

Navigating Life's Obstacles

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet (Psalm 119:105, *KJV*).

Scripture: Psalm 119:97-112

Song: “Thy Word”

On the popular, long-running reality television program *Survivor*, contestants face off in various challenges to win rewards, such as food, blankets, and immunity from getting voted off the show. In one recurring challenge, contestants must work as a team to complete tasks within an obstacle course.

This challenge is difficult because the team members completing the tasks are blindfolded. The only way they know what to do is by listening to the voice of the “caller”—the one person who can see what is going on. The caller’s ability to give clear directions and the other contestants’ ability to listen carefully, precisely following the caller’s instructions, mean the difference between victory and defeat.

None of us knows what the future holds. Often it feels as though life is an obstacle course that we’re trying to navigate blindfolded! Thankfully, God’s Word provides us with a manual for life, helping us avoid pitfalls and teaching us how to please Him in all we do. Our responsibility is to listen carefully and trust His instructions, obeying them even when we can’t see the outcome. This is what it means to live a life of faith.

Father, remind me today that living a life of faith means following You even when I cannot see the way forward. In Jesus’ name, amen.

January 8–14. **Kelly VanKirk Suzano** lives in New York State with her husband and daughter. She teaches chorus and general music classes and helps lead worship at her local church.

The Outcome Is His

[Jesus said,] “My yoke is easy and my burden is light”
(Matthew 11:30).

Scripture: Matthew 11:25-30

Song: “I Cast All My Cares upon You”

I owned a Christian dance studio for several years, and while I loved my job, it was nerve-racking to have an entire year of teaching evaluated based on a single performance by my students. Without fail each year—a few weeks before our big, end-of-the-year recital—I would start having anxious dreams. Once I even dreamed that my students spilled soda pop all over the studio floor and then used their recital costumes to clean up the mess!

The problem was that no matter how well I prepared, the outcome was never totally in my hands. One unfocused dancer could derail a performance, and it was this feeling of not being in control that produced all my stress-induced nightmares.

We can be thankful that God has a better way for us to go about our lives and our work in His kingdom. When we take His yoke, *He* carries the burden, so there is no pressure on us to perform. We can plant gospel seeds in the hearts of our unsaved friends and family, pray for our children night and day, and share the truths of God’s Word with everyone we meet. But at the end of the day, it’s God’s Spirit who causes our work to succeed. What a relief to know that, by faith, we can place our work in His hands and trust Him with the outcome.

Father, thank You that I can rest, knowing that my work in Your kingdom is in Your hands. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Prison with a Purpose

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you (Psalm 56:3).

Scripture: Psalm 56

Song: “Faith of Our Fathers”

In 1660, Puritan minister John Bunyan (1628–1688) was arrested for conducting religious meetings in Bedford, England. (A newly restored monarchy deemed such gatherings illegal.) He was held in prison for refusing to give up preaching and spent the majority of the next 12 years suffering under the conditions of his confinement, separated from his wife and children. Despite these hardships, Bunyan chose to follow in the footsteps of the apostles. He knew from their example that he “ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29, *KJV*).

The apostle Paul was arrested for preaching the gospel too. It was likely during one of his detainments in Rome that he wrote the books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Bunyan, like Paul, used his prison time to write, penning many sermons and various titles, including his most famous book, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Considered one of the greatest works of theological fiction in the English language, this allegory has been a source of encouragement to Christians for more than three centuries.

We may never find ourselves imprisoned for our faith, but at some point, we may experience what seems like an imprisonment of the soul—a time when we feel shackled by circumstances, sorrow, or anxiety. God can use these times to refine our faith, further conforming us to Christ’s image. Even our prisons can be redeemed for His purposes.

Father, I trust that that You’re with me in my trials and that You will bring about Your good purposes through them. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Spiritual Sight

We are looking for the city that is to come (Hebrews 13:14).

Scripture: Hebrews 13:5-16

Song: “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go”

George Matheson (1842–1906) was a popular 19th-century Scottish preacher. His sermons were powerful and moving, but many who heard him speak had no idea of the private burden he bore. As a young man, George began losing his eyesight, and soon all he could see were shadows. To make matters worse, when the woman to whom he was engaged found out about his condition, she called off their wedding. On the evening of his sister’s wedding, George was feeling particularly burdened. Perhaps the wedding brought up memories of his lost relationship. Whatever it was, his pain inspired him to pen the much-beloved hymn “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go.”

One of the main themes of the book of Hebrews is that the physical world is simply a shadow of the real world, Heaven. George knew that this world was not his home, and through the eyes of faith, he saw a heavenly city where all tears would one day be wiped away. He trusted that God’s love and care for him were strong enough to overcome any burden in this life.

May the words he penned encourage our hearts to look to Heaven too: “O Joy that seekest me through pain, / I cannot close my heart to Thee. / I trace the rainbow through the rain, / And feel the promise is not vain, / That morn shall tearless be.”

Father, by faith I will fix my gaze on the things of Heaven. In Jesus’ name, amen.

Mother to Thousands

[Jesus said,] I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you (John 14:18).

Scripture: John 14:18-27

Song: “I Surrender All”

In her early twenties, Lillian Trasher (1887–1961) was 10 days away from marrying the love of her life. There was just one problem: she had a growing belief that God was calling her to be a missionary, and her future husband did not share her conviction. In the most difficult decision of her young life, she broke off her engagement and committed herself to becoming a missionary.

On October 8, 1910, Trasher set sail for Alexandria, Egypt, trusting that God would show her what to do when she got there. Within months of arriving, the young missionary was called upon to pray at the deathbed of a mother with a young infant. Trasher felt compelled to take the child in. She was soon renting her own house and taking in more orphans, providing food, shelter, and the love of Christ to Cairo’s most vulnerable. Although it may have seemed to Lillian Trasher that she had given up her dream of having a family, she became a mother to thousands!

God calls each of us to “die” to our own goals and ambitions so that His purposes can be accomplished through us. When we loosen our grip on our own plans, we open ourselves to discovering the life God has planned for us—a life lived for God’s highest glory and the greatest good in this world.

Father, thank You for providing the grace and strength I need to surrender all to You. In Jesus’ name, amen.

His Spirit Speaks

We have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Song: “All the Way My Savior Leads Me”

Many years ago, I had the privilege of having a meal with a survivor of a North Korean prison camp. I listened in awe as this woman described her experiences. She was not a Christian when she was first arrested, but God revealed himself to her and she received Christ as Savior. In her newfound faith, she had neither a Bible nor any Christian mentors, but the Spirit of God began revealing truth to her, showing her how He wanted her to live. It wasn't until after her escape that she realized the Holy Spirit had revealed many truths of Scripture to her, even though she had no physical copy of God's Word.

What a reproof her story brought to my heart! Although I had numerous Bibles, how often did I truly take time out of my day to meditate on God's Word and allow its truth to penetrate my heart? How often did I quiet myself long enough to know the conviction of God's Spirit?

As Christians, we are heirs to incredible promises; one of the most humbling is that we have been given the mind of Christ. Let's not take this for granted but daily immerse ourselves in God's holy Word instead. When we do, God's truth will begin to change us from within.

Father, thank You for the gift of Your Word and the power of Your Holy Spirit in my life! I will be careful not to take these for granted. In Jesus' name, amen.

Stepping Out in Faith

In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:6).

Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-12

Song: “Trust and Obey”

When I was in college, I believed that God was directing me to go to China and teach English for the summer. But I wanted to be sure I was following His lead. I prayed. I sought counsel. I pleaded for God to give me a sign so I would *know*. Then one day, while at the laundromat, I noticed a small booklet on a table. It was about the need for the gospel in China. What clearer sign did I need? Still, I hesitated. How can one really *know* they are in the will of God?

Something my dad said to me not only made me decide to go to China but also freed me from years of hesitating to act because of fear. He said to me, “Kelly, you truly want God’s will, and He knows that. Even if you find out later that going to China wasn’t His perfect will for you, don’t you trust that He’s big enough to handle it?” I was dumbstruck. God wasn’t asking me to make perfect decisions. He was asking me to trust my imperfect decisions to a perfect God.

As you enter the unknown of 2024, don’t let fear hold you back from what you believe God is directing you to do. If you’ve prayed diligently and your motivation is to honor Him, step out fearlessly, trusting that God will lead you into all He has in store.

Father, I entrust my imperfect decisions to Your perfect plan. In Jesus’ name, amen.