

Flourish

LIVE LOVED.
LIVE FEARLESS.
LIVE FREE.



MARGARET FEINBERG


WORTHY[®]
Inspired

YOUR INVITATION TO FLOURISH



I could not have penned a more terrifying personal tale than my previous year. My battle with a life-threatening illness at times stole my will to live. A glut of surgeries altered my body forever. Drugs I can't pronounce fogged my mind and clouded cohesive thought—a serious problem for a writer.

My body ravaged.

My spirit lifeless.

My friendships atrophied.

My connection with God felt frayed.

The Margaret I once knew had slipped away.

Can you empathize? Like me, do you ache for a previous version of life? Perhaps you've been navigating a cavern of deep grief, loss, or loneliness. Years of caring for an ailing parent stripped margin from your life, or raising and releasing your children has prompted questions of purpose and meaning. Pockets of time spent in Scripture or prayer or pews—once sources of happy wonderment—now feel like a chore.

These moments make us feel like the parched soul described by the ancient prophet Jeremiah:

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“That person will be like a bush in the wastelands;
they will not see prosperity when it comes.
They will dwell in the parched places of the desert,
in a salt land where no one lives.”

(Jeremiah 17:5–6)

Are you depressed yet?

You shouldn't be.

Jeremiah refuses to end with this elegy because he knows desolation is not our destination. Instead, the prophet lifts our downcast eyes with hope of revitalization.

“Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,
whose confidence is in him.
They will be like a tree planted by the water
that sends out its roots by the stream.
It does not fear when heat comes;
its leaves are always green.
It has no worries in a year of drought
and never fails to bear fruit.”

(Jeremiah 17:7–8)

All who heard Jeremiah's words would have snapped to attention. Ancient Israel sweltered in its arid landscape. An emerald-leafed tree served as a remarkable symbol of life and vitality. The striking image drills deep, but then the prophet adds a detail that's almost absurd: This tree *never* fails to bear fruit.

The metaphor is the modern equivalent of a slot machine that always strikes the jackpot, a lottery ticket dispenser that produces the winning numbers every time, a bank account with unlimited funds.

Eyes open, mouths gape, waves of whispers ripple through the crowd.

Trees in the Bible often serve as metaphors referring to people, not plants.¹ By stacking these two images side-by-side, Jeremiah gives voice to one of life's most weighty decisions. Will we resign ourselves to live like a desert tumbleweed or become a lush and lavish tree? Will we live parched or be planted by a rivulet? Will we wither away or bear clusters of tangy fruit?

Jeremiah presents a choice, but really there is *no* choice.

I'll be the second tree, thank you very much.

The life Jeremiah describes can be summed up in a single word from the Bible: *flourish*.

The word “flourish” pops like corn in the Bible, appearing most often among the poets and the prophets. This agricultural term—*yapriah*, “to blossom” or *parach*, “to bud”—emerges alongside images of trees, grass, vegetation. Sacred excavation reveals layers of meaning within these metaphors.

From the opening biblical command to “be fruitful” (Genesis 1:28), we find God commending behavior that enables creation and humanity to flourish. The text portrays a partnership that leads to both personal and communal flourishing.

Proverbs 14:11 says, “the tent of the upright will flourish,” which teaches that a life that flourishes nurtures the community around us. God can “make the dry tree flourish” (Ezekiel 17:24), illustrating that adversity cannot steal God’s ability to make us flourish.

Throughout the Psalms, the flourishing of the righteous sings in harmony with peace, a deep sense of shalom. Other passages, such as Psalm 1, show that the virtuous, flourishing life springs from community.² This is why I recommend reading this devotional alongside friends.

What does it mean to flourish?



We flourish when we pursue the life God intends.



When our busy schedules keep us from stopping to love on a hurting friend, we falter. But when we slow to open our arms to embrace the wounded, we flourish.

When we snap back at the difficult coworker, we flop. But if we return the insensitivities with kindness, we flourish.

When our parents’ inadequacies make us resentful, we flail. But when we learn to love and honor them despite their imperfections, we flourish.

