rothwell and Haley intrigues him.

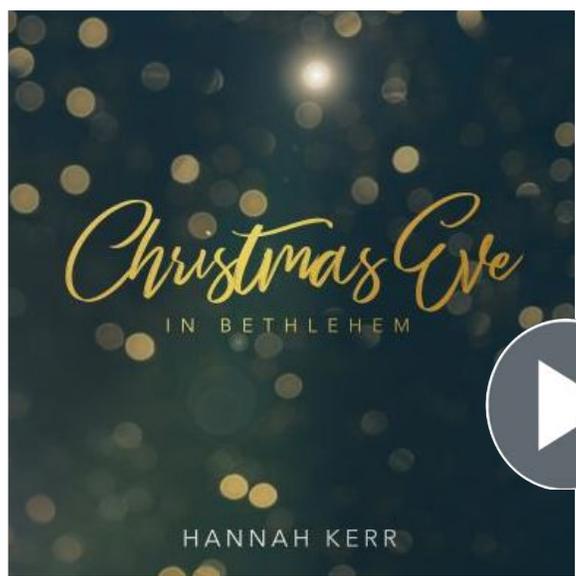
Bold, intuitive, and confident, she exhibits incredible kindness towards a young teen and his family, whom she barely knows. When the incident becomes volatile, Steven becomes privy to information that has the potential to change Haley's life forever. Suddenly, life and love are on the line as Haley and Steven race to uncover family secrets. —Rebecca Maney



# MUSICREVIEWS

## HANNAH KERR

### Christmas Eve in Bethlehem



Following her 2017 holiday EP *Emmanuel*, songwriter and vocalist Hannah Kerr's *Christmas Eve in Bethlehem* is a 10-track collection including several Christmas classics, plus two new songs, to joyously kick off the season.

Hannah's smooth, light and airy vocals carry selections such as the title track and "Emmanuel," both new, as well as the prayer-like "Breath of Heaven" and "Silent Night" sweetly to listeners' ears.

The title track is especially meaningful, as it expresses the full weight and significance of Jesus' birth, and how that should compel each of us to worship Him. Hannah also

adds a lighthearted joy to the set with familiar tunes such as "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," "White Christmas" and "Winter Wonderland."

Light a fire, and grab a blanket and some hot cocoa, and let *Christmas Eve in Bethlehem* warm you up for the holidays.



## MATT MAHER

### The Advent of Christmas

Singer/songwriter Matt Maher has released his first holiday album, *The Advent of Christmas*, 13 tracks sure to get you into the spirit of the season.

While a few tracks are Matt's own renditions of some familiar classics, several are new, bringing a freshness to the holiday music genre while emphasizing the real meaning of Christmas. The theme of Advent — the four weeks anticipating the celebration of Jesus' birth — runs through tracks such as "Gabriel's Message" and "Born on that Day."

"From the very beginning and through the history of Christianity, the season of Advent has been a way of remembering (more fully) the mystery of God becoming human," Matt says. "I wanted to have a collection of songs—some that are familiar and many that are new—that prepare us for the four weeks of Advent and how each week is devoted to the concepts of hope, peace, joy and love." Merry Christmas and more. To put it succinctly, this album is pure Christmas blessings delivered from Matt Maher.



## RUSS TAFF

### Believe

Christian music icon Russ Taff has released *Believe* (November 2), his first album in seven years and his debut praise and worship record from Sweetwater Studios.

*Believe* will likely appeal to those who enjoy classic, traditional gospel sounds with moments of easy guitar rock occasionally blended in. The 12 tracks combine some fresh recordings of Russ's best known songs,

