



craving connection

30 CHALLENGES

for REAL LIFE ENGAGEMENT

from the
(in)courage community

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Starting a New Thing

CONSIDER

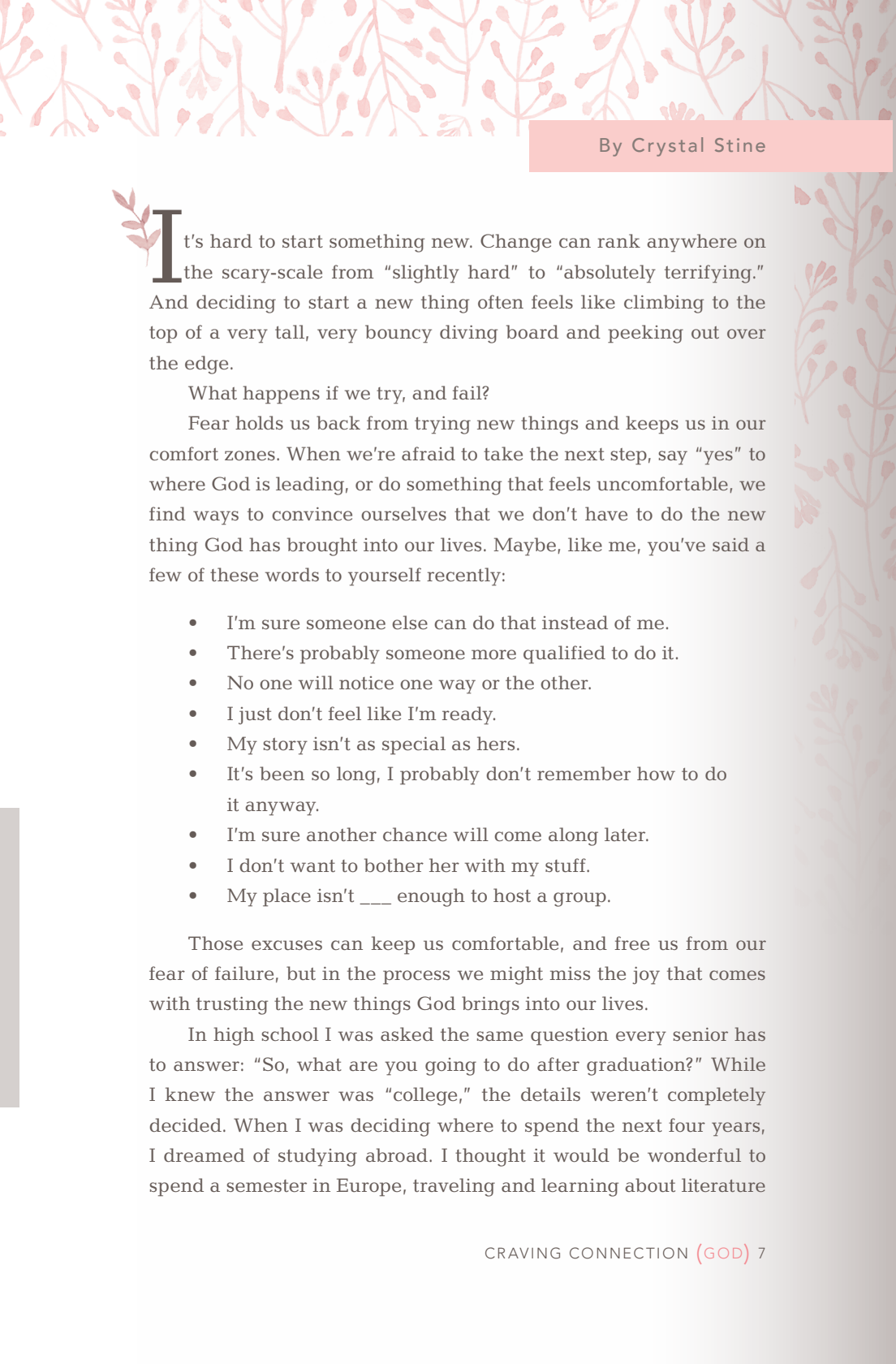
God's desire for relationship with us requires us to believe in a promise that brings change.

"Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Do you not see it? Indeed, I will make a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert."