From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah to Zechariah and Elizabeth, from Genesis to Revelation, flourishing lives serve as signs and symbols of the kingdom of God. God’s grace and favor make flourishing possible. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ empowers us to live loved, fearless, and free.

If that isn't enough to make you salivate, here's some whipped cream and a plump, juicy cherry: Our flourishing gives God great satisfaction and joy.

After feeling wilted inside, I committed to unearth what the Bible revealed about a flourishing life. New passages budded with tender blossoms. Old ones burst forth from the winter dormancy and sprang fresh insights.

A handful of traits of the flourishing life emerged...

Planted in Love

Rooted in Trust

Grounded in Wisdom

Nourished by Community

Springing with Courage

Growing in Grace

Prepared for Drought

Protected from Floods

Budding with Hope

Blossoming in Freedom

Ripening with Resilience

Bursting with Life

Cultivated by Christ

Along the way, I harvested a bouquet of surprising scriptural beauties and stories of flourishing I couldn't keep to myself.

I hand them to you as a gift in hope we will learn to flourish together.

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The lush life awaits.

We can learn to hear God's voice echoing in the everyday.

We can learn to scout for God in the nooks of life.

We can learn to live in awe of God's wonders.

We can learn to burst forth with a joy that cannot be contained.

We can begin flourishing today.

My hope and prayer is that we will learn to thrive alongside our loved ones and sip the sweet nectar of life-giving bonds. To push our roots into the depths of not only the richest, but also the rockiest soil. To tap into the underground river of Living Water.

Blessings,
Margaret

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL



- Fifty-two entries allow you to enjoy this devotional at your own pace. Read one entry per week throughout the year. Or read one each day for eight weeks, then repeat. Do what works best for you. Remember, all is grace.

- For your ease, a box sits next to each entry in the table of contents. Check off the ones you've completed as you read so you don't get lost along the way.

- Each entry concludes with an activity or reflection question and prayer. Take a few moments to dig deeper into what you just read. Even the smallest moments of prayer and silence can be transformative.

- After each month's reading (every four devotions), you'll find a lush coloring page. Grab crayons or colored pencils. Allow your inner creative spirit to flourish. Speak the Scripture aloud. Journal what you discover as you interact with the text.

- Since life is best lived alongside others, *Flourish* is designed to be enjoyed among friends. Invite someone near or far to join you in each of the readings, talk openly about what you're discovering, and pray for each other.

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→→→ Share your artwork, your activities, your reflections, your discoveries, your questions through social media. Use hashtag #flourishdevo so we can find each other online and learn to live loved, live fearless, and live free together.

Planted
in
Love



Week 1

THREE WORDS
YOU NEED TO HEAR



Three words exist that you must hear from God today. No matter what your circumstance, this trio of syllables breathes life, imbues hope, infuses joy:

I.

Love.

You.

Lucky for you and me, these three little words emerge again and again throughout Scripture. Each page reveals the bigheartedness of God and his endless reservoirs of love.

“I paid a huge price for you... That’s how much you mean to me! That’s how much I love you! I’d sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you” (Isaiah 43:4 MSG).

That’s just one seedling from the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Jesus talks about love, teaches about love, models love. He even sacrifices his body because he loves you so much.

Why does God use the entire Bible and thousands of years of history to talk about love?

Because he wants us to flourish and knows that can only happen when we hear and believe those three words.

Maybe like me, you are all too aware of your faults and failures, your shortcoming and slipups. While we may never ask someone, “Am I loveable?” we spend oodles of time wondering.

I confess that sometimes I modify my behavior to satisfy their silent cravings. I orchestrate an adorable outfit so I can receive more compliments. Or I try to win someone’s affection by purchasing them an outrageously generous gift. If the person responds with affirmation or accolade, I pretend it’s nothing at all. Yet deep down, I wish they’d say more. Perhaps their words would dull the ache that accompanies my suspicion that I’m not lovable.

Perhaps you do that, too.