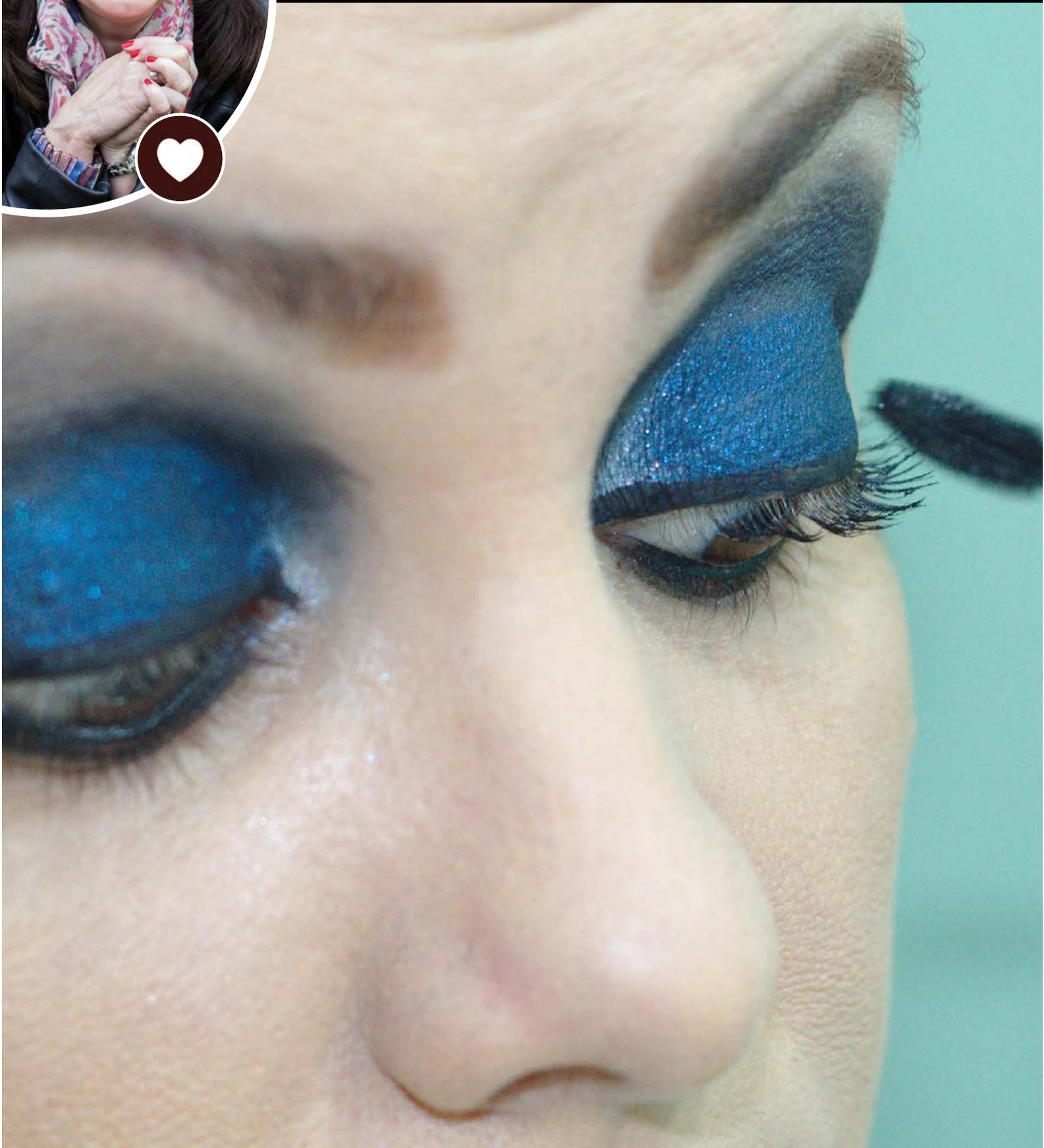
including "We Will Stand" and "I Still Believe," with his vocal approach to several widely familiar worship selections including "Your Love Never Fails," "Same Power" and more.

Speaking of the album, which celebrates the joy that comes of God working through our trials, Russ says, "I want to remind people that He's God. We can trust him. We can take our cares and lay them at his feet, and He will take them.

When I'm troubled, I just get off by myself and I sing worship songs just to Him. After a little bit, I start feeling better because I feel Him."



