Hi Ladies!

First you need to know that I am sending you all big bear hugs right now!!!!! I miss seeing your faces and being able to talk directly with you. I pray that you and your family are well physically, spiritually, and emotionally. This is definitely a strange time in our world!

Many of you have been in studies that I have taught and occasionally I reference Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, Life Together. In this book he describes the isolated believer in far lands who longs for the interaction with a fellow believer and then he goes on to write:

*It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a grace of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time still separates us from loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of our hearts. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.*

I used to read this and think of those believers around the world who have little access to the community of believers and I would pray for them but not with the earnestness that I do now. Now I have had a small taste of what it is like to not have face-to-face fellowship with fellow believers. I realize even more now what a gift of grace it is to do life with fellow believers. While I know that my circumstances will end soon, I pray it will spur me to more deeply pray for fellow believers who live in this distancing from fellow believers day in and day out!

Now more than ever I am thankful that technology allows us to continue in some level of communication with fellow believers – we need it desperately! In addition to our Facebook, website page, and Instagram accounts, we like to keep in touch through the monthly newsletter. Even though we already did an April Newsletter, Katie and I wanted to do an extra Women’s Ministry Newsletter this month to help keep us all connected with one another. We have invited numerous women from our church to submit their thoughts on various subjects: prayer, children’s drawings, working moms, to fun and silly adventures in this time. Our prayer is that it would be a source of encouragement and a reminder of the gift of grace that God has given you in the Briarwood Family!

Love you all BUNCHES!!!!

Kristie

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Cathe Cleveland | Choices in an Age of Pandemic

There are so many unknowns in this time of fighting Covid-19. Decision-making is almost impossible because there is no way to have all the knowledge that it really takes to make a reasonable choice. Most choices we make will be absolutely second guessed in hindsight. We are all human, errors in judgment and death are a 100% certainty at some point for every one of us. But the manner and timing of our death is no surprise to the Lord.

Psalms 116:15 (ESV) “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”

My faith in Christ gives me confidence in facing death. But who knows what circumstances will surround me at the time of God’s choosing? I can be confident, however, that He knew the number of days I would have before I was born, and nothing I do would ever be able to change that.

Psalms 139:16 (ESV) Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.

I know many people are facing some of these thoughts, maybe even for the first time in this season of Covid-19.

These past couple of weeks have definitely been filled with mixed blessings for our family. First, on March 22, our daughter Katie developed Covid-like symptoms and did not go into work. Because of the number of people she had been exposed to, we were pretty convinced it was Covid-19. We do not know where she could have picked it up. It could have been anywhere, even from the grocery store. She thought she was being very careful. She took the test on Tuesday of that week but as of now we still do not have results. She has had all the symptoms you hear about though. Fortunately, she appears to be over the hump and getting better. The hardest part for all of us was that she and James, her boyfriend, had been at our house on Friday for dinner and to do laundry. When she came in that evening, I said to her that we were going to social distance while she was here as if she had it.

We were pretty careful, except everyone was petting her dog while they were here. Hands were washed often and she diligently used Clorox wipes on everything she touched. The choice for them to be here we all made, with incomplete information, and that decision might easily have been deeply regretted.

Having had MS since 1996, I know I am more high risk for lots of things. Especially since I have been wheelchair bound for ~7 years. I feel pretty ready to go home to the Lord whenever that time comes. What I was not ready for though was facing either a difficult illness or death leaving my daughter feeling like she had exposed me. The stress of that thought was definitely the most difficult part of that week for me.

The Lord has a way of gently reminding us of things we know but are forgetting in current circumstances. An enCourage podcast where I had been interviewed on the subject of suffering months ago had long been scheduled and was posted that Tuesday. He used my own words to remind me to turn to the Word as I processed what was going on.

When Katie’s boyfriend went to help take care of her, he told her he was bringing cough syrup. But he brought her something else—an engagement ring. We are so thankful for him for so many reasons. He also had symptoms but they are both doing better now. What a story they will have.

We are to the point where we can say that I did not get infected when Katie was here last week. My body is not acting like it does when I have an infection going on (as one of my doctors put it, MS is a jealous disease that does not like to be upstaged). I am so unbelievably thankful.

