

Experiencing God's Love
Pastor Jen Souter
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How many of you were at McBIC in 1995? I ask that question because during the 1993–1995 window, Pastor Ken Hepner, Pastor Doris Barr and our leadership team at McBIC began a journey into a prayer and counseling ministry that we know today as transformational prayer or healing prayer. God began showing us that the healing, growth and discipleship of followers of Jesus frequently stalled due to wounds they had experienced or lies they'd believed from their childhood, teen or young adult years. Hundreds of people—including ourselves—received Jesus' healing and experienced significant breakthroughs in their relationship with Jesus and in how they interacted with other people.

A Scripture God led Pastor Ken to, which became foundational for those walking through healing, was James 4:6-10:

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

– James 4:6-10

These verses became a template our staff and others who served in this ministry walked people through as we sought to position them before Jesus to experience his truth and his healing. There's a lot I could unpack from those verses, but today I want to have us just focus on the first six words: "*But he gives us more grace.*" That simple statement assures us that no matter what God has already done in our lives, more of his grace is available to us.

It's easy for followers of Jesus to fall into the trap of thinking that when Jesus saves us from our sins, our spiritual journey is complete. It's true that when Jesus died on the cross, everything we need was provided for us—we were given victory over sin and over death—but our ability to receive all Jesus has handed to us is worked out over the course of our lives. The fancy Biblical term is sanctification, the lifelong process of growing in holiness and becoming increasingly like Jesus.

Can you agree with me that all of us need more Christlikeness in our lives? None of us instantly became a finished product when we accepted Jesus into our lives. I like the way Terry Wardle explains

our journey of transformation in Christlikeness. Terry says, “When I became a follower of Jesus, I was transformed, throughout my life I’m continually being transformed, and one day, I will be fully transformed.” No matter where you and I might be in our spiritual journey, God has more grace for us.

I share that with you this morning, because in a few moments, we’ll have the privilege of hearing from Jen Souter, McBIC’s Kids Pastor, and Jen is going to share with us how God has been at work in her life over the past three years. I love Jen’s story, and I’ve loved watching God work in her life, because Jen’s journey has confirmed a personal conviction I have. My conviction is that being a pastor doesn’t have to harm pastors spiritually. That might seem self-evident to many of you, but it’s not. Too often, pastors feel like doing God’s work means they have to sacrifice God working within them. I’m so grateful that our church family doesn’t accept that lie—that you believe our staff and I can minister to you and to our wider community as pastors AND that while doing so, we can thrive spiritually. Well, I need to stop before I start telling Jen’s story, but I felt it was very important for me to share that and to affirm you for being a church family that doesn’t just place expectations on its pastors but are genuinely concerned about our spiritual health and growth. THANK YOU!

Jen Souter has been McBIC’s Kids’ Pastor for three and a half years. Jen has done a great job leading our kids from birth through 5th grade, while also investing in and leading our kids’ ministry volunteers. I also appreciate Jen’s ministry to our church family as a whole, and I love hearing her preach from time to time. I look forward to hearing what Jen has to share with us today.

Thank you, Layne. Good morning, McBIC. It’s a joy and honor to be with you this morning. I may be the only one on staff who was excited about sharing my story when Layne proposed this sermon series to us. Immediately stories of what God has done in my life flooded my mind. As someone who loves and adores kids, I know the power that stories have. In fact, the first sermon I ever gave in my senior year of high school was titled, “Everyone has a story to tell, so tell it.” Stories shape us, shape our families, and ultimately bring memories to life.

I grew up in a wonderful, loving Christian home. We weren’t perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but Christ was our foundation. I was the middle daughter of three girls. In many ways, though, I was the son my parents never had. I loved being outside, getting dirty. At recess in elementary school, you would find me on the field playing football with the boys.

As you can imagine, my dad and I had a very special relationship. He coached many of my soccer teams and was my biggest fan during the basketball season. We would watch every sporting event, live or on tv, that we could together. He was my best friend.

Then May 17, 2004, became one of those days in my life that would mark a before and an after. I was wrapping up my junior year of high school when my dad, my coach, my best friend died. In an instant, my innocence was gone, and my life became marked by “before dad” and “after dad.”

