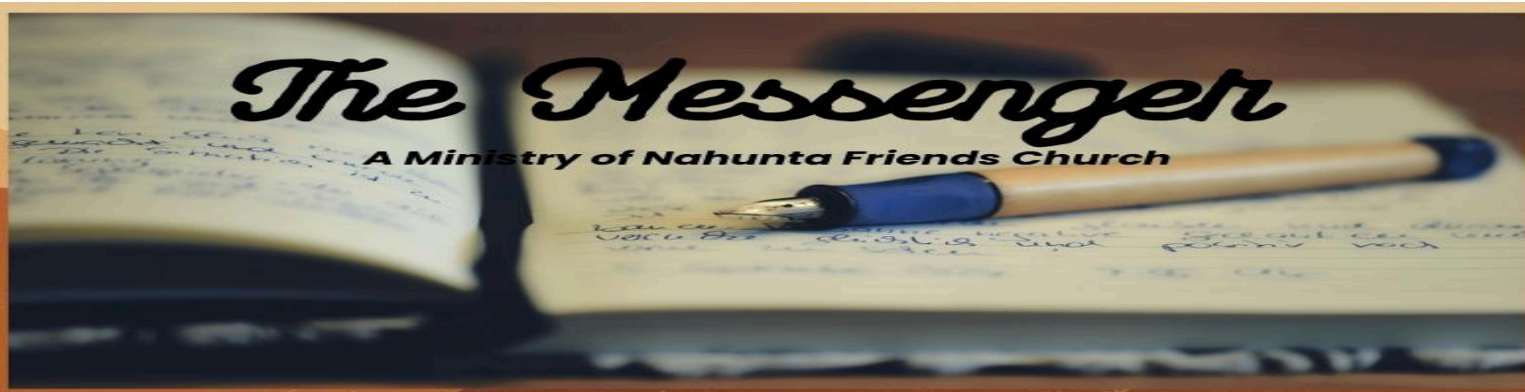




The God Who Knows Our Sorrows

September 2026

"The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt" Ex.3:7

For over four hundred years, the children of Israel were captives in Egypt. During that time God was silent. He was not acting in a way His people could understand. They wondered if they would ever be free. Generation after generation would come and go, with no hint of deliverance from their dreadful lives. Did God even care about them? Did God even exist after all? But, when God does finally act, and confronts their stammering leader through the burning bush, He reveals something vitally important to that eighty-year-old Midian shepherd. One of the first things God did when he called Moses was to convey his constant awareness of the plight of his enslaved people. *"And the Lord said: "I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. ⁸ So I have come down to deliver them ..."* Ex.3:7-8. NKJV

God said, *"I know their sorrows."* He did not start explaining to Moses why it took over four centuries to rescue His chosen. He says; *"I have seen... I have heard... I am concerned... So, I have come down..."* God is about to show His people how much He cares for them, even if it was a long time coming.

It is amazing how much more we can bear, how many questions can remain unanswered, how many solutions can remain hidden, when we know someone cares. Especially if that Someone will one day make it all well, make it all right.

The Bible does not teach us that we are to understand all of God's ways, but what it does call us to do is to trust God's heart. No doubt, on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, the disciples must have thought that the Master would save himself. They saw him raise Lazarus, and heal the sick, so surely, he can escape the cross, but if he had, then no remedy for sin, and no salvation for souls would have been secured. Something brutal had to be endured so that something beautiful could emerge.