Yet God alone provides satisfying responses to our deepest doubts, our most mangled fears. Through the spyglass of Scripture, we see the abundant love of God isn’t just some abstract theological idea, but a gift that is real and that we can experience every day.



**Jesus empowers us to move from
recognizing God’s love to receiving God’s love.**



Recently, I confessed to God that I felt unlovable. As I aired my feelings, I reflected on his expressions of love in the Scripture. When I arrived at Psalm 33:5: “The earth is full of his unfailing love,” my eyes grew damp. The response swelled like sea surf before crashing over my soul.

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God's fierce love is abounding, bounteous, crammed, bursting, jammed full, running over, teeming, overflowing, never in short supply. Divine affection orbits and permeates and saturates. God's love never ends. Tears plopped on the page.

The emotional reaction left me puzzled. I'm not a teary person and go to great lengths to avoid becoming misty—including avoiding all Nicholas Sparks movies.

By then I was weeping.

When I regained my composure, I realized Scripture exposed my hidden questions, doubts, and angst regarding God's love. I believe in my cranium he loves me but strain to receive his affection in the fibers of my being.

On far too many days, God's love doesn't feel palpable or perceptible. Though I proclaim God's love to others, such divine affection often feels like it's for someone else, anyone else, just not me. Yet the passages reveal God's love as closer, more faithful, more bountiful than I comprehend in the nooks and crannies of every day.

Life's difficulties, disappointments, and flat out disasters often twist our perspectives of our core identities. They convince us we do not belong, we do not matter, that our lives are inconsequential. The coarseness of life can close us off from absorbing and receiving God's good gifts.

Like a plant seeks water, punching through packed soil, splitting solid rock, in some cases moving mountains to drink from an underground

spring, we are created to thirst and discover the fullness of life found in God and his love.

After I finished reflecting on Scripture and dried my eyes, a prayer emanated from my lips:

God, open me to the fullness of your love. Awaken me to your divine affection.

I wondered why I hadn't done this sooner. Love is the foundation for faith and knowing God, yet I'd never set apart specific time to marinate in the truth of God's fierce love. I ended my time hopeful—and yes, even happier.



FLOURISH TODAY: Turn to page 27 and color Jeremiah 31:3, inserting your name into the promise: “I have loved you, _____, with an everlasting love.” Snap a photo and share with your friends online using #flourishdevo

THIS WEEK'S PRAYER: *Father, Open me to the fullness of your love. Awaken me to your divine affection. Amen.*



Week 2

THE NATURE OF LOVE



How do you recharge your emotional and physical batteries? Some people frolic in the ocean. Others prefer stillness and solitude. Others draw energy from celebrating with a crowd of friends. For me, the wonders of a hike in the mountains rejuvenate my core.

Maybe that's one of the reasons I find Jesus' teachings magnetic. He loves to instruct from nature, about nature, with nature. He preaches from stony mountaintops, wheat fields, even the middle of a lake. Farmers and foxes and hens take leading roles in stories. He handpicks fisherman as disciples and nicknames himself the Good Shepherd. Divulging his nature through nature, he orders the squalls and sea spray obey him.

What does Jesus' affection for creation have to do with love?

Much.

In one of Jesus' most famous sermons, he speaks of creation to unearth a crucial dimension of love.

"Look at the birds of the air," Jesus counsels in Matthew 6:26, followed by, "See how the flowers of the field grow" (v. 28).

Jesus says those who follow him are to become birders and botanists, people who fix their eyes on ravens and lilies, specimens that display the good, the lovely, the admirable. But this command is more than an invitation to join the Sierra Club.

If we're living in white-hot pursuit of God, Jesus says, the focus of our lives will shift. Everyday details like what's missing from the brunch menu to the ever-changing fashion boots trends will lose their importance. We will become less fussy and more grateful.

Jesus insists on this refocusing. Life tends to draw our gaze downward in discouragement and inward in selfishness. But Jesus tells us to squint outward and upward. We must branch out to admire the robins, canaries, and hummingbirds and listen to them whisper rumors of another world.

Their physical presence reminds us of the invisible God who holds together all things. Though we may be tempted to question or doubt God's loving-kindness, these feathery friends display God's unbridled love for his creatures.