*by rhonda rhea*  
WWW.RHONDARHEA.COM



# got mercy in line?

## I'VE PRETTY MUCH ALWAYS

**BEEN A GIRLIE-GIRL.** When I was little, while the other kids were singing, “Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes,” I was singing something more like, “Head, new hairdo, purse and shoes, purse and shoes.”

Froo-froo is part of my make-up. Even my makeup is part of my make-up. I was in a hurry and ran out of the house without eyeliner the other day.

People are definitely not used to seeing me liner-less, but even I underestimated their consternation. All day long they kept asking if I was feeling okay. “Have you been under the weather?” “Do you need to go home?”

Because, yeah, everyone knows the first sign of an illness is the loss of dark lines around the eyes.

Some weren't even that nice. “Something's wrong with your face.” “You look terrible.” “You're not contagious, right?” Fortunately, I knew what to take for the illness. The medicine for acute linerlessness is ... liner.

### **Give me 20 cc's of eyeliner, STAT!**

Much more important though, what do we do when people seem bent on asking hurtful questions and saying unkind things during the holidays? Sometimes people say things that are thoughtless but not necessarily intentional. Other times their words are cruelly calculated to wound.

Our knee-jerk reaction to either is often defensive. Our minds are suddenly scrambling to come up with a line or two that will put that person in his place. We feel driven to give him a taste of his own medicine, as it were.

The real medicine? It's mercy. We're called to extend it — STAT — even to those who've been

intentionally malicious. Not an eye for an eye (or eyeliner for eyeliner either).

Offering mercy and forgiveness isn't easy when there's unsettled injustice hanging in the air. Our pride steps in and wants to demand we get the respect we feel we're due. We're ever to stand up for truth. But we aren't always required to seek justice for ourselves.

Just as it did with Jesus, sometimes mercy overrides justice. Jesus tells us Himself to “love your enemies, do what is good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is gracious to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful” (Luke 6:35-36, HCSB).

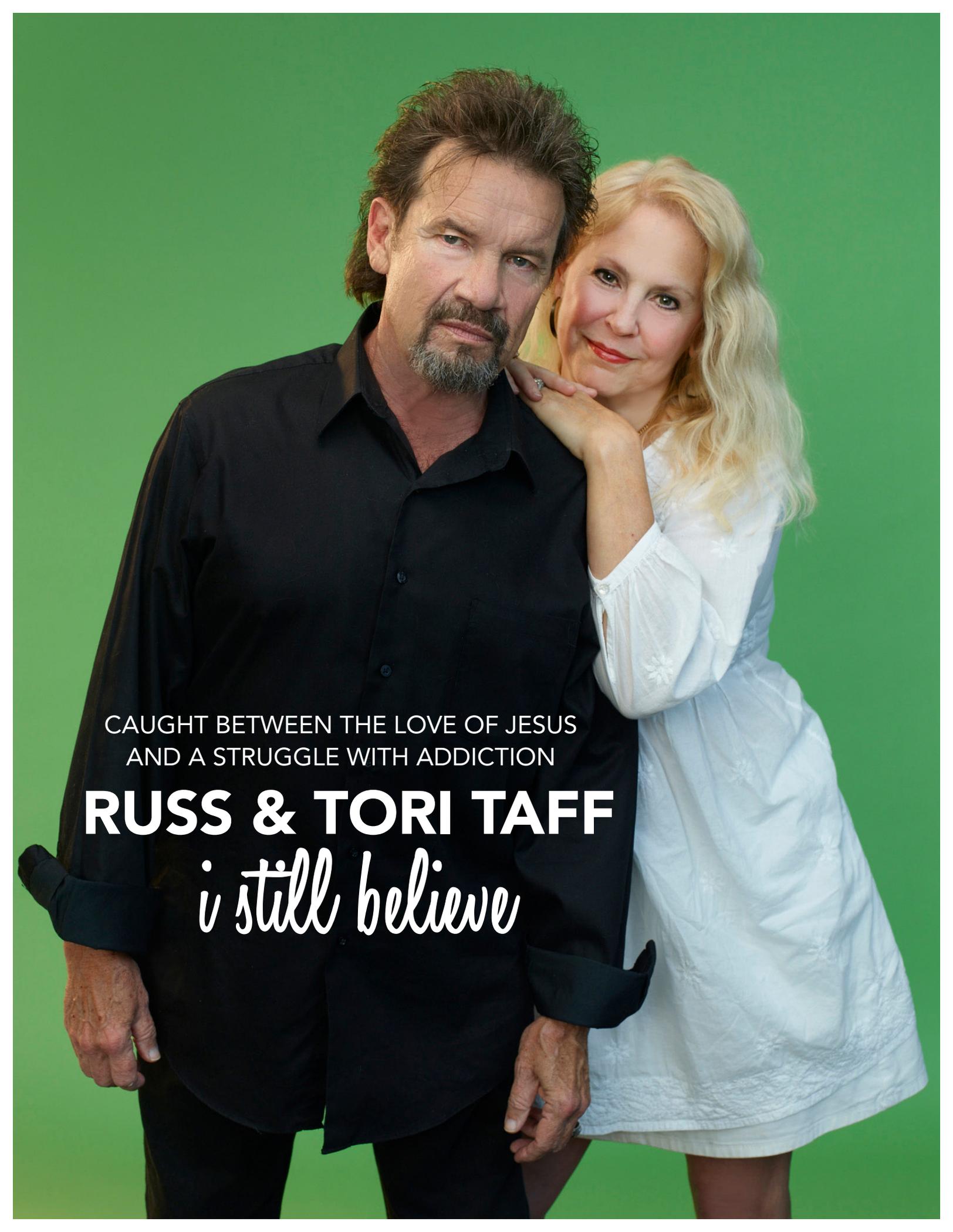
We tend to think, I'll show mercy once that rascal earns it. Yet we need to remember our call to offer God's kind of mercy. He gave it freely to us when we were powerless to earn it. Then we need to remember Jesus' command again to show mercy “just as your Father” does.