Do you have a struggle that needs a divine answer? Does God seem distant and detached from your pain? Do you sometimes quietly wonder if there is a God after all? Do you feel the blows of the cruel taskmasters of physical pain, or grief, or guilt, or fear? Though the miracle has not yet come, there is something comforting in knowing that God knows, and God cares. I Peter 5:6-7 says, *So, humble yourselves under God's strong hand, and in his own good time he will lift you up. You can throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon him, for you are his personal concern.* J.B.Phillips



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Frank Graeff was a Methodist minister in the late 19th century in Pennsylvania. A circuit riding preacher with a special knack for inspiring children. He was not the most famous pastor of his day, but he would pen the lyrics to a song that would be sung for generations after his death in 1919. After experiencing the deaths of two-thirds of his immediate family he penned these words, *"Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth or song, as the burdens press, and the cares distress, and the way grows weary and long. Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares, His heart is touched with my grief; when the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares."*

Sometimes we must wait for the deliverance we seek, but we can do so convinced that our struggle is seen by the One to whom we are praying. This is the One who sees our oppression, who hears our cries, and knows our sorrows. When you can trust His heart like that...the waiting becomes more bearable.

Randy



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Desperate Prayer August 2026

Years ago, I had a conversation with a man whose spiritual life had influenced me greatly. He was a Methodist pastor named Phil Hinerman. We talked about many things that day, and then I asked him about prayer. I was wondering if he knew of some good books on prayer that he would recommend to me. As I was waiting for his response, I was expecting some classic titles or newer volumes on communion with God that had given him the secret to spiritual growth. Almost immediately he gave me a surprising answer. He said, *I have not found any book on prayer that fully satisfies me.* He went on to expound on a life of learning about prayer mainly from experience. It was a growing process that was continuing in his life deep into his 80's. He spoke of certain elements of his prayer practice such as gratitude, surrender, faith, intercession, and then more gratitude. He spoke of how important it was for him to pray daily with a specific time and place. He then added that he had learned to pray whether he felt like it or not. I left that conversation remembering one other statement he made to me. He said, *I have to pray to survive the day.*

That last confession has stuck with me for many years; *I pray to survive.* It is so easy to listen to sermons on prayer, or to deliver them, or read books on prayer, and talk about prayer...without ever praying, without having a real prayer life. My conversation with this elder saint reminded me that prayer should be studied, but more importantly it must be practiced. Prayer must become the great navigating tool of our lives. A sailor can chart his course by the stars at night. He can do this because the stars are fixed in the heavens. They are unchanging even if he is being tossed around by the waves of the sea. The Lord utilizes prayer in many ways, but he always uses it to keep our hearts and minds fixed on his unchanging character and grace in the midst of an unstable and often hostile world.

In the book, *Lead with Prayer*, Ryan Scoog writes about a security guard that was assigned to protect Billy Graham early in his ministry. While at an auditorium this guard slipped out to check the alleyway. When he returned, he could not find the evangelist. *Oh no, I've lost Billy Graham!* While frantically searching backstage he heard a desperate, solitary voice. He found Graham on his face pleading in prayer, *God, I cannot do this without you! God, I need your strength and power to speak today.* No crusade was planned that day. Billy Graham was preparing to speak to a midsize group of leaders for only fifteen minutes.

The most important contributions that prayer brings through our lives does not come from technique, but from tenacity. Not from perfection, but from persistence. Not just from duty, but from desperation. We don't need to be convinced of the value of prayer; we just need to pray. We need to pray regularly, habitually, and expectantly. We need to embrace the truth that prayer really *is* about survival.



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Randy

Taking Off the Headphones July 2026

*Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible
Romans 12:18 (NLT)*

Interesting things can happen on a five-hour plane trip. Such was the case for me years ago on a flight from Portland. There was a young fella who looked to be in his twenties in the window seat on my row. Soon a woman in her late fifties joined us and began to nestle into the middle seat. I try to suppress first impressions, but sometimes they are overwhelming. The young man seemed forceful and overconfident, and the woman seemed a bit self-focused and indifferent, but we all settled down, and the plane took off.