Each of us has different circumstances that add to the stress of this pandemic. We watch hospitals
near us begin to really struggle under the strain of inadequate numbers of beds, numbers of PPEs and facemasks, and the fear of infection for their staff or their families. We begin to see there are places where people are going to have to make hard choices, especially if this approaches anywhere near some of the apocalyptic predictions of some reports. No matter how skeptical you are of the reporting or government response, you have to wonder how widespread will this get? I'm not sure any human has a real clue. The numbers they are using cannot be even close to the reality until testing is easily available in all situations when needed. Far more are probably infected than we know. But possibly and hopefully, far more have had it and recovered as well.

We all wait for those curves to slow their growth and begin to come down. We pray for our health care workers who are on the front line. We may feel helpless. But we can be confident of a few things. Our country has strayed far from the Lord. Many will probably at least consider spiritual truth as a result of this situation. But I do not believe that the actions of unbelievers are key for the relief from the situation for such a time as this.

I was reminded to go back to 2 Chronicles this week to the dedication of Solomon's Temple.

2 Chronicles 7:12-16 (ESV) Then the Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time." (italics added)

His people who are called by his name in our time are none other than Christians. He is clearly addressing believers and not unbelievers here. The New Testament teaches us that we, as believers, are both individually and corporately God’s temple, where he dwells now.

1 Corinthians 3:16 (ESV) "Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?"

Ephesians 2:19-22 (ESV) “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

As believers, we have a choice in how we will respond. So how will you respond? Will you join with those who humble themselves before our Lord, praying, seeking his face, and turning from any wicked ways? Or will you continue with life as close to usual as you can under quarantine? How bad will this have to get before we cry out to our loving heavenly Father who patiently waits for us? This is our key calling that is awaiting our response for such a time as this.

“I think encouragement has been through little things like reading fun new books or fresh flowers or FaceTiming my college friends that I haven’t all seen in a while! Work has had some fun variety like delivering triplets! One of the main encouragements, though, has been this all happening around Easter. It has made me realize how thankful I am for the gospel, as well as how grateful I am for church community and how much I long for it to be physical again, not just virtual. It’s been such a blessing to be able to reflect on the truths of the gospel when I feel frustrated or afraid, instead of living in a world without hope!”

–Mary Beth Carlisle | Nurse
Whenever the Lord works in someone’s life, it is a glorious thing... here is my story.

I was young and married with two children and in a fancy church with stained glass windows and padded seats and yet I knew my life had no meaning. One Sunday, my husband suggested we go visit a church off 280 with folding chairs. From the beginning of going to that church became the beginning of my life being filled with God’s word. The Lord’s Day worship and tithing was prioritized and valued. The very first time I walked in Briarwood church I knew I was a sinner; understood I needed a savior; and I knew needed to be forgiven! I learned of our gracious God.

My husband and I became Christians around the same time, within a month of each other. I was in my 30’s when I became a Christian. I was in Briarwood from those early days on and it’s been a time of the Lord teaching me hard but good lessons. I was widowed at 58 and joined the Faithful Followers Sunday School class. Through this time I learned the importance of the body of believers and living the Christian life as a family. The saddest thing to me is someone trying to live the Christian life apart from the body of Christ. One talent needs another talent who needs another talent. We cannot do it on our own!

Whoever the Lord puts in the pew next to me is there for a reason. The Lord showed me the value of people!

The Lord brought many people in my life like Jean Beeland, who is a great friend and shares so many books with me; and Caroline Montgomery, who taught me to cook during early Briarwood. I didn’t know you learned how to cook in a kitchen with other people. I also remember learning to cook with Barbara Castleberry. I still love to cook to this day and still use some of Barbara’s recipes. It’s also a little tiny touch of heaven. If you miss this, you miss a tremendous blessing from the Lord.

I’ve gone through cancer with a husband and that was a struggle and some hard times, but really my testimony is God’s grace to me. I am thankful that Harry Reeder has been a faithful preacher as was Frank Barker. You don’t walk into Briarwood and wonder if you’re going to hear the Word of God. The Word is preeminent. And I can’t wait until I can get back and pray and sing with the rest of the body. When you’ve lived 88 years, it’s hard to put the important things first, but the important things are the Church and the Word of God.

When I get to heaven, I think my face will be at the foot of the Lord Jesus and I’ll say I don’t know why you chose me, but it’s been a great grace. And that’s what I’d like to leave at 88.
Katie Dixon | Real Life

I know that some very smart scientists, virologists, and epidemiologists might have anticipated that this pandemic was coming, but it certainly caught me off guard. Having not seen anything like this during my lifetime, I did not realize what was about to happen, and quite frankly, have no idea what is on the horizon. For someone who works in healthcare it has been frustrating to be faced with something that we don’t know much about.