ISAIAH 43:19

ENGAGE

Text or e-mail a note of encouragement to a friend and let her know she's important to you.

It's hard to start something new. Change can rank anywhere on the scary-scale from "slightly hard" to "absolutely terrifying." And deciding to start a new thing often feels like climbing to the top of a very tall, very bouncy diving board and peeking out over the edge.

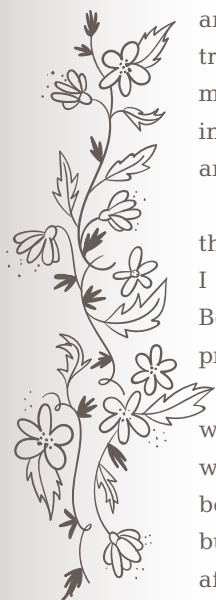
What happens if we try, and fail?

Fear holds us back from trying new things and keeps us in our comfort zones. When we're afraid to take the next step, say "yes" to where God is leading, or do something that feels uncomfortable, we find ways to convince ourselves that we don't have to do the new thing God has brought into our lives. Maybe, like me, you've said a few of these words to yourself recently:

- I'm sure someone else can do that instead of me.
- There's probably someone more qualified to do it.
- No one will notice one way or the other.
- I just don't feel like I'm ready.
- My story isn't as special as hers.
- It's been so long, I probably don't remember how to do it anyway.
- I'm sure another chance will come along later.
- I don't want to bother her with my stuff.
- My place isn't ___ enough to host a group.

Those excuses can keep us comfortable, and free us from our fear of failure, but in the process we might miss the joy that comes with trusting the new things God brings into our lives.

In high school I was asked the same question every senior has to answer: "So, what are you going to do after graduation?" While I knew the answer was "college," the details weren't completely decided. When I was deciding where to spend the next four years, I dreamed of studying abroad. I thought it would be wonderful to spend a semester in Europe, traveling and learning about literature



and history, right where it all actually happened. I'd traveled to England and Scotland in tenth grade with my Humanities class and fell in love with both countries in a way that affirmed my decision to enter college as an English major (with a focus on books, not grammar).

I never did study abroad. I felt so homesick during the two short trips I did go on that I was fearful of what I would miss if I traveled for a longer period of time. Because of this, I never even applied for the abroad program.

During my first short-term mission trip to Mexico, with the Presbyterian youth group I volunteered with while I was in college, I spent a week surrounded by beautiful children and passionate high school students, but my fears kept me from being truly present. I was afraid to truly connect because I was sure I would be rejected. My thoughts were so focused on home and comfortable relationships that I missed what God was trying to have me experience in that moment.

In college I went on another short trip to Austria and Germany as part of my college's gospel choir. I boarded the plane, only to find myself calling home from France in tears. I blew through calling cards as often as we climbed church bell towers, more concerned about keeping up with everything happening at home than with embracing the experience God had planned for me.

Our hearts long for the comforts of home, but being homesick and having anxiety can keep us from making the new connections God has planned for us. This world is not our home, and we will be homesick. We will be afraid, and we will worry. We'll fear rejection, and we'll regret missed opportunities. But God never says we have to face change alone. He promises that He will be

our strength (Exod. 15:2), so we don't have to rely on ourselves and our feelings to get us through.

God revealed to me recently that I have a track record of letting fear convince me that doing what I'd always done was the best choice, and in doing so, I've missed out on experiences I'll never be able to replicate. If we're being completely honest, my life is a perfect example of someone who chooses the guaranteed-to-succeed road. If it feels uncertain or I think I might end up embarrassed or rejected at the end of it, I've avoided it—regardless of how wonderful the experience might be.

I've been discovering, though, that God's desire for relationship with us requires us to believe in a promise that brings change. In Isaiah 43:19 we read that God promises He is about to do something new. In verse 18 God told His people to remember their great deliverance from the Egyptians, so why is He now telling them to forget? God doesn't want us to forget what He's done for us—but He also doesn't want us to stay in the past. *The Message* says it like this:

“Forget about what’s happened;
don’t keep going over old history.
Be alert, be present. I’m about to do something brand-new.
It’s bursting out! Don’t you see it?
There it is! I’m making a road through the desert,
rivers in the badlands.” (Isa. 43:18–19)

Isn't this good news? When you look back and remember past change and the growth that took place, aren't you thankful? God's plan and purpose brings change to our lives. We are created in God's image, and that means we reflect a God who does new things. He made the humble things holy when He sent His Son to be born in a manger. He commands us to love our enemies. Jesus spends time with and loves those the rest of the world sees as undesirable.