“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. *Are you not much more valuable than they?*” (Matthew 6:26)

There's more. Because Jesus' encouragement to focus on nature is lassoed to a lesson about why it matters.

“See how the flowers of the field grow... If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, *will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?*” (vv. 28–30).

Jesus' teachings beat back the propaganda that we don't matter to God. That we must strain forward on our own. That the weight rests on our spines. That we master our own destinies.

In this pen of hogwash, Jesus turns our eyes to the featured creatures and asks, “Are you not worth much more than they?”

Jesus highlights our incalculable worth. Our preciousness cannot be weighed in carats. As God’s prized possession, we do not have to live our lives grasping for that which is freely given.

Being planted in love means perceiving our immeasurable value to God.



**You may not think you matter to God,
but you matter more to God than you think.**



The first century Jews to whom Jesus preached should have known this truth already. The Old Testament speaks of God as jealous and possessive, and the ancient writers meant this in the best possible way.

God’s people are referred to as God’s possession. The repetition of “I am your God” and “You are mine” echoes from the Bible in the laws, the decrees, the commands, the calls to holiness.³

God’s love for you can be seen in nature because if he created masterpieces like a tangerine sunset or a crimson rose, imagine how much more artistry he accomplished when he created you.

When you’re tempted to believe you aren’t worthy of God’s love, take a hike. Literally. Rush outdoors and observe God’s handiwork. Look over here and there and everywhere. Eye the furry and the feathery. Observe the vivid, velvety, and wooly creations.

Consider the careful craftsmanship behind fashioning one breath, one wing, one petal. Reflect on the loving care the Maker takes in every creative expression. They are beautiful, but they pale in comparison to you.

That's how much God loves you.



FLOURISH TODAY: Step out your front door. Identify three things in creation that God values. Pause. Breathe deep. Now reflect on how much more God loves you. Repeat, if necessary.

THIS WEEK'S PRAYER: *Father, When I feel unworthy, help me to notice the reminders of your love all around me. Amen.*



Week 3

CONFESSIONS OF
A RECOVERING PERFECTIONIST



Hello, my name is Margaret Feinberg, and I am a recovering perfectionist.

I like my life and my house and my workspace to be tidy and clean and in proper order. When I fail, I beat myself up. When I succeed, I don't take time to rest or celebrate before moving on to the next task.

Perfectionism ranks among the worst flaws because of its natural positive feedback mechanism. A perfectionist lives frustrated by flaws, and since perfectionism is a flaw, perfectionists exist in a constant state of frustration.

Even if you're not a perfectionist, you can still become discouraged by your flaws. Perhaps that's why Jesus' roster of disciples provides great comfort. One might expect Jesus to handpick the best and brightest. Would you expect any less from the Son of God?

Plus, tick-tock, Jesus only has thirty-six months of ministry. He can't afford to take unnecessary risks if he hopes to accomplish his mission in such a short span of time.

But, as it turns out, Jesus would have made a lousy kickball captain. He doesn't select the strongest, most agile players. He skips over the smarty pants valedictorians and Ivy League graduates. Instead, Jesus assembles an improbable team.

PLANTED IN LOVE

Luke 6:13 records: “When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.”

Peter—impetuous, brazen, competitive, waffler

Andrew—lives in the shadow of his brother, Peter

James—a son of “thunder,” edging for the front row

John—a son of “thunder,” full of hot air and swagger

Philip—limited by his experience

Bartholomew—lacks a filter

Matthew—shady past as a tax collector

Thomas—must I remind you of his colossal doubt?

Simon the Zealot—freedom fighter

Jude—way too quiet, not likely to be selected for class president

Judas—a greedy backstabber

What’s-his-name?—that obscure guy no one can remember

A list like this makes the perfectionist in me as nervous as an introvert at a housewarming party.

Jesus takes an enormous risk. His every act endures heavy scrutiny. Religious paparazzi tail Jesus snapping mental images of his movements, his comebacks, his companions. The trackers share their discoveries with the religious hierarchy. They spend hours dissecting every syllable, every interaction.