A narrative—a story—was written on that day: “Jenny, you are strong. You can get through anything. You are in control. You are the rock of your family.” And from that day on, that’s the story I told myself repeatedly. I am strong. I am in control. I am the rock of my family. It became my identity and the way I showed up in the world.

I completed my senior year of high school and went off to college. Eventually I would end up at Messiah, and then after graduation, I accepted a kids’ pastor position at a fairly large United Methodist Church in Montgomery County, Maryland, right outside of Washington D.C.

After two years there, our youth pastor resigned. After about six months, we finally found the right person, but he ended up leaving just two months later to join another church. At this point, the school year was getting ready to begin, which is like prime time for ministries to kick off, and our lead pastor called me to his office. He said, “Jen, I need you to oversee both children and youth ministries until we can find the right person for us.” Because the narrative I had told myself was that I am strong and can get through anything, I said, “Sure, I would be happy to.”

Well, we ended up never hiring anyone full time, and I became the NextGen Pastor. I was overseeing all ministry from nursery to young adults and had six part-time people working underneath me. Oh, and we also had a Monday to Friday preschool with about 25 staff and 125 preschoolers, and I was overseeing the director and board of that preschool.

I was 25 years old at this point. My brain has just fully developed. I had only been in full-time ministry for three years, and yet here I was leading a vital ministry in a large church. I wasn’t married and didn’t have kids, so work, the church, and the families that attended became my life. As part of my compensation, I got to move into one of the church parsonages on the property, so I didn’t just work at the church—I lived there. But it made being at the church three nights a week easier.

The church was my life. It was my identity.

I kept this pace up for four years—until September 18, 2016. I got called out, exposed by a caring, loving family of the church. This family had a child in each phase of ministry, and they could see that the ministries were suffering—that I was suffering. I couldn’t be strong anymore. I couldn’t hide or pretend anymore. I needed some help. At the age of 29, I experienced burnout. (Burnout is exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration.)

Remember the narrative I told myself at this point for over a decade? I am strong. I am in control. I can do hard things. I am a rock. No wonder I experienced burnout. I was trying to do everything in my own strength and power. I was so busy doing the work of God that I neglected the work that God wanted to do within me. My personal relationship with Jesus was nonexistent. So over the next few months, pieces of my job were given to other staff members, and I began to put myself first and the job second.

In January 2019, God made it clear to me that it was time to leave the church after almost 10 years of ministry. I felt like I gave everything I had and then some, and I was ready to move back to PA where my family was. A few weeks later, I was scrolling through Facebook, and I saw that a church in Mechanicsburg was looking for a kids' pastor. I thought, "Hey, I know Mechanicsburg." I did some research and realized it was McBIC. I called my little sister who, during her time at Messiah, worshiped here, and she said, "Jenny, you have to apply. It's a great church." I applied, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I knew early on—in fact, it was the first time I met Pastor Layne for lunch—that I was supposed to be at McBIC. Not because of any grand ministry ideas I had, even though I hoped that God would use me, but it was for personal reasons. Personally I was supposed to be at McBIC. I had no idea why, but on that day, I committed to a posture of open hands: saying yes to whatever God had for me.

I didn't realize it at the time, but about six months into the job, I would have my first chance to say yes to God when Pastor Susan took the young pastors on staff to Ashland, Ohio, for Terry Wardle's Formational Prayer seminar. I never heard of Terry before, but as word got out to the congregation that this was happening, people came up to me saying, "I am so glad you are going! It's going to change your life." I thought, "Wow, I've never been to a seminar or conference that changed my life." Honestly I was a bit skeptical, but I trusted Pastor Susan, and off I went.

The second day of the seminar, God revealed Himself to me in a powerful way that I couldn't deny. We were practicing the discipline of safe place. In "safe place," the Spirit communicates truth through a surrendered and sanctified imagination.

So there I was at this seminar, practicing safe place—something I had never done before—and God led me to the hallway of my childhood home.

I could picture the off-white walls, and they weren't smooth. They had little bumps to them, and as a kid, I would run my hand against it every time I walked by—to the delight of my mom, who then, once a week, would have to clean the dirty fingerprints off those walls. And I could feel those bumps on the tips of my fingers as I sat in this basement of a church in Ohio.

