

Fran & Jesus still on the Job

THE CHRISTIAN
WorkingWoman



by Mary Lowman



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The Christian Working Woman
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Introduction

In case you have not met Fran, let me introduce you. She is a fictional workplace woman, a young widow with two school-aged children. These stories are written as a conversation between Jesus and Fran. I chose this story-telling format in order to illustrate what it means to practice the presence of Jesus in everyday life. For born-again believers, we have the privilege of being in constant and continual communication with Jesus because his Spirit is within us, and he never leaves us. We are foolish not to take full advantage of that truth.

When I began the first Fran and Jesus story in 1989, I had no idea it would be so popular. From the enthusiastic response, I recognized this was an effective teaching tool, so I've continued adding new episodes. The first *Fran and Jesus on the Job* book was published in 1993 but has long been out of print.

The fictional conversations between Jesus and Fran are, of course, my own invention based on Scripture, and I believe they are true to Scripture. But they are not the inspired Word of God, as are the actual words of Jesus as recorded in the Bible.

Story-telling is one of the most powerful ways to communicate, as evidenced by Jesus' use of parables. Somehow we listen better and hear truth more clearly in story-form. So, it is my prayer that these Fran stories will carry truth from God's Word into the hearts of all who read.

Who is Fran?

Fran is a woman of my imagination, no doubt like me in many ways, but not based on my life or anyone else's. Her husband was tragically killed in an auto accident a few years ago, and this made it necessary for her to go back into the workforce to support herself and her kids. She works as a project manager for a successful marketing company, and each episode addresses a particular situation Fran faces as a single working mom.

How This Book is Organized

This book is a compilation of some of the Fran and Jesus stories which have been written and aired since the first book was published. Therefore, unlike most "novels," it does not follow a chapter by chapter progression. Each chapter is a stand-alone episode in the life of Fran. So, you can "pick and choose" the chapters you want to read based on your interest and need. And you don't have to read them in sequence.

Many have asked for an updated edition of *Fran and Jesus on the Job*, and this is my response to that request. I pray it will indeed encourage you to remember that, as a Christ-follower, you are never alone, and you can do life every day in every situation with Jesus right there, ready to guide and encourage you.

Chapter 1

Taking a Stand with a Difficult Manager

Today, as Fran arrives at work with Jesus at her side, she's a little nervous because it's the day for her performance review with her manager, Marilyn. She says to Jesus, "I'll be glad when this is over. I hate reviews. But I hope it goes well because the better the review, the more raise I get. I could use a nice raise."

Jesus replies, *"Fran, I'll go into that performance review with you, so take a deep breath and know that whatever happens, I'm in this with you."*

"Thanks, Lord!" She smiles at Jesus' words of encouragement. He really helps her keep perspective. After all, she reminds herself that she works for Jesus not for Marilyn, and as long as he is pleased with her work, she has the approval that is important.

"You know, Lord, my track record is good this year. I was second highest in sales volume in the whole office, and my account retention record is the best. And I got a big order from John Warton last week; nobody's been able to break that account before. So, I think I'm in good shape."

"Do you think Marilyn will have anything to say about the Drexel account, Fran?" Jesus asks.

The Drexel account is the one Fran had to give up because she refused to submit deceptive figures in her proposal. Marilyn gave it to Tom, a young salesman, who blew the whole thing and lost the business.

"Who knows, Lord, but with my good record, I don't see how she can refuse to give me a good rating on my review. After all, I didn't lose that account; Tom did! Well, it's about time to go." Fran starts to rush out.

"Why don't you have a quiet moment of prayer before you go in there? Do you have time?" Jesus asks.

Fran smiles, as she shuts her office door. "Of course I do, Lord! I can't afford not to take time for prayer, can I?" She sits down and continues to pray quietly, "Dear Father, give me your strength, your perspective, your calmness, and your wisdom as I go into this performance review. I ask you to put the right words in my mouth. I pray for a favorable review, if that is your will. Thanks for giving me Jesus to be right here beside me during this. That helps a lot. I pray this in his name. Amen."

And with that, she heads toward Marilyn's office for the review.

"Come on in, Fran," Marilyn says in a rather rigid voice, as she closes the door behind her. "I've already completed your performance review. What I'd like you to do is look it over and then we'll discuss it." She hands Fran the form.

Fran's eyes begin to focus on the review and slowly she realizes she has been given a very poor rating. Marilyn has given her the grade of "Does not meet the requirements of the job," which means Fran will be put on notice. By being put on notice, she is given three months to improve and, if not, she will be fired. She gulps hard and thinks, "Lord, do you see this? Can you believe it? There's no way she can justify this poor rating. It means I don't get a raise, and I may get fired. Lord!"

"Yes, Fran, I see it," Jesus responds. "The important thing now is to stay calm. Remember, you prayed about your words, so be very cautious and measure your words carefully."

With her heart beating like crazy, Fran looks up at Marilyn. "I guess you can see this review is very shocking to me. I really don't understand how you can honestly appraise my work as not meeting the requirements. Here are my sales figures. As you know, I'm second in the whole office in volume and first in customer retention. I just don't understand," Fran says to Marilyn, as she hands her the sales figures.

"Listen, Fran, numbers don't tell the whole story. You demonstrated a total unwillingness to obey orders. You were insubordinate, and as a result we lost the Drexel business. I could fire you for that, Fran, but I'm giving you a break. You have three months to shape up and decide if you're a team player or not. Otherwise, you'll be looking for another job."

Fran can't believe her ears. "Jesus," she breathes a prayer, "are you going to let her get by with this? You know how unfair this is! After all, I was doing what you told me to do—I was doing the right thing, and now I'm about to lose my job. Jesus, where are you?"

"I'm right here, Fran; I haven't moved an inch," he says comfortingly to her. *"Have I ever failed you?"* he asks Fran. *"Have I ever left you or forsaken you?"*

"No," Fran replies, "but this is different. I'm really in trouble. What do I do?"

"I thought you'd never ask," says Jesus, and he quietly begins to put into her mind what she should now say to Marilyn.

Fran can feel a quiet calm come over her. What's that verse—the peace *which passes understanding*? That's what it is—unreasonable peace.

The words she had prayed for begin to form in her mind, and Fran turns to Marilyn and says, "Marilyn, I think the procedures give me the right to voice my objection to this review, isn't that right? I think I'd like to exercise that right. I believe I'm supposed to put it in writing and submit it to Ed Butler, the Vice President of Human Resources, so I'll do that."

Fran didn't raise her voice or show any vindictiveness. She knows the right move to make is to tell Marilyn she intends to follow the company procedure for appeal of a performance review. Even though she tries to be very gentle, she looks at Marilyn and realizes she is very angry.

As Marilyn's face gets redder, she gets up and stands over Fran intimidatingly. "You can do whatever you like, but it won't get you anywhere. I've reviewed all this with Ed and he's in total agreement with what I've done. Insubordination is an offense for which any employee can be fired. You'll find it in the personnel handbook, if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I believe you, Marilyn," Fran replies, "but I don't feel I've been insubordinate. I'd like to follow the procedures for expressing my non-concurrence."

Suddenly Fran feels very fearful. What am I saying? she thinks. I'm in trouble, and I'm making Marilyn very angry. "Jesus, this is escalating, and I don't know what to do. I've never seen Marilyn so out of control and hateful, Jesus!" Fran feels a sudden panic attack as she asks Jesus for help.

Jesus whispers in her ear, *"Please remember that Marilyn is angry because you did the right thing. You were a light shining in her darkness, and she didn't like it. Don't take it personally. I'm going to get you through this, Fran, I promise."*

Just hearing his voice reassures Fran, and the peace that passes understanding sweeps over her again. But somehow, the more peaceful she feels, the more upset and out of control Marilyn seems to be.

After pacing in front of Fran for what seems like an eternity, Marilyn turns and says, "There's a place on page three of the review for your comments, if you insist on getting yourself in further trouble. After you write them, return it to me. I'll take it to Ed."

"Marilyn," Fran says, "if I remember correctly, I believe the procedures indicate I'm to take it directly to Ed's office, and then an interview will be scheduled, isn't that right?" Again, the calmness of her voice amazes Fran.

But when she sees how angry this makes Marilyn, she says to Jesus, "Oops, I think I said the wrong thing. Guess I shouldn't have brought that up, huh Lord?"

"No," Jesus responds, *"it's okay, Fran. Marilyn is uncomfortable because she knows you could get her in a bunch of trouble if you talk to Ed."*

"Get her in trouble? Why, of course," Fran replies. Suddenly it's all so clear to Fran. Marilyn is bluffing about Ed, trying to frighten Fran. She never dreamed Fran would think of talking to Ed. This is simply her way of getting back at Fran.

"You know, Lord, I just hadn't stopped to put it all together. I heard Marilyn's manager was very upset with her for turning the Drexel account over to Tom at the last minute. He blamed her for losing that business. So, she's just looking to get even with me, I think."

"Right," says Jesus, "but you know, you now have the advantage over Marilyn. She knows if you escalate the issue, she'll be in further trouble."

Fran turns her attention back to Marilyn, who is staring at her with a look of fear and hatred. Beginning with some words of profanity, she says to Fran, "If you think you can get me in trouble, you're wrong, Fran. My job is secure; they'll believe what I tell them, not what you write on that form or say to Ed."

For the first time, Fran sees that Marilyn is an insecure, desperate woman.

Suddenly Fran can feel nothing but pity for Marilyn. "Lord," she says to Jesus, "look at her. She's pitiful."

Jesus agrees.

Fran asks, "Well, Lord, how do I respond to her now? Do I keep insisting on my right to talk with Ed? I feel so sorry for her."

Jesus smiles. *"You feel sorry for her. Isn't that interesting, Fran? A few minutes ago, you were frightened, and it appeared that Marilyn was a huge problem in your life. Now you feel sorry for her."*

Fran sees the humor and smiles inwardly. "Well, you know, Lord, it's because you allow me to see people through your eyes. If you weren't here beside me, I wouldn't feel sorry for Marilyn."

"Yes, Fran, you're looking through my eyes now, and you see Marilyn to be what she is: A very insecure and frightened woman. All that intimidation she's been using on you is just her way of covering up," Jesus says.

It seems like all at once Fran knows what she should do. She turns to Marilyn, and says, "Marilyn, maybe it's not really necessary for me to talk to Ed at this time. If you'll just tell me exactly what I have to do to improve my performance and put that in writing for me, I'll do everything I can honestly do to improve. I believe another review will be due in three months, and hopefully by then you will be able to change it. That could solve the whole issue, couldn't it?"

Fran thinks, "I didn't intend to say that, Lord. Where did that come from?"

"From me. You prayed for wisdom, so I put that idea in your mind. That's an answer to prayer, Fran."

Fran looks at Marilyn, who has rather quietly sat down and seems much calmer, almost sheepish.

"Fran," she says, "I, uh, I'm sure, uh...Well, yes I think that's a possibility. We could possibly pull your review up in three months. Do you still want to talk to Ed?" Marilyn asks very hesitatingly.

"No," Fran replies, "as long as I have in writing exactly what I'm supposed to do, and as long as it's something I realistically can achieve, I'm willing to give it a three-month trial before talking to Ed."

Marilyn is obviously relieved and looks at Fran in bewilderment. "You mean, you aren't going to do anything at this time, is that right?"

"Correct, Marilyn, I would prefer to work this out between us if possible. I don't like confrontations like this, and since I know I'll work hard and do the best job I can, I think I should have a good shot at dramatically improving that review, don't you? Provided, of course, we don't run into anymore 'Drexel' experiences." Fran looks to see how Marilyn responds to her reference to Drexel. She wants to make certain Marilyn understands she is still unwilling to compromise her integrity, even to keep her job.

Marilyn replies, "that's one of those unfortunate happenings, Fran. Hopefully it won't happen again."

"Then we'll have another performance review in three months, is that right?" Fran asks.

"I have the flexibility of scheduling it sooner if I like, but at least in three months, yes," Marilyn answers. "If I covered all your questions, I guess that's all we need to talk about now." Marilyn looks at Fran with what could almost be described as a smile.

As Fran and Jesus leave her office, the atmosphere is totally different. Fran says to Jesus, "Sounds like Marilyn just heaved a big sigh of relief, Lord. Did you hear that?"

"Yes," Jesus answers, *"I think Marilyn realizes you could have hung a noose around her neck today, but you chose not to."*

Jesus is right. Fran could have gotten her vengeance so easily, but she's let Marilyn off the hook. Marilyn has been nothing but a thorn in her flesh, and she could have had her in lots of trouble; instead, she chose to show mercy.

"I could never have done that without you, Lord," she says.

"Fran, do you remember the passage in Matthew 16 you read this morning about taking up your daily cross and following me?" Jesus asks.

"Now that you bring it up, I have to tell you I'm not sure I know what it means to take up a cross daily and follow you. I mean, who would voluntarily want to take up some hardship or sorrow? Guess I don't understand what you mean, Lord," Fran replies.

"What you've just done, Fran, is what it means. Your own natural will has today been placed at a crossroad with what I wanted you to do. You chose to do it my way, Fran, instead of doing it your way. You were willing to let Marilyn off the hook, not knowing what the outcome would be. You faced a cross today and decided you would take it up. That's what it means, Fran," Jesus answers.

"You mean, that was my daily cross?" Fran asks rather puzzled.

"Anytime you relinquish your will and choose mine, you've taken your cross to follow me. That's what discipleship is." Jesus smiles at her.

"Jesus, if I'd been on my own, I would have kept pushing her and insisted on talking with Ed. But now I see by backing off, I've saved Marilyn's neck and her whole attitude changed toward me—right in front of my eyes. Your way was a lot better than mine."

"Fran," Jesus replies with a grin, *"I always lead you in paths that are good for you. You know my plans for you are good ones, not plans to harm you, Fran."*

"Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for being so patient with me and leading me step by step, day by day. I can't imagine facing this unfair, unjust world without you by my side. But then, nobody could understand cruel treatment better than you." Fran's heart is stirred again to realize how much she loves Jesus for what he has done for her.

"By the way," Jesus says, *"did you realize Marilyn read 1 Corinthians 13 today—the chapter which describes what real love is like?"*

"She did?" Fran replies. "I didn't see a Bible on her desk? I don't think she's ever read the Bible, Lord."

"No, not in the Bible. She read it in you, Fran. You are the Living Edition of God's Word. Now you can wait and see what will happen because you chose to be merciful. Well done, good and faithful servant."

Tears come to Fran's eyes. Just to know the Lord is pleased with her is all she needs to know.

"You know, Lord," Fran says, "even if I'd been fired on the spot, I could make it just hearing you say those words to me. I guess I don't really need Marilyn's good review. All I need is yours."

Closing

So, Fran has had another incredible lesson from Jesus on how to deal with difficult situations. In the process, she's been a witness to a woman who desperately needs to know Jesus. Who knows what will come from all this!

Could it be that you are facing some very unfair situation on your job or elsewhere? Please be aware if you are a Christ-follower, none of these things happen to you by accident. God is allowing them in your life for various reasons.

One of the reasons is to teach you how to trust Jesus, how to step out in faith and do what he wants you to do, even when it looks dangerous and illogical. You can see how Fran's faith and trust have grown, and how she is learning to turn to Jesus more and more. As we exercise faith, it builds more faith into us.

Chapter 2

Dealing with a Dishonest Coworker

"Fran, you got time for lunch today?" Louise asks as she pokes her head around Fran's door. Louise and Fran have become good friends, and it's great to have a fellow believer on the job to talk to. They meet at lunch once a week to pray for the company and for the people they work with. It has been a wonderful time of fellowship, and they've seen lots of answers to prayer.

But this is not their prayer day, so Fran asks, "Something wrong?"

"Well, kinda," Louise replies. "I just need some advice but I know how busy you are so..."

"No, let's do it," Fran answers. And with that, they head to the cafeteria. Sitting down in a quiet corner, Fran says to Louise, "You look worried. I have a feeling something is bothering you."

"You're right," Louise agrees.

After asking God's blessing on the food, Louise says, "Fran, you know how Marilyn made such a point in the staff meeting last week about our expense accounts and what's allowed and what isn't, especially as it relates to meals."

"Yeah," Fran replies. "She told me some people have really taken advantage of that policy."

"Well," Louise says, lowering her voice, "I'm supposed to approve all expense accounts for those in my group before they go to Marilyn, and she made it clear that we're supposed to make certain all the charges are in compliance with company policy. That's what I'm upset about. Jerry is lying about his expenses, charging meals to the company that are not business related, and today we had some words about it." Jerry is the senior account manager in Louise's group.

"What kind of words?" Fran asks.

"Well, he turned in his expenses with receipts for meals that were not with clients," Louise explains. "So, I gave them back to him with a note about the meals policy, and he calls me in his office, shuts the door and says, 'Since when are you telling me what meals I can charge and what I can't?'"

Louise lowers her voice further. "I told him these were the new instructions I had received from Marilyn, that it was my responsibility to make sure all charges were accurate, and he said, 'Well, I've been working for this company for twelve years, and I'm not having someone checking my expense accounts.'"

Louise looks at Fran and shakes her head. "What did you say?" Fran asks.

"I said something like 'Well, Jerry, I'm just following instructions. Marilyn told us to be responsible for these expenses and make sure they're right. What do you want me to tell her?' I asked him."

Louise takes a deep breath. "He threw the report at me and said, 'You just note that those meals are client meals.' Then he gave me names of two clients to put on the report, but I knew it wasn't true. So I said, 'Gee, Jerry, I think you must be mistaken.' And I reminded him they weren't client meals. He stared at me with a look that could kill, and said, 'You're supposed to do as I direct you to do, so just do it, Louise. Don't make a big deal out of it.'"

"Oh, great," Fran says to Louise, "he really put you in a tough spot. What happened then?"

"Fran, I'm ashamed to tell you, but I didn't have the guts to stand up to him. He is so intimidating," Louise replies. "So, I just took the report and walked out." Louise is obviously very upset with herself.

"Fran, I didn't do the right thing. You know, I just kept thinking about how much I need this job, and I know Jerry—he is politically connected and I would never win in a fight against him." Louise puts her fork down and pushes back from the table, very agitated.

"Louise, you were caught totally off-guard, and that's understandable. Besides, you haven't turned the report in yet, have you?" Fran asks.

"No, it's still on my desk, but it's due tomorrow," Louise says. "Now, what am I going to do?"

"Well, what are your options?" Fran asks.

"My options are to put some clients' names in there, like he said. Nobody will ever know the difference and be done with it. Or to go back and tell Jerry I can't approve the report when I know they are not client meals," Louise explains.