Luke 6:7 says, “The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus.” The religious powerbrokers work around the clock to snare the Son of God, so he can’t afford a roster of liabilities.

The religious leaders nitpick Jesus. By contrast, Jesus’ screening process for his disciples elevates the lowly. He reminds us that the kingdom of God doesn’t expand through the work of religious paparazzi and spiritual overachievers. God isn’t limited by our imperfections.

God fiercely loves us through our flaws and imperfections—not in spite of them.

Sometimes I count my flaws as reasons to be disqualified by God. Maybe you do, too. I’ve never been the keenest in any class, the swiftest in any sport, the most agile in any activity.

As a senior in high school, I took the SAT for college admission. I scored a 410 in English. I think you receive a score of 400 for writing your name at the top of the page. Yet despite the absence of a large vocabulary and creating far too many nonwords (according to my husband, Leif), I’ve published dozens of books and Bible studies.

Our weaknesses and flaws can become portals for God's grace, windows to display his glory. When imperfect people trust God and do their best to follow him, they become glimmers of goodness, and we can only assume that something or Someone else must be at work.

Jesus' selection of the disciples reveals that God's affection for us never wavers—whether we score big or run up a deficit on life's ledger.



**When we're at our very worst,
God still loves us as if we're at our very best.**



No matter how you feel about yourself or your life today, Jesus invites you to find your way back home to the open arms of the Father. To be enfolded in his warm embrace. To bask in his joyous grin over you.

Whenever your flaws overwhelm you, think of the flawed followers of Jesus who are revered as apostles. He loves you just as dearly as he loved them and offers you the privilege of serving him. Just as you are.

Live loved amid your many flaws. You're in good company.



FLOURISH TODAY: Identify three specifics you don't like about yourself. Thank God for the imperfections and the opportunity they provide to display God's grace and his glory.

THIS WEEK'S PRAYER: *Father, Thank you for loving flawed disciples like me. Amen.*



Week 4

LIVE LOVE AND GIVE LOVE



Love's short four-letter construction is deceiving. The word seems so simple: L-O-V-E. But trying to understand love can leave your head spinning. *What does that four-letter word look like? How does it work? And why does love seem so difficult to conjure up when it comes to that nasty next door neighbor?*

Adventurous by nature, I converted my questions into a spiritual caper. I scoured the Bible from front to back, from *alef* to *tav*, to log teachings about love. From this, I developed a catalog of the characteristics of love. If I knew how to identify love, I could spot it among counterfeits.

A curious pattern soon emerged: Love moves. While I imagined love like a colossal ruby-red heart that sat stationary, love wiggles and squirms more than a sugar-filled toddler.

Love rejoices.

Love protects.

Love trusts.

Love forgives.

Love hopes.

Love perseveres.

Love leads.

Love keeps.

Love abounds.

More than a string of letters, a word can change based on its function. My elementary English teacher called this the “part of speech.” Though I often think of love steady as a noun, love glides like a verb. Much like a liquid, love splashes and splatters, infiltrates and infuses, careens and cascades. The imagery stirred my longing to dive into the subterranean depths of God’s love.

The more Scripture I explored, the more I believed and received God’s love. Then I smacked into 1 John 4:19–21: “We love [God] because he first loved us . . . Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”

Gulp.



Love finds a way to you then through you.



Because of its verby nature, love cannot become dammed up with us. The L-word floods into our lives, nourishes our spirits, then animates our actions. We *fill* with love and then we *spill* with love. When we drench others with love, God refills and overflows our holding tanks.

I prayed to become more attuned to the needs of others. The changes were slow like the way dripping water reshapes a stone.

An elderly woman needed a place to sit. I gave her mine.

A father of two at the checkout seemed rushed. I offered him my place in line.

The lady next to me in the waiting room wanted to chat. I put down my magazine and enjoyed her company.