It has been hard to be away from our family, friends, school, church, and our normal routines. More time at home as a family has allowed for more walks in the neighborhood, more snuggles, more conversations, and more projects. To act like it’s all Pinterest-pretty and Instagram-worthy would be highly inaccurate. There has also been more impatience, more tears, more annoyances, and more stir craziness. For me, it kind of ebbs and flows. One minute you look around and think how grateful you are for the family God has blessed you with. The next minute, you think that you will scream if those same sweet people ask you what you are making for the next meal or if they can have their 85th snack for the day. His grace has been abundant and the sanctification is fierce.

When I pause long enough to compare it to life before COVID-19, I find that it isn't that different. I still have to keep my eyes on Jesus and rely on His strength to get me through. I have to shift my perspective to see blessings in the midst of the messes. I have to remind myself that during this uncertainty for us, God is unchanging. He has been on His throne during the flood, during wars, during other pandemics, and numerous natural disasters. There is much uncertainty around us right now and I cannot even begin to explain it. I have no idea how it will change us and the world in which we live. I do know, that much like Peter had to do when he walked on the water, I have to keep my eyes fixed on Jesus and take one step at a time. Sometimes that step is making cookies or a craft with my kids. While other times, it’s hiding in my room with chocolate or taking an extra long shower. It looks different for all of us, but thankfully, grace is new every morning.
Cindy Ball | Recipe for Red Beans and Rice

This is a family favorite! It is perfect in any season. It’s a Sunday Lunch go to, because it can be ready when you get home. It’s also great comfort food, just easy and tasty. I grew up on the Mississippi gulf coast and this has always been a staple in our home. With the Cajun influence all along the Coast, sometimes dinner could get quite spicy - depending on the Chef that night. And of course bottle of Tabasco Sauce was always nearby, just in case you needed a little more kick!!

- 1 lb package Red beans (I prefer Camillia Brand Red Kidney Beans)
- 1 onion chopped
- 1 stalk celery chopped
- 1 garlic clove finely chopped
- 1 bell pepper seeds removed
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 tablespoons parsley flakes
- 4-5 cups of water
- 1 pkg smoked sausage
- 1 small ham chopped
- Rice cooked separately

Rinse and soak beans overnight in enough water to cover beans. In the morning, pour off water, rinse beans and put in a crock pot (for slow cooking) or a stock pot for regular cooking on top of stove. Cover beans with 4-5 cups of water. You can adjust the amount of water per you own preference.

Add to pot: Bay leaf, Parsley flakes, salt and pepper to taste, chopped ham, and sausage

In a sauté pan melt butter, add in onion, celery, and garlic (add last because garlic burns easily) This is where the flavor is won or lost. Fix it up all you like with more seasoning.

Now add these ingredients to the pot, stir.

Cover and cook for 6-8 hours on high (crock pot) or on the stove for 2-3 hours, stirring occasionally. Add more water as you feel is necessary and to prevent dryness; again it’s your preference.

This dish is so fun, because it can be prepared with different ingredients every time. Use spicier sausage; use ham hock instead of ham; use only one kind of meat; mix it up and put in something totally different. Just experiment with other spices, for example creole spices or more veggies. The options are endless. Serve with French bread and a Green Salad.

Bon Appetite!
Kelly Chadwick & Kristie Stein | Book Recommendations

At just under five feet tall, Virginia Prodan was no match for the towering 6’10” gun-wielding assassin the Romanian government sent to her office to take her life. It was not the first time her life had been threatened—nor would it be the last.

As a young attorney under Nicolae Ceausescu’s vicious communist regime, Virginia had spent her entire life searching for the truth. When she finally found it in the pages of the most forbidden book in all of Romania, Virginia accepted then divine call to defend fellow followers of Christ against unjust persecution in an otherwise ungodly land. For this act of treason, she was kidnapped, beaten, tortured, placed under house arrest, and came within seconds of being executed under the orders of Ceausescu himself. How Virginia managed not only to elude her enemies time and again, but helped expose the appalling secret that would ultimately lead to the demise of Ceausescu’s evil empire is one of the most extraordinary stories ever told.

A must-read for all generations, Saving My Assassin is the unforgettable account of one woman’s search for truth, her defiance in the face of sheer evil, and a surprise encounter that proves without a shadow of a doubt that nothing is impossible with God.