"Well, let's consider those options," Fran says, as she finishes her salad. "If you do what Jerry wants you to, you will be lying, right?"

"I don't know," Louise replies. "Is it really lying when I'm simply following directions? I tried to do it by the book, but Jerry is forcing me to lie. Therefore, can I really be held accountable?"

"Would you be doing something which you know to be inaccurate and wrong?" Fran asks.

"Yes," Louise answers, "but only because I've been told to. Besides, Fran, it's only \$87, which is not a big deal."

"Not a big deal, Louise? Not a big deal to Jesus if we do something which we know is wrong?" Fran asks.

"I know, I know," Louise says, putting her head in her hands. "I'm just trying to find a way out, but you're right, Fran. If I approve the report, I'm just as guilty as Jerry."

"And furthermore, if you do it once, you'll have to keep doing it, right?" Fran continues. "So, the first option is neither right nor smart. I think of those verses in Proverbs 4 which warn us not to even swerve off the path. Even little compromises—or what we call little compromises—can lead to major disasters, and I think this is one example of how taking the easy way out could get you in deeper and deeper."

"But, Fran," Louise looks at her with fear in her eyes, "if I refuse to do what Jerry told me to do, well, he'll find a way to take it out on me. That's the way he is."

"But Louise," Fran touches her arm for assurance, "when we allow the consequences to determine our actions, then we are really heading for trouble. We have to base our actions on biblical principle, and then trust God for the consequences."

"Yeah, but wow," Louise says, "when it's your job on the line—I don't know, Fran. It's tough. I've been laid off once, and I'm still trying to catch up financially. I'd be in a big mess if I lost this job."

Fran says, "Look, Louise, we need to pray about this, don't we. Let's take a walk outside and pray about it."

Louise agrees, and they head outside. Fran prays first. "Lord, we're in a mess here. You know the situation and you know Louise is trying to do the right thing. But you also know her job could be on the line. So, what we need is some divine wisdom. Lord, please give Louise or me an idea of the best way to handle this, so she's not a part of any deception."

Louise then prays, "Lord, I desperately need your strength. I'm scared to death of losing my job again, and I realize I'm depending on my job for security instead of depending on you. I know you will take care of me, and you can do that with or without this job. I trust you with the consequences, and I promise to do the right thing and not to compromise my standards or ethics. I claim the promise you gave me when I was unemployed: *Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken.* I'm in your hands. Now, please give me wisdom."

The quiet peace of Jesus seems to fall on Fran and Louise like a blanket as they finish praying. Louise says, "Isn't it amazing how Jesus gives us peace when we finally turn to him!"

"Yes," Fran replies, "it is. But sometimes we're so silly and wait so long to turn to him, don't we?"

"Yeah, I could have done this as soon as I walked out of Jerry's office and had the peace of Jesus flooding my mind at once. But instead I chose to fret about it all morning. Thanks, Fran, so much for helping me get focused again on Jesus," Louise says, taking her hand.

"You know, Louise," Fran replies, "this is what the Body of Christ is all about. You encourage and support me when I need it, and I do that for you when you need it. How many times have I run to you in panic mode?" she asks with a laugh.

"We really do need each other, don't we?" Louise agrees. "Well, now to decide what to do."

"I have an idea," Fran says. "Take the expense form back into Jerry and explain that this presents a dilemma for you. Tell him you cannot in good conscience approve it since you know it is against company policy. However, what you can do is let him complete the report and take it directly to Marilyn, without your signature."

"Hmm," Louise says, "so what I'll be saying to him is I won't lie for you, but if you want to lie for yourself, I'll give you the opportunity."

"Yes, in a sense that's it," Fran answers. "But you will make it clear to him you cannot do it, and it is his decision."

"But Fran, I know those meals are personal. They are with his girlfriend, Gail. You know, he's getting divorced, and I know he meets her for lunch several times a week when he's out on sales calls. I've heard him setting dates up with her many times," Louise explains. "So, I can't claim to be ignorant."

"I understand," Fran says, "but you aren't claiming to be ignorant. You're just refusing to put your signature of approval on the expense account."

"Am I just dodging the issue then, Fran?" Louise asks. "I mean, as a Christian, should I not report these meals as personal since I know they are?"

"Wow, Louise," Fran says, "this is a tough question. We need to dig into the Word and pray about it some more. Why don't you come over to the house tonight, and we'll see what we can come up with."

All through the afternoon, Fran's mind keeps going back to the dilemma, and she talks with Jesus about it several times. "Lord," she says, "are we, as Christians, supposed to report people when we know they're wrong, or is it enough just to keep from being a part of their wrongdoing? How do we know the right thing to do?"

Jesus assures Fran that God's principles are clearly defined in the Bible, and they will always give her general guidance. He reminds her of the verse in James 1:5 which says *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.* He says, *"Since you asked for wisdom for yourself and Louise, I will be true to my Word and give you wisdom."*

"Thank you, Lord," Fran says with a smile.

Commentary

I hope you caught some important principles Fran and Louise were discussing. And I hope you'll remember doing it the right way—God's way—is always best for you even when it looks like trouble.

Part 2

That evening as Fran gets her children ready for bed, the doorbell rings and Louise arrives.

"Whew," Fran says to Louise, "as much as I love them, it's always nice to have the peace and quiet that comes once they're in bed."

"But they're so nice, Fran," Louise says.

"Thanks, Louise," Fran replies.

"Well, have you given the problem any more thought?" Louise asks.

"Off and on all afternoon," Fran says. "I couldn't come up with a specific verse which I thought gave a specific answer, could you?"

"Well, not exactly," Louise says. "But I know it would be wrong for me to approve the report, since I know Jerry is cheating. That much I know."

"Right, I agree," Fran says. "So now we just have to consider your other options."

"Let's start with prayer," Louise suggests, and they spend a considerable time praying together. Both pray for wisdom from above and Louise again confirms to the Lord she is willing to do his will no matter what the cost will be to her. Fran prays their minds will be renewed by God's Spirit so they won't think incorrectly, and they will know God's good and perfect will.

"Louise," Fran says, "I suggest we start by listing all the options you have."

"Good idea," Louise agrees, and they get a pad to write on. After some discussion, they come up with only two options:

1. Turn in the report without your approval on it and see what happens.
2. Return the report to Jerry and ask him to complete it and turn it in himself.

No longer is any consideration given to approving the report as it is or lying in any way. They both agree it is not a biblical option.

"Let's think about what will happen in each case," Fran suggests. So she and Louise write down everything they can think of. Option 1, they decide, is simply postponing the inevitable.

The report would come back to Louise for completion, and she'd still be faced with the dilemma. Option 2 would mean a direct confrontation with Jerry and undoubtedly would cause him to be very upset with Louise. And Louise is fearful of retribution on his part. After all, Jerry's been around a long time and has some pull in the company.

"You know," Louise says, "it's not like Jerry would even miss the \$87, Fran. He makes plenty of money. You'd think I was talking about \$87,000, the way he acts about this."

"Remember Louise," Fran responds, "money makes people do crazy things—even small amounts of money. That's why Jesus said you can't serve God and Money, with a capital 'M.' It has power over people to cause them to do all kinds of dishonest things, and often totally out of proportion to the amount."

"You know, you're right," Louise says. "I remember last week I was filling out an expense account for myself, and I was really tempted to put down a meal I didn't have to pay for. I had to force myself not to do it, because I wanted to pick up \$15."

"Oh, it's happened to me many times," Fran says, "and I haven't always done the right thing."

"I guess I can't be too hard on poor Jerry," Louise says. "After all, if it weren't for Jesus, I'm sure I'd do the same thing. And even with Jesus, I'm tempted to cheat for a few measly dollars."

"You're right," Fran agrees. "You know, Louise, we didn't pray for Jerry. We should."

And with that, they stop where they are to pray for Jerry, for his salvation, for his family, for Gail, his girlfriend, and for a change of his heart to be willing to do the right thing. "I hadn't thought about praying for him," Louise says as they finish. "I guess I saw him as my enemy."

"Well, he is in a way," Fran says, "but Jesus says to do good to your enemies and pray for them."

"For sure," Louise agrees. "But back to Option 2. Should I put it back in Jerry's lap? Or is it my responsibility, as a Christian, to turn the report in and tell Marilyn what he has asked me to do?"

"Well, let me just ask you a few questions," Fran says. "You did exactly what you were supposed to do the first time—right?"

"Right," Louise says. "I fully intended to follow company instructions. But Jerry didn't want me to."

"So, up to this point, you've done exactly right. Now, since Jerry does not report to you and you are not responsible for his behavior, do you think it would be either right or necessary for you to report on him?" Fran poses the question to Louise.

They discuss it at length, and Louise finally concludes she is not called to be the policewoman of the office—not even of Jerry. She is called to do her job with total honesty and not to be a part of any deception. If Jerry chooses to cheat, that is his decision. But she has to be certain he understands she will not be in any way connected with his deception.

Fran refers Louise to 1 Peter, and they read chapter three. "Look at this passage," Fran says, *But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord...it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (1 Peter 3: 14, 17).*

"I think Peter wrote this passage for me," Louise smiles at Fran.

"You may suffer for doing what is right, but you will be blessed," Fran says. "Remember, if you don't do it right, you'll suffer, too. Much better to suffer for doing right."

After some further discussion, Louise leaves and as Fran wearily prepares for bed, she prays, "Lord, I'm tired, but that was time well spent. Thank you for giving us the wisdom we asked for."

Jesus assures Fran that Louise is fortified now for whatever she faces tomorrow. But she realizes tomorrow won't be easy for Louise, so she prays again.

"Lord, I know the fears and doubts will attack Louise again tomorrow. Our enemy won't give up easily. Give her great comfort and assurance tomorrow and a good night's sleep tonight. Remind her that greater is he who is in her than he who is in the world. Thanks, Lord," and with that she puts her head on the pillow and is instantly asleep.

The next morning Fran arrives at the office before Louise and puts some cookies on her desk with a card which says: *When I am afraid, I will trust in you. I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?* (Psalm 56:3-4) and props it on her desk near the cookies.

Fran doesn't even see Louise until lunch time. "Well," Louise says as they get seated at the table, "I told him, Fran. And he didn't like it. He said I was making a big deal out of this and being silly about it. But I told him I just saw it differently than he did, and while I wanted to cooperate with him, this was a matter of conscience."

"What did he say?" Fran asks.

"He said he didn't have time to bother with that report, so just turn it in as I originally had planned, and take those meals off the report," Louise says. "I know he wasn't happy about it, but I also know I did the right thing. I sure am glad we talked about it last night, because I know I handled it a lot better than I would have otherwise. I don't know, Fran, but I don't think he'll take it out on me. I could be mistaken, but I really think I saw a renewed respect for me, just the way he acted."

Fran pats her arm. "I'm so proud of you, Louise. And the good news is, even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. You can't lose."

"I truly feel that way, Fran," Louise says. "But my heart was in my throat. It was not easy."

"But a lot easier than doing it the wrong way," Fran says, and Louise agrees.

As she gets back in her office, Fran silently prays, "Lord, thank you for giving Louise strength to do the right thing? I believe she handled it very well. Thank you for wisdom and courage."

She realizes that this has been a growing experience not only for Louise but for herself as well. Facing dishonesty on the job can be very intimidating and frightening, but Fran realizes that as a Christian, she has to always do the right thing, regardless of the cost.

Closing

Our course of action in these situations is not always crystal clear, which means we have to turn to God's Word and prayer for guidance. And the decision Louise made could have been different if certain circumstances were different. For example, if Jerry worked for her and she was accountable for Jerry's actions, then she would have had to insist he do the right thing, rather than suggest.

For most of us, our knee-jerk reaction in a situation like this is to take the easy way out—or what looks like the easy way out. Nobody likes to confront someone about their honesty or lack of it. It is never comfortable. But sometimes our Christian principles require that of us.

Remember, however, that your choice of words is very critical in these situations. Louise and Fran carefully prayed about how to approach Jerry. Louise didn't go in half-cocked, shooting from the hip. She gave careful thought to her words and her approach, and did it without condescension or condemnation. Nonetheless, she was still very bold in her stand for what she knew was right.

If you try to have a confrontation like this without prayer and compassion for the other person, you could find yourself in an argument with no good ending.

Louise remembered that if it weren't for the Lord, she'd be just as dishonest as the next person. She saw Jerry through God's eyes, and that gave her a new perspective. She even prayed for Jerry and the circumstances of his life of which she was aware.

So, remember, when you are faced with some similar type of dilemma, take time to pray and get wisdom from the Lord. Then you can be assured that whatever the consequences are, you did the right thing and God will honor you.

The principles given to us by the Lord are there to guide us through these decisions. The important thing we must remember is that God's way is the only way to go. It's much better to suffer for doing what is right than to suffer for doing what is wrong.

Chapter 3

Facing a Possible Lay-off

As Fran arrives at work today, Jesus is again right beside her. As they settle into her office, Louise, a coworker and a fellow believer, rushes in and shuts the door behind her. "Fran, sit down. You're not going to believe what I heard. We just lost two key accounts, our largest. They took their business somewhere else. That's about 30% of this division's business, Fran. Do you realize what that means?"

Fran sits down; she does indeed realize what it means. "You're kidding, Louise. We lost both of those accounts? Why?"

"Money. Simpson and Elliott came in with incredibly low bids when their contracts were up for renewal, and they went for it. Fran, there will be some drastic cuts around here, you can be sure of that. And you know who gets cut first—those of us with less than five years' service. That's you and me. Fran, we could be out of a job in a week."

Louise's words hit Fran like a ton of bricks. "They wouldn't do that. We have good records; we bring in business; we do our jobs well."

"Don't kid yourself," Louise replies. "When it comes to laying people off, it's last in, first out, regardless of your contribution to the company. I gotta go to a meeting; let's have lunch and talk more."

"Yeah, sure," Fran replies as Louise rushes out of her office.

"Lord, did you hear that?" Fran begins to talk to Jesus. "If Louise is right, I could be in serious trouble. I guess I'd have to collect unemployment. But unemployment won't pay my bills, and I have very little money put back. I mean with two kids to feed and clothe, it just takes a lot. And jobs are hard to find; Lord, what should I do?"

When panic moments hit, Fran has learned to sit still and listen. So, she sits down and waits for Jesus to speak to her. After a few quiet moments, Jesus says, "*Remember I am still in control of your life and nothing takes me by surprise.*" He reminds her to think of some promises he has given her in the past.

"What was that Psalm I read this morning?" Fran searches her memory as she reaches for her Bible. "Here it is—Psalm 56."

Jesus urges her to read some of those verses again. As so often happens, it was just right for today—it was no accident she read that Psalm this morning.

The words of the Psalm start to have a calming effect on Fran. She reads out loud verses three and four:

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise—in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?

Fran thinks about it and then talks to the Lord again. "Quite honestly, Lord, right now it feels like mortal man—my employer—has the power to do something pretty dreadful to me—like take my job away."

As soon as she confesses this fear, she is reminded of the verses in Romans 8:38 and 39 which assure her that nothing can separate her from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. "Thank you, Lord," she says, "for I know you will never leave me."

Her fear begins to subside. She recites out loud some more of God's commitments to her.

"Lord, you've promised to supply all of my needs according to your riches," Fran says. "And I know you have the riches and resources to meet my needs and those of my children, even if I lose this job." Those words come out a little shaky, but it helps her to recite them out loud.

"You know, Fran," Jesus says, *"facing possible financial hardships, lack of income, loss of a job really makes you see how much you depend on others when you should trust in me. Maybe you've been trusting your employer for security instead of trusting me."* This grips Fran's heart.

Jesus quietly assures her again there is no need to panic. She can relax. This company does not hold her future in their hands; God does.

Fran can't keep the tears back. "It's so easy to forget that, Lord. Thanks for reminding me. I can trust you with my future. But I have a feeling you're going to have to remind me of that quite often in the next few days as this all starts to play out. I'm sure the fear and panic will raise its ugly head again."

She decides to type those two verses from Psalm 56 on a card and prop it up right there on her desk so she has to see it all the time. She needs to remember when she is afraid that the Lord is there for her and no earthly person or organization can get to her except through God. Nothing happens to her by accident. God filters everything that touches her life. She is his responsibility, and he is more than capable of taking care of her.

"I will keep trusting you, Lord," Fran says out loud. "I'm okay now; I'm fine. I better get to work. Got lots to do today."

And with that, Fran's mind is at rest, and she begins her day's work. Lunchtime rolls around, and Louise sticks her head in Fran's office. "Hey, it's time for lunch; let's go."

"I'll meet you in the cafeteria in five minutes," Fran answers as she finishes up some figures she's working on. Just as she's starting to leave for lunch, Marilyn, her manager, walks into her office.

"Fran, we need to find some time to talk this afternoon. How's your schedule?" Marilyn asks in a rather subdued manner.

Fran can feel her heart beating faster. "Any time's okay with me, Marilyn. What's up?"

"I'll give you all the details later. Why don't you come to my office about 3:00," Marilyn replies.

"Sure, okay—see you at three, Marilyn." Fran turns to Jesus as Marilyn leaves. "Lord, looks like Louise was right. This probably will be it—the big news. I wonder how much notice they'll give me. I wonder how many weeks' pay I'll get. What does the handbook say? One week's pay for every year worked, I think," Fran starts working out the figures on her calculator.

Again, Jesus speaks quietly to her: *"You know, Fran, I wouldn't start borrowing trouble from tomorrow. It's not profitable to come to conclusions before you know the facts. That's not truthful thinking."* Fran is reminded of her study in Philippians 4, where we're told what to think about and what not to think about. Imagining future events and speculating on what you will do if certain things happen often gets you into untruthful thinking and unnecessary stress.

"Okay, Lord, I'll just wait and see what she says. Now, I better go meet Louise. She'll be in panic mode, and I'll need you there to help me stay calm," Fran says to Jesus.

"Remember," Jesus says, *"Louise is worried, but don't let that cause you to be fearful."*

As they settle down at a secluded table with their lunch trays, Louise starts in right away. "So, have you heard anything else, Fran? Do you believe what I told you? I'm telling you, I got it straight from George over in accounting."

"I've been stuck in my office all morning finishing up a proposal, so I haven't talked with anyone else. However, Marilyn did ask me to see her this afternoon at three, and she seemed kinda somber," Fran reports to Louise.

"See; see what I told you. I bet you anything, she'll drop the shoe on you then. She'll probably see me today, too. I'm sure I'll get the axe; I've only been here two years," Louise laments, while picking at her food. "You know, I'm not so hungry. If I lose my job, what will I do?" She pushes her tray away and puts her head in her hands.