It's only by His grace that we're able to show that mercy, to take the high road to rise above an irritation and to take the higher road and forgive an offense.

*Lord, help us to see people who've hurt us with Your eyes. At every place, we feel powerless to love and forgive, empower us by the indwelling presence of Your Holy Spirit. Give us the ability to love people, not because they're worthy of our love, but because You've told us to love them, and You are more than worthy of our obedience. Let us love people, Lord, out of overwhelming love for You.*

Our God is faithful. He can answer that prayer in ways that amaze us entirely and radically change the way we love and the way we live.

You might not believe your eyes. Or eyeliners. *JH*



CAUGHT BETWEEN THE LOVE OF JESUS  
AND A STRUGGLE WITH ADDICTION

**RUSS & TORI TAFF**

*i still believe*



You know the difference between shame and guilt?  
Guilt tells you that you did something wrong.  
Shames tells you that **you** are the thing that is wrong.

—Russ Taff to *Leading Hearts*



MULTIPLE GRAMMY AWARD WINNING VOCALIST AND SONGWRITER, RUSS TAFF, HAS CREATED SOME OF THE MOST MEMORABLE SONGS IN GOSPEL MUSIC.

Having been an integral part of the Imperials, as well as having launched an amazing solo career, Russ' iconic voice of grit and soul is etched upon many of our hearts and minds. What some may not realize is that his wife, Tori, is an equally accomplished and gifted artist in her own right, having co-written and arranged multiple award-winning songs.

*Leading Hearts Magazine* recently had the opportunity to sit down to speak with this dynamic duo. They have a story to tell, and their desire is that

by doing so, they will make a difference.

Russ grew up in a Pentecostal pastor's home. Upon arriving in a town to take over a new pastorate, life was filled with fresh beginnings. That all would quickly change over a short period of time. Russ recalls, "My dad struggled with alcoholism, and our home was not a happy place. We were told often that we weren't going to amount to anything."

Russ understands now that the cycle of his own father's addiction greatly affected the household and his mother's capacity to provide a loving and stable environment. This resulted in his father's inability to stay in one pastorate for very long, and his mother was often verbally and physically abusive.