People appeared before me that I hadn't seen before, or rather, hadn't wanted to see before. Living loved nudged me to engage, to embrace, to serve each one—even in the slightest of ways. More than anything, I desired that these people lived loved, too. Overflowing with God's affection, I longed for as many people as possible to join the party and discover how beautifully loved they are.

This transformational process didn't come without a struggle. I argued uncharitably with the customer service guy of my cell phone carrier. I snipped at a sales clerk for her slow service. Leif returned home late from work to find me critical instead of compassionate.

If you try to give the love you've received from God, expect moments of wincing and strain. Love that is shared with you must be spread to others.

When you flounder and fail to dispense, don't give in to defeat. Instead, seize the opportunity to recommit yourself to living loved and giving love.

The way of love rumbles and tumbles, a mysterious path fraught with failure and frustration. When you're tempted to throw up your hands and yell, "I can't," listen for the still voice of God to whisper:

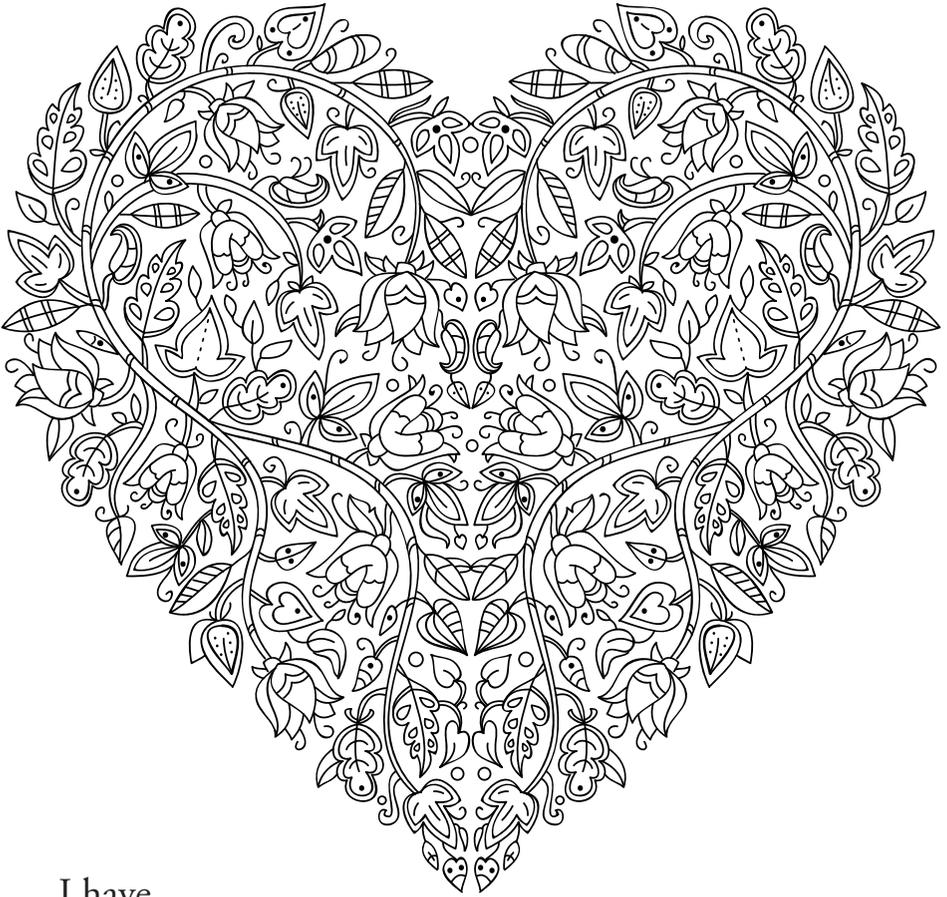
"No, *you* can't. But *my love* can."



FLOURISH TODAY: Think back to a time when someone made you feel most loved. Duplicate that action in the life of someone who needs it today.

THIS WEEK'S PRAYER: *Father, Help me to make more room for your love in my life by pouring it out to others. Amen.*





I have

loved you, _____ ,

with an

everlasting love.

With

unfailing love

I have drawn you to myself.

JEREMIAH 31:3 NIV