"Louise, I went into a panic after you left my office, but I remembered a verse I read in Psalm 56 just this morning. It says whenever we are afraid, we must trust in the Lord, and it asks, *What can mere mortals do to me?* All this company can do to you is let you go. That's all, Louise, and that's not the end of the world. Jesus has promised to take care of you."

"I knew you would say something like that, Fran, and I know your faith is strong, but I'm sorry. I just can't dismiss it so easily. This is serious. Jobs can be very difficult to find these days—what

with all the jobs lost in the pandemic. And unemployment benefits run out fast." Louise turns her head so Fran can't see the tears.

"I know it's serious, Louise, but do you think Jesus just helps us when it's easy? Either we can trust him or we can't, and this is where the rubber meets the road. It's easy to say we trust him when everything is going good and we have other resources to meet our needs. But now, you and I face the distinct possibility that our trusted resource—our employer—may not be so trustworthy after all. We should have known that all along, Louise. Only Jesus is totally trustworthy, and I'm just going to keep putting my trust in him to take care of me and my kids. He'll take care of you, too. You belong to him."

Fran's words seem to have little effect on Louise. "Lord," Fran says quietly to Jesus, "she's not listening to me. She needs to hear it from you, I think."

But Fran knows from her own experience that Louise will not hear it from the Lord until she comes to him for help, and she hasn't done that yet.

Fran turns to Louise, "You know, Louise, why don't you take the rest of the lunch hour and go out to your car to get alone and just spend some time in prayer. I think that will help you a great deal. You need to hear it straight from Jesus to you; he's not going to fail you now, Louise. He will keep his promises." Fran puts her arm around Louise.

"Okay, Fran. I think you're right. I'll see you later," Louise says as she walks off with her food untouched. Fran gets up to leave as well.

Commentary

Maybe you've faced or are facing a similar predicament, and you may have already lost your job through no fault of your own. Christians are not immune to unemployment.

I hope you will remember some of these words of encouragement from Jesus to Fran, and you will apply them to your own heart. Whenever fear starts to overtake you, you must immediately go to the Word of God to find an antidote for it. That is where you will find the peace that passes understanding.

You'll note that because Fran had been reading God's Word regularly, it was there for her when she needed it. Some Christians never spend any time getting to know God until a crisis arises, and then they have no foundation. They have little knowledge of God's Word. So that fear just consumes them.

You'll also note it was helpful for Fran to recite out loud, in the midst of her fears, the promises of God, the things she knew about God that allayed her fears. I will warn you that at those moments, you won't feel like doing that. You have to do it by a set of your will and by faith.

But if you will train yourself to respond to fear with promises from God's Word, it will drive out the fear quickly.

Part 2

After lunch Fran and Jesus return to her office, and she completes her project with peace in her heart that really amazes her. At one point she says to Jesus, "You know, Lord, with this meeting coming up with Marilyn, I would expect myself to be useless. But here I am calmly working away. That's not like me, you know."

Jesus says, *"I know, Fran, it's like me. You're becoming more and more like me. That's what you're supposed to do—that's what every Christian should be doing. And you're experiencing the peace which passes understanding, Fran."*

"I sure am, Lord," Fran replies. "That unexplainable peace. It's because of you. You are my peace, and you're here with me all the time. That's why I have peace," Fran smiles as she goes back to work.

Time passes quickly, and Fran looks at her watch. "Wow, it's 3:00. Time to go see Marilyn. Let's go, Jesus; I wouldn't think of going to this without you." And together they head down the hall.

Marilyn shuts the door behind Fran as she sits down. "Well, you've probably been hearing some rumors today, Fran. Everybody else has. What I'm trying to do is stop the rumors and give you some facts so you can know what's happening. Frankly, this all came to me this morning in a management meeting. It's been very sudden for all of us, but as you've probably heard, we lost two huge accounts."

"Yeah, that's what I heard," Fran responds. "And I heard a bunch of us would have to be laid off."

Marilyn nods her head, "Unfortunately, that's the case. They are telling me I have to let five of my fifteen account reps go. And the rules are the newest employees go unless there are some extenuating circumstances to do it otherwise. I've been looking at the records, Fran, and you're number eleven."

"So, that means I'm out of here I guess," Fran looks at Marilyn.

"I don't know for sure yet," Marilyn responds. "You see, John, who is number 10, has been here only six months longer than you, and John has had an unsatisfactory performance rating for almost a year now. This is just between you and me, Fran, but I had started the process of putting John on notice. Would you believe, I filled out the forms yesterday, but didn't sign them or turn them in. If I had just moved on that sooner, it would make things simpler. But,

I'm hoping I can let John go and keep you. You're one of my best performers; we've been through a lot together. I respect you, and I want to keep you if I can."

Fran smiles at Marilyn, remembering when Marilyn actually wanted to fire Fran because of Fran's unwillingness to lower her standards to get a new account. It reassures Fran to see the Lord brought her through that one, and he'll take her through this tough spot as well.

"Well, Marilyn, I appreciate those words of confidence more than I can say. That means a lot to me, regardless of what happens. And I feel sorry for John. He has a family, too, doesn't he?"

"Yes, and that's been part of his problem lately. He's been going through a nasty divorce, and it has really affected his work. I've tried to hang in there with him until he could get everything settled, but it just drags on and on. And his performance gets worse and worse. At any rate, I have to do what's right for the company." Marilyn shares a little of the problem with Fran.

"Wow, Marilyn, you're really in a tough spot. I don't envy you," Fran feels for Marilyn.

Marilyn looks at Fran with amazement in her eyes and voice. "I'm in a tough spot? But my job's not threatened Fran, and yours is."

"Yeah, but what I do won't affect other people's lives, and you have to make choices that affect others. I think that must be especially tough. Marilyn, I just want you to know I will be praying for you in this—I'll be praying for all of us," Fran replies.

"You'll be praying for me? Well, I guess it can't hurt. I don't want to give you any false hope, Fran. I may not be able to save your job. Technically, John should stay and not you," Marilyn struggles to understand Fran's serenity.

"I understand, Marilyn. You know, I need a job, too; I have two kids to support. But if you decide to keep John, it'll be okay, because I know I'd worry a lot about him out of work. It might be harder for him to find a job than me, and with the divorce, he might break under it." Fran tries to explain how she feels to Marilyn.

"I have to tell you the truth, Fran, if I didn't know you as well as I do, I wouldn't believe you could be so calm and say what you did. You're different. What makes you different? I know you're religious, but it's something else," Marilyn asks with a puzzled look.

Fran chuckles. "I don't know, Marilyn. I don't think of myself as religious, but I do have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I rely on him to meet my needs and give me strength. If you see a difference in me, I figure it has to be Jesus who makes the difference."

"Well, I don't understand that. I never thought I'd like one of you 'Jesus freaks,' but I have to admit, you're different. Someday let's talk about it more," Marilyn suggests.

"Love to, Marilyn. I guess I am a 'Jesus freak', as you put it, and I'd love to tell you why. Let's have dinner soon," Fran replies with a smile.

"Just as soon as I get all this terrible ordeal over with. There's not much more I can tell you now. I'm meeting with Human Resources late today and tonight, so maybe I'll have an answer for you tomorrow. Meanwhile, I wanted you to know the status. Remember, this must stay between us. I wouldn't share this with anyone but you, Fran. I trust you to keep it confidential."

"Not to worry, Marilyn. I'll talk with you tomorrow." Fran gets up to leave. "Oh, by the way, how about Louise?"

"I'm afraid she'll have to go, too. She's number 13. But I haven't talked with her yet, so keep that to yourself," Marilyn advises Fran.

Driving home that evening, Fran says to Jesus, "That was pretty incredible what Marilyn said to me today, Lord. She wants to keep me, and a few months ago she was trying to fire me!"

She reminds herself to follow up on that dinner invitation. Marilyn has open ears to hear, and Fran realizes again no one is in her life by accident. It was hard for her to understand when she was having trouble with Marilyn, but now she can see God is up to something in this relationship.

"I know I have to be ready to give answers for the hope within me," Fran says to Jesus, "and it looks like she wants to ask some questions. It's just hard to believe the relationship has changed so drastically. Thanks, Lord, that's you're doin'." Fran smiles as she pulls in the driveway.

Her evening with the kids is normal, helping with homework, having some fun, reading to them as they go to bed. Afterwards, she plops in her favorite chair, feeling rather bushed.

"This day has been exhausting; I feel pretty wiped out, Lord," she says to Jesus.

"You know," she continues, "I really worry about John. If he gets laid off and not me, it could be devastating for him. And with all his expenses now, he's got it worse than I do, Lord. Should I suggest to Marilyn that she should keep him and not me?" Fran turns to Jesus for some advice.

She waits to hear his quiet voice. She has learned to give Jesus time to talk to her and let the mind of Christ in her have an opportunity to control her thinking. But this time, she doesn't hear a direct answer from Jesus, so she decides it would be better to let this work itself out and just keep her hands off of it.

"When in doubt, don't," Fran says out loud. "But Lord," she continues, "I just want you to know I'm willing to accept it either way, and I know you'll take care of it either way. So, I'm in a win-win situation. But please, remember John." Jesus assures her he will.

"And Louise, too, Lord. If I stay and she goes, that would be hard for both of us," Fran reminds Jesus.

Assured that the Lord will never forget and never forsake those who trust in him, she heads for her bedroom for some much-needed rest.

Closing

Did Fran lose her job? No. The next day Marilyn told her she had decided to fight the decision to lay off five people and convinced them to cut that to four. After all, if you don't have account reps, how can you replace the business you lost? Marilyn made a strong argument and won her case. So, Fran stayed, and so did John. But Louise was laid off.

But for Fran the outcome was decided when she gave the situation over to the Lord and looked to him for her support and trusted him to take care of her. Once she did that—and continued to do that—she was in a win-win situation. Regardless of the circumstances, her peace remained.

Obviously, it was easier the way it turned out; Fran didn't want to find a new job. She is, however, very concerned about Louise and has been spending lots of time with her in the evenings, encouraging her and praying with her. In fact, she talked with Marilyn about her and is hoping maybe in a month or two she might be rehired. At any rate, Fran will do all she can to help Louise cope.

She did have dinner with Marilyn, and they spent a lot of time talking about what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It's all new to Marilyn, and she finds it a little scary. But Fran is sowing seeds and praying they will take root in good soil in Marilyn's heart. Who knows what could happen?

When we have Jesus beside us at all times, when we look to him for our needs and truly trust him to take care of us, then we will have incredible, unreasonable peace, just like Fran did.

Have you been practicing the presence of Jesus in your life daily? Or do you try to carry all your problems yourself, take care of all your needs, and solve all your problems alone?

For those of us who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we have his blessed Holy Spirit dwelling within our bodies, accompanying us everywhere at all times. We need to be aware of his presence and power and turn to him for advice, comfort, and strength.

Chapter 4

Struggling with Stress and Fatigue

Fran looks at the clock. "Ten o'clock, and I still haven't done the ironing," she says to herself, wearily. But knowing the kids don't have anything ready to wear tomorrow, she sets up the ironing board in front of the television and prepares to iron while watching the late news.

Alice's clothes require extra time, but she likes for her to look nice. Drew's clothes are much easier, but a pair of jeans every day still causes a heavy ironing load. Slowly she presses her silk blouse; she loves this blouse, but it takes extra care.

The news goes off, but Fran is still ironing. At 11:00, she says "I'll finish this ironing tomorrow morning. I'll have to get up early. Right now I've got to get that bathroom clean." She invited some friends from work over tomorrow evening for a light dinner—something she's been wanting to do. She spent the entire evening making some salads and trying to get the house looking perfect.

She tackles the bathroom with fervor, scrubbing and scouring to make it sparkle. After putting away all the cleaning stuff, she wearily dresses for bed. "I'm not going to even bother taking off my makeup," Fran decides, as she sets the alarm a half-hour earlier and crawls into bed. "Oh, Lord," she starts to pray as she lays her head on the pillow, "I need your strength. Help me to get up in the morning and get everything done before tomorrow night. And please bless our time together tomorrow; I want my home to be a testimony, and I want to share you with the people at work. Thank You ..." but before she can complete the sentence, she falls asleep, exhausted.

The next morning when the alarm goes off, Fran jumps like she's been shot. "What—what is it?" She gradually realizes it is the alarm clock. "Oh my goodness," she says out loud, "What time is it?" Turning on the light, she remembers she had set the clock early in order to get everything done before leaving home.

"Oh, I just can't get up yet," Fran says, and crawls back under the covers, pulling them over her head. She stays there for twenty minutes, feeling guilty because she knows she needs to get up but resisting putting her feet on the floor with everything in her. Finally, she manages to sit up in bed.

"I am so tired," she says. "I don't know how I'm going to make it today. I think every bone in my body is aching."

Stumbling downstairs into the kitchen, she puts a cup of water in the microwave for tea. "Gotta get a cup of tea before I can do anything," she thinks. "Come on, hurry up," she mumbles to the microwave. That three minutes to boil water seems like an eternity to Fran.

Finally, with tea in hand, she looks into the family room and notices the ironing board still standing where she left it last night. "Oh, no," she says out loud, "I forgot about that ironing. Wearily, she turns on the iron and sits down to wait. She senses a presence nearby, and realizes Jesus is there. "Good morning, Lord," she says.

"Good morning, Fran," he replies. "You look a little harassed today."

"I'm just tired. But I hope to have some quiet time to spend with you before I get off today—soon as I get this ironing done," she quickly adds, with an apologetic tone.

"Fran, I understand your need for more sleep, and I know you're tired. I'm here with you all the time, just remember that," he says to her.

And with those words of comfort, Fran heaves a sigh and relaxes her shoulders. She then realizes how uptight she was, with all of her muscles flexed and her teeth clenched. "I guess I'm a little stressed out, Lord," she quietly admits to him.

"Yes, and it's understandable, isn't it?" Jesus responds, as Fran gulps down the last of her tea and begins to iron.

"What do you mean?" Fran asks Jesus.

"I mean, you've been going at quite a pace lately. It's understandable that your body is rebelling against it," Jesus replies. *"Do you remember that when I was here on earth in a body like yours, I took rest periods?"*

"Sure, but you had twelve disciples who did all the little stuff," Fran responds with a chuckle.

"If I had someone to clean and cook and do the little stuff, I could rest once in a while, too."

Hearing her words, Fran wishes she hadn't said that, but Jesus doesn't react to her words.

"Sorry, Lord, I know that wasn't true or nice. I'm sorry," she says. "But honestly, as a woman and a mother, there are just so many little things I'm responsible for, and if I don't do them, the place would shut down. I don't think men understand sometimes."

"You mean, like ironing?" Jesus asks.

"Yes," Fran replies, as she starts on the second pair of Drew's jeans. "Who would iron these jeans if I didn't?"

"Maybe they don't need ironing," Jesus responds quietly.

"You mean let my kid go to school in wrinkled jeans? Oh, no; I'm not letting down my standards. My kids are going to look good," Fran says, very self-righteously.

"Well, why do you have to iron them this morning?" Jesus asks.

"Because I'm having some friends over tonight from work, and I've got to get this all done before they get here," Fran answers.

"Why?" Jesus asks.

"Why? Well, because...what would they think..." Fran pauses as she tries to come up with a logical explanation. "I guess, Lord, it really wouldn't matter whether the ironing was done or not." This is a totally new thought for Fran: She could leave something undone.

"Why am I so obsessed with being the perfect housekeeper? Why do I focus so much time and energy on these things?" Fran asks, stopping to think about it for the first time.

"Perhaps," Jesus responds gently, "you've taken some pride in being perfect. Perhaps you iron those jeans for you, not for Drew. Perhaps your own self-image is tied up in your performance. Perhaps it's time for some serious re-evaluation of your priorities."

Fran feels so overwhelmed by what Jesus has just said to her that she turns off the iron and sits down on the sofa. It's almost more than she can comprehend. But she begins to get a glimpse of what he's saying to her.

"Lord, I've had pride in my heart about my ability to cope, to handle everything, to have perfect children and a perfect house. I never realized it before," Fran admits to Jesus. "I want to show off my kids and my house tonight; that's what I've been thinking. My motives are all wrong."

Seeing herself in this way upsets Fran, but Jesus says to her, *"No, no, Fran; all your motives aren't wrong. You have good motives, too. You want those people from work to know me; you want to be a good friend; you want to share what I've given you. Intermixed with the good motives are usually some others that need to be swept out."*

Fran thinks about that. "You aren't condemning me, are you? You know my heart; you know how proud I am; you know how self-serving my motives tend to be, but you are not condemning me."

"There is no condemnation for you because you are in me, Fran," Jesus reminds her.

"Romans 8:1—I know that verse; I've memorized it. But it just dawned on me that you don't look for ways to condemn me. You aren't trying to place guilt on me, even when I deserve it," Fran says.

"No, my desire for you is that you will be conformed to my image, and that's a growing process, Fran," Jesus reminds her.

Fran thinks about how Jesus lets her see things little by little, as she can handle them, in order to help her become more and more molded in his image. And she realizes she needs to

take a serious look at her priorities as a working mom, and make some choices. "I think I see what you're talking about, Lord."

"Good, Fran," Jesus says. "Don't you remember? You've been praying Romans 12:1-2 every day for quite a while now, and I'm answering your prayer."

"You mean offering my body as a living sacrifice and asking you to help me not to be conformed to this world but to transform me by renewing my mind? Yes, I have been praying that, and I meant it," Fran says excitedly, "But I just didn't realize my prayers were being answered."

"When you ask anything in my name, I will hear and answer," Jesus reminds her.

"Please help me, Lord, to clean up my motives," Fran asks with sincerity.

"I will continue to do so," he assures her. *"And as you see this more clearly, you can make better priority decisions, which means you'll know when to put the ironing board away and let Drew wear jeans right out of the dryer."*

Fran laughs. "Okay, no more ironing today. Away with this board. Whoopee!" she says as she puts it up.

"Hey, Mom, what's the matter?" A sleepy-eyed Drew walks in just as Fran is celebrating.

"Oh, honey, did I wake you up? I'm sorry. I was just talking to myself—and talking to Jesus, too," she gives him a big hug. "I guess it's almost time you were up anyway. Is Alice awake yet?"

"Nope; she's still a sleepy-head," Drew replies. "You were talking to Jesus? What do you mean?"

"Well, I just mean that since Jesus is with us all the time, we can talk to him wherever we are," Fran tries to answer very simply.

"But you were ironing. You can't talk to Jesus when you're ironing," Drew responds. "You have to have your Bible and bow your head and close your eyes. In fact, you should be in church!"