The singer says, "Because of that, I grew up carrying so much shame. Even when I joined the Imperials, there was always this thing that would make me stand back and drop my head, and this voice would say, 'You're a fraud. You don't have any business singing up there.' You know the difference between shame and guilt? Guilt tells you that you did something wrong. Shame tells you that **you** are the thing that is wrong. I had so much shame."

Tori now has a much better understanding of how Russ' shame played out in their early years of marriage. She remembers, "All of this was before Russ began self-medicating. The shame he was carrying wasn't about the drinking at this point. Knowledge is power, and finding out what you are dealing with—who the true enemy is—was really important in our life. The fact that Russ had that low level of self-worth is the reason that alcohol, when it

**-continued on p. 50-**

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## -continued from p. 49-

was introduced, felt like a miracle drug. The secret drinking was how he self-medicated from the voices in his head.”

Russ and Tori continued to communicate the weight of Russ’s inner pain as well as how it seemed to fade away with his first experience with alcohol. Russ explains, “I went into my adulthood carrying this great weight of insecurity and shame. Voices were always in my head.”

Remarkably, taking that first drink didn’t come until Russ was 26 years old. They were in New York, and it was a ridiculously hot day. He was in a room with a small window unit air conditioner and a refrigerator. He says “There was a Heineken, so I popped it open and drank it. I popped a second one, and by the third one I remember the voices were becoming silent.” Those first moments started the career Russ made of drinking.

Russ began a cycle of drinking when he was out on the road touring. As time passed, moments of sobriety between drinking caused another dark realization. Russ says, “The guilt that I was just like my dad became crippling. Before I knew it, I began hiding, as I had watched my dad do.”

Tori recalls those years. “I was noticing that Russ was fading away. He was dark, sad and angry. Russ was diagnosed with clinical depression, so I attributed all of this to that depression. What I didn’t know at the time was that he was exacerbating the depression by pouring a depressant into his system on a regular basis.”

Tori explains that not all addiction plays out noticeably. “Alcoholism and addiction, in all of its many phases, is soul destroying and family destroying, but it shows up differently. Because I didn’t see him stumbling in and throwing up on my couch, I didn’t really know who the enemy was or what we were up against.

Over time, Tori and close family were able to identify the secret, and Russ entered into rehab. Tori found a great support in Al-Anon, a support group for families and friends of alcoholics. Tori says, “It’s not a club any of us want to join, but it is a lifeline. We, of course, were in therapy. It’s important to know that there were years of sobriety, so this

wasn’t a constant in our lives. Russ actually went to treatment three different times over the years.”

Russ attributes his current sobriety to the healing power of God, the support of Tori and that final time in rehab. October 2018 saw the release of the feature-length documentary, “Russ Taff: I Still Believe,” as it played in more than 700 theaters nationwide. The film chronicles Russ’ life, one of Christian music’s most influential voices, as well as his secret struggle with alcoholism. In the documentary, Russ and Tori vulnerably and openly share their experience, including the abusive nature of Russ’s childhood.

Tori continues to be a pillar of strength to many as she offers support to those who find themselves walking a similar path to hers:

“Though it may look so very dark and hopeless right now, I promise you it won’t always feel this way. Recovery IS possible; we are living proof.

Though you may want to with all your heart, you cannot fix or save your addicted loved one — that job is for God and your loved one to tackle together.

YOU can get better, regardless of what else happens around you. Addiction is a family disease, and everyone whose life is touched by it is affected by it. You need to do your own work and find your own healing. Al-Anon is free and everywhere. Good counseling is available on a sliding financial scale basis in almost every city.

Lean hard into God — pour out your heart, your fears, your anger, your confusion. He loves you, and He can take it.”

