

STRENGTH FOR THE DAY

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The Palm Tree as a Symbol

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree.

—Psalm 92:12, NIV

Entering a new year, we all wonder what kind of a year it will be: What joys or challenges will it bring? Will we be strong and graceful? Will we gain a new experience of God's abundant presence in our lives?

Once, during my childhood, I heard a sermon on Psalm 92:12. Growing up in places deprived of palm trees, I was impressed with the list of characteristics they possess that resemble a godly life. Later, I forgot most of them, but the impression was so memorable I started to research the subject. I found out that palm trees are evergreen—a symbol of everlasting life, immortality, and eternity.

Palm trees are visually distinctive. They are easily identifiable in any landscape due to their unique shape and form. If a band is placed around a palm tree's trunk, as the tree grows, it will break the band. The bands become deeply embedded in the trunks of other kinds of trees. Palm trees are also strong and durable and do not easily break in a storm.

Palm trees can flourish in a desert. Their strong roots grow down deep into the soil, where they find the water needed to survive. Palm trees are surprisingly fruitful, producing different fruits, nuts, and oils. They are valuable and the older the tree, the sweeter its fruit. Palm trees' leaves and bark can be used in multiple ways.

Palm trees provide shade and shelter for travelers, birds, and animals. They also protect other varieties of trees. Citrus trees often grow under palms, where they are protected from excessive heat and sunshine.

The promise in Psalm 92:12 has become profoundly encouraging to me. As I consider the beauty of the palm tree, I am reminded that as disciples of Jesus, we should be unique and distinctive, strong and durable, rooted in God and well nourished by His Word. Christians should flourish and bear fruit even in a desert, serve people in multiple ways, and help them grow. As we grow older, we should become sweeter and more like Jesus—evergreen in faith, hope, and love.

Galina Steele

January 2

Finding the Rest in *Restore*

And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

—Exodus 33:14, ESV

A new year has begun! *What is my theme word for this year?* I asked myself. The word would need to be relevant; one that would make a difference in my life. *Joy? Hope? Trust?* Then the word *restore* popped into my mind. Our family has restored houses, cars, and gardens. *Restore* has always been a good word for this do-it-yourself kind of woman. I like to get the job done. *Restore* sounds energetic. Yes, it is exactly my kind of word.

With my typical get-it-done attitude, I enthusiastically began learning more about my word. Eventually, in lights brighter than sunshine on snow, four letters stood out: *r-e-s-t*. Seriously? "There is no time to rest, God," I mumbled. But those four letters continued to invite me. So how does *restore*, an action word, fit with *rest*, a quieting word? And what does it look like in this busy, type A life of mine? I was unsure, but I knew I had to find out.

Slowly, I began to see that the challenges of the previous year had worn me down. My joy quotient measured close to zero. My mind would ruminate without purpose, and while I could still hustle with the best of them when needed, I would crash when done. Could God be suggesting a pause in all my efforts? Was He hinting at something more to life than getting through my endless to-do lists? Did He want to be first and last on my list in every situation?

I love my quiet time. When I pray and pause in His Word, the Scriptures encourage and energize my heart and mind. But I noticed that as my day progressed, I would lose that sense of His peace, joy, and connection. When life demanded more than I could give, I would jump right in to find a solution. The results were not always positive. I began to sense a need for His presence to stretch throughout my day.

So, what would happen if the first thing I did in any situation—joyous or junky—was to pause for a moment and rest in His presence? And in the pause, recognize He is with me—within me. With that realization, I could release to Him whatever is going on.

A weight has rolled off my shoulders. Yes, God is changing me. I am learning that to restore, I must first rest. It is quite a new adventure with Him. And somehow, my to-do lists are still getting done.

Lynn Ortel

New Every Morning

*They [the LORD's compassions] are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

*I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
therefore I will wait for him."*

—Lamentations 3:23, 24, NIV

Yesterday, I received a parcel in the mail containing next year's devotional book for women. I have received an author's copy of these books for the last thirty years. This beautiful book, *New Every Morning*, was written by women from around the world, sharing what God means to them and inviting others to start their day with thoughts of Him. Some stories tell of pain, others of joy, but all invite us to turn to Jesus, our best Friend, in every situation. He knows and understands what life is like for us because He lived on Earth and had close contact with many women. Through His loving and respectful attitude toward women, Jesus showed the society of His time that its treatment of women was not what God had intended when He created *Ish* and *Isha*—man and woman—in His image. As Jesus saw their problems and had compassion, so He sees women today. He sees what we struggle with and invites us to let Him carry our burdens each day.