"Oh, Drew, let me tell you something wonderful," Fran says, as she takes his hand and sits on the sofa with him. "Jesus is not only our Savior and our God, but he is also our best friend. And he has told us we can talk to him anytime, anywhere. And that means, even when I'm ironing, I can talk to Jesus."

"Are you serious, Mom? That doesn't sound right," Drew questions Fran.

"But it is right. The Bible tells us he will never leave us or forsake us," Fran says. "That means when you're at school, you can talk to Jesus. When you have a problem and you can't talk to me because I'm at work or something, guess what?"

"I can talk to Jesus," Drew answers.

"You got it," Fran says as she squeezes his hand. "I can't be with you all the time, but Jesus can. You know, Drew, I talk to Jesus at work all the time."

"You do? But what does everybody else think when they hear you talking to Jesus?" Drew asks in simple child-like reality.

"Well, they can't see Jesus or hear him talk to me, but I can still talk to him," Fran explains.

"And even though they can't see or hear me talk to Jesus, I'm sure they can tell the difference in me when I talk to Jesus and when I don't."

As they're talking, Alice walks in rubbing her eyes. "How come nobody woke me up? What's going on?" she asks.

"Oh, come here, sweetheart," Fran gathers her on the sofa with Drew. "We were just having a little conversation about talking to Jesus."

"Yeah, Alice," Drew jumps in, "guess what? Mom says I can talk to Jesus when I'm at school. I don't even have to have my eyes closed."

"Me too? Me too, Mommy? I want to talk to Jesus at school," Alice looks at Fran with those big wide eyes.

"Yes, darling, you too. When Jesus is our Savior, we can talk to him all the time," Fran replies.

The three of them spend a few precious, memorable moments together on the sofa, before they start their busy day. Fran tucks that morning away into her file of unforgettable experiences and thanks Jesus over and over for this incredible opportunity to share something so important with her children.

And the lesson Fran teaches her children is far more important than getting the ironing done, which is a great lesson for Fran to learn.

Because of the time spent with the kids, the rest of the morning is a bit off-schedule. Fran doesn't have time to polish the silver, as she had planned to do this morning. There wasn't time to put the finishing touches on the meal she had planned to do. Drew wears a shirt that didn't get ironed, but Fran is amazed to see that once he has it on, you can't tell the difference. Certainly it didn't matter to Drew that it wasn't ironed.

After dropping the kids at school, Fran talks to Jesus while fighting traffic. "Lord, I just have a feeling this morning was the beginning of an important change in my life. I feel like I've turned a major corner," Fran says.

"Fran," Jesus responds, "you had a wonderful lesson in priorities today. You had your morning totally planned with busy work, things you thought had to be done this morning. And

instead, I had a divine appointment for you, a heavenly interruption, and you did something far more important than get the ironing done or polish silver."

"What was that phrase Pastor Brad used in his sermon recently—we need to have Forever Eyes—that's it, Forever Eyes," Fran recalls. "Guess I need better eyesight in order to have better priorities, huh?"

"Staying focused on what's eternally important will help you know when to let something go and when it truly needs to be done now," Jesus says.

"Oops," Fran suddenly exclaims, as she slams on the brakes to avoid hitting the car in front.

"What's the matter with you, driving like an idiot? I can't believe how some people drive."

Looking at her watch, she realizes she's running late. "Oh, come on you guys, move your cars. I don't want to be late for work."

Sitting in the traffic, Fran starts to tighten up again. "You know, fighting this traffic every morning is just a major pain in the neck, Lord," Fran says. "By the time I get to the office, I'm already stressed out."

Finally they pull in the parking lot and Fran rushes out of the car, grabbing her laptop bag and purse, making a mad dash for the door. "Oh, good grief, I don't want to be late," she fumes to herself as she walks rapidly.

"Why don't you sing?" Jesus asks her.

"Sing?" Fran says.

"Yes, instead of fuming all the way to the door, why not sing or hum?" he suggests.

"Remember David; he sang when things got tough. I gave you music to help relieve your stress."

"So, instead of thinking about how late I am and how much I need to hurry, I should sing—is that what you're telling me, Lord?" Fran asks.

"Sure, try it," Jesus answers. *"It won't slow you down, and while you're rushing, you'll also be releasing some of that stress."*

"Okay, here goes," Fran says, and she begins to sing under her breath her favorite chorus.

"He's a good, good Father, that's what he is, that's what he is. And I'm loved by him, that's who I am, that's who I am." By the time she has sung it twice, she's in the door and amazingly, her shoulders have relaxed and some of the stress has gone away.

"Hey, that's a good idea, Lord," Fran says to Jesus as they walk to her desk. "I'll try that again."

At about 10:00, Fran gets herself a cup of tea. She sits back to enjoy her tea at her desk, but in the process hits her elbow and spills tea all down her blouse. "Oh, good grief, my good silk

blouse. Oh, no, I doubt I can get this tea stain out," Fran fusses as she tries to repair the damage. "This is my favorite blouse, and it wasn't cheap."

"It's just a blouse," Jesus says quietly to her.

"What do you mean, it's just a blouse? I don't have money to throw away, and this is a good blouse," Fran says as her blood pressure rises.

"Fran, it's just a blouse. When you allow the things you own to cause you undue stress, something's wrong," Jesus reminds her.

"Lord, I'll probably have to take this to the cleaners to get the tea stain out. Do you know what they charge to clean a silk blouse? It's ridiculous," Fran replies, with even more stress and strain in her voice.

"Then give it away," Jesus says to her.

"Give away my blouse? What for? I love this blouse," Fran replies.

"Fran, you don't own that blouse; it owns you. If it continues to cause you stress, give it away. You worry all the time about damaging it. Is it worth it?" Jesus asks pointedly.

"I hadn't thought about it that way. I guess I do get stressed out over things of my own doing, don't I?" Fran asks rhetorically.

"Certainly there's a lot of stress in your life which is unavoidable. That's why it's very important to get rid of the unnecessary stress" Jesus says.

"And this blouse is one of those, huh?" Fran asks.

"Well, get rid of it or change your attitude toward it," Jesus advises.

On the way home, Fran keeps thinking about the problems of the day and as she does, her shoulders get tighter and tighter, and the knots grow in her stomach.

"Why don't you dump them in the river?" Jesus says to her.

His voice startles her; she often forgets he's there, listening to her words and thoughts.

"Dump them in the river? What do you mean?" Fran asks, bewildered.

"You'll be crossing the river in a few minutes. I suggest you dump all the problems from work in the river so you can enjoy your evening without all that unnecessary stress," Jesus responds. *"You need to learn to leave the job behind you and not bring problems home that can't be solved at home."*

Fran laughs as she thinks about dumping her problems in the river. "Well, I guess it's not a bad way to remind myself that I need a break from the problems of the day."

"Yes," Jesus replies, "and as you dump them in the river, you can also quote a verse, like Psalm 62:5: Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him. Or Isaiah 32:18: My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. You need a break from the cares of the job. Dump them in the river and watch your stress levels go down."

Fran decides to try that mental exercise and as she crosses the Fox River, she says out loud, "Okay, all you problems from the day, here you go into the river. Now you just stay there 'til I go back on Monday. I'll see you then." She giggles as she says it, feeling rather foolish, but it does seem to help. Her shoulders relax and a smile breaks out on her face.

With those things off of her mind, she begins to think about the evening ahead. She says to Jesus, "I'm really excited about having some of the women from the office over tonight. And I've noticed all day today that instead of worrying about how the house looks or if they'll think I'm a good cook, I've been more focused on them and wanting to get to know them."

"That's much healthier, isn't it, Fran?" Jesus asks.

"I've been putting this off for months because I wanted to have everything just right," Fran says. "Maybe I shouldn't worry so much about everything being just right, and then I'd have more opportunities to build relationships."

"Fran, if those women are comfortable here tonight and if the fellowship is good, it will be because you show them love and attention," Jesus says. *"They won't notice dust on the furniture as much as you think they will."*

"Lord, I guess us women just have these ideas about housekeeping," Fran explains. "We tend to associate our image as a woman with our cleaning and cooking skills. Truth is, I love to cook and entertain, and I enjoy a clean house."

"Nothing wrong with that, Fran," Jesus responds. *"I've given you those things to enjoy. Just keep your priorities in line."*

As she walks in the door, Drew runs up to her. "Mom, guess what I did today. I talked to Jesus at school, just like you said. You remember Brian—that kid who made fun of me last week. Well, he started doing the same thing again. Said my ears were big and all kinds of stuff like that. I was starting to get real mad at him, and I remembered what you said. So, I just asked Jesus to help me not be mad at Brian. I didn't say anything mean back to Brian, but just told him God gave me my ears, and that's the way they are. He stopped after that."

Fran listens with a huge grin on her face, and gives Drew a big hug. "Oh, Drew, that's so good. I want you to remember to tell that to Grandma and Grandpa!"

Alice runs in with her story for the day, and Fran stops to listen. Somehow all she has to do doesn't seem as important as these conversations with her children. Already Fran can see how she's wearing Forever Eyes better.

So, with calm in her spirit, she feeds the kids and does the things needed to be ready when her friends arrive at 7:00. Her friend, Louise, arrives a little early to give her a hand.

"You know, Fran," Louise says, "I've learned a little secret. I never go shopping on the way home from work anymore."

"You don't?" Fran asks. "Why not? That's when I do most all of my shopping."

"Because that is the highest traffic time. It takes longer, and it's far more frustrating," Louise replies. "This morning I stopped at the store on the way to work, and the store was practically empty. I breezed through, got what I needed, checked out without standing in line, and the clerk even had a smile on her face. Saved me lots of time and aggravation."

"Hmm," Fran says, "I'll try to remember that—shop when there are no crowds."

When the others arrive, they somehow all end up in the kitchen, talking, munching on some cheese and crackers, and helping Fran as needed. The evening progresses, and the women seem to love being there. Since it's Friday night, no one seems to be in a rush to leave, and Fran keeps pouring coffee and tea while they linger. At one point, Jerri says to her, "Fran, how long have you been a widow?"

"Almost five years," she replies.

"I've been looking at your pictures here. Jim looks like a terrific guy. I'm sure you miss him," Jerri adds.

And with that opening, Fran very comfortably tells her friends how Jesus has been her strength and enabled her to face Jim's death. She hadn't planned to give her testimony, but it was a natural opening, and they listen attentively.

Finally, one of them says, "You know, it's almost 10:30. I really have to go, but this has been a lovely evening. Thank you, Fran. I can't remember when I've had such a relaxing time."

"Me too," Phyllis adds. "And I love your house. The food was delicious, but next time, let us bring the food."

"Great idea," Fran responds. "Let's do it again soon." Everyone agrees, and finally the house is empty.

Fran surveys the kitchen, looking at all the dirty dishes and realizing the house is just a tool to use, not a possession to show off. God used it tonight for his glory, and she is so pleased at

how it turned out. She says, "You know, Lord, these dishes can sit here 'til tomorrow. I'm tired, and I need some rest. I'm going to bed."

"Good idea," Jesus agrees.

Closing

Jesus has taught Fran some simple but important lessons in priorities and learning to look through Forever Eyes. It really does take a lot of the stress out of our lives when we do that. Of course, Fran will have to learn these lessons again, no doubt, as you and I do, but Jesus is patient to teach us and allow us to learn how to deal with our hectic lives and schedules.

Chapter 5

Defeated by Gossip

As Fran arrives at work this Tuesday morning, she goes for a cup of coffee where she runs into her friend, Andy.

"How's your wife feeling?" Fran asks. She knows his wife is diabetic and struggles with it.

"Oh, she's doing a little better lately, thanks for asking," Andy replies. "When she follows the right diet and gets some exercise, she really gets along pretty well."

"I'm sure that's not so easy to do all the time," Fran replies.

They exchange a little more small talk and then Andy says, "Hey, by the way, did you know that Bill Best is leaving the company?"

"No kidding?" Fran says. "Bill Best? Why?"

"I'm not sure, but what I heard is he was told to resign or be fired," Andy answers. "Don't quote me on this, of course, but that's what I hear from the guys up in our department. It's a real shocker."

"But he's VP of human resources, and he's been here, what, twenty years or more," Fran says.

"Why would they ask him to resign? He is a very nice person."

"Well, again," Andy responds, "this is only what I've heard, but one of the guys said Bill was caught in some unethical dealings—something to do with purchasing stock and having inside information. I heard he was threatened with criminal prosecution, but they're letting him off easy."

"Are you sure, Andy?" Fran asks. "That's really hard to believe. I mean, Bill seems like the most honest guy in the world."

"I know," Andy says, "that's what I said. But like one of the guys said, sometimes looks can fool you. You can't always judge a book by its cover, right?"

"Well, we shouldn't jump to conclusions either," Fran says.

"Yeah," Andy says, "but you know what I mean. You can't always tell what's on the inside by looking at the outside."

"If this is true," Fran says, "this is going to ruin Bill. And he has such a nice family. I met them at the picnic last year. Do you really think it's true, Andy?"

"Like I said, it's what I heard, but these guys are usually pretty savvy when it comes to inside information. And where there's smoke, there's usually fire, Fran. Maybe you can find out more from your department. But I gotta run. You have a great day; I'll talk to you later."

As she goes back to her office, Fran is really concerned about this bad news. Bill has been very nice to her and seemed to think highly of her. He had asked her to be a part of a task force last year representing marketing, and she had an opportunity at lunch one day to tell him about her faith in Christ. In fact, she's been praying for him. This is very shocking news!

At lunch she tells Louise what Andy told her. Louise is her good friend, also a believer, and they share a lot. In fact, Louise had been laid off for a couple of months, but thankfully they were able to rehire her. Fran is so glad to have her there everyday.

"Can you believe it, Louise? Bill Best of all people—caught red-handed in an unethical stock transaction. Something about inside information. Andy said they could have prosecuted him if they had chosen to, so they're doing him a favor letting him resign."

"My goodness," Louise responds, "I find that hard to believe. Bill is one of the nicest people in this whole company. Are you sure Andy got his story straight, Fran?"

"Well, I asked him several times, and he seemed pretty certain his source was reliable. Of course, we don't know for sure but...."

"But those things don't get started on their own," Louise fills in. "You just never know, do you, Fran?"

"No, I guess not," Fran replies. "There's that old greedy sin nature again, and even nice people can fall victims to greed. Without Jesus, Louise, we're capable of anything."

They talk a few more minutes and head back to work. Later that day, another coworker, Ray from accounting, stops into Fran's office. "Hey, Fran, I've got some questions on this latest invoice from Stranton. Can you help me?"

"Sure," she says and together they spend a few minutes straightening out the invoice. As Ray is starting to leave, Fran says, "Ray, did you hear about Bill Best?"

"Yeah, isn't that a bummer?" he says. "Bill's one of the good guys; I really hate to see him leave. Wonder why he's leaving after all these years? He's too young to retire."

"You mean you haven't heard?" Fran asks.

"Nope, I'm just a bean counter, Fran, nobody talks to me," he laughs at himself.

"Well, the inside scoop is he's been caught in an unethical stock deal, and they're doing him a favor to let him resign," Fran informs Ray.

"No way," he responds in shock.

"Well, that's just what I've heard, Ray, so don't quote me, but it sure seems like it. You know, Ray, even the good ones can fall," Fran continues. "Money is a corrupter."

"Wait 'til I tell Joan. You know, Joan, my manager. She thinks Bill Best is god practically. Oh, man, this is going to wipe her out. Well, I better run," he says as he leaves her office, in a bit of a rush.

As he's walking out the door, Fran calls out to him, "Oh, Ray, maybe you shouldn't tell anyone until we know for sure..." But it was too late; Ray was out of earshot.

Fran sits at her desk and thinks about all this. She feels badly about saying anything to Ray. She should have told him not to tell anyone. But, she thinks, he'll just tell Joan and that's as far as it'll get, I'm sure. Then, thinking again about Bill, she says out loud to herself, "Wow, how quick a good person can fall."

"Yes, it's true, isn't it?" Jesus replies.

Once again, she's forgotten Jesus is there, but he always, always is.

"It's true how fast things can fall apart," he adds.

It makes Fran a bit uneasy. But she has lots to get done, so she buries those uneasy feelings in work and, before she knows it, the day is about over. As she is getting ready to leave her office, her friend, Josey from the Marketing Department, stops by. "Hey, you wouldn't have time for a cup of coffee before you go home, would you?" she asks. It's a strange request and she looks troubled.

Fran looks at her watch. "Well, I've got about 15 minutes—is that enough?"

"Sure," Josey answers, "we can go to McDonald's across the street."

As they sit down, Josey says, "You heard about Bill Best."

"Yeah," Fran replies. "Very sad, isn't it?"

"You know, Fran, he hired me fifteen years ago, and the man's been like a father to me. It's just killing me to think he's been caught in something unethical."

"How'd you hear about it?" Fran asks.

"Joan told me—you know, Joan in accounting," she says.

"Oh," Fran replies, and she realizes Joan probably learned it from Ray, who learned it from Fran, who learned it from Andy. Suddenly, Fran gets that queasy feeling in her stomach again. She has to face the reality that she's become the source of gossip, and she's not even sure of her facts.

"Well," she stammers to Josey, "maybe it's not as bad as it sounds. There are two sides to every story, you know."

"Fran, Joan wouldn't tell me something like that if she didn't know for sure," Josey says. Fran's stomach does another somersault. "She said it has something to do with stock and inside information. She said he made a bundle of money just before the company went through that downsizing last year, and they caught him."

"But we don't know that for sure," Fran tries to back pedal and stop the gossip before it goes any further. "I mean, it's just a rumor at this point, right?"

"Did you see Bill today, Fran?" Josey asks. "He looked like death warmed over. It was written all over his face. He wouldn't even look me in the eye when he walked past me, and he was in a rush to get out. It's true, Fran."

"But we don't know for sure," she says again, lamely and sadly. They talk a few more minutes and then part. Fran is now feeling very sick to her stomach. As soon as she gets home from work, she dials Andy as quickly as possible. No answer; just voicemail. After she gets the kids' supper ready and has them eating, she excuses herself and calls again. He answers this time.

"Hi, Fran." Andy starts.

"Andy, are you sure of your facts that you told me about Bill Best? Do you know for sure he was accused of unethical behavior?" she verbally accosts him.

"What?" Andy is caught off guard. "Why? What's the problem?"

"Well, you just shouldn't be telling me things like that if they're not true," Fran keeps going, with anger in her voice.

"Fran, I told you it was what I had heard from the guys upstairs," Andy defends himself.

"Besides, I told you not to tell anyone else. You didn't, did you?"

"You never told me that, Andy!" Fran exclaims. "Yes, I told some people."

"Oh, good grief, Fran, why'd you do that?" Andy is upset. "Who'd you tell?"

