

PREFACE

A DEEP AND UNWAVERING PEACE

By Claire McGarry

WE ALL YEARN for peace and look for it in different places. After searching for it over the years, I'd like to propose that true peace is found in love.

If you've ever fallen head over heels in love with another person, you know what I mean. Nothing phases you during that honeymoon period. I experienced it firsthand with my husband, John. There were times when I ran out of gas on the highway, lost my purse with cash and credit cards inside, and fell and twisted my ankle. None of those things undid me. None of them stole my serenity. I considered those events and other problems just minor bumps in the road because I was in love with John and viewing life through rose-colored glasses. Having him by my side was enough to calm my soul. Moreover, John was at the ready to rescue me in every one of those situations. Through it all, he loved me exactly as I am, without judgment, without keeping score.

Sadly, honeymoon periods do end. John and I still love and support each other, but we have a flawed and earthly relationship. We both make mistakes. We're prone to bicker, compete, and reopen old wounds.

The relationship God offers us, however, can be divine if we embrace the heavenly aspect of it. As the Source of love itself, He is unconditional and unchanging. His love comes with no strings attached, no trace of judgment, and no need to earn it or deserve it. He doles it out graciously and lavishly. We just need to turn to Him to receive it.

And when we do? Peace abounds! The deeper we entwine our heart in His, grounding our days in His Word and in His presence, the more peaceful they will be. Sure, we may still lose our car keys, miss a deadline for work, or get bad news from the doctor. However, when we view these problems through God-colored glasses, we're able to look past them and focus on Him to calm our soul. We can feel tranquil—peaceful—despite the pitfalls or mountains in our path because we know His love for us is constant and pure.

Moreover, just as John was there to rescue me, God is always ready and waiting to rescue us at every turn. Isaiah 46:4 (NIV) says: "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

Unfortunately, many people misinterpret what God means when He vows to rescue us, defaulting to society's definition of "rescue," thinking it results in an easy life, one without conflict or hardship. Worse yet, we let social media

and its images of the perfect family, beautiful home, and exotic vacations bombard us constantly, further convincing us that a life other than the one God has given us is what will fill us with abundant joy.

Peace Is an Inside Job

The truth is the complete opposite. John 14:27 (NIV) says: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” True peace isn’t about how things look on the outside. If we only feel calm when things are good, we’re fastening our heart to our circumstances, giving serenity permission to come and go based on the ups and downs of life. That’s not peace at all. It’s actually pleasure, and pleasure is a fleeting emotion.

I experienced the difference on our recent family vacation. We had saved for the trip for over a year and spent the weeks leading up to it planning fun activities and excursions. Unfortunately, less than twenty-four hours after we left home, I sustained an injury that almost ruined it all. As we were exploring the shores of Lake George, New York, I slipped and fell on a wet dock. Up I went like a cartoon character with both legs flying into the air. When I came crashing down, I landed my full body weight on my left elbow. I’ve experienced a lot of pain in my life, but that fall had me gasping for air and reeling in agony. I didn’t break any bones, but my elbow was so bruised that I couldn’t bend it or use my entire left arm for days, to the point where my daughter had to dress and undress me.

The next day, as my husband and kids went kayaking, I had no choice but to stay back and nurse my wounds—both the pain in my arm and the ache in my heart. I could already tell I wasn't going to be able to participate in most of the remaining activities; I'd be a bystander on my own vacation. In my dejection, I turned to God in prayer, reflecting on what I was reading in that day's devotional, a passage from Matthew 13. I was so uncomfortable, I couldn't concentrate beyond verse 16 (NIV): "But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear."

My mind began to wander, and that verse kept repeating in my head. Without any conscious thought at all, it morphed into "Blessed am I." The more that new mantra repeated in my mind, the more my heart aligned with the words. Yes—my injury was preventing me from physically participating in the fun. But it was my self-pity that was preventing me from participating with my heart. I could still be with my family during meals and downtime, playing games and making memories in other ways. I was on vacation after all—away from the demands of life, with the people that mean the most in the world to me. Blessed was I, indeed!

From that point on, I enjoyed every minute of that vacation—not because God outwardly healed me and took away the pain in my arm, but because He rescued me inwardly, taking away the pain in my heart and replacing it with peace and gratitude, even as my elbow continued to throb.

That experience gave the verse in Matthew 13:16 a whole new meaning. When I was using my eyes to see only the negative and my ears to hear only the complaints in my

heart, I was blind and deaf to the gifts before me. It took God's grace to heal my perspective, opening the eyes and ears of my heart so I could experience the peace He was offering me in the midst of my pain and disappointment.

Shifting Our Perspective to Recognize Peace

In 1915, Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin created the black-and-white image called Rubin's vase. When you focus on the white space, you see a vase. When you focus on the black space, you see two faces. It's an example of how things change depending on viewpoint, perspective, or context.