The powerful, dramatic story of how a successful Hollywood set designer whose identity was deeply rooted in his homosexuality came to be suddenly and utterly transformed by the power of the gospel.

When Becket Cook moved from Dallas to Los Angeles after college, he discovered a socially progressive, liberal town that embraced not only his creative side but also his homosexuality. He devoted his time to growing his career as a successful set designer and to finding "the one" man who would fill his heart. His life centered around celebrity-filled Hollywood parties and he traveled to society hot-spots around the world--until a chance encounter with a pastor at an LA coffee shop one morning changed everything.

In A Change of Affection, Becket Cook shares his testimony as someone who was transformed by the power of the gospel. His dramatic conversion to Christianity and subsequent seminary training inform his views on homosexuality--personally, biblically, theologically, and culturally--and his compelling book guides readers through this complex and controversial issue while revealing how to lovingly engage with those who disagree.

Leif Enger’s best-selling debut is at once a heroic quest, a tragedy, and a love story in which "what could be unbelievable becomes extraordinary" (Miami Herald). Enger brings us eleven-year-old Reuben Land, an asthmatic boy in the Midwest who has reason to believe in miracles. Along with his sister and father, Reuben finds himself on a cross-country search for his outlaw older brother who has been charged with murder. Their journey unfolds like a revelation, and its conclusion shows how family, love, and faith can stand up to the most terrifying of enemies, and the most tragic of fates.
Amy Butler | The Power of Prayer and the Word During the Pandemic

Throughout the “shelter at home” order, due to the corona virus pandemic, my personal prayer life has been strengthened. Our family’s time at home began a little earlier than most because my oldest daughter, Anna Morgan, returned to Birmingham from Europe the day before the country of Spain, where she had been studying abroad, went into lockdown. This was an initial test of my faith as a mom, so I asked others to join me in prayer for her safe arrival home. The Lord was faithful to hear and answer those prayers, and our fourteen-day quarantine period began!

As this time lengthened due to the stay at home order, I began watching as all of the special events that I had been looking forward to this spring began disappearing from my calendar. These items included my senior son’s high school graduation ceremony, my oldest son’s best friend's wedding, the delay of a bridal tea for the daughter of a friend who now resides in heaven, missing out on the birth of a dear friend’s baby after walking through nine months of pregnancy with her, the loss of time with my precious preschoolers who did not finish out their school year, the cancellation of the trip of a lifetime. Many of you have probably experienced deeper and more significant losses during this time such as the loss of health or the loss of a loved one.

The question remains: How do we process our disappointments? In Dr. Cloud’s counseling class, we have been learning about the gift of lament. Lament is an expression of loss and sorrow. We are learning to lament through our reading and meditating on the Psalms. Boyd Bailey, in his article, “A Multi-faceted Grief,” shares that “lament is a language of love to our Lord. Mourning is medicine to bring us back to God. Only God’s unfailing love can bring comfort to our compounded sorrow.” For me, I am learning to take these disappointments to the Lord in prayer as I access scripture promises to strengthen my faith. Surrender is the key word for spiritual growth in this season of my life as I am going through this pruning process. The Lord is helping me crucify my flesh as I exchange my desires for His plans.

Thankfully, I have been trained through almost twenty years of Moms in Prayer ministry (momsinprayer.org) to study the attributes of God, confess my sins, offer thanksgiving, and pray scripture promises. When I feel helpless, I remember Psalm 121:1-2, “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” When I feel hopeless, I recall Romans 15:13, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” When I am sleepless, I remind myself of Psalm 4:8, “I will lie down and sleep in peace for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” When I am afraid, the Lord brings to mind Psalm 56:3, “When I am afraid, I put my trust in You.”

A few other verses have also helped comfort my soul. When I am disappointed, Isaiah 49:23 says, “those who hope in Me will not be disappointed.” When I am anxious, the apostle Peter exhorts me to “humble myself under the mighty hand of God so at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.” When I want to take control, Zechariah 4:6 encourages me: “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” My father in law shared a definition of hope, which has encouraged me. Hope is a confident expectation. During the pandemic, praying the Word of God back to Him and taking walks in our Savior’s beautiful creation has given me hope and restored my soul.
August Griffith | WBL Director

“Working from home” these days feels like more “struggling while trapped at home.” Please pray for all of the working Mamas in your life! For those of us with young children at home, the days are full and messy during COVID-19 quarantine. Many of us are working from our kitchen tables and juggling the constant needs of our children. I can only imagine how difficult it is for the Mom caring for multiple children and also overseeing virtual schoolwork all day long. Pray for her sanity!