"Well, that's not the point," she says. "The point is you never should have told me if it weren't the truth."

"Hey, Fran, I told you that in confidence," Andy says. "I didn't tell another soul about it but you, and I expected you to have more sense than to blab it to everybody else in the company. I'm sure I told you not to tell anyone."

"Oh, right," Fran says, "blame it all on me. I don't believe it!"

"Hey, mom, what's the matter?" Drew has come into the family room as he hears his mom upset.

"Nothing, Drew," she answers him in frustration. "Just go back and finish dinner and mind your own business."

"Don't take it out on him," Andy says, as he hears all that from his end of the phone.

"Thanks a lot, Andy, but I don't need any advice on how to raise my kids. Goodbye!" she says.

Commentary

Whoa! And *how* did all this start? With gossip.

Solomon was right when he wrote, *A gossip separates close friends* (Proverbs 16:28b). Look how quickly it has driven a wedge between Fran and Andy. In fact, there are many terrible consequences caused by gossip:

- Gossip betrays a confidence. (Proverbs 11:13)
- Gossip causes quarrels. (Proverbs 26:20)
- Gossip ruins reputations.
- Gossip often causes irreparable damage.

I'm fairly certain everyone can think of some specific harm that has happened to them or to someone they know because of gossip.

Fran got involved in this gossip innocently. She didn't have malicious intentions, but at several points in the day, her tongue got ahead of her brain, and she told a story which was neither verified for accuracy, nor was it necessary for anyone to know, whether accurate or not. Her tongue was out of control, and she ignored several nudges along the way when Jesus was trying to get her attention before she spread the rumors she had heard.

Now, the situation at work is not a pretty picture because gossip is not pretty. I'm praying God will use this story to convict all of us about our propensity to gossip.

Note this verse from Ephesians 4:29: *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.* Let's pray this verse into our lives so our gossip is stopped dead in its tracks!

In talking about the tongue, James warns us, *Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.* Fran's tongue has been the small spark which set some fires going, as she spread some gossip handed on to her by her friend, Andy. Andy heard Bill Best, the VP of human resources in their company was asked to resign because of some unethical conduct, and Fran has spread that rumor to several other people.

Now, keep in mind, Fran didn't do it in an attitude of gossip or malice. She likes Bill a lot, and it was in concern that she told Louise and Ray. But what she failed to do was check out her facts, for one thing. And then she forgot to put some controls on her tongue. Now the story has gone full circle and has come back to her, like that old gossip game we used to play, distorted and exaggerated, and it has begun to dawn on Fran that she has played a critical role in spreading this rumor.

Part 2

Now, after getting the kids to bed, Fran plops down on the sofa. "What a miserable day this has been," she says out loud to herself.

"Yes, *indeed*," Jesus responds.

Sometimes, quite frankly, Fran is annoyed that Jesus is always there. It seems she can't have a thought to herself. But of course, the only times she is annoyed is when she's thinking or doing something she shouldn't be thinking or doing. Otherwise, she loves having him with her at all times. However, at the moment, she's not ready for the confrontation she assumes Jesus has in mind, so she does what she often does to block out the Lord's voice: she gets busy.

She attacks the house like a white tornado, cleaning the oven, washing three loads, vacuuming the downstairs, and cleaning the kids' shoes. Finally at midnight, beyond her usual bedtime, she falls into bed exhausted and tries to sleep. But it turns out to be one of those nights when sleep is fitful, and she wakes seemingly more exhausted than when she went to bed.

As she starts to get up, Jesus begins to talk to her: "*Why did you pass on information you didn't know was true?*" he asks.

"Well, here we go," she thinks. There's no avoiding the issue now. She gets defensive. "Andy told me, and I figured he must have known..." she begins.

"Fran," Jesus interrupts her, "*what comes out of your mouth is your responsibility, not Andy's or anyone else's.*"

She knows he's right, but she's not ready to confront her sin. So, quickly she gets up and gets busy again. She purposely stayed in bed until the last minute so she wouldn't have time to read her Bible and pray. Instead, she fusses at the kids and rushes them so their morning is off to a bad start, too.

As she arrives at work—feeling just awful inside—her manager, Marilyn, comes into her office.

"Fran, do you know somebody has started a vicious rumor about Bill Best and why he's leaving the company, and there's not one word of truth to it?"

"What's that?" Fran replies, stunned.

"I can't imagine how it got started, but my guess is it was those guys on the third floor. They usually are the ones to get the rumor mill going. Anyway, the truth is Bill has just been diagnosed with lung cancer, and they give him maybe six months to live."

"No way," Fran replies in alarm. "Oh, Marilyn, surely not. Not Bill."

"I know how you feel," Marilyn says. "He's one of the nicest guys around. But it's true. I talked with him myself. He found out two days ago, but he didn't want people to know before he left. And now, I hear this rumor that he was asked to resign because of something unethical. I just can't believe how cruel people can be."

The lump in Fran's throat, and the knot in her stomach are so large that she is paralyzed.

"Fran, you're white as a sheet," Marilyn remarks. "But I know—this is a real shocker. If I ever find out who started these vicious rumors about Bill, I'm having their head on a platter. Do me a favor, will you? If you hear that rumor from anyone, please set them straight. I gotta go to a meeting. Fran, are you okay?"

"I'm...I'm...just shocked, that's all," Fran finally manages to get out. "I'll talk to you later," she says as Marilyn leaves her office.

After Marilyn leaves, Fran somehow manages to get up and close her office door. Then she drops her head on her desk and begins to sob uncontrollably.

Quietly she hears the voice of Jesus, "*Are you crying for Bill or for yourself?*" he asks.

"Oh, Lord, I don't know," she can hardly talk. "This is the worst thing I've ever done and to Bill of all people."

"*Yes, what you did was very hurtful, Fran,*" Jesus comments, "*but not unforgivable.*"

Fran stops sobbing for a moment, and then says, "Oh, Lord, I don't have the gall to ask you to forgive me for this. I don't deserve to be forgiven."

"*That's true, Fran,*" Jesus says gently, "*but then you never are deserving of my forgiveness. I forgive because I choose to forgive, when asked.*"

"But, Lord, after the way I treated Andy and the way I ignored you and the rumors I spread about Bill which were totally untrue—there's no way I can just say please forgive me, and that's it. I can't forgive myself for this. It's too easy."

"Forgiveness is never easy, Fran," Jesus answers her. "I died so you could be forgiven, so it's not easy forgiveness. But it would be a shame for you to go unforgiven when I've already paid the price so you could be forgiven."

Fran has to think about that for a minute. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Look at it this way," Jesus says. "If I'm willing to forgive you, even though you don't deserve to be forgiven, how could you be so arrogant as to not forgive yourself? Are you better than me?"

"I see what you mean," Fran says quietly. "But what I did is so awful."

"The results are awful, and you will suffer some of the consequences of your actions. But you need to be forgiven so you can go forward and make restitution and learn from your experience," Jesus instructs her.

Finally understanding her need for forgiveness, Fran asks for the forgiveness which Jesus so generously offers her. The burden of the guilt is taken off her shoulders, but her heart is still very heavy because of the damage she did through her careless tongue.

"Now, what should I do, Lord?" Fran asks.

"In a case like this where you have wronged others, you need to ask for their forgiveness, too," Jesus answers.

"You mean, go to Louise and Ray and ask them to forgive me for telling them the gossip?" Fran inquires.

"Yes," Jesus says, *"and Marilyn and Andy."*

"But Lord," Fran says, "Andy should ask for my forgiveness. He started this whole thing."

"Wait a minute, Fran," Jesus interrupts her. *"You are responsible for your actions. Whether Andy did wrong or not, you cannot shift the blame to him for what you did."*

Fran hangs her head again. "You're right, of course," she says. "I really was cruel to him last night. And I was the one who kept telling the rumor. If I'd never told anyone else, it probably would have stopped here."

"You always have to remember that whether you're 10% guilty or 90% guilty, you have to still seek forgiveness for your part. So without condemning Andy, you need to ask his forgiveness."

"This is not going to be easy," Fran says.

"No, but the sooner you do it, the better," Jesus gently urges her to get to it.

She calls Andy. "Can you meet me for a cup of coffee?" she asks him timidly. He agrees to meet her, and as they sit down, she says, "I have just learned some terrible news, Andy. Bill Best resigned because he is dying of cancer and doesn't have long to live, not because he did anything wrong."

Andy looks stunned. "Oh, man," he says, "that's terrible news, Fran. I didn't know."

"No, I realize you didn't," Fran says, "but besides that, what I really wanted to see you about is to ask you to forgive me for my behavior toward you last night on the phone. That was awful; I was trying to blame you for my careless tongue. Will you please forgive me?" She can hardly keep back the tears.

"Of course," he meekly answers, "but I guess I'm as wrong as you are." For a few minutes they talk about the consequences of their rumor mill and agree never to let it happen again.

Later that morning, Fran finds Marilyn alone in her office. "Can I talk with you a minute, Marilyn?"

"Sure," she replies, and Fran walks in and closes the door behind her.

"Marilyn, there's no easy way to tell you this, so I've just got to tell you as quickly as I can. I'm the person who started the incorrect rumor about Bill Best, and I am so very sorry," Fran starts.

"You?" Marilyn is shocked. "Not you, Fran! How could you?"

"Oh, Marilyn, I just let my tongue get going and it started a great fire," she says. "I heard it from the guys upstairs, just like you suspected."

"You mean from Andy?" Marilyn asks.

"Yeah, but it's not Andy's fault. He warned me it was just a rumor, and I should have kept my mouth shut. But then I told Louise and Ray in accounting who told Joan, who told Josey, and by that time it was out of control," Fran explains. "I can't even begin to tell you how ashamed and sorry I am for all of this." Words seem inadequate at this point, so Fran gets quiet.

After a long pause, Marilyn looks at Fran and says, "You know, I think I had you on some kind of a pedestal, Fran. I thought you were such a good Christian that you'd never do something like this."

Fran replies, "I just fell off the pedestal, Marilyn. I'm sorry."

"No," Marilyn interrupts, "it's okay. In fact, I think it's good for me to realize you're just as human as the rest of us."

"But that's no excuse for what I did," Fran says. "Jesus has forgiven me, and I intend to learn from this horrible experience so hopefully it never happens again. I just can't tell you how badly I feel. I like Bill Best so much."

"You're not going to apologize to him, are you?" Marilyn asks.

"Well, don't you think I should?" Fran responds.

"No, I don't Fran, because he has no idea this rumor got started, and there's no need to burden him with it," Marilyn says.

"That sounds like good advice, Marilyn," Fran says. "I'll pray about that."

She and Marilyn have a long talk about forgiveness and learning to forgive yourself. As she walks out of Marilyn's office, Fran says, "Lord, I don't know, but it looks like you used this horrible thing to teach Marilyn something she needs to know about forgiveness."

"Well, it's my habit to turn ashes into beauty anytime I can," he says.

Fran makes her way to Ray, Josey, and finally Louise, asking each of them to forgive her. It was emotionally exhausting, but it had to be done. So, at the end of this long day, she puts her head on her pillow in peace, much sadder for the experience, but hopefully much wiser as well. She asks Jesus to show her how best to reach out to Bill and his family during this difficult time, and plans on tackling that issue tomorrow.

Closing

Gossip is not a game to play; gossip is malicious and harmful and it can cause irreparable damage to people and relationships. I challenge you to memorize Ephesians 4:29: *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."* And then pray it into your life regularly. It will make a huge difference in the words you speak.

Chapter 6

Refusing a Promotion

Fran's workload is increasing daily and no matter how hard she works, it's impossible to keep up in a normal eight-hour day. She is strongly committed to being home by 6:00 each evening, but lately she often finds it impossible. And she usually brings work home to do after the kids go to bed.

Fran keeps thinking it'll get better; it's just a temporary workload problem. But she's beginning to realize that is not the case. She talks to Jesus about this almost daily, trying to know what she should do.

"Lord," she says to him this morning, "you gave me this job, and I know you want me to do good work. You've given me lots of good ideas and helped me so often, but success is killing me. I feel very trapped."

She has learned to simply talk to Jesus, in a reverent way of course, because after all, he is her friend, and he cares about everything in her life. She has also learned to sit quietly and give the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus within her—an opportunity to communicate with her spirit.

This morning she thinks about her tendency to want to be a superwoman. She has begun to recognize it is not easy for her to set boundaries.

"I have to admit," Fran says to the Lord, "all the good press I've been getting at work feels good. My boss often tells me what a great job I'm doing."

Quietly Jesus says: "*Fran, don't forget your Forever Eyes.*" Forever Eyes is Fran's way of reminding herself only what lasts for eternity really counts, but it's so easy to lose focus when every day is full of deadlines, phone calls, and kudos.

"Yes," Fran replies, "I understand. Thank you again for this job, but please help me keep it in perspective. I know my children are far more important than my accomplishments at work, and I know people are more important to you than positions and titles and paychecks. My challenge is not to lose sight of that in my busy days."

Fran commits to Jesus again that she wants more than anything to please him. After a little more quiet time with Jesus, Fran starts her busy day by getting her two kids up and ready for school.

Arriving at work, she finds Joyce, her assistant, has gotten there ahead of her and put a muffin and cup of coffee on her desk. She and Joyce have become good friends, even though at first Fran was very frustrated with her poor work habits. But with some true concern and

compassion, Fran reached out to Joyce, discovered she was a very discouraged single mom, invited her to church, and became friends with her.

Joyce comes to church with Toby, her little boy, almost every Sunday now, and she told Fran she's quit drinking. Fran believes she's very close to accepting Christ as her Savior. One thing for sure, her attitude at work has changed 180 degrees! What a joy she is to have around!

As Fran hangs up her coat, Joyce comes in with messages. "Joyce, what a treat! Thank you so much for the muffin. How'd you know I'd need that this morning?" Fran asks, as she gives her a hug.

"I know you've been working too hard and too long. You know, you can't keep this up, Fran. You need more help. Already you've got two fires to put out," she says as she hands the messages to Fran.

Fran sighs, "just our daily crisis. That's the nature of this business, Joyce. It goes with the territory."

"Does burn-out go with the territory?" Joyce replies. "I'm worried about you."

Fran smiles at her. "I appreciate your concern, really I do," Fran says. "And you're right; I can't keep this up. But it'll get better soon I think."

"Yeah, and I'm Donald Duck," Joyce says as she rolls her eyes and walks out of Fran's office.

One of the messages is from her boss: "Can you have lunch today?"

"Hmm, I wonder what's up," Fran says to Jesus, as she enjoys her muffin and coffee. She texts Marilyn that lunch is fine, and then plows into the stack of work on her desk.

The morning goes by before she realizes it, and Marilyn is standing in her doorway. "It's time for lunch, Fran," she says. "Hope you didn't forget."

"Oh, hi Marilyn," Fran replies. "Nope, I didn't forget; just didn't realize how late it is." She puts down her work and grabs her purse. "We haven't had lunch together in weeks. Am I being called on the carpet or something?" Fran smiles at Marilyn. Their relationship has improved immensely, and they both seem to feel very comfortable with each other.

"On the carpet at Pier 22. We're going first class," Marilyn says as she leads the way.

Fran says, "Pier 22. Sounds great, but let me check the finances here. That's not in my budget."

"Don't worry; this is on the company," Marilyn says.

"No joke? Great, I'll enjoy every bite," Fran replies.

They carry on the usual chit-chat as Marilyn drives to the restaurant, but in the back of her mind, Fran is thinking, "What's up?" She quickly says to Jesus, "Please give me wisdom, guidance, and clear thinking for whatever it is I'm going to face."

Jesus reminds her again to keep her Forever Eyes on.

They get a private table in the back of the restaurant, and Fran orders Dover Sole, her favorite. As they munch on their salads, waiting for the entree, Marilyn begins, "Fran, I just want you to know the management of the company recognizes what a great job you're doing with Mitchell's. The account has already exceeded projections, and I'm convinced it's mainly due to your hard work and creativity. And I've said so to the people who count."

"Thanks, Marilyn," Fran replies, putting down her knife. "I was just thinking this morning what a pleasure it is to have a boss like you. You have been so supportive and helpful; and of course, you've taught me a lot. I rely on your business judgment often; I don't deserve all the credit, you know that."

"You deserve a great deal of credit, and my pleasant duty today is to tell you that beginning next month, you will be promoted to Senior Account Rep," Marilyn says slowly, letting the effect settle in on Fran.

Fran's mouth drops open, and she is stunned. Trying to assimilate it all, she pauses for a moment, and then says, "You're not kidding, are you? Senior Account Rep—I never dreamed I'd get it this soon."

"It is soon. In fact, as I recollect, there are only two others who have been promoted this fast. Sam—you don't know him, he's in corporate now—and myself," she says with a smile.

"Well, I'm in very good company then. Thanks, Marilyn. Now tell me exactly what this means," Fran says.

"Well, it means you'll be getting a 15% raise right off the bat. Then you'll be eligible for the yearly bonuses and profit sharing. You'll have management status, Fran," Marilyn informs her.

The smile on Fran's face won't go away. "I can sure use the money," she says.

"Well, I can imagine a single mom like you has lots of expenses," Marilyn says. "Never having any children myself, I'm sure I don't have the financial obligations that you do."

They talk further about the bonus program and how much money that can mean to Fran. It could be significant depending on how much Fran bills to the client and on the company's profitability. Fran's head is spinning just thinking about how nice it will be to have some extra money.

In the midst of the conversation, Jesus sends her a quiet prompting: *"Ask her about added responsibilities and workload."* It seems like an unnecessary question to Fran, but Jesus seems insistent, so she does.

"Marilyn, let me be sure I understand exactly what will be expected of me. What added responsibilities or duties will I have?" she asks.

"Well, basically you'll still be doing what you're doing with Mitchell's. There'll be some additional management meetings and responsibilities, but nothing significant, I don't think," Marilyn informs her.

Fran puts her fork down and thinks about what Marilyn has said. Her workload will not go down; it will go up. And already she is over-capacity. If she accepts this promotion, the responsibilities go with it.

"Lord, I need Forever Eyes fast," Fran breathes a prayer, and it seems as though she is given an instant capsule picture of life as a Senior Account Rep. Frantic, hectic, tired, burned-out. And on the sidelines are her kids, waiting for her attention, taking second place to the job. Once Fran takes the promotion, she can't refuse the responsibilities. Now she must make a choice, and it's not an easy one.

Jesus again reminds her, *"Fran, remember promotions, titles, and incomes don't count for eternity, so don't be deceived by the allure of these things."*

"But Lord," she breathes a prayer in her mind, "I could use the money, you know that, and it's just not smart to turn down a promotion. They'll think I'm crazy!"