When we accept Christ as the Savior of our lives, we're not just saying empty words. We commit to a life of change. God makes us

a brand-new thing, and He asks us to love each other in the radical, uncomfortable, change-filled way that He first loved us.

So what does that mean for the connections we're craving with God, with our friendships, and with our communities? It means we need to be alert for the new things God is doing, and ask Him to reveal where He wants us to change. It means acknowledging that change can be scary, but trusting that abiding with God and being alert to His will carries far more blessings than choosing to stay in our comfort zones. It means surrendering my desires to His desires and believing that He sees, knows, and is over every step of my journey.



*HE MADE THE HUMBLE THINGS HOLY WHEN
HE SENT HIS SON TO BE BORN IN A MANAGER.*

Maybe you feel dry and empty, having gone through a season of pouring out to others. Ask God to bring rivers to the desert places of your soul. Has your heart been in a season of wilderness and wandering lately? Ask God to clear a path in it.

Be alert, and be present.

John C. Maxwell says this about change: "Change is inevitable. Growth is optional." In our lives, we will experience change. Right now you're about five minutes older than you were when you started reading (don't worry—you don't look a second over four minutes older). Some change, like aging, is inevitable. Others—like choosing to travel abroad, write a book, reach out to a friend, start a women's ministry, host a mom's night out, or saying "yes" to the thing God is asking you to do next—require us to make a decision.

- Will we change?
- Will we do the thing fear is telling us we shouldn't do?
- And if we do it—will we grow from it?

When we go into a season of change and trying new things with an open heart, we leave room for God to grow us to be more like Him. The times that I've grown the most—as a mother, a wife, a friend, a child of God—have all happened as a result of doing something new and trusting God to equip me to do the work He's called me to do.

That doesn't mean God won't work in us and through us right where we are, without asking us to do a new thing. Some seasons in our life require us to do the hard work of waiting. Maybe in those quiet places we'll learn a new skill, or discover that we're more courageous than we once believed. Or maybe God will use the talents and passions we develop to prepare us for the next door He wants to open.

Although I never left my college campus to study overseas, God used me right where I was. He wanted to create something new in my life, but in order to do that, He had to first take me through a season of removing the old, hardened pieces I'd built up like a wall. I desperately needed a river through my dry and weary soul, but before God could work on my heart, He needed to take me to a wilderness place so I could hear Him more clearly. It didn't feel like the exciting "new thing" I expected God to have for me, and while it wasn't what I wanted, it was what I needed.

In that season I had been craving connections with friends, prioritizing the thoughts and approval of others above my relationship with God. I looked to others for security and placed friends on pedestals and platforms with expectations so high they would never be able to live up to them. When it came to my faith life, I'd been doing a great job of paying attention to God on Sundays



or when it looked good to the people I was around, but when it was just the two of us? He wasn't my priority connection.

So God took me on a wilderness journey that lasted for about ten years. My pride, confidence, and security in anything that wasn't based on my relationship with God were all idols—replacements for God—that needed to be removed before He could do a new thing in my life.

It was lonely in that season, and God took every bit of my "I can do this on my own and I don't need anyone" attitude and brought me to a place where all I could do was say, "God, I can't do this without you." As He began to reshape my heart, I began to see a small glimpse of His plan for my life. Not a single wilderness moment, feeling of being homesick, or failure is ever wasted—God was preparing me for what was ahead, because:

- I wouldn't crave connection if I never felt alone.
- I wouldn't know how to encourage if I never needed to be encouraged.
- I wouldn't understand how important an invitation to the table would be if I never felt excluded.

When life takes an unexpected turn and we can't see the next new thing God is planning, we can choose to grow or we can choose to retreat. God's desire is for us to be in relationship—both with Him and with others. God doesn't want to see us alone, but it takes a tremendous amount of courage to reach out after rejection, or to face your fear.

God promises to do a new thing in our lives. Our Creator God, who so uniquely formed the entire earth, knows every hair on our heads and every desire of our hearts. He will equip us with all that we need to face the changes ahead.