Under my feet, I could feel the smooth, hardwood floors. If you had the right socks on, you could fly down that hallway.

I could see the painting of my home church to my right. The thermostat to my left. My parents' wedding picture was behind me. And a picture of my grandparents was in front of me, next to the really messy coat closet we had.

And I could see my mom collapsed on the floor of that hallway.

You see, that hallway was where I found out my dad had died. My mom was coming back to tell us girls that he was gone, but she didn't make it. That hallway was where the narrative began of "I am strong. I can do hard things. I am the rock of my family." Because on that day in 2004, I left my bedroom and met my mom in the hallway. I bent down. I let her cry for a minute, and then I made her look up at me, and I said, "We are going to get through this."

You can imagine my surprise when, 16 years later in a safe place exercise, God led me to the worst place of my life. In no way was the hallway a safe place. But God reminded me of my prayer to be open, my posture of surrender, and I stayed in that hallway.

This time, I saw something that I never saw on May 17, 2004, or for the 16 years after. I saw Jesus behind me. On the worst day of my life, Jesus was there. Jesus was in the hallway. And for the first time, I didn't just know I had experienced God's goodness and faithfulness. I had experienced Jesus' deep love for me. Jesus was there, in the hallway the entire time. It changed my life!

Zephaniah 3:17 became the verse that I clung to: "The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." God loves me. God delights in me. God is fond of me. Jesus wouldn't have been in the hallway if that weren't true. On the worst day of my life, Jesus was there!

What God did in that hallway was show me that I was never actually alone. He was always there. When I embraced my mom, yes, it was a daughter's love—and it was also Jesus' love. When I said, "We are going to get through this," Jesus was a part of that "we."

For 16 years, I didn't trust that God loved me. Why would I? He had the power to save my dad, but He didn't. He wasn't really a loving God after all. I believed in a popular positivity saying: "Everything happens for a reason." This brought some comfort, but as the years went on, it greatly impacted my relationship with God, because no reason ever came.

Last year, I read Kate Bowler's book, "Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved." Kate is a professor at Duke Divinity and walked through a very intense battle with cancer. She

concludes that some things happen without a reason. Losing my dad is one of those things for me, because I couldn't envision any reason being good enough.

God didn't take him away. Sometimes life just happens, period. Sometimes we have to live life without an explanation.

I don't know why the people we love die. I don't know why a 35-year-old gets diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. I don't know why a mother and father have to walk through the miscarriage of their child. I don't know why you didn't get the job you wanted. I don't know why you are experiencing chronic back pain. I don't know.

What I do know is that God is with you. He loves you. He is so very near in the midst of our pain and suffering.

It's a little bit easier to receive His deep love for me, because I experienced His goodness and faithfulness in my life. Jesus was in the hallway. That is what I cling to, what I remember when God—when life—doesn't feel good.

A big part of my journey was, yes, experiencing God's love for me, and I also had to rewrite the narrative I told myself and trust God. After an almost two-year journey of some really hard work led by my spiritual director, my story, the narrative I told myself, changed. It went from "I am strong" to "Jesus is strong within me." From "I am in control" to "He is in control." "I can do hard things" to "We can do hard things." "I am the rock of my family" to "Jesus is the rock of my family."

Something that I was fearful of during my journey of healing was that I would lose myself, my identity. God created me to be strong, to show up confidently in the world, and I was worried that changing the narrative of my story would strip those things away.

What I realized, though, is they wouldn't disappear. It's who God made me to be. The difference, though, is now I know the author of my strength and power. Jesus portrayed strength and power, and now these are His characteristics that I get to display to the world. And what I love is that I get to display them like He did: not how the world expects but in a different way.

Instead of dominating and displaying force, I now get to share strength through vulnerability and humility. Psalm 28:7 says, "The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him."

My story reminds me a lot of the story of Peter, one of Jesus' disciples. Peter, like me, shows up strong and confident in the world. He rarely thinks before speaking. He just feels things so strongly in his gut, and then he goes after it.