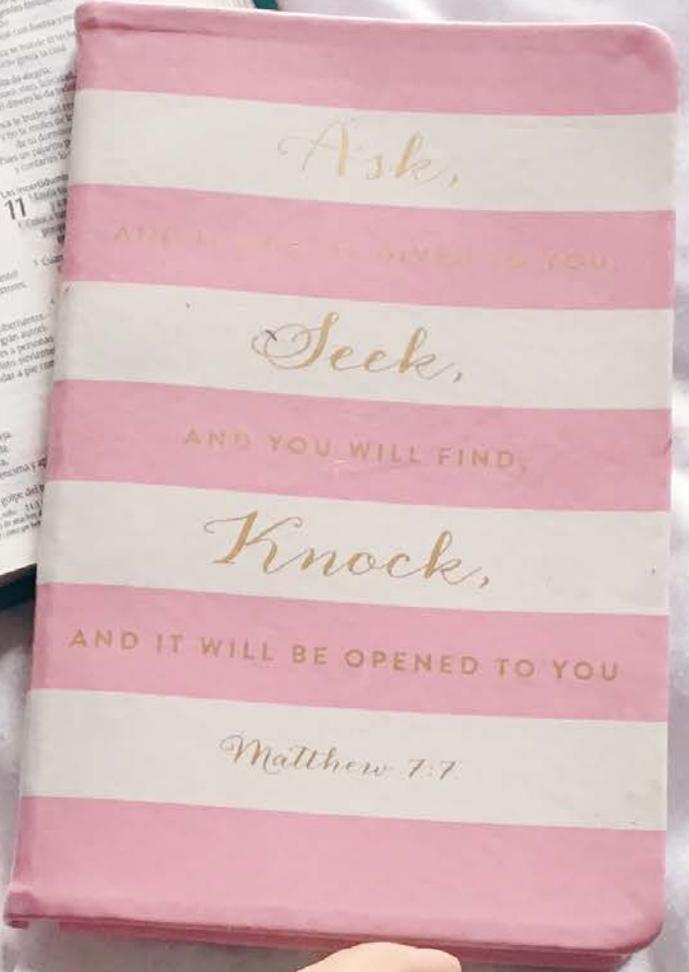
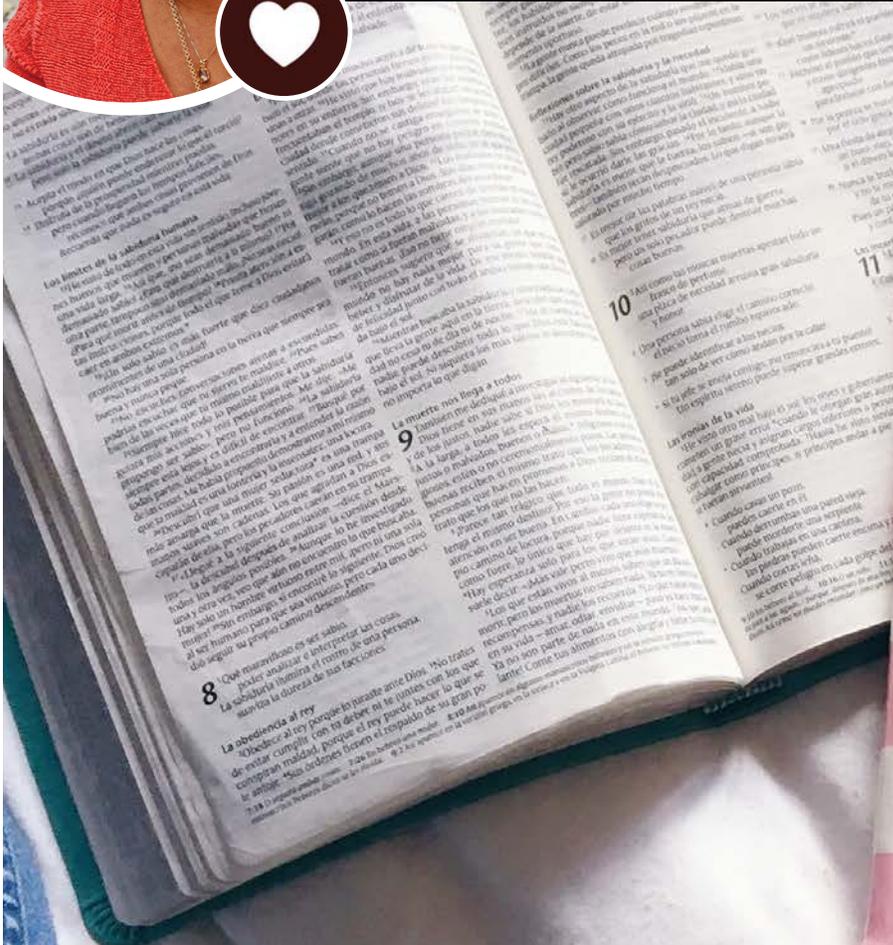
Russ recently released his first new album in seven years, a praise and worship project called *Believe*. Russ says, “While I’ve previously released recordings that documented where I was in my own walk, this album is just different. I wanted to say thank you to God for carrying me through so many dark places.” *LH*