CONNECTION QUESTIONS

1. What new things might God be doing in your life during this season?
2. When it comes to change, do you tend to retreat or pursue growth?
3. What kind of connection are you craving most today: God, friends, or community?

CONNECTION CHALLENGE

Have you ever had someone reach out to you unexpectedly and the timing be so significantly perfect that the credit goes only to the Lord? How did it feel to be the recipient of God's graciousness through another person? Has the Lord ever brought someone to mind for you, making it clear that He wanted you to reach out to that person? What was your response?

Spend some time thinking and praying about a friend who may need encouragement. Then, text or e-mail a note of encouragement and let her know she's important to you.

PRAYER

Father, thank You for being a God who creates new paths in the wilderness. Fill the dry desert parts of our souls with Your living water. Do a new thing in our hearts, chipping away at the hurting and retreating parts and replacing them with healing and restoration. May we be daughters of the Most High King who crave a connection with You above all else, and may we see change as a chance to grow to be more like You. Help us to be ever alert, and ever present.





Lantern Lights

CONSIDER

Become a city on a hill, a light and beautiful and inviting experience amidst a world that seems to love the dark.

"You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

MATTHEW 5:14-16

ENGAGE

Share a funny story and give yourself permission to send some of those cares and burdens to God, floating like lanterns on the waves of your laughter.

I love the scene in *Tangled* when Rapunzel and Flynn Rider are out in the boat and the sky fills with Chinese lanterns. The dark night fills with firefly-like lights, and the sky turns from black to a really peaceful dark blue, almost purple, as the yellow-hued lanterns float upward.

They are everywhere. Floating up from the castle, then down over the lake, the specks of light work together to form a totally new color of night. They make it seem magical, not dark.

Do you remember that part of the movie? It's almost breathtaking, even as a cartoon. The amount of lanterns in the sky, around the little boat holding the two main characters, makes for what I consider the most beautiful moment in the film. (There are multiple yearly celebrations around the globe where you can see these lanterns launched *en masse*, the most well-known one being in Thailand.)

Obviously, after seeing the movie and doing some research online of my own, I wanted to send up Chinese lanterns in my neighborhood with my friends. We don't have a castle or a canoe, but we would figure out a way around that. I ordered lanterns off the Internet, and the box showed up on my doorstep thanks to the kind mailman. The lanterns came in a pack of ten, so I ordered two packs. According to the illustrated directions, they seemed simple enough—take them out of the package, flatten them out, light the fueled rice paper ring on the base, and in no time they will float away and you'll be surrounded by the beauty of a Disney film. (Or so we thought.)

With twenty to launch, my buddies spread out across a field by my house and got ready to light. At the same time, we set lit match to ring of future fire and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

We each held a lantern and watched impatiently as they lit up but never floated away. We tried throwing them, we tried lifting our hands above our heads, hoping a few more inches skyward would bring takeoff.

It didn't happen. Fifteen minutes into the event, we were acting ridiculous. Running like our fire-lit lanterns were kites that needed wind to pick up, throwing them back and forth while trying to avoid getting burned, and eventually just sitting on the ground with our lit lanterns in hand, gripped by an edge of the paper lantern, laughing at the idea of what we imagined versus what we actually got.

The memory is still great. It is one of those running inside jokes, and we laugh about it often. If something goes wrong, if our expectations aren't met, if we have to laugh off something to keep from crying, someone will usually say, "Today deserves some Chinese lanterns."



Jesus talks about light in Matthew 5:14–16:

"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (NIV).

I picture that same hue as the Chinese lanterns, the warm glowing yellows that only come from real fire, contained in small quantities.

In 2014 I visited Israel for the first time and walked up the Mount of Beatitudes to where Jesus preached these exact words to a crowd gathered near Him. I saw how, as you look across the terrain of that area, you can see little patches of homes, little cities literally built on the sides of hills. And I imagined, in that moment, what it was like to see them at night. That same yellow hue of candlelight in homes, clustered together to form a community, just like I imagined those lanterns in the sky. I thought about the friendships in those towns, thousands of years ago, and how Jesus knew those villages.

It feels like He wasn't just asking us to be a light, to stand bright and alone like a lighthouse. I don't even think He was saying for us to be a lamp, necessarily. When I picture this scene He's describing, I picture a group of women sitting around, after the chores were finished for the day, laughing and reminiscing by candlelight. Because the lamp isn't hidden under a bowl, it lights the whole house, giving light to everyone gathered there. It's inviting. It's welcoming. It's friendly.