As I look at the long row of women's devotional books in my bookcase, I realize that life has changed a lot in the last thirty years. Events have come and gone, my children have grown, and situations are different. Some of the things I wrote about in the earliest books do not even exist anymore. But one thing has not changed: God is still there, taking care of us. Jesus is still our Friend in whom we can trust. He has not changed. And every morning He is there, waiting for us to start our day with Him, offering us encouragement and counsel for all our problems, though sometimes He asks us to wait until we understand what He is saying to us.

During His time on Earth, He recognized the pain that sin had caused the women He encountered, and He knows that we need His loving support as God's daughters today. He still sees in us the image of God in which He created us. He wants to help us reflect this image so others can see it as well.

The Lord is our portion; therefore, let us wait for Him. And as we ask and wait, He will transform our lives.

Hannele Ottschofski

January 4

Your Story

*Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*

—Psalm 139:16, NIV

Don't you love being in control? Knowing exactly what is going to happen next? And even if you do not, having the certainty that if you do not like what is happening, you can just click the backspace key and start over? Wait. Did I say backspace key? Yep. I did. I am talking about writing. It is addictive. When I write, I am in control. Even when I get mad at my characters, I can still tell them what to do. I can push and stretch and cut the plot to fit the mold I have created in my mind.

But real life is not like that. I get lost easily in real life. The plot gets tangled, and I do not always live up to the character I am supposed to be. Sometimes I get dressed, look in the mirror, and think, *Something could go wrong. I may make a big mistake today, and my whole life could be ruined.* Though we are in control of our decisions, we are not always in control of our circumstances. But do not worry! This story you are living—though I have not read it, I know one thing—if you have the right Author writing it, it is going to have a happy ending. I promise.

God does not need a backspace key. He is so great at this that He will just pick up where you are in that complicated plot and, slowly but surely, pull all the tangled strings free. Every. Last. One. That conversation you are nervous about having with someone? He will write it. That plot twist you cannot even see? He will take care of it.

So now, when I look in the mirror, I can say, “Wow! I cannot wait to see how He is going to keep this story going. I wonder if He will sprinkle a little humor into this chapter today.” (Believe it or not, some authors do like to see their characters happy.)

My story is still being written, and every day He adds a new page. Each day I know I draw closer to my happy ending.

What about you? Who is writing your story? The Master Author promises, “I know the plans I have for you,” . . . “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV).

Sasha De Dios

Ralph-if and His Neighborhood

*“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name;
You are Mine.”*

—Isaiah 43:1, NKJV

I can still picture it: my first “book,” written in blue magic marker on orange construction paper; the pages stapled together with way too many staples. I remember my dad proudly showing off my first written masterpiece to neighbors and family. It was a “masterpiece” with a huge mistake. I did not know how to spell *Ralph*—the name of the hero in the story—correctly. Somehow, I spelled it with an *if* in it. *Ralif*? *Ralfif*? I do not remember how I spelled it, but I do recall that when I learned about my mistake, I just included it in the story. Ralph had an “if” for everything. The entire story focused on all of the young boy’s “ifs” for everything that happened around him in his neighborhood. My mistake was redeemed and became the central theme of his story. This redemption of a mistake is much like what God does in our lives.

God takes our mistakes, the things we get wrong, and the hard things thrown at us, and He redeems them. He speaks into the devastating moments with grace, loving-kindness, and unending mercy—and redeems. And like with “Ralph-if,” He often wants to use these parts of our stories to impact others. The very parts of our stories we wish we could hide are often the stories where we see God most powerfully in our own lives, and they brings courage and hope to others.