by *lisa burrus*  
PROFILE CONTRIBUTOR





by sharon elliott  
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# new beginnings, new plans

IN JUST A FEW WEEKS WE WILL GREET 2019! BEGINNINGS ALWAYS HOLD SUCH PROMISE. THEY ARE TIMES TO REFLECT AND THEN MAKE NEW PLANS.

They are times, to be honest with ourselves about both what we previously did wrong and what we did right. Beginnings are fresh and full of hope, great times to set goals and priorities.

I'd like to challenge you to focus on some spiritual theme for this new year. One year not long ago, my focus was on prayer. I used Nick Harrison's daily devotional entitled

*Magnificent Prayer*,

reading a short selection on the topic every day.

Just that much focus worked to turn my prayer life

around and made me anticipate and appreciate my communication moments with God more and more.

Another year, my spiritual focus was on getting to know God better. In addition to reading my Bible — God's own amazing book to me — I used J.I. Packer's books *Knowing God*, *God Has Spoken* and *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. The Bible and those books worked together to inspire me to write many of the devotions that appear in my now-published devotional entitled *366 Glimpses of God: Getting to Know the God Who Knows You*.

Beginnings are fresh and full of hope, great times to set goals and priorities

Along with reading my Bible and daily devotions, for the past 20 years, I have chosen a word that is my personal affirmation for that year. In 1998, the first year I did this, I was facing some pretty hard trials, so my word was "stand." In the years since, I have concentrated on words like peace, trust, vision and joy. In 2010, my word was "glory." I was determined to give God glory and let the glory of the Lord shine through me. And in 2011, my word was "favor." I watched closely to see how my magnificent Heavenly Father showered favor on me and on His people throughout the year.

So now the challenge is yours. I encourage you to focus on a spiritual theme for 2019. Perhaps you'd

like to start with focusing on God's favor as I did in 2011. Begin 2019 with the uplifting verse found in Psalm 149:4. "For the Lord takes

pleasure in His people" (NKJV). God smiles when He thinks about us. I've heard that if God had a refrigerator, our picture would be on it.

I have not yet decided what my focus will be this year, but whatever my theme and word-for-the-year turns out to be, as I read through my Bible again and write this year's devotions on my blog, I will continue to share facts and gems my heart hears from God. It will be a great idea for you to write down the precious things God says to you as well.

Happy New Year! *JH*



### *meet the publisher*

LINDA EVANS SHEPHERD @LINDASHEPHERD is publisher of *Leading Hearts* magazine. She is also a best-selling author, an in-demand speaker, and president of Right to the Heart ministries. She is founder of the Advanced Writers and Speakers Association (AWSA). She lives in Colorado with husband, Paul, and son, Jimmy. [www.Shepro.com](http://www.Shepro.com)

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MEET OUR

# Contributors

## features

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## ^ columns

"EVERY GOOD AND  
**PERFECT**  
GIFT COMES  
FROM ABOVE..."

-JAMES 1:17



MERRY CHRISTMAS & HAPPY NEW YEAR  
**FROM LEADING HEARTS AND**  
THE ADVANCED WRITERS & SPEAKERS ASSOCIATION