Peter, also like me, had an inauthentic narrative he told himself. While Jesus and the disciples were gathered for the Last Supper, Peter says this in front of everyone:

But he (Peter) replied, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.” Jesus answered, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.”
—Luke 22:33-34

And Peter denied Jesus three times. It is not hard to imagine Peter fleeing into the darkness following his last denial, weeping uncontrollably. I can imagine the story, the narrative that Peter told himself. “I am a flawed man. God will never use me. I am such a failure.” And yet...

I’m going to pick up in Mark 16:6-7, where the angel at the tomb is telling this to the very frightened women:

“But he said to them, “Don’t be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn’t here. Look, here’s the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you.” – Mark 16:6–7 (Common English Bible)

I love that. “Especially Peter.” What would it have meant to Peter that the messenger of God had specifically singled him out, asking him to go to Galilee to meet the risen Jesus?

I think for Peter, it would have given him hope. Hope that, despite his denial of Jesus, he was still wanted, needed, and loved. I think it would have meant that Jesus might well forgive him. And it would have been a sign that there was more for him to do. It meant everything.

Fast forward to Jesus and his disciples having breakfast together at the Sea of Galilee. And in front of everyone, Jesus reinstates Peter. Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” For each of the three denials, Jesus asks Peter if he indeed loves Jesus. And each time, Peter says, “Yes, I love you Lord.” How would Peter show his love for Jesus? By feeding Christ’s sheep, by caring for His lambs.

And Peter did just that. In that moment on the beach, the story, the narrative that Peter told himself, changed from “God will never use me” to “Yes, indeed God will use me.” From “I am a failure” to “God will work through my failure to bring glory to Himself.” From “I am no longer the rock” to “I am the rock.”

Peter had a hallway moment. He experienced the goodness, faithfulness, and love of Jesus. It’s powerful! It’s life changing!

My journey of surrendering to the deep love of Jesus and trusting that deep love will be my journey forever. In fact, just a few weeks ago, a new layer was revealed, where I am not trusting Jesus' love in a certain aspect of my life. It feels like I am starting all over again. It feels raw. And honestly, it's been a struggle to feel Jesus' love in it. But I know I can trust God's love for me. I know that He will be with me. I know that He is good and faithful.

I know God is saying "Especially Jen." "Make sure she knows I want her, I need her, I love her."

Friends, God is saying "Especially"—put your name in that space. Especially... "Make sure he knows, she knows—I want you, I need you, I love you."

God longs to rewrite the false story, the false narrative, that you have been telling yourself. God longs to give you a revelation of how deeply in love with you He is. Allow Him to guide you into new and refreshing depths of His love.

To respond today, I want to use a practice that has been helpful for me, called guided prayer. Guided prayer is a form of prayer that deepens your connection with God through meditating on Bible verses.

The Scripture I want to use is Zephaniah 3:17, the Scripture I highlighted earlier.

I call it a practice, because just like if you have ever played a sport or learned a musical instrument, you have to practice in order to feel comfortable and confident in it. It's the same way for connecting with God, being in relationship with Him. We have to continually practice different disciplines.

We will have some moments of silence. It won't be long, I promise. But just enough for you to sense God's love and nearness. Feel free to take some deep breaths as I begin.

God you are good. You are faithful. You want us. You need us. You love us. May we feel your deep love for us right now. Quiet our spirits and the noise in our heads, trusting that this moment is all that we need to be present too.

The Lord your God is with you,

He is with you. On the best day of your life. On the worst day of your life. He was with you. He is Emmanuel.

the Mighty Warrior who saves.

He is our protector. He is our defender. If we feel weak. If we feel strong. He is our Mighty Warrior.

He will take great delight in you;

He delights to be with you. He loves you. He is fond of you. He moved heaven and earth just to be where we are.

in his love he will no longer rebuke you,

In His love we find rest. We find peace. We find grace.

but will rejoice over you with singing.”

There is joy. Joy sounds like your favorite song coming on the radio. Joy sounds like laughter. Joy sounds like His voice singing over you.

Father, I thank you for always being with us. I thank you for your deep love for us. It runs so deep that you decided to send your one and only Son for us. Thank you that even in the midst of pain and suffering, there is joy, there is gratitude. May we live holding grief and gratitude together, knowing that ultimately it's your love that is holding it all. Amen.