Let your light shine.

Let your light shine so others see your good deeds—light your candle, set it on the table, and invite some people to sit around it with you. Feed them. Laugh with them. Become a city on a hill, a light and beautiful and inviting experience amidst a world that seems to love the dark.



My group of girlfriends in Nashville got together a few weeks ago on a Sunday night for dinner. It's rare we are all available on the same night, but the stars aligned and we gathered around grilled fish and seasoned vegetables. Ten of us crowded around one table, and because the weather was still mild, we ate with the back doors open to the deck. Strung across the deck were beautiful twinkly lights, and so we turned off the lights in the dining room, lit some candles, and scattered them down the table.



We ate slowly. No one had anywhere else to be. We could see each other fine, thanks to the candles and the twinkly lights outside, and something about the shade of the meal made everyone relax and not wish to be anywhere else.

We laughed. A lot. From a haircut mishap to missing a flight (and yes, the Chinese lantern tale was retold in full), we swapped stories for hours, nibbling as we went, passing cookies when the dinner was finished. No one wanted to move at the risk that one simple trip to the bathroom could break the loveliness that had fallen over the night.

In a way I don't know how to put words around, our laughter lit up the night too. That seems true to me a lot—that laughter brings light to dark places and dark moments. Something happens to my insides when a hard experience has a lifting moment of laughter—I feel resettled, I feel understood, I feel relief. We need that, don't we? I think it is why grieving families sometimes break into fits of laughter that cannot be controlled. It's why one of the first things a kid learns at church is how to stifle a giggle explosion during the preaching. (And seriously, isn't that one of the very best feelings? Laughing when you aren't supposed to be laughing?) Friends who connect with you there, in that place of pure laughter and joy, are often the same ones who can dig in with you when things aren't okay. Because they know how to laugh and love when things are easy and light, they often know how to do that well in the dark also.



*LAUGHTER BRINGS LIGHT TO DARK
PLACES AND DARK MOMENTS.*

I saw it clearly that night, as we just kept hearing one story after another. There were also moments of deep conversation, sadness, concerns expressed. We ebbed and flowed, as happens in life often, from the serious to the hilarious. The candles melted down and puddled wax on the linen table clothes, and the yellow hue of the light deepened. But no one moved, and the light in the room never dimmed. No dishes were rushed to the sink, no glasses loaded in the dishwasher. We just kept talking, laughing, relaxing into a place where nothing was hurried and no one was on their phones—and this was exactly where we all wanted to be.

It was just us around a table with happy hearts and candlelight.

That night made me want to reject electricity at meals all together and just have candles to light the way to dessert. The simplicity of it made the beauty of our friendship stand out, and the problems that separate us or the issues that keep us busy in our own lives all just sort of faded into the dark parts of the room. It made me think of my circle of friends who waited patiently by the same shade of light for a collection of Chinese lanterns to launch. And it made me think of the groups of women, who for hundreds and thousands of years, have sat together under that same light. I bet they laughed like we do (at the right times AND at the wrong times). I bet they had nights that they hoped would never end and chores they pushed aside.

It made me think of Israel, historically and also in the modern time where the Sabbath meal is still weekly celebrated in Jerusalem. And it made me think of Jesus.

When I read His words from Matthew, that dinner, my friends, groups of women through all of time, come to mind. Maybe that's what Jesus was talking about. He wants us to be friendly and inviting and full of life, like a city full of warmth and hubbub and laughter and love, each home inviting with the candlelight of generations gone by.



The Chinese lanterns did finally take off that night, by the way. After sitting on the field and just having them light our conversation, one gently lifted off, just hovering a few inches above the grass. You should have seen the looks on our faces. It was like a little miraculous light moment to watch that lantern make a move to float on its own power. While we were slack-jawed about that one getting its float on, another one took flight. And one after another, they began to fly. It took about twenty minutes from when we first gave up hope to when they actually floated skyward. (Lesson learned. It takes a bit of time for the lanterns to take flight.)