She can hear Jesus saying to her, *"Which is more important to you, Fran, what people think or what I think?"*

Jesus always cuts through the maze and helps Fran to see the clear-cut choice she has. She gulps and says slowly, "Marilyn, obviously I'm very honored with this promotion and I appreciate your confidence in me more than I can say. But I need to ask you to give me a day to think it over before I accept."

"Think it over?" Marilyn asks with great surprise. "What can there be to think over? You've worked hard and earned a promotion."

"Yes, I believe I have worked hard for it," Fran agrees, "but I have to consider the impact it will have on my family. Frankly, Marilyn, lately I've had to work a lot of extra hours just to keep up, and I've been debating what to do if it continues. It appears to me it will continue, and now with some added responsibility..."

"Fran, you can't turn down this promotion. If you do, I don't know what will happen. I might have to reassign you," Marilyn seems genuinely concerned and puzzled.

"I surely don't want to put you in a bind, Marilyn," Fran responds, "but I have to give this careful consideration. My priorities, because of my children, are different, and I don't apologize for that. I have to be at home in the evenings and have time and energy for my kids. They won't be young and teachable forever, and I have limited years with them. I don't want to blow those years. Nothing is worth neglecting my children."

Looks like Fran's Forever Eyes are going to cost her a promotion. It's not always comfortable to make decisions based on eternal priorities, but it is always blessed by our Lord and will in the end be for our good.

"You know, I never even thought about the possibility that you might turn down this promotion, Fran," Marilyn says, shaking her head. "I guess I'm so used to people clawing their way to the top as quickly as possible, that it's a little puzzling to meet someone who isn't hell-bent on climbing the ladder."

In her spirit Fran can sense she has an open door, a marvelous opportunity to tell Marilyn why she is different. The thought frightens Fran. Her palms get sweaty, and her heart starts beating faster. But she knows full well she should never be ashamed to tell anyone about her walk with Jesus. So, she takes a deep breath and responds to Marilyn.

"Don't get me wrong, Marilyn, I'd love to take this promotion. I'd love to prove I'm superwoman and can walk on water. But the facts are, I'm not. It's something I've been learning lately. In the past I've found a lot of my identity in trying to be superwoman, and that's a big mistake. So, now I try to put on what I call Forever Eyes and look at each situation from a long-term perspective. It helps me to make better choices."

"Forever Eyes—that's a strange term. Part of your religious belief?" Marilyn asks.

"Yeah, I guess it is. Jesus teaches us to store our treasures in heaven, not on this earth, and by that I think he means not to be focused on stuff that won't last forever," Fran tries to explain in non-theological terminology. "My kids are going to last forever, and I don't want to wake up in ten years regretting the fact that I didn't give them the foundation they needed in these early years. They are eternally important; promotions are not."

"You are willing to give up this promotion if you feel it will impact your kids in any way, is that what you're telling me?" Marilyn asks incredulously.

"Yeah, I guess you've netted it out perfectly," Fran replies.

"Do you know how that kind of attitude is viewed by the male executives above us, Fran?" Marilyn asks. "They say we asked for equal treatment and equal opportunities, so we can't bail out when it calls for equal commitment and sacrifice. It doesn't help women break through the glass ceiling when competent women like you refuse to accept promotions because of your children."

This catches Fran off guard. She gets a knot in her stomach. Quickly she sends up another emergency prayer to Jesus, "Lord, what do I say now?"

Jesus says: "*Fran, don't back away from what you know is truth; don't compromise.*" And in that moment, Fran knows what to say to Marilyn.

"That's heavy, Marilyn. But it doesn't change my thinking, because my first priority is to my kids, not to women in business. I believe as long as I work hard and perform well for this company, I have given everything expected and required. And furthermore, this is not a female issue, as I see it. It's a family issue."

At that, Marilyn seems to be at a loss for words, and the silence between them lengthens. But Fran senses it's a time for her to be quiet and let Marilyn make the first move.

"You're serious about this, aren't you, Fran," Marilyn remarks. After another pause, she says, "I admire you. I really do admire you."

"You do?" Fran says with shock in her voice. "You're not mad at me?"

"No, I admire you. You've got some kind of guts," Marilyn says. "I first saw it when you refused to do the proposal the way I wanted you to. Remember the Drexel account?"

"How could I ever forget," Fran replies. "I almost lost my job over it."

Marilyn smiles, "I knew then you were a different kind of cat. Then when you took on John Sims when he started making his usual passes at you—then I knew you had some kind of strength I'd never seen before. And now, to see you be willing to turn down money you need because you refuse to short-change your kids, I'm impressed. But I'm not sure if I think you're smart or weird." Marilyn gives Fran that tongue-in-cheek look.

Fran replies. "I'm certainly not extra-smart, and in the context of my commitment to Jesus Christ, my actions aren't weird. You see, Marilyn, more important than anything else in my life is my commitment to Jesus."

"You know, you've tried to talk to me about that before, but frankly, it just makes me uncomfortable," Marilyn confesses. "I've never been around people who talk about Jesus as though they know him."

Fran smiles and says, "Well, I can see how that would seem weird. But when you know him as I do, it's not weird at all. He is more real to me than you are, Marilyn. He is my best friend, my counselor, my guide. I know him, and he knows me—very well!"

"See, that's seems really weird, Fran. How can you know a man who doesn't exist? He's dead. How can you know Jesus?" Marilyn asks.

Fran's mind is spinning. Fran can't believe she's got such an opening to talk about Jesus. Again she quickly asks Jesus to help her. And for the next hour, Fran talks with Marilyn about Jesus. Marilyn knows almost nothing, so, in the simplest words possible, Fran explains, over and over again, what it means to know Jesus.

Marilyn listens intently. As Fran shares how she daily communicates with Jesus and how he gives her strength, how he healed her pain and comforted her when Jim died, how he cares about her and her kids, Marilyn is very touched and tears start to roll down her cheeks.

"All my life," Marilyn says, "I've always wanted someone who just loved me for myself, and I've never had it. You know, Fran, every day of my life my mother told me I was a mistake and should not have been born, and if abortion had been available to her, she would never have had me." Marilyn is crying unashamedly at this point.

"Oh, Marilyn, I'm so sorry," Fran says. "What pain and hurt. Jesus understands your pain and he loves you so much. He wants to be to you everything he is to me."

"But I'm not good like you are, Fran," Marilyn says. "I just can't live like you do."

"Don't you understand, the reason I'm good—if I am—is because of Jesus," Fran explains. "You don't have to get cleaned up to come to Jesus. You come to Jesus to get cleaned up. He's the only one who can change you."

"But what will my friends think if I suddenly become a religious fanatic?" Marilyn looks at Fran with red swollen eyes.

"They'll think you're weird," Fran smiles, "but they'll want to know where you got your peace and joy."

"How do I do it?" Marilyn asks.

"You just talk to Jesus like you talk to me," Fran says, touching her hand. She looks around to see that the restaurant is almost empty, and the waiter is leaving them alone. She prays that Jesus will keep it that way for a few more minutes.

"You mean, now? Talk to Jesus now?" Marilyn says.

"Why not?" Fran replies. "You don't even have to close your eyes. I'll start and then you say whatever is on your heart."

"Okay," Marilyn agrees.

Fran doesn't even bow her head but begins, "Lord, it's me, Fran, and with me, as you know, is Marilyn. She's struggling with this idea of becoming a disciple of Jesus, and while she wants to do it, she's also scared. I know you understand that, so please give her the assurance that you love her and are listening to her."

After a few moments' silence, Marilyn begins, so quietly at first that Fran can hardly hear. "God," she says, "I'm Marilyn, like Fran said, and I am indeed scared. I'm not sure I can believe everything Fran has told me, but I know she's got something I don't have. And I also know I need you. I'm not a good person; you know all the bad things I've done. I don't have a kind heart like Fran, but she says you'll give me one. At any rate, if this is really the truth, then I want to accept you into my life. Please forgive me for being so bad and please help me to be good. Amen."

They both sit in silence for a few moments. Then Fran says, "I know God heard you, Marilyn, and he is faithful to his promises. He said in the Bible that anyone who comes to him in simple faith will never be rejected. I believe you are accepted. Welcome to the family. You are now my sister in Christ." And with that Fran can no longer hold back the tears. She gets more tissues out of her purse, and puts her head in her hands sobbing.

"Why are you crying, Fran?" Marilyn asks as she grabs one of her tissues.

"Because," Fran says, "all the angels in heaven are having a party right now because you accepted Jesus. Did you know that, Marilyn?"

"Oh, come on, get serious," Marilyn says.

"I am serious. The Bible says that when one sinner repents and comes to the Lord, all of heaven rejoices, and I'm rejoicing, too. My joy just happens to come out in tears," Fran says as she wipes her eyes again.

"You really think that did it?" Marilyn says. "That's all I have to do? No trial period? Nothing else—just ask God to forgive me?"

"That's it—simple faith and repentance," Fran assures her.

They look at each other with big smiles and ruined make-up! "Hello, my sister," Marilyn says. "I have to get used to this."

They talk for a few more minutes and Marilyn understands she is a baby Christian needing much teaching and discipleship, and Fran tells her about their discipleship program at church. Marilyn is willing to do a one-on-one Bible study with another woman, and Fran offers to set it up for her.

On the way back, Marilyn says, "You know, we almost forgot the purpose of this luncheon—your promotion. Now, what am I going to do about that?"

"You do whatever you have to do, Marilyn, but I know I can't take on any more work or responsibility that would demand more time. If that means I can't accept the promotion, so be it," Fran says.

"Well, let me think about it. I'll get back to you tomorrow," Marilyn says.

On the way home from work Fran stops at the bookstore to buy Marilyn a Bible. She can hardly keep her feet on the ground, as she recalls the great miracle that has taken place today.

The next morning she takes the Bible in to Marilyn's office and lays it on her desk, wrapped in a box with a special note from Fran written on the inside. Mid-morning Marilyn walks into her office, shuts her door, thanks her for the Bible, and says, "I've got good news for you. I've gotten approval to assign an assistant rep to you with the Mitchell account. The business they're giving us warrants two people. So, you are indeed a Senior Account Rep, with an assistant reporting to you. Can you accept the promotion under those circumstances?"

"You better believe it," Fran says, as she shakes Marilyn's extended hand. "Marilyn, thanks so much."

"My pleasure," she replies. "You know, Fran, I prayed this morning that Jesus would help me get this approved. I think it worked."

"I know it worked," Fran replies. "See, you're already learning to practice the presence of Jesus in your life. I told you he'd be there for you all the time."

"This morning when I woke up," Marilyn says, "I just lay there in bed and kept saying, 'Is this real or am I just imagining it?' I really do feel different. Like heavy burdens have been taken off my back. Is that normal?"

"Totally normal, because indeed heavy burdens have been taken off your back, Marilyn," Fran replies. "That burden was sin and pain and loneliness. You don't have to carry them anymore. You're free."

"So what you're saying is I am now a liberated woman, is that it?" Marilyn says with a laugh.

"You got that right," Fran says. "You never knew liberation until you accepted Jesus."

"Well, as you suggested, I'm going to start reading the book of John. Thanks again for the Bible," Marilyn says.

She walks out, and Fran stands in stunned awe at what God has done. All she can say is "Thank You, Jesus. Thank You, Jesus."

God opened such a wonderful door for Fran to talk to Marilyn—all because she was willing to turn down a promotion. That is a surprise ending.

Chapter 7

Setting Reasonable Boundaries

As much as we have heard about boundaries there are lots of us who still struggle with setting reasonable boundaries. And I have to confess I continue to find it a challenge to set and keep them. Sometimes it seems like a conflict of interest—don't you think? I mean Jesus taught us to go the extra mile, but how many extra miles do we go before we've exceeded our boundaries?

This is one of the issues we face as followers of Jesus Christ—how do we balance the principles of servanthood and putting others' interest ahead of our own with the need for boundaries? And that's exactly what Fran is facing right now.

As we look at Fran's struggle with establishing appropriate boundaries for her life, part of the problem is she has the somewhat misplaced idea that as a Christ-follower, she should try to do what anyone asks of her. After all, she thinks, isn't that what Jesus meant when he told us in the Sermon on the Mount that we should go the extra mile? Well, no it isn't. One mile, yes, but not unending extra miles.

Fran faces various people in her life who are pushing her boundaries. They are each different, but they represent the various ways boundaries can become a real issue. The first one deals with a friend who continually exceeds normal and acceptable boundaries when it comes to requiring a lot of Fran's time.

It's Sunday afternoon and Fran has planned to spend a quiet day at home with her two children, just enjoying an afternoon to play games with Drew and Alice, and maybe even do some good reading, one of her favorite pastimes that she doesn't get to do very often. Just as she is in the midst of a game of Crazy Eights, having fun with her kids, the phone rings, and Jane is on the other end.

Jane is a friend from church who calls Fran quite often and talks for long periods of time about all her issues. You might say she is a high-maintenance friend, but Fran has tried to listen and help her, thinking this is the right thing to do. Admittedly it has become a bit out-of-balance and as Fran sees Jane's name on caller ID, she is really tempted to just let it go, but she's supposed to be there for her friends, right? So, she answers, and sure enough Jane begins her typical long and detailed complaining and whining. Jane is the type who tells you how to build a clock when all you want to know is what time it is.

At first, Fran tries to encourage her and offer some suggestions, but everything she says is resisted by Jane, and it seems Fran can do nothing but listen. Whatever advice Fran may have is immediately discounted by Jane. "That wouldn't work" is her familiar retort, or "You just don't understand" is another.

After 20 minutes, Drew says, “Mom, aren’t we gonna finish our game?” No doubt Jane heard Drew, but she completely ignores it and continues her tirade. After another ten minutes and several pleas from Drew and Alice, Fran realizes Jane is not going to stop anytime soon, so when Jane takes a breath, she says, “Hey, Jane, the kids and I were playing a game, and I promised them we’d finish, so if you don’t mind, I need to get back to them. I’ll be praying for you. In fact, why don’t I pray for you now before we hang up?”

Jane says, “You’re always busy and don’t have time to talk. I guess games are more important to you than friends.” And with that she hangs up, totally ignoring Fran’s offer to pray.

Fran says to herself, “I guess I should have let her keep talking, but honestly, it doesn’t do any good to listen to her. She simply isn’t interested in solutions or advice; all she wants is to bend my ear and get my sympathy. I don’t know, Lord, what am I supposed to do?”

Was Fran right to finally bring this conversation to a close? She feels a bit guilty, but then she feels guilty about her commitment to the kids as well. If it were a one-time event, the answer might be different. But Jane has been doing this to Fran for several weeks, and this is the first time Fran has assertively brought a conversation to the close, which obviously has not set well with Jane. Did she have a better option?

Do you have some “Janes” in your life—people who continually bend your ear and take up your time, but nothing good ever seems to come from it? Maybe it’s time to do something about it. Perhaps instead of putting up with Jane’s time-consuming litany of complaints, Fran needs to consider what she might do to help Jane, while at the same time setting some boundaries for these frequent one-sided conversations. It’s obvious they aren’t accomplishing anything good for either woman.

So, I would advise Fran to find the right time—maybe over a meal—where she could try to help Jane, perhaps by advising her to seek some spiritual or professional counsel, while explaining that Fran doesn’t feel qualified to offer that kind of counsel, nor does she have time for lengthy discussions due to being a single mom. That’s a little risky, admittedly, and it may bring an end to their friendship, but at least it offers some hope for Jane if she would listen.

You see, setting boundaries is often very uncomfortable and false guilt is one of our enemies. Fran needs to recognize the guilt she feels is totally inappropriate, refuse to accept it, and take the hard step of setting some boundaries, for her sake as well as Jane’s.

Have you learned to distinguish false guilt from true guilt? They feel about the same, but one is legitimate, and the other isn’t. In this case, false guilt says to Fran: I should be a better friend. Jane is unhappy with me so I must have done something wrong. False guilt is usually

vague non-specific feelings that you've failed, but you can't put your finger on exactly what you've done wrong.

Here's another boundary issue for Fran, this time involving a coworker.

It's Tuesday, and Fran has a plate full of things to get done for one of her most important clients before a deadline on Wednesday. As she digs in with a plan to make it happen, a coworker walks into her office.

"Hey, Fran, how's it going?" It's Amy, a nice gal who is a project manager like Fran, but who somehow always seems to need help from others—especially Fran!

"Hi, Amy. It's going good, but I'm under the gun to meet a deadline by tomorrow. How are things going for you?"

Uh-oh, Fran thinks, that was probably not the best question to ask. So, Amy begins to slowly talk about a presentation she is preparing for a new prospect tomorrow, but she is stumped. As she explains her dilemma, Fran feels it coming—Amy is going to ask for her help. And sure enough, she does.

"Fran, I know you're busy, but you're so smart and so fast, if you could just look over my presentation and give me your opinion, I would be so grateful. I really need to get this account; my manager says if my sales don't pick up, my job could be at risk—at least he implied that. It won't take you ten minutes. How about it?"

The voice in her head says, "Don't go there, Fran. This is a time to say no." But her exaggerated idea of what it means to "go the extra mile" overcomes her better sense, and she agrees to give Amy ten minutes.

What happens? Ten minutes turns into three hours, where Fran completely redesigns her presentation, makes it much stronger, and Amy is thrilled. "Sorry it took so long, Fran, but I know you'll do a great job on your project. Thanks so much," and off she goes. Now Fran has to take her work home and take time away from her family and her sleep to meet her own deadline.

Here's a situation where Fran has trouble saying no. You see, Fran is a very capable person who truly can get a lot done in a short amount of time—and done well—and so she has a well-earned reputation for being a go-to person. And guess what, she likes that image. She likes to be the superwoman who amazes people with her abilities. So pride is one reason she keeps trying to do more than she should.

But another reason is she truly wants to be a servant, and she prays regularly that God will give her a servant heart. She believes no one is in her life by accident. Somehow her good motivation has caused her to take on more than she should, and it has caused her to become

an enabler of others at times without realizing it. Fran should have listened to that quiet voice which told her to say no, but she just finds that so hard to do.

How do you know when to say no, when to go the extra mile, and when to draw the line in the sand and stick to your boundaries? Truthfully, there are no hard and fast rules here, but one thing to consider is whether you are becoming an enabler by not saying no. Here, Amy takes the easy way out and gets Fran to do her work under the guise of needing “a little help.”