At one point in the flight, I heard the guy chewing something. It sounded like gum or a piece of tire tread. Whatever it was, he was working it over. Obviously the woman heard it well, and it was getting to her. A little later in the flight, having all she could stand, the woman looked at the guy and said, *Your chewing is so loud and obnoxious. You sound like an animal.* At first he seemed shocked, then he bowed up. He took his gum out of his mouth and show it to her. He asked if she would be more offended if he twirled it on his finger. Well! At that point, the fight was on. For several minutes they threw barbs at one another, until it got ugly. The woman finally said, *Your mother did a rotten job of raising you!* to which the guy replied, *I have these headphones here that drown out sound. I can see your lips moving but I can't hear your voice. I bet your husband would love a pair of these!*

I contemplated what I should do. I could offer to sit between them, but did not feel led to die a martyr for Jesus from such an insignificant event. I also thought about reading the Bible....out loud. Maybe a passage from Leviticus about stoning would be good. Eventually the young man put on his headphones and tuned out, then the lady asked the stewardess for some headphones so that she could tune him out. For the next two hours they sat in silence, walled off from each other and the conflict between them. Waiting to land and get away from it all....while I was quietly thanking God that I had an aisle seat.

This is symbolic of how relational conflict can be handled, or *not* be handled. We all face conflict in our lives. It may be with a coworker or neighbor, or in the home with a spouse, parent, or child. One of the easiest responses to conflict is to shut out the other person and the problem.

In most conflicts, we have three options. The first option is to **“tune it up”**, which happens when we get loud, or angry, or forceful. I have done that, and always lived to regret it. Can you relate? The second option is to **“tune out”**, which is when we cut the person off through avoidance or the silent treatment. When we do this we are curling up in the cocoon of self-protection while still spewing out voiceless venom. Silence may be needed in



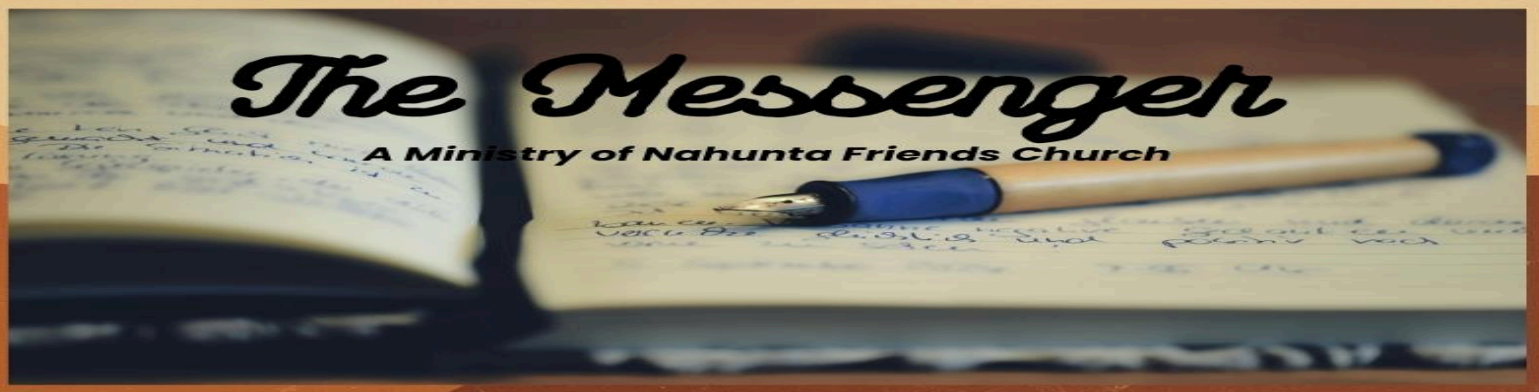
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a heated moment, but this silence is not productive because it is rooted in revenge. There is a third option. We can **“tune in”**. We can tune in on several levels in the midst of a disagreement. One area we can tune into is our own emotions. We can ask, *Why am I so mad?* Is it because I have been mistreated or do I just want to get my way?” Such honest self-assessment is priceless during conflict, and often just as rare. The second area I can tune into is the other person. I must ask, *Have I really heard this person? Is there truth in their comments, even if it is buried under a lot of emotion and immaturity?* Finally, and most importantly, we can tune into the Holy Spirit. The Lord will help us understand the conflict from His perspective and give us the grace to act and react with a Christ-like spirit.