The sky didn't massively change colors for us like it does in the movies. Apparently it takes a few thousand to get that kind of result. (Lesson learned. It takes just a few more lanterns than we had that night.) But we did watch our twenty lanterns float up, higher in the sky than we even imagined they would go. Then we saw them spread out over the crest of the tree line, almost roll over the tops of the trees like a wave of yellow joy, and disappear out of sight. They finally flew, finally lived up to their reason for being, and brought us tons of laughs.

And that's the part that felt so magical and so full of light. I will never forget it. I had worn my rain boots, the blue ones I bought that time in New York City, more because they were by the back door when we were ready to leave than because the ground was wet or muddy. I had pulled them off when we sat around on the ground and laughed with our lanterns in hand. Those lanterns, once skybound, weren't all that illuminating for us, but the laughter and the friendship—that's the light that filled up my soul.

We watched the lanterns until they were over that crest and out of view, and then I slid my boots back on and we all turned and headed toward home. But that yellow color of the lit lanterns came with me, in my memory, in my heart.

CONNECTION QUESTIONS

1. What would it look like for your home to be a city on a hill?
2. Who in your life feels like a light in the darkness?
3. What's one of your favorite memories, whether things went exactly as planned or not, with your best friends?



CONNECTION CHALLENGE

How has laughter brought light to your life? Do you need to add a little light to a dark season? Invite a few friends over for dinner, light the candles, turn on the twinkly lights, and laugh together.

Share a funny story and give yourself permission to send some of those cares and burdens to God, floating like lanterns on the waves of your laughter.

PRAYER

God, You are light. Thank You for letting us reflect specks of Your light into the lives of the people we know. Open our eyes to see the beautiful moments all around us, the funny and the sweet and the kind, and help us to invite others into those places of light. Make our lives and our homes cities on a hill.






We're Stronger Together

CONSIDER

Community means we win together and lose together. We cheer each other on, hold each other up, and keep Jesus at the center of it all.




"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."

ECCLESIASTES 4:12 (NIV)



ENGAGE

Practice going from "me" to "three" and connect with two people this week.

 My friends and I sat cross-legged on a flower-covered comforter. There might have been a pop star poster gracing the bedroom wall. Certainly we had enough hairspray on our bangs to qualify our little group as a fire hazard. We giggled about boys as we braided colored threads and slipped them onto each other's wrists. When school started in a few weeks we would have a visual declaration that said, "Someone likes me. Someone chose me. Someone wants to share life (and a lunch table) with me." In other words, I have *people*.

Friendship bracelets first became popular in the 1970s and they continue to be summer camp favorites. For many of us, these bracelets may be our only experience with creating something that could be called a "cord" or "rope" in Scripture. Historically, braided ropes weren't for decoration or adornment; they served important practical purposes. So when Solomon said, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Eccl. 4:12 NIV), his listeners would have instantly understood the depth of what he meant. But for us that short phrase could use a little more explanation.

For example, the number of strands mentioned in this verse is significant. According to the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Three was for the Israelites the typical number for completeness, probably because the rope of three strands was the strongest cord in use."¹⁵ As believers today, we also recognize that "three" is the number of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we often hear this verse used at weddings to talk about the strength of two people plus Jesus.

While there are certainly divine illustrations to be found in Ecclesiastes 4:12, there's also a lot of insight for how we live in community. The pattern of "three" in relationship appears to be significant in our human connections. A recent study showed that the average person has "2.03 confidantes." A "confidante" was defined as someone the responder "had discussed 'important matters' with



over the previous six months."¹⁶ In other words, the most common social system in today's world is made up of three people. (A side note: In a world where it seems everyone has tons of friends, we can take comfort in knowing that if we even have a couple of folks we connect with in a meaningful way then we're doing just fine.)

Psychological research also supports the significance of "three" when it comes to relationships. The Bowen Center says, "A triangle is a three-person relationship system. It is considered the building block or 'molecule' of larger emotional systems because a triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system is unstable because it tolerates little tension before involving a third person. A triangle can contain much more tension without involving another person because the tension can shift around three relationships."¹⁷

One person is an individual. Two people make a relationship. But when we get to "three" we have *community*. We have become something we could not be on our own. The strands are now a strong cord.



In our busy world the question naturally becomes, "Why bother coming together?" We've been taught to look out for number one, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and that we can be anything we want to be . . . all by ourselves. And relationships are messy. They're complicated. At times they're downright painful. It seems like the risk could outweigh the reward.