What should Fran have done? She should have refused to do Amy's work for her. If it were possible to look at her presentation for a short ten minutes, offer her some suggestions, and be done, that would have been appropriate. She could have said, “Amy, I can give you exactly ten minutes but no more. If you think that will help, I'm glad to do that, but otherwise, I just can't do more today.” But Fran would have to stick to that ten-minute boundary and not allow herself to exceed it.

Then, because this has become a habit with Amy, she probably needs to find another time to carefully explain that her own workload is all she can handle, and at the same time, share some things she's learned about preparing good presentations. Amy might be lazy, and bailing out Amy is a form of enabling this, and in the long run she is not doing her a favor.

Boundary-setting is challenging for Fran, but her attempts at being superwoman will not benefit her or her friends. So, she needs to address this issue in her life. Maybe you do as well.

The challenge of setting reasonable boundaries is almost always a relationship issue. And it frequently comes from our misplaced idea of what it means to be a good friend or team player. As Christ-followers, our standard given to us by Jesus himself is to go the extra mile, to do more than is required of us. We are called to be servants, as Jesus was, and that should always be our attitude.

But when we try to do more than we should and we think that going the extra mile means we jump through everyone's hoops and meet everyone's expectations, we are in dangerous territory. This is how we become burned out; it's how we become enablers; it's how we allow false guilt to drive us into exhaustion and resentment.

I would remind you Jesus knew how to say no. Do you remember when the disciples were looking for Jesus one morning because a crowd of people had gathered to hear him again, and no doubt, were eager to take advantage of his gift of healing? They found him alone, praying, and they exclaimed: *Everyone is looking for you!* Jesus replied, *Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.* The disciples tried to tell Jesus he should come back and preach to the crowd waiting for him, but Jesus knew when to say no. You'll find that story in Mark 1.

Another time a man stopped him and asked him to settle a disagreement. He said, *Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.* But Jesus said to him, *Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?* Basically Jesus said, “Sorry, that’s not my job.” He drew a boundary and said no, even though he could have done it. It was not what he was sent to do. You’ll find that story in Luke 12.

Jesus knew he could not please everyone; in his human body, he had physical limitations, as we do. He became weary, as we do. He needed rest and time alone, as we do. And to do what God had sent him to do, he had to refuse to do other things—he had to draw boundaries. I believe his example teaches us that we must also learn to draw reasonable boundaries to do what God wants us to do.

With two hours to go before the end of the day, Fran is counting the minutes until she can leave, tying up a few loose ends, and dreaming of going to bed when the kids do tonight. But in walks her manager, who says,

“Fran, if you’re not busy tonight, I’d love for you to join me for dinner with the Vice President of Marketing, who is in town this week, you know. I’ve been telling him about your success and how you’ve helped us get 20% ahead of our quota. He asked if you would join us. I know you have your kids, but if you could get a sitter, I’d be glad to cover that expense for you.”

Don’t do it, Fran, the inner voice of God’s Spirit seems to say to her, but how can she say no? I mean, how often do you get this kind of opportunity to make a good impression? Well, she thinks, I can do it. Mom will keep the kids for me. It’s just one night. So she hears herself saying, “That’s very nice of him. I think I can make that happen. Let me make a call, and I’ll get back to you.”

She calls her mom, who does have plans for that evening, but Fran twists her arm and convinces her that her Dad will be glad to watch the kids while she’s away, so of course, Mom can’t say no either. Fran has her problem solved. Then, when she gets home and explains to the kids that she has to go out to dinner with her boss, Drew complains, “But Mom, we agreed to help me with my science project tonight. You promised.”

Fran did promise to help Drew tonight since she couldn’t help him last night because she had to bring work home. Now what? Fran is determined to make this dinner with the Vice President. After all, it’s her job! So, she convinces Drew that Granddad will help him with the project. After all, Granddad is much better at these things than she is. Drew is not happy about that. “You mean, I’ve got to take all this stuff over to their house? Can’t Granddad come over here?”

Okay, so now Fran has another issue to resolve. Can she talk her Dad into coming to her house, which will make things much easier for Drew? It's worth a try. So she calls her dad, who is on his way home from work, and plays on his Granddad heart.

"Dad, Drew really wants your help with his science project tonight—you're so much better at this than I am, and I was wondering if you'd mind coming here. It's difficult to move all his stuff over to your house and then back here. Is that possible?"

So, a tired Granddad agrees to change his plans and fill in for Fran.

This is just an example of the unintended consequences that can happen when you refuse to set some boundaries. Of course, once in a while these things happen and people have to step up to the plate and help out—especially with single moms. I was a single mom for many years, so I get that. But much of this particular situation is a result of Fran's inability to set some boundaries.

You see, not only does Fran have difficulty saying no to the irritating and unnecessary requests that are made of her, she also has trouble turning down an offer she sees as positive. That's understandable; most of us have that same problem. But if she keeps living outside the margins of her life, overriding reasonable boundaries, the day will come when she'll have to deal with some serious not-so-nice consequences.

Can you identify with Fran? I can think of times in my life, when my daughter was young and still at home, when I didn't set boundaries on myself. I took a job that required a great deal of travel and kept me away from home too much. But it was a somewhat glamorous job that I really wanted so I convinced myself I had no choice. That was not true; I could have refused that promotion to stay home, but I didn't want to do that. So, I exceeded reasonable boundaries that should have been in place at that stage of my daughter's life.

The dinner with the boss and the Vice President wasn't as productive as Fran had imagined. It turned into a much later night than she expected, and the conversation didn't always stay within business boundaries. After a few drinks, this Vice President told some inappropriate stories and made some remarks that verged on sexual overtures, and it became a pretty uncomfortable situation. Fran used the excuse of getting home to her kids to exit the dinner as early as possible, but it was still 10:00 by the time she got home. With apologies to her dad, she tried to clean up some of the mess from the science project, get her house in decent condition, and fall into bed at midnight.

Now, it's Friday, and she is running on fumes. "Thank God it's Friday," she says to herself. "There's nothing on the calendar for the weekend. So, I can sleep late, get stuff done at home, and take it easy. And I promised the kids we'd do something fun tomorrow, whatever they would like to do."

Then, at about 3:00 she sees a text from her pastor asking that she help with a special event at church tomorrow. He writes:

Fran, I know this is a late request, but did you know that Courtney Trent's mother died suddenly—heart attack, I think—and so she's not able to do the registration for our equipping class tomorrow. We've got over 200 people registered, and I need someone who knows the program and the software and can handle the registration process calmly and efficiently. That, of course, is you. Again, sorry for the late request, but I'm sure hoping and praying you can do it. Let me know as soon as possible.

"Well," Fran says to herself, "how do you say no to that? I'm so sorry for Courtney. It's certainly not Pastor's fault this request is so late, and for sure he needs help. It is church work, after all, so I just think I have to buck up and do it. Some weeks are just like this, and you just need to get through them. Of course I'll help him." And so she sends a response that assures Pastor Paul she'll be there.

Now she has to break the news to her kids and disappoint them, work late on Friday to get her Saturday chores done, and try to get a few hours' sleep before heading off to church. What a week!

Commentary

Have you found yourself in some similar tough weeks? They happen and are sometimes unavoidable, but if you find far too many of your weeks are exceeding reasonable boundaries, it might be helpful to take a look at the underlying causes for this dilemma.

For Fran, it's a combination of trying to please everyone, enjoying the recognition she gets from being the go-to person who can do lots of things well and feeling guilty when she has to say no.

And another reason is she thrives on activity. She loves challenges. She enjoys winning and hates losing. And therefore that competitive spirit often gets her in trouble.

So, what does she do? That's how God has made her, she reasons. True, but God has given her a good mind, has promised to give her wisdom, and has a list of good deeds for her to do that will not bring her to continual burnout. Hard work? Yes, of course. Weariness at times? Certainly. But not a continual habit of crossing reasonable boundaries and thereby depleting her energy, which often causes her to neglect more important responsibilities.

If you have trouble holding to reasonable boundaries, and you know it, perhaps you'll consider what causes you to do that, ask God for wisdom, and then pray for his strength to stick to your boundaries. It really is the best way to live out your faith.

This is necessary for our lives to glorify Christ. Out-of-balance lives aren't good testimonies. I find when I'm overstepping my boundaries, that's when I'm most likely to develop a rotten attitude, say things I regret, hurt people I love. It's a never-ending challenge for me, as I'm sure it is for all of us, but we have the power of God's Spirit to enable us to set and keep reasonable boundaries.

Chapter 8

Taking an Ethical Stand

Fran and Louise are account reps with good track records and success. Their hard work and honesty have paid off, and they are held in high esteem by their management and coworkers. This Thursday morning Fran is really excited for Louise, because she expects she will be awarded a big new national account. She's the right person for that account, and their manager, Marilyn, has indicated that she recommended her. The final decision is to be made today, so it's been hard for Fran to stay focused.

The phone rings just about lunch time, and it's Andy, a friend in the art department. "Hi, Fran," Andy says, "just wanted to tell you how sorry I am for Louise."

"What do you mean, Andy?" Fran asks with a lump in her throat.

"You haven't heard? Louise didn't get the new account; it went to Lloyd."

"Lloyd? Why Lloyd?" Fran asks in bewilderment. "Lloyd isn't nearly as qualified as Louise, and Marilyn told Louise..."

"I know, I know," Andy says, "nobody knows why Lloyd got it instead of Louise. I just feel so bad for her."

"Thanks for letting me know, Andy," Fran says. "I need to find Louise. Talk to you later."

She hangs up and dials Louise's number; no answer. Her office is on the next floor, but she just can't sit still and wait any longer. So she heads for her office, taking the shortcut up the stairwell. As she's going up, Louise is coming down.

"Louise," Fran says, "I was headed for your office. Andy just told me."

"Can you believe it?" Louise looks at her with a slight grin. "Marilyn told me Lloyd was selected because of his quote 'experience with entertaining large national accounts.'"

"What did she mean?" Fran asks.

"Oh, I think it's clear; somebody decided I wouldn't be willing to wine and dine this client as they expect to be," Louise replies.

"You mean because you're a Christian, and they know you don't do the party scene?" Fran replies. "Louise, that's discrimination. Didn't you protest to Marilyn?"

"Look, she feels as badly about it as I do," Louise says, "and she's a fairly new believer. So, I'm not going to hassle her, Fran."

"You mean, you're not going to fight this, Louise?" Fran can't believe her ears.

"No, I prayed about it, and I have to trust God and let it go," Louise tells her.

"But Louise, this is a matter of principle. It's wrong for the company to discriminate against you because of your convictions," Fran says. "You're just letting them get by with inappropriate—and might I add—illegal behavior. It's not right!"

"I have to do what I think is right, and this is one of those 'turn the other cheek' times. I can't prove they've discriminated against me, and even if I could, it would not be a good testimony for me to start demanding my rights," Louise replies. "The company has been good to me, Fran, and I just have to deal with this disappointment."

"But, Louise, not only is this wrong for you, it's wrong for the company," Fran argues. "You're much better at your job than Lloyd is; you'd do a much better job for that client."

"Fran," Louise says, "please, don't take this so hard. I really appreciate your concern for me, but I just don't believe this is a matter over which I should raise an issue. The Lord just keeps telling me to let it go, Fran, so that's what I have to do."

Tears come to Fran's eyes and start down her cheeks as she stands in the stairwell with Louise. More than anything, they are tears of anger because of this unfair thing that has happened to Louise. She finds it difficult to accept her way of dealing with it.

They talk a little longer, and agree to talk again that evening. Driving home from work, Fran says to Jesus, "Lord, this is not fair. Louise should stand up for her rights. You don't expect us to just lay down and let people walk over us, do you?"

"Fran," Jesus quietly replies, *"don't you remember what I said in the Sermon on the Mount?"*

"You mean the 'turn the other cheek' part? Yes, but Lord does that means we're supposed to be door mats? What kind of testimony is that?" Fran replies.

"Fran," Jesus continues, *"you should know by now that as my follower, you don't live by the same rules as others. The weapons you fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds."*

"Yeah, I know," Fran says, "but I don't think you meant for us to just roll over. I feel so badly for Louise. She's such a great person, and she would handle that account imminently better than Lloyd. I just can't see how this is the right thing for her to do. It almost seems like she's a little wimpy. I think she should be more assertive; she appears weak."

"Don't confuse acceptance and submission with weakness, Fran," Jesus reminds her. *"It takes a lot more character and strength to let go than it does to fight."*

Fran is not yet ready to hear what Jesus is telling her. Her sense of fair play and anger at the way Louise has been treated seem to have boiled up inside her, and so she ends the conversation with Jesus.

That evening she and Louise talk on the phone, and she again argues with her to be more assertive about her rights. Louise says, "Look, Fran, we just don't see eye to eye on this, and I guess we'll have to let it go at that."

But Fran doesn't want to leave it unfinished. She tries again to convince Louise, "I appreciate your position, but if you'll stand up to the company about this, it will benefit other people, too. It'll let them know they can't treat any employee with discrimination."

"Fran, did you ever think this could be a gift for me. I mean, maybe God is keeping me from an account that would be nothing but headaches. I just don't want to push this, Fran."

Reluctantly, Fran concedes the argument as she realizes she is not going to change Louise's mind. The conversation ends on a rather frigid note. Louise suggests they pray about it, and she does pray before they hang up.

It's a restless night for Fran because she is struggling with Louise's response. On one hand she admires Louise's submissive spirit, but on the other hand, she wants her to be more vocal, and rant and rave and make people at the office listen to her. She senses that is not God's way, but her competitive attitude and take-charge personality make it difficult for her to let it go.

The next day at work, she still feels that restless feeling inside, as she has not settled this issue in her heart. Later in morning, Marilyn, her boss, walks in. "Got plans for lunch?" she asks.

"No, just working," Fran replies.

"Well, let's get out of here," Marilyn says. "I need some fresh air."

As they settle in at the diner nearby, Marilyn slumps in the booth. "Fran, I probably shouldn't be talking to you about this Louise situation, but I wanted you to know I fought it tooth and nail. Obviously I lost."

"I knew you would stand up for Louise, Marilyn," Fran replies. "She was the best person for the job."

"That's for sure, and she earned that account," Marilyn says. "But my boss knows the senior vice president on this account really well, and this guy is a real playboy, if you know what I mean. He expects a 'good time' when he's on a business trip. So, knowing Louise would never compromise her principles and lifestyle, he just figured give it to Lloyd and avoid the problem. I mean, Lloyd certainly qualifies for having a good time, I guess."

"You mean, your boss knows Louise is a Christian?" Fran is surprised.

"Everybody knows Louise has certain principles which she will never compromise."

All of a sudden it's as though a veil has been lifted from Fran's eyes. The whole situation looks so different. Jesus whispers to her, *"Glad you put on your Forever Eyes again, Fran."*

Back in her office, she closes the door and spends a few minutes in prayer. "Lord, please, please forgive me for my rebellious and unbelieving heart. And please forgive me for having such an earthbound view of this whole thing. I don't know when I'll ever learn that your way is best, but please don't give up on me."

Afterward she dials Louise's number. "Louise, I owe you an apology. Can we talk after work?"

"Sure," Louise says. "I'll come by your office on the way out."

As they sit in her car for a brief conversation before going home, Fran tells Louise about her luncheon with Marilyn and how differently she sees the whole thing now. "I apologize, Louise, for ragging on you. That was not my place to do, and I was dead wrong. I really admire your ability to trust God even in the midst of a disappointment. I've learned a lesson by watching how you've handled this."

"Gee, Fran," Louise says, "I don't feel like I'm handling it so great. It still hurts, but I believe if I fight it, I'll just mess things up worse. Have to tell you, though, I was already spending that additional income. There's something I want to buy, and it costs a good bit. Oh, well, in God's time."

"Well, I gotta get home to the kids. You've got a committee meeting at church tonight, right?" she asks.

"Right," and they each head in separate directions for the evening.

Commentary

Discipleship can be costly, but like Louise said, only God knows what grief she may have escaped or what an impact her principled life will have on those who are watching. Following Jesus is the biggest bargain we'll ever have, no matter what it costs.

Part 2

Now, this Saturday morning, Fran is thinking of what she can do special for Louise to make up for this disappointment, and she gets an idea. She calls Louise and says, "If you're not busy tonight, why don't you come over. We can watch a good movie, and I'll cook spaghetti. We can have our own private party to celebrate the victory God has given you and the good he's going to bring out of this bad situation!"

Louise says, "You're so kind to think of that, but did you forget? We promised Claire and Maritza we'd have dinner with them and catch a movie."

"Oh, right," Fran says, "I did forget. Bummer! I better make sure Mom can watch the kids tonight. Thanks for reminding me."

Louise says, "Well, Claire and Maritza are new at church and we need to get to know them better."

So, Fran gets busy with all her Saturday chores and errands before it's time to go out. They meet Claire and Maritza at a nice little Italian restaurant and enjoy some good pasta.

"Hey, what movie do you want to go to?" Louise asks. They discuss two or three and Claire suggests one rated R.

"You know," Fran says, "I just have a rule for myself that I don't see R rated movies. But I know there is one rated PG-13 in the Plaza that sounds kinda cute. That okay with you guys?"

Everyone agrees it sounds okay. Claire says, "You mean, you never go to an R rated movie? But some of them are really good."

"The acting may be good and things like that, but I just don't want to fill up my mind with scenes of violence or sex or inappropriate language or lifestyles. You know, what you see has a stronger impact on you than anything else," Fran responds.

It's obvious this is a whole new thought for Claire, and they talk about it a bit more. Louise joins in to say she has learned to be very selective about the movies she watches, at home, in the theater—wherever. "I've discovered once I see those images, they are very difficult to get out of my head. In fact, when they started invading my prayer time, that's when I knew I had to be more selective in what I watched."

As they wait in line for tickets, Fran says to Louise on the side, "I wonder about this movie, don't you, Louise? What if it's no good?"

"We'll leave," Louise says quietly.

"You mean, just leave Claire and Maritza?" Fran says, somewhat concerned.

"We don't watch junk, right Fran," Louise says as they go into the theater. They get settled into their seats with their popcorn, looking forward to a lighthearted funny movie.

About ten minutes into the movie, Fran begins to feel nervous. This is not the wholesome movie it is advertised to be. The lead couple are not married, living together, as though there's nothing wrong with it. And the language is not all that wholesome, either. She can tell that Louise is also not comfortable with it.

After a few more minutes, Louise whispers in her ear, "We can't sit through this movie, Fran. This is trash. I think we have to leave, don't you?"

"I agree it's a rotten movie," she whispers back, "but I don't want to embarrass Claire and Maritza."

"I'll take care of that, Fran, don't worry," she says, and with that she whispers something to Claire then motions to Fran to head out of the theater.

As they get to the lobby, Fran asks "What did you tell Claire?"