One of my mistakes was a suicide attempt at eighteen. It was a source of shame and something my parents said we would never speak of again. And yet I knew God wanted me to tell that story when another family faced a similar crisis. With fear and trembling, I shared how God had led me in that moment and turned my life around. My story brought them courage and hope. Similarly, a friend thought of her divorce only as a source of pain and shame. God transformed her story with healing and blessing and turned it into a powerful message of courage for others. Another friend is a survivor of domestic violence—something she hid from her family for years. Now she walks alongside others, bringing hope and teaching churches and people how to best minister to hurting people.

Our God not only redeems but also brings beauty and hope from our pain and wounds.

Tamyra Horst

January 6

What a Friend

*Now this is the confidence that we have in Him,
that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

—1 John 5:14, NKJV

One evening Jesus and His disciples were on the Sea of Galilee when a sudden storm threatened to capsize their boat. The terrified disciples asked Jesus for help after their own efforts had failed. With one simple command, “Peace, be still!” Jesus lulled the raging sea back into tranquility (Mark 4:35–41, NKJV). Like the disciples, my prayers were mostly for big things. I did not think it was necessary to “bother” God with mundane problems. But as I grow older, my life experiences have taught me otherwise. Now I pray without ceasing, even for simple things.

Practicing a healthy lifestyle has reduced but not removed my hypertension, which I am genetically susceptible to. One December my blood pressure had been unusually high for several days, so I went to see my cardiologist. At her office, parking is usually limited. On that visit, I spent more than two hours in the doctor’s office, and my husband could not find a place to park in that time.

A week later, as I drove back for the results, my repeated prayer was, “Dear God, please help me to find a parking space.” My hopes were dashed when I saw a line of cars circling like ants searching for food. “Please, Jesus, please, I don’t want to be late.” Just then, I saw a car backing out. I quickly swung into the space as another car circled around. “Thank You, God! Thank You, Jesus,” I repeated, grateful to make it in time for my appointment.

Praise God, the results were negative. I decided to buy a gift for the office staff, which meant giving up my precious parking space. How could I expect God to provide another one? My plan was to turn on the car’s hazard lights and pull up to the front for a few minutes. But to my surprise, a car backed out as I approached. I pulled in and cried, “Lord, You are too good to me. I don’t deserve this.” The staff were grateful for the gift, and I was doubly blessed.

Regarding prayer, Joseph M. Scriven penned these words:

O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.*

Oh, what a Friend!

Maureen Nembhard

* Joseph M. Scriven, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” 1855, public domain.

I Am With You Always

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

—Psalm 23:4, KJV

It was a beautiful evening, and I had just finished an overdue visit to my hairdresser and returned to my car. It was really dark as I put the key in the ignition and turned on the engine. Then I saw it: low beam headlight failure! *No problem*, I thought. *I can just use the high beams as needed*. To say I was overconfident as I drove off would be an understatement, but I knew I would be on well-lit roads in twenty minutes. Or so I thought.

I realized this was not the best solution when I saw blue-and-red lights flashing at the scene of an accident at the first major intersection. My heart sank. Now I would have to take a detour on an unfamiliar road. My overconfidence disappeared, and I prayed, “Lord, have mercy.”

If I had been able to turn left, that would have been great. I knew the alternate way through the mall parking access roads, but because of the accident, there was only one way. I had to go right. That night right seemed wrong for me. However, as I turned right, there was one thing I could thank God for: the police were too busy with the accident to take time to notice my low-beam dilemma.

As I turned onto the unknown one-lane road, there were no streetlights. I felt helpless on a dark road with my one low-beam light. I could not see my way. But God heard my cry and gave me peace. I know God heard because there was every reason to panic.

The GPS was not helpful, and I could not see a safe place to stop and call my husband. Thank God, my GSS (Good Shepherd System) was working; I could depend on Psalm 23:4. “Thou art with me,” I prayed as I followed a few cars headed in the same direction as home.

Finally, I saw a familiar road, but I was in the wrong lane. I needed to get over to the left-turn lane. I put on my left indicator, and a road angel graciously allowed me to slip into the correct lane. “Thank You, Jesus,” I exclaimed. That back road had never looked so good! It was well lit, and I was more familiar with it. I soon made it safely home. The Good Shepherd had fulfilled His promise yet again. “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20, KJV). Another tested and proven promise from the Lord! Thank You, Lord!

Claudette Garbutt-Harding