To answer that question and those concerns, we need to look closer at the purpose of a “rope” (we’ll use that word since it’s more common in our culture and is a synonym for “cord.”)

First, a rope is created to help withstand tension. Most of us are familiar with the game tug of war. A group grabs each end of the rope and then pulls with all their might. Whoever drags their opponent across a line in the middle wins. But the participant that always seems to get the worst of it is the rope itself. It has to deal with demands from both sides. It gets stretched in opposing directions. It has constant stress. Does that sound like anyone else’s life besides mine?

Our world is like a big game of tug of war. The needs of our families pull on us. Then a work deadline comes, and we have to stretch in that direction. We look for relief at church and instead sometimes feel like we’re given a list of expectations that yank us into guilt. How can we survive all this? We need other “strands” to help us bear the weight. Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” In other words, *without community we snap.* We’ve all had those moments when we’ve had enough and we simply lose it. We say things we don’t mean, we make choices we’re not proud of, we fray when we really want to stay and be strong.

We need to be able to send a text that says “having a bad day—please pray.” Maybe meet with a friend (or two) over coffee and get gut-honest about the struggle we’re facing. Even invite a few people over for dinner and let the laundry wait while we remember what it’s like to laugh. *We can’t take the tension of life all by ourselves.* We need to share it with others or we’ll be pulled to pieces.

WE CAN’T TAKE THE TENSION OF LIFE ALL
BY OURSELVES. WE NEED TO SHARE IT WITH
OTHERS OR WE’LL BE PULLED TO PIECES.



Also, a rope is created to help with heavy lifting. Think of a pulley system. Individual strands would not be able to withstand the

weight placed on them, but together they become a powerful force that can be strategically leveraged. There are a lot of burdens in this world. Every day we encounter needs. All around us are hurting people. Our good intentions often lead us to believe we need to solve every problem for every person. But God never intended for us to live this way. We're part of the body of Christ. It's only as we come together with other believers that we can truly be effective. We're not called to do it all; we are called to do our part. When we try to bear the weight of the world by ourselves we're going beyond being servant hearted—we're trying to be Jesus. And we are also asking for burnout. Eventually something within us will give way and we simply won't be able to continue.

I've lived this reality. For years I thought that "ministry" meant singlehandedly meeting every need that came my way. I often lived outside the gifts God created me to offer, ignored who He created me to be, and neglected my own health and well-being. When depression and anxiety threatened to consume me, I sought help from a counselor. She helped me see that the expectations I had for myself far exceeded the expectations God had for me. I needed to surround myself with others whose strengths complemented my weaknesses, who could share the load, and who would be energized by what drained me. As I relinquished what God never asked me to do in the first place, I found a renewed sense of passion, joy, and purpose. I was doing *less* but making a difference *more*. That's the power of coming together.

Finally, a rope is created to help with security. I've become a bit obsessed with superhero shows and movies the last few months. I like the battle between good and evil (especially since in these scenarios good always wins). A theme I've noticed is that bad guys are always getting tied up. To trees. To chairs. To the nearest non-moving object around. The heroes of the story understand this: you can't let your enemy run wild and free if you want to win the battle.

We'd be wise to remember that as well. Whether we realize it or not, we have enemies too. We fight the negative thoughts in our mind. We combat the enemy of our souls who would love to see us

fall. We must defeat discouragement, doubt, and fear. If a superhero tied up a villain with a single string we'd expect mayhem to ensue. But when we try to deal with our opponents on our own we're doing the same. We gain strength when we join together with others who will speak truth to us on the days we can't remember it, who will pray fiercely on our behalf, who will help hold back all that threatens us. When we *come* together we can *overcome* whatever we may face.



Even when we understand the purpose of community we may be confused about the process of it. How do we begin connecting with each other? Or if we already have bonds with others how do we become closer?

Before a rope can ever be formed, the strands must be prepared. In ancient times that meant natural fibers would be smoothed so that they were ready to join with others. For us I believe this means first taking a close look at our hearts. We can ask God, "What's in my heart or life that might interfere with community?"

Here are a few common ways we can make our relationships rougher than they need to be:

Pride. It's easy to look at others and think, "I don't need you," or even, "I'm better than you." Those thoughts keep us from intertwining our lives. Humility says, "I'm not created to do life on my own," and "Even if you're different than me, you have something to offer."

Insecurity—We may have the opposite of the thoughts above (I tend to). We think, "No one needs me," or "Everyone else is better than me." Those statements are just as effective at keeping us away from

others. Instead we can say, "God has given me a place in the body of Christ and good gifts to share."

Unforgiveness—Nothing frays our souls like unforgiveness, bitterness, and resentment. They're like barbs that cut those around us. Before we can become braided into the rope it helps tremendously to start the process of healing. I say *start* because forgiveness is an ongoing work in our lives. We only need to be willing to say, "Lord, please help me learn to forgive."

Thankfully, our struggles don't disqualify us from community. Our hearts will never be fully "smooth" in this life. A strand doesn't need to be perfect; it simply needs to continue letting the rope maker work on it as needed. And it's often in community that more of those rough places get smoothed out.

The next step in the process is braiding. For us, that means coming to a place where we're willing to share our lives with others. The strands in a rope aren't parallel; they are interconnected. Andrea Mitchell says, "I firmly believe Satan doesn't want us to have community with others, especially other believers. It's extremely hard for someone to steal your joy or redirect your focus when you are surrounded by like-minded people. Rather, when we isolate ourselves we start to listen to the lies that fill our mind that no one else would ever allow themselves to get to this rotten point, that we are a failure, a loser, with no hope. He knows that when we hide ourselves away in the dark, we are more apt to invite him in."¹⁸

True connections take time, commitment, and courage. While social media can make it seem like bonding is as easy as clicking a "like" button, we're called to go deeper with each other. And that means making relationships a priority. Our season of life and circumstances will impact our capacity for connection, but



we can all pause and ask, "What can I do to truly connect with the people I love?" Even a little bit of time or encouragement can make a big difference.

Being intertwined also means choosing to stay even when it's hard. We live in a fallen world, and we are fallen people. That means inevitably conflicts will come, personalities will clash, and disappointments will happen. The most obvious choice is to withdraw and protect ourselves. And in cases like abuse or other patterns of destructive behavior, that is also the wisest. But often we leave to avoid the messy process of loving one another. We think there must be a better friend, group, or church out there and abandon the people right in front of us in search of "better." But the reality is just as we will never be perfect, we will never find a perfect community. In this world there are only in-progress people (including us).

We become stronger when we learn to stay because the strands of rope depend on each other. What happens to one happens to all of them. We're told, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). We're to share the happy and the hard of life. Sometimes we plaster on a smile and pretend that we're okay when we're dying inside. Other times we hold back because we fear the jealousy or resentment of those around us. But community means we win together and lose together. We cheer each other on, hold each other up, and keep Jesus at the center of it all.

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That kind of community is possible because the ties that bind us together aren't simply human. The friendship bracelets I made years ago inevitably fell apart. But Colossians 1:17 says, "By Him all things hold together." We can have hope for our relationships

because Jesus is in them. Will there be difficulties? Yes. Will we have conflicts? Yes. Will we walk through seasons of loneliness? Yes. But do we have to do life alone? No.

Somewhere inside me there's still a girl sitting cross-legged on a flower-covered comforter. And with all her heart she still wants to be able to say, "Someone likes me. Someone chose me. Someone wants to share life (and a lunch table) with me." In other words, "I have *people*." That desire never goes away because it's placed there by God. We may try to ignore it or shut it up, but it will keep coming back. We are not made to be individual strands. We are meant to be part of a strong cord. One that can't quickly be broken. One that can bear life's weight. One that connects us to the God who created us for each other.



CONNECTION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of friend do you want to be for others?
2. What scares you most about connecting? What is a truth from Scripture that can help you overcome that fear?
3. How has God been a faithful friend to you?



PRAYER

God, sometimes community can be hard and scary. Please give me the courage to truly connect. Intertwine my life with others and make our bonds strong. Thank you for working in and through my relationships. Amen.

CONNECTION CHALLENGE

As you consider the community God has placed in your life, pray that God will work to smooth edges and create friendships equipped to do the heavy lifting of life—together.

On a piece of paper, list who God has placed in your life. Then practice going from “me” to “three” by connecting with two people on your list this week.

To take it a step further, why not grab some thread and make friendship bracelets together to wear and remind you of God’s love for you, for your friends, and for your community.