"I just said we were uncomfortable with the movie, and we'd meet them right outside the lobby when it's over. C'mon, let's go get a cup of coffee."

"I hate to do this to Claire and Maritza. They probably think we're really weird. Guess we should have checked out this movie a little better, huh?" Fran comments.

"Yeah, that's a good lesson to remember next time we're choosing a movie. But I wouldn't want to be watching that movie if Jesus returned right now, would you?"

"No," Fran says, "but I feel badly for Claire and Maritza. And it's kinda embarrassing. Don't you think we should have just waited it out?"

"Trust me, Fran," Louise says, "we did the right thing."

Things are quiet for a few moments, as they both are lost in their own thoughts. Then Fran says, "It's interesting, Louise. This past week I thought you didn't fight enough for your beliefs. I wanted you to stand up and fight the discrimination when they didn't give you the new account. We both know it was simply because you have Christian principles that kept you from getting that business. But tonight you were very assertive in taking a stand about this movie. It's almost like you're two different people."

Louise thinks. "I see what you mean, but let me see if I can explain. I didn't take a stand at the office about being denied the new account because I felt it would damage my testimony. The new account—and the money that came with it—are not worth coming across as a money-mad, abrasive, give-me-what-I-deserve kind of person. That's the way most people are, but as a Christian, I don't think I should be. The only person who lost—so to speak—was me, and I was more than willing to do that. Tonight much more was at stake than just somebody treating me unfairly. I didn't see any other options, Fran."

Fran looks at her in amazement. "I'm seeing a side of you I've never seen before, Louise," she says.

"You mean my wimpy side or my assertive side?" Louise asks with a grin. "Which do you like best?"

"I guess I wondered why you weren't more assertive at the office. I thought you should stand up and be heard," Fran says sheepishly, "if you know what I mean."

"You thought I was a wimp—go ahead and say it," Louise laughs.

"Well, not exactly a wimp, but," Fran stammers. "Then tonight, well..."

"Tonight I almost embarrassed you because I was so strong and aggressive, right?" Louise asks.

"Well, it was a little embarrassing, I guess, but," Fran looks for the right words.

"You should know something about me, Fran. When it comes to my responsibility and accountability to God, I am not embarrassed to do the right thing—period. Do you know what I mean?"

Fran has never heard Louise so forceful, and she realizes what a warped idea she had of how she should behave. Louise has her priorities much more in line than she does.

"I'm ashamed to confess I was embarrassed to leave the theater," Fran says. "It reveals how shallow my convictions are."

"Come on, Fran, don't be so hard on yourself," Louise says. "Hey, how about some ice cream while we're waiting. Ice cream always solves problems."

As Louise orders the ice cream, they look up to see Claire and Maritza coming in.

"Hey," Claire says, "I thought we'd find you here. We decided to leave, too."

Fran says, "I'm sorry about leaving so abruptly but..."

"It was my decision, Claire," Louise interrupts. "And I do apologize if we embarrassed you. I just felt the movie was so far off base, that it was nothing I wanted to watch."

"I thought it was pretty dumb myself," Maritza agrees.

"What bugged me," Louise says, "was that they were portraying this illicit relationship as though it was okay—just because they're a cute couple and very sophisticated. Hollywood makes sin look normal."

Claire says, "I hadn't thought about that."

Louise adds, "You know, what I've finally decided is that you have to set standards and then stick to them. Often as Christians we lower our standards a little bit here and a little bit there, and all of a sudden, we're on a slippery slope downhill."

"Just the other day at work, someone started telling an off-color joke, and I was so uncomfortable," Claire says. "I know I turned red and hung my head. In fact, they kinda made fun of me. But I didn't know what to do."

"That's happened to me before, too," Fran says. "I used to think I just had to grin and bear it, so to speak, but no more. I either walk away from the conversation, if that's possible, or I ask them to hold the joke until I'm not around. I've actually done that."

"You're kidding," Maritza chimes in. "Wow, that took guts. What did they say?"

"You won't believe this, but several people came to me and thanked me for saying something," Fran relates. "They didn't like this person's dirty jokes any more than I did, but nobody had said anything. Now, everybody knows not to tell those jokes when I'm around. They tease me, but I consider it a compliment."

"I never thought about it that way," Maritza says. "Where I work the language and the jokes are really awful, but I've never known how to deal with it. I just may try your idea."

"Well, first, pray lots about it, Maritza," Louise says. "In fact, after we finish this ice cream, let's just have a time of prayer together about it."

"Great idea," Fran says. "We can go back to my house if you like."

And with that, a long discussion begins, giving Louise and Fran a wonderful opportunity to share and encourage their new friends in their walk as Christians. It turned into a wonderful evening, actually.

After they leave her house, Fran quietly thanks Jesus for the courage and character Louise has and for the wonderful evening this turned out to be.

Chapter 9

Falling In Love

Fran has invited Barry to have dinner this Friday evening with her and her two kids, Alice and Drew. Since the death of her husband over three years ago, Fran has had neither the time nor the desire to get involved in another relationship. How could she ever find another man like her Jim? But she does miss that male presence in her life, and more importantly, she knows her children miss their father.

As Barry arrives in his blue jeans and Texas boots, Fran notices how good he looks—much more so than she noticed at the office. Strange how people look different in different settings, Fran thinks. She introduces him to the kids.

"Hi, Drew and Alice," he says. "If you're like my nephews, you love *Adventures in Odyssey*, so I brought you a video."

"Look Alice," Drew says excitedly, "this is great, and this is one we don't have."

"Thanks, Mr...eh.," Alice stumbles.

"Just call me Barry, Alice," he says with a big grin.

As the kids hurry off to watch their new video, Fran says, "How nice of you to do that, Barry. That will keep them occupied for awhile!"

"They're cute kids, Fran," Barry says, "but I don't know how you manage them and your job. I know how busy your job is."

"It's a challenge, but Jesus keeps helping me, Barry," Fran replies. "I truly am learning to lean on him every minute of every day, and he's always there for me."

Throughout dinner Barry talks with the kids, has them laughing, and afterward he plays catch with Drew. He even reads them a story before they head to bed. When the house is finally quiet, Fran says, "I can't get over your way with the kids, Barry. You'd think you had a dozen of them yourself."

"I love kids; I've got a couple of nephews and a niece, but I don't get to see them very often. I don't know why, but I've just always enjoyed being with kids. Maybe I communicate better with them than adults," Barry says self-consciously with a laugh.

"I can't see you having any trouble communicating with anyone, Barry," Fran assures him.

"Well, we got off to a rocky start," he says, quietly testing the waters.

"That was my fault, not yours," Fran replies. "I really feel so badly about the way..."

"Hey, Fran, please, I didn't mean to bring that up," Barry interrupts her. "It's funny about first impressions, isn't it?"

"I don't know how funny it is, but I sure learned a good lesson about judging books by their..." Fran stops in mid-sentence. "I mean, I learned how often I'm wrong when I jump to...oh, you know what I mean."

Barry is laughing at her, and they both have a good laugh at themselves. "Thanks for putting the kids to bed," Fran says. "It's been a long time since I had help with these parenting chores."

"Tell me about your husband, Fran," Barry says. "What was his name—Jim?"

"Yes, Jim. Well, he was a really good father and the best kind of husband," Fran replies slowly. "Even after almost four years, I miss him as much as ever."

For the next couple of hours, she and Barry continue their conversation. It was comfortable, and neither of them wanted it to end. But finally Barry said, "I should go; those kids will have you up early tomorrow, I bet. Thanks again for dinner."

"Thank you for coming. It was a treat for all of us," Fran insists.

"It's been good to make some new friends," Barry comments.

"Hey, if you're looking for a church, you're welcome to give ours a try. There are lots of singles there," Fran says.

"I appreciate that; I'll visit," Barry says. They say their good nights, and Fran watches as he drives off.

After she crawls in bed, she has a difficult time falling asleep. She keeps reliving the evening, smiling in the dark as she remembers how much she enjoyed being with Barry. She finds herself wondering if he'll be in church Sunday, hoping he will, wanting to see him again. Restlessly she looks at the clock—after midnight. "Go to sleep, Fran," she says to herself. Then she decides to talk to Jesus.

"Lord, I had a really good evening tonight with Barry. I thank you again for turning what was such a bad start in this relationship into something...pleasant," she stumbles a bit for the right words. "Lord, I have to admit it was nice to be with a man again. Lord, give me wisdom and help me not to lose my head or my heart," and with those words she drifts off to sleep.

The next morning Fran wakes early, even with the short night's sleep. And the first thing she thinks about is her evening with Barry. As she is basking in the leftover rays from last night, she senses the presence of Jesus. Without a word spoken, Fran gets out of bed, washes her face, and sits down in her special chair to spend some time reading the Bible, meditating,

and praying. Instinctively she knows she needs perspective and balance, and she always finds that by spending quiet time with Jesus.

As she finishes, she hears the kids rattling dishes in the kitchen, fixing cereal for their breakfast and turning on their new *Adventures in Odyssey*. "How nice of Barry to think of the kids," she thinks. While she's dressing, the phone rings and her heart almost stops. Maybe it's Barry, she hopes as she picks up the phone. But it was her friend, Louise.

"How'd it go last night?" Louise asks.

"Well..." Fran replies.

"Say no more. I can tell by your tone. It went really well," Louise answers her own question.

"I would say it went really well," Fran says, dreamily. She tells Louise about the evening and like the good friend she is, Louise listens to every detail with interest and excitement.

"I'm so glad you had such a great time, Fran," Louise says. "You need a romantic interest in your life. It's been a long time."

The words seem to bring Fran back into reality. A romantic interest—is that what Barry is? She concludes her conversation with Louise, and digs around in her mind to understand what's happening to her. Am I falling for this guy? she asks herself. Well, why not? comes the reply.

Before she can get up the phone rings again and this time it is Barry. "I know it's early, but I figured the kids would have you up by now," Barry explains.

"They're watching your video again," Fran says, as her heart beats a mile a minute. She can't believe how thrilled she is to hear his voice. She and Barry pick up the conversation where they left off, it seems, and before she knows it an hour has passed, and the kids are yelling.

"I'm afraid I better go separate those two before they hurt each other," Fran explains to Barry.

"I was just wondering," Barry hesitates. "I don't know what you've got planned today, but could you use some help? I'm pretty handy around the house." The next thing Fran knows, they've made plans to spend the day together. She feels suddenly energized, and plunges into the necessary household activities before Barry arrives.

In the midst of putting makeup on, she looks in the mirror at herself. "Fran," she says, "you're falling for this guy!" "Yes," comes the response from the face in the mirror.

Commentary

There are some important principles I want to emphasize as we discuss this "falling in love" topic. First, God has built us to be attracted to the opposite sex, and we were designed for companionship so we can appreciate, enjoy, and be thankful for the process that leads to it. But we must also remember since sin came into the picture back in the Garden of Eden, it has affected every aspect of our lives and that includes this phenomenon of "falling in love."

The chemistry and feelings stirred up when we are "in love" are extremely strong and difficult to control. Therefore, a wise person should move slowly in these areas. Now, that is not a message well-received in our society. Everything we see on television and in movies, every romance novel says that falling in love is fast. You respond to your emotions, you follow your instincts, you give in to your hormones, and you go for instant gratification. Have you seen or read anything in the secular domain that even suggests taking it slowly, or waiting, or denying your emotions? I doubt it.

But if you are a Christian single, it's really important to remember Paul's admonition to the Ephesians: *But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.* If you are committed to purity of life, you must make a decision before emotional involvements that you will be cautious, careful, and slow moving in your romantic relationships. I have a wonderful single friend who has a new love interest in her life, but she uses the 90-day principle. That is, no touching for at least 90 days. Sounds like a smart idea to me.

Fran seems to have found a man who is compatible with her in many ways, and it would be easy to run ahead of herself and allow her feelings to rule her heart. She must not do this; it is an invitation to disaster, and even a good relationship can be ruined by hasty involvements.

Part 2

On this Sunday morning, as Fran begins to get ready for church, she is excited because Barry is going to join her and the kids. He's new in town and looking for a church home, so naturally she invited him to join them today. Her head is definitely in the clouds.

That still small voice of Jesus says to her, *"You should be talking to me about this relationship, Fran."* It causes her to stop for a minute as she realizes she heard the voice of Jesus.

Fran sits on the bed, and says to Jesus, "Haven't I talked to you about Barry? Well, it's so new. I mean, Friday night he was here and then all day yesterday."

"I noticed," Jesus says. *"He was here very late both nights."*

"We are so comfortable together; he's so easy to talk to, and the kids love him," Fran says.

"The kids were in bed at 8:00," Jesus replies. "Barry didn't leave until after midnight."

"Well, we're adults, Lord," Fran explains, "and you know nothing wrong happened here. I would never let anything get out of hand—and neither would Barry."

"A few corrections, Fran," Jesus says. "Even though you're adults and both of you are committed to me, you are still susceptible to the temptations of the flesh. Being alone for so many hours is an invitation to temptation. And don't ever think you and Barry are above being tempted in any way. It's when you think you're standing that you're most likely to fall."

Jesus' words have a sobering effect on Fran. It's like bursting her balloon. "Lord, after all I've been through with Jim's death, don't I deserve a little romance? Barry is such a wonderful man." The tears start to come.

"Fran, I'm not trying to rain on your parade. I've allowed Barry into your life, and he is a good man. But I want you to start thinking straight now before it's too late. You could mess up something good if you're not careful," Jesus says.

Instinctively Fran reaches for her Bible to look up a verse that comes to her mind. "Here it is," she says, "Proverbs 4:23: *Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*" Does that mean I have to stop seeing Barry?" Fran asks Jesus.

"No, of course not," Jesus replies. "It simply means that you should slow down, take precautions, don't trust your flesh one bit, and build in safeguards to protect this relationship from any harm."

Fran writes the verse out on a card and sticks it in her purse. She needs to have that close by so she won't forget what Jesus told her.

She hurries to get the kids ready, off to church, and settled in their class. Then she heads for her Sisters in Christ class, a wonderful group of women who experience great fellowship. As she rounds the corner, she runs into Barry.

"Oh, hi," she says, "I didn't know you were coming for Sunday school."

"Sure, Fran," he says, "I always go to Sunday school."

"Well, uh...I have to go to a women's class but I guess..." Fran tries to decide what to do.

"You go right on to your class, Fran. Just direct me to the singles group, I guess," Barry insists.

She does that and they agree to meet and sit together in church. As she walks to her class, she finds herself thinking, "I would rather be in the singles class with him. It wouldn't hurt to miss my class one Sunday. Besides, I don't want those other single women to get any ideas."

"Fran," Jesus says to her, "do you hear what you're thinking?"

"I guess that wasn't too spiritually minded, huh?" Fran replies. "Okay, okay, I'll go to my class. You're right, Lord; I don't need to make a fool of myself over this man."

"Indeed," Jesus responds, "and if I'm in control of your life, you can trust this relationship to me without manipulation. I am still in control, am I not?" he asks.

"You are," Fran replies without hesitation, "and you always will be."

Fran gathers the kids after Sunday school and makes sure they're situated in the junior church service. Then she meets Barry, and they find a convenient pew in church. As the service proceeds, Fran finds it a little bit difficult to concentrate on the service.

After church Barry says, "How about hamburgers for lunch—my treat?" The kids are all for it, so they head for the closest fast food restaurant. As she watches Barry with the kids, Fran is in awe. Nobody but Jim ever related to the kids like Barry does. She can tell Drew is becoming more and more attached to him, and Alice has won his heart with her big blue eyes.

Fran can't remember feeling so relaxed and excited at the same time. It just seems too good to be true. At the end of the day as she sits on the sofa beside Barry, he moves closer and takes her hand. "I've been trying to think of how to say what I'm feeling, Fran," Barry starts, "but you know I'm not too good at words." His grin totally disarms her.

"You're good at everything, Barry," Fran says as he wraps both hands around hers. They look in each other's eyes for a long time and then Barry slowly leans closer and places a soft, brief kiss on Fran's cheek. It feels good; she wants more.

"Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." The words of Proverbs 4 pop into her mind, rather unexpectedly.

She moves away a bit and says, "Barry, it's pretty obvious we have some serious chemistry here, and I have to tell you this is the best weekend I've had since—since Jim died. And in order not to spoil whatever it is we've got, I think we need to..."

"Funny you should say that, Fran," Barry gently interrupts her, "because just this morning as I was reading my Bible, a verse in Proverbs 4 spoke to me and I wanted to share it with you. Got a Bible handy?"

"I know the verse," Fran says, stunned to realize Jesus has given him the same warning he gave her. She quotes Proverbs 4:23, and it begins a long discussion of what it means in their relationship. They both admit that the feelings are advancing on them rapidly and some brakes should be applied. They agree to limit the nights they see each other and the time they are alone. And Barry suggests they always take time to share something from the Bible and pray together.

As he leaves that evening, Fran is overwhelmed. She sits down on the sofa, buries her head in her hands, and with tears of joy, pours out words of praise and thanksgiving for Barry and this wonderful weekend, but most of all, for Jesus and his gentle love and protection over her.

Closing

Barry and Fran have made some important decisions to control and govern their relationship. It is a smart move on their part, and if they will consistently abide by their own rules, it will allow them to make wiser decisions about their relationship, whatever direction it takes.

Too often singles fall too fast and hard and rush into a relationship too quickly. Sometimes you can truly spoil the prospects for a good relationship by letting it get ahead of you, both in words and in physical attachment.

Let me point out some of the good reasons for Fran and Barry's decision. First, Fran needs to have plenty of time for her children and not give them the feeling that they take second place to Barry. She needs to keep order in their lives. If she's trying to see Barry every night, important things would be left undone, and her children would likely be short-changed.

Secondly they agree to limit their time alone together. As soon as you think you can handle any kind of temptation, you're in trouble. And two people "in love" need to take precautions to limit their exposure to sexual temptation. Being alone for hours and hours is asking for trouble. So, Fran and Barry are going to limit that time, and spend time with the children as well as other people.

It would be easy for Fran to think "Barry is God's answer to my prayers for a husband and a father for my children." But she has known him a very short time, and there is much they need to know about each other before any kind of plans are considered. Just because they are both Christians doesn't mean they are well-suited. Certainly that is the primary consideration in choosing a partner, but there are many other considerations they both must think about.

Barry needs to clearly think through taking on a ready-made family, and Fran has to assess the impact this will have on her children. Family blending is not easy. I don't care how much "in love" a couple may be. So, they truly need to slow down and purposely take their time in allowing the relationship to develop.

When your heart starts to skip a beat or two remember to guard your heart carefully, because once you lose control, it is a slippery slope to disaster.