God gave us free will, and with that comes the freedom to choose how we view things. Are we going to focus on the dark struggles in our lives that have the power to eclipse our days and steal our peace? Or are we going to focus on the bright spaces where God's light is shining through, casting out shadows and exuding grace? When we look to the Light of the World with complete trust, we submit to His will for us, sure in the fact that He's always working for our good (Romans 8:28).

Of course, it's easy to see the good in a true and complete healing. But can we see the good when a burden isn't removed? Difficult situations tell us the truth about who we really are and how authentic our faith is. Does our belief evaporate like steam when the heat is turned up? Do we cling to the false peace of this world that slips through our fingers any time something doesn't go our way?

I learned that difficulties can become second chances to practice trust. If we use them like a forger's fire to burn

away whatever negative emotions are entwined around our heart, they refine us—and perfect our faith. Just as lifting heavy things strengthens our physical muscles, bearing up under our struggles with grace strengthens our spiritual muscles. God is with us through it all, strengthening and helping us (Isaiah 41:10) to grow stronger in heart and mind. Consequently, our inner serenity becomes so resolute that the outer waves of adversity can't wash it away.

This doesn't happen, though, without consciously turning to God over and over again. In the same way our earthly relationships are nurtured by time spent together, our Heavenly relationship needs our attention too—not for God, but for us.

Peace Flourishes in Relationships

When my oldest son, Zack, went off to college last year, I longed for him to call or text. I wanted to hear about every aspect of his experience. I was curious about the new people he was meeting, the classes he was taking, the clubs he was joining, and how he was adjusting to being away from home. I'd gone to college myself, way back when, and had experienced the ups and downs of being on my own for the first time. I felt I had the wisdom and experience to help him through it. But no one wants unsolicited advice, especially a teenage boy. I couldn't be a helicopter parent, forcing my guidance down his throat. It was up to him to ask me for it. It was also up to him to decide what he was and wasn't willing to share with me. I'm a bit of a control freak. It was incredibly hard to give him the space he needed

when I so desperately wanted to orchestrate his life and smooth things out for him. I also missed him immensely and craved the connection, even if it was just a random text here and there.

Whether Zack called me routinely or not, shared all that was going on in his life or not, there was no doubt in my mind that I would move heaven and earth to get him whatever he needed—be it in an emergency or just for his well-being. I'm his mother. I'll always want to help him get what's best for him.

God is our loving Father and yearns to be involved in our lives too. There's nothing that brings Him more joy than for us to turn to Him and share all that we're experiencing. Not only does He have the perfect wisdom to guide us, but consistent connection with Him also gifts us with the promise in Matthew 13:16—eyes to see the love and peace He's offering us all the time.

Nevertheless, He doesn't keep score and will still rescue us and give us what's best for us even if we only turn to Him when we're in need. However, it's by remaining connected to Him that we maintain the eyes and ears to recognize His goodness in the here and now, and all the ways He's answered our prayers in the past.

Seek Him for Peace

So, if true peace is found in love, then we all have access to the one source: God. Let's stop seeking peace in comfort and, instead, seek peace in Him. Let's experience that head-over-heels love God is always offering us, a love that brings

a deep and unwavering serenity if we'd just free-fall into it. Let's turn to Him, over and over again, building relationships and standing on His promise to always work for our good no matter how things appear on the surface. Let's stay in His Word where story after story reminds us just how faithful He is in providing that peace.

The following stories in this book illustrate the same. Each one is from an author who experienced firsthand how God is always offering peace, no matter the circumstances. They're proof that God is active in the here and now, every moment of every day, showering grace on any heart that remains open and faithful to Him. May these stories inspire you to see how God is always working for your good in ways you may only recognize when viewed through the eyes of faith.

A heart at peace gives life to the
body, but envy rots the bones.

Proverbs 14:30 (NIV)

MY OWN AMAZING RACE

By Lynne Hartke

“ONE RUNNER,” MY SON, Nate, said as he plopped down the \$3 registration fee for his son, Micah, to participate in the community track meet.

Athletes of all ages surrounded us—from high school, middle school, and elementary. Eyes wide, Micah surveyed the oval track and infield. A hurdler practiced his rhythm as he sailed over a row of hurdles. A volunteer raked the gravel pit for the long jump. A coach gave pointers to a group of young girls as they stretched out their calf muscles on the grass.

At age three, Micah seemed out of place—more of a team mascot than a serious participant. Yet, despite his small stature, in his young chest beat the heart of a runner.

“Play chase, Grandma?” Micah had asked an hour earlier while his mom, Rachel, had organized camp chairs, water bottles, and snacks for the evening competition. Chase was Micah’s favorite game.