My son Calvin just turned one last month and he is so much fun right now. I truly enjoy him but it is also an exhausting stage. He just learned to walk so as you can imagine, he is mastering this new skill and loving all of the extra time to explore our house... aka his “kingdom.” Calvin is infatuated with all of the dangerous items in our house - like light sockets, glass picture frames, and dog food. I am hustling to Zoom Meetings and changing diapers. I am singing lullabies and thinking about my expense report. I am pushing a stroller and responding to that deadline with a poorly worded email. [Please forgive the typos! Juggling motherhood in a quarantine!] I feel simultaneously frustrated and grateful all week long.

It’s frustrating to be “home” and not fully present, but I am grateful for the blessing to work remotely. It’s frustrating that we have no childcare, yet I treasure these extended days with Calvin.

What I’ve learned during this season is 1.) I need the Holy Spirit to guide me hour by hour. 2.) I may be frustrated and disappointed but God can handle it. In fact, he promises in his word: “Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for you souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matt 11:28-30

HIS BURDEN IS LIGHT.

Lord, help me to come to you in my frustrations and disappointment. Help me to give you my anger, my exhaustion, and my fear. Help me to learn from you in the midst of this crisis. Help me to be a faithful employee AND a faithful mother today. Your promises are true and your burden is light.

We are all experiencing this crisis differently. Keep taking it one day at a time dear sister. And when your burden is heavy, give it to Jesus. [And don’t forget to check on your working-mom friends!]

WBL Update: Like the rest of the world, we had to change our plans. But God’s plans are always better! We were able to offer our Spring Luncheon virtually! We shared Lauren Sisler’s testimony online and hundreds of women all across the country we’re able to tune in. Praise God that so many women were able to join us remotely! Please pray with us that God would use our video message to draw women to himself and to open new ministry doors.

“Be still, and know that | I will be I AM GOD. | exalted | AMONG THE | I WILL BE | NATIONS. | exalted | THE LORD OF HOSTS IS | IN THE EARTH.” | with us | THE GOD OF JACOB | IS OUR FORTRESS | Psalm 46:10-11
Dr. Chesley Peed | Briarwood Counselor

We asked Dr. Chesley Peed to engage with a general scenario of how some of our women might be feeling right now. The following is the scenario and her encouragement to us as believers:

I am not anxious by nature. However I almost feel paralyzed worried about the health of my family, and my parents. I’m concerned about my husband’s job and my job. How do I stop my fears playing over and over in my head?

It is only natural to be experiencing fear during this time. It is an unprecedented, global pandemic. We probably all have a list abounding in “what-ifs” that could easily allow fear to dig its nasty talons into our hearts.

However, as believers, it is important to engage the emotions we feel during this time in a way that is biblical, and honoring to the Lord. We are afraid because the people and things we love are under threat—some probably for the first time. Engaging fear biblically, includes us acknowledging what is causing our minds and hearts discomfort. Confess the fear to the Lord in an open and honest prayer.

You could probably tell me how many times “fear not” appears in Scripture, but not know how to practically “fear not.” Maybe it would be helpful for you to make a list of concerns and when you are done praying through them the first time, title your list: “Things I am Trusting the Lord With,” as a physical reminder of transforming fear to trust.

The elementary principles of faith are going to be what aid you in your endeavor to engage fear biblically. Take your thoughts captive. Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus reminds us in our present age to not only put off the “old self” and be “renewed in the spirit of our minds” but to also put on the “new self” (Ephesians 4:22-24). An emotional response comes from our thoughts about a situation. We cannot simply stop fearing without first taking our thoughts captive and consciously replacing our desire for control or knowledge, with trust in the Lord and His sovereignty.

Begin your quiet time with the Lord each day by using Psalm 27 as an outline for remembering who He is and what He has done for you in the past. Cry out to Him in lament over the current global situation and the present and potential crises surrounding your family. Petition Him for help. End with courageous resting in who He is and belief of His goodness. This global pandemic and its wake are revealing the self-reliance buried in our hearts – this we can thank the Lord for – we can choose to either cherish it and live in fear, or confess it and let it move us closer to our Savior.
Barrie Downs | Artist

The following are a collection of coloring sheets Barrie has created! To print them out for use, see the PDF versions attached to this email.