So, our lesson for better relationships is not to go through life with headphones on. When conflicts happen we should try to tune in to the other person before seeing them as an adversary. Pay attention to your deeper motives, listen to the other person’s perspective, and draw on the Holy Spirit’s wisdom.

Oh, there is one more lesson for better relationships....don’t chew so loud.

Randy



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Great Expectations June 2026

Graduations are all around us. With those long commencements come a bucket of dreams for every young adult donning a cap and gown. This causes me to remember expectations of my own. For me, many life dreams emerged in my late 20's on drives through Indiana. The scenery of those first trips to seminary were very unimpressive. It was just flat and boring. The highway was surrounded with mountains of black snow under a canopy of gray skies. It was a dull drive until you crossed the border to Illinois and could see the black beacon of the Sear's Tower. The Hoosier state was pretty dreary compared to the rolling hills of Kentucky and the vibrant city of Chicago. So, in Indiana, I had the time and mental space to dream. With a cassette playing at full volume in my Acura, I could think a lot about my future with few distractions.

It was during those treks on highway 65 that I dreamed of what my life would be like. I dreamed of conversions to Christ and great sermons, of small groups deep in prayer and great sermons, of an expanding witness for Christ through a growing congregation and great sermons! I also dreamed of a family, of marriage, and children. My big dreams were sequential, with just enough everyday life in between to glue them together. Now, more than 35 years later, it's pretty clear that things have not always been like I dreamed. In reality, the things we hope for do not always turn out like we envisioned, no matter how hard we work toward them.

Back to Indiana, I often would be traveling through that state at dusk. There above the flat earth filled with farmhouses and farmland was the sunset. This glorious vista had been above me all the time, but I had not been looking up enough to notice it. It looked like the sky went on forever in every direction. The earth was dwarfed by the magnificence of the Creator's watercolor splashes of red, yellow, and orange, all painted on a canvas of winter gray. What had been a boring place to only dream *my* dreams, had become a sanctuary, shouting out the glory of One so much greater.

Our dreams and expectations for life are part of who we are, but that does not mean that all of those dreams will come to pass. Here is the lesson: we can handle the disappointment of unmet dreams better if we live life under the canopy of our God's glorious love. Our dreams of life are meant to be seen in our peripheral vision. Our main gaze is meant to be upon Christ. When that happens, we can navigate the setbacks. We just have to keep our eyes on Him. Psalm 121's words echo here: *I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.*"

You know, Indiana really is a beautiful state after all!

Randy



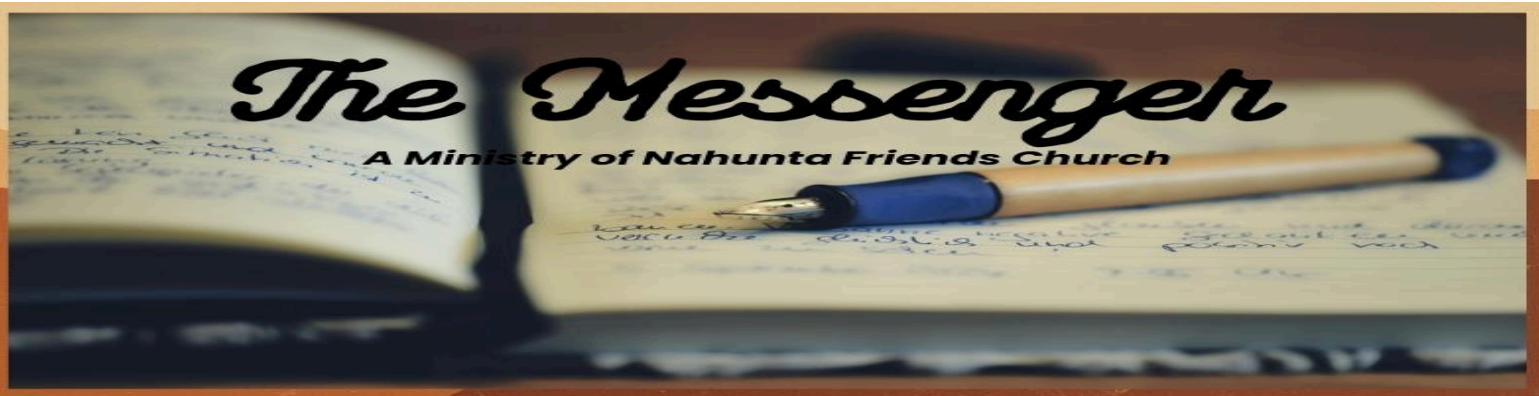
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The Listening Chair

May 2026

Winfred Crouse was a tall and strong man, a man's man, but with a tender streak. He was my uncle and he lived in the parsonage about two-throws from South Fork Friends meetinghouse where he pastored. I was just a boy, but I remember things that boys notice. There were fishing rods hanging in the garage, a *Mustang* and a *Nova* in the gravel driveway, a collie named *King* and a cat named *Tom*. I also remember that Winfred had several metal chairs clustered together near the shade of a big oak. Of all the things I encountered in those visits to my uncle's house, it would be those metal chairs that stood out, and one in particular.

The chair I speak of was probably a hundred years old. It had been Winfred's mother's chair. Multiple coats of white paint clung to the metal. The legs of the chair were bent in such a way that it would rock, but they had curved so far over the years that when you sat down, your rear-end almost touched the ground. It was just right! But the significance of that chair was who sat in it. Winfred spent many hours in that chair. It was a listening chair.

Whenever Winfred was in his chair, with Scottie dog, *Max*, at his feet, he was listening. Sometimes he was listening to a church member who stopped by to share a burden. Other times he might be alone with the Master, listening to His promptings or to the soothing sounds of creation. Winfred was steeped in the Quaker ideal that listening was often better than speaking. That is what made him such a good sounding board for others. He would not speak into a conversation until he had heard your story, and your heart.

Without a listening chair, no one can remain vital and effective in ministry, or in life itself for that matter. Those who know that, and who live it out, become a magnet that draws others to themselves. People can feel the respect and compassion from one who has learned to listen.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us that after the ascension, Jesus Christ *sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*. And Romans 8:34 tells us this: *Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us*. Christ sits on the throne of majesty and honor constantly intervening on our behalf. Every prayer you have ever prayed has been heard by the One in the Listening Chair. He listens to every cry for help, every plea for forgiveness, every expression of gratitude, every invitation to come into a heart. Did you know that? He is listening. He is listening *for* you. He is listening *to* you. So, talk to Him. Pour out your heart to Him, and then after you have done that, spend some time listening to Him.



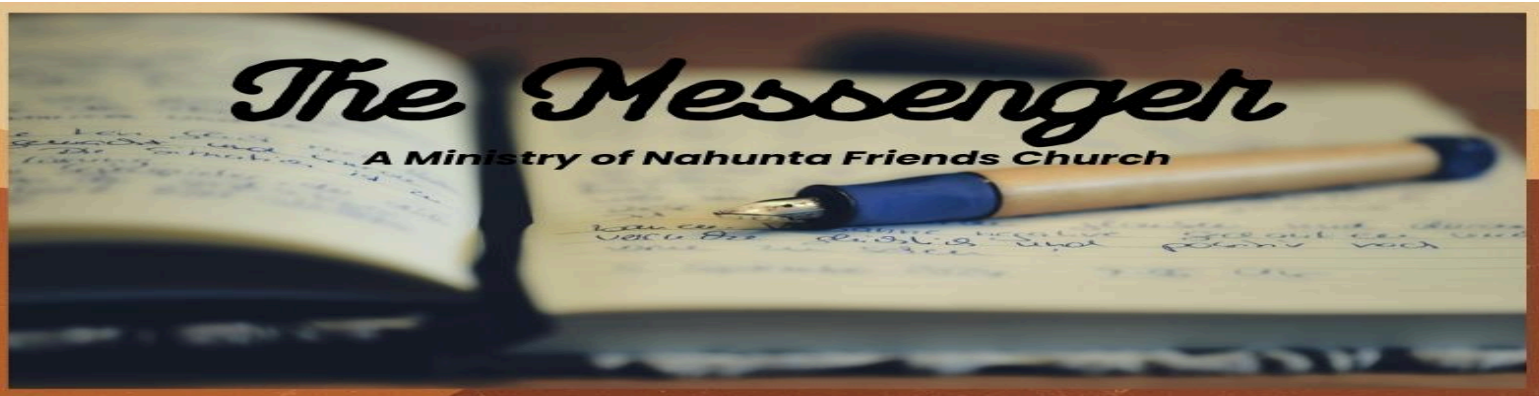
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Randy

God's Relentless Mercy

April 2026

But Jonah ran away from the Lord.... It takes only three verses into the book of Jonah to encounter these infamous words. You see, God had given a mission to this prophet and Jonah responded by showing the Lord his backside. Jonah's most defining title became *fugitive*, and his most descriptive trait became *rebellion*.

But the book of Jonah is not primarily about the disobedience of one man. It is about the tireless energy of God to pursue a runaway. Each verse of this tiny book drips with mercy; God's mercy. God pursues Jonah out of divine love. It is love for a city that needs to hear the truth, but also a stubborn love for a trembling, weak-kneed prophet.

The life of a fugitive is a miserable one. He lives relentlessly on the move. He must abandon the places and people that bring him the most comfort and joy. He is always...always looking over his shoulder. I suppose a fugitive like this would be easy to spot after being on the run. Yet it is possible to be a runaway and still look normal. It is possible to be externally "together" while being a spiritual deserter on the inside.

Why does a person run from God? We may run from the responsibilities and opportunities that God places before us. Others of us may flee from God's loving conviction of unconfessed sin. Some of us may run from intimacy with God because we doubt that He is even there. Still others of us may run from God because we think we have found something better to satisfy our needs.

It is possible to run from God and still have a comfortable place among the religious. It is even conceivable to run from God while still functioning in a church culture, to be doing all the right things outwardly, but to inwardly be taking a detour from God's call. Here is where the real message of Jonah comes in. Throughout Jonah's evasive moves and childish tantrums, he is still pursued by a relentless mercy. When someone runs from God, the Father pursues them with unyielding grace. Because of His love, God does not abandon the hunt of those who have wandered from Him.

There are several definitions for the word *tar heel* as it applies to our state. In the late 19th century, North Carolina was a large producer of tar and pitch used for sailing vessels. It was a derogatory name at first, like the word *Quaker*, but eventually became a badge of honor when the North Carolina troops held their ground in battle. They stood fast like they had tar on their heels. This month we will begin a sermon series on the book of



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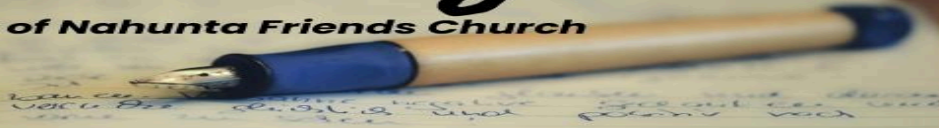


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Jonah. As we do, may we all find a new resilience to stand in obedient service to Christ. To the One who cried, *not my will but thine be done* before He faced the cross for us. He did not run from His mission, and neither should we.

Randy

Skunks March 2026

Years ago, on a hot August day, I was driving down old 421 and encountered a dead skunk in my lane. It did not take long for that ripe smell to rush into the car. Impulsively, I slowed down and turned the fan on high. I soon realized that the car was being filled with that one-of-a-kind scent...so I turned the fan off. Now the aroma was trapped inside, placing me in the middle of a skunk cloud! To add to the dilemma, I had slowed down in my valiant fight against skunk gas and the smell had a chance to linger. I finally found deliverance by opening up all the windows in that old Pontiac and pretending to be at Daytona. Church bulletins and food wrappers were flying around in the back seat. In seconds the hot summer air was pushing that pungent smell away and I was able to continue my journey. I have learned how to respond to a dead skunk: open the windows and don't slow down!

As we move through each day, we never know what we will encounter. There are many unpleasant difficulties that could lay in our path. They may merely be aggravating inconveniences, or they may be disruptions that challenge us in a deeper way. In times like that, what is typically your first impulse? Is it anger? Blaming? withdrawal? or incessant worry? How much do these reactions actually help us deal with the discomfort of a frustrating moment? They often just serve to trap those negative emotions in the cabin of our thoughts where we rehearse them over and over. If the windows of our mind and spirit are closed, or at least distracted from the truth and promises of God, we can be stuck with the odor of a bad experience for days, months, or even years. Our natural impulses are not effective in fending off such irritations and can actually make them worse.

Instead, what if our initial response was to open the windows of our mind to allow the fresh air of Scripture to flow through? What if instead of impulse we began to sing a hymn or a worship song? What if in the midst of that disgusting moment we began to pray? We may find that the scent of the trial begins to fade. What if instead of parking our thoughts near the place of frustration, we focus on where we are going? What if in the moments we are disrupted by an unprovoked and unexpected trial, we keep our destination in mind? As followers of Christ, we have an identity, a purpose, and a destiny from God. When we surrender ourselves over to God's panoramic view of our life, the scent of a lifehurt is put into perspective and can begin to slip away. This is



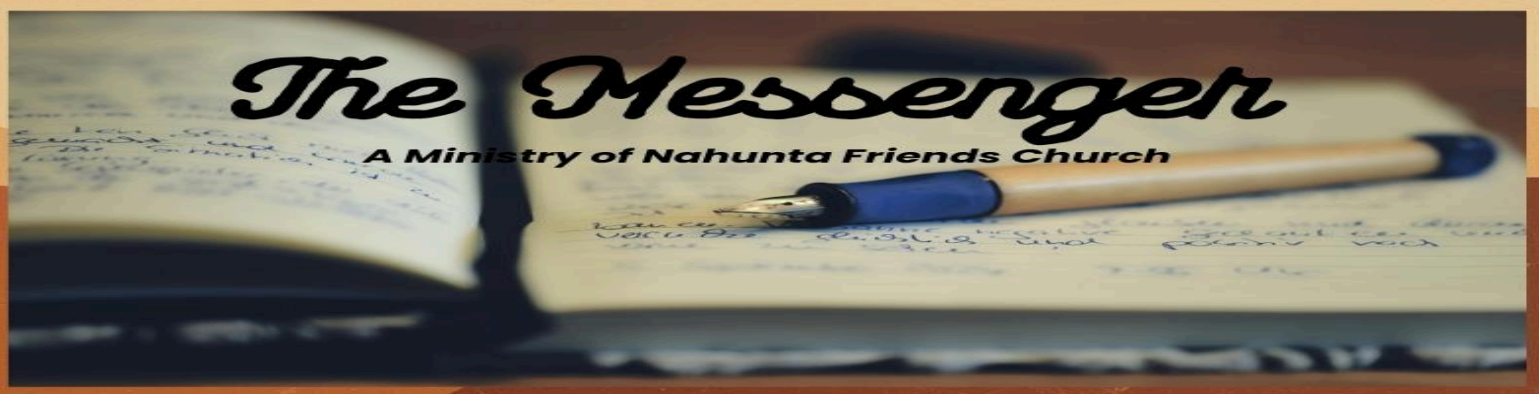
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not about denial. Skunks stink. Sometimes life stinks, but God is good. When we allow His perspective and His promises to flow through our minds, He will transform our days, no matter what's in our path!

Randy

Lord, Teach Me To Pray!

February 2026

Once when Jesus had been out praying, one of his disciples came to him as he finished and said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples..." Luke 11:1

Master, I wonder what that disciple saw in you when he witnessed you in prayer. A wise disciple he was to ask you to tutor him, So I too ask, *Lord, teach me to pray*. Lord, teach me to pray so that I may know you as you are, not as I choose to perceive you to be, or as my emotions tell me. Guide my faith so that I can adore my God as my Heavenly Father, and still honor as my Holy King.

Lord, teach me to pray so that I may keep your Kingdom, at the center of my attention. Let me not be swayed by the words of men, but be directed as a citizen of Another Land. Help me to pray for your will on earth as it is in heaven, your will *in me* as it is in heaven. Help me to be sensitive to the brokenness of a world that has not embraced your rule, but also mindful that one day *every knee shall bow*.

Lord, teach me to pray that the bread for my daily and momentary needs is recognized for what it is; a gift from you, not the reward of my own achievements. Help me in prayer to always know my dependence on you. Help me to see your fingerprints on everything good that touches my life, and let me not get so caught up in what I long for, that I fail to thank you for what has already been placed before me.

Lord, teach me to pray so that I will have the grace to forgive. Help me not to hold on to an unforgiving spirit toward others, which will only weaken my soul. Lord, this is so hard. It is especially difficult in times when the serpent uses the voices of those who once were close and trusted. Let me forgive with the same forgiveness you have showered on my life.

Lord, teach me to pray so that I can stand under the withering attacks of evil. Guide my steps so that I will not fall into needless temptation. Give me discernment so that I can always hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, and not be lured away by the siren call of the wolf.



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Lord, teach me to pray so that I can live in your servant love, with the passion of your cross, with the power of your resurrection, and with the hope of your return. Loving Savior, as I watch the snow falling to the waiting soil, may my heart turn to you moment by moment, breath by breath, and humbly fall at your feet in prayer. Lord, teach me to pray.

Randy

Come with Me!

January 2026

Superficiality is the curse of our age...the desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people. ~ Richard Foster

Have you ever had a demanding day? In Mark Chapter 6, we see Jesus and his disciples having one. It was a day marked by the rejection of Jesus by his hometown of Nazareth. A miraculous, short-term mission effort by the disciples. The horrible martyrdom of John the Baptist and the miraculous feeding of a multitude. Finally, the disciples encounter a vicious storm on the water, and at around 3:00am Jesus walks on the choppy waves to them in the storm. When he climbs into their boat, the storm ceases. Now, that is a challenging day!

When I read this chapter in a red-letter Bible, each reference to the words of Jesus is penetrating and carries great insight. But the words of verse 31 strike me the most right now. In the throes of a stressful day, Jesus says, *Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.* Consider with me what these words could mean for us right now.

First, Christ invites his disciples into fellowship with him. He says, *Come with me.* The personal nature of Christ's presence with us is the same. In the midst of a sometimes hectic and challenging life., Jesus says, *tune everything out, and tune me in!* We don't have to beg God to be with us. He desires it more than we do, and he knows how much we need to be with him.

Then he says, *by yourselves.* This shows the specific need we have at times to be cut off from the urgency around us. The disciples needed relief from people, and so do we. Jesus calls them to a corporate solitude, away from the demands, noise, and expectations of others. Multitasking can be a wonderful practice, but not when it comes to prayer and deep communion with the Lord.

Next, he says *to a quiet place.* They are not being called to a resort, but to a place that is still, calm, and private. Other translations use *desert* or *desolate place* to describe the Shepherd's invitation. Jesus is pulling them away from the pace within them and around them.

The fourth part of this sentence from Jesus is the purpose of it all: *and get some rest.* This rest is not just physical, it is spiritual, mental, and emotional. The disciples need to be replenished and removed from the addictive nature of constant stimulation and engagement. To do that they need to be with Jesus, without others, in a quiet place, so they can



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rest. Jesus is inviting them to more than a nap. He is calling them to a fresh state of being. He is inviting them to what he says in Matthew 11:28, *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*

Do we know how much Jesus wants to be with us? Do we know how badly we need to be with him? Wherever you are right now, whatever you are doing...stop. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Don't rush this. Now listen. Can you hear it? Can you sense it? He is speaking your name. He is saying, *Come with me.* What if you let go of all you are holding onto, and take his

hand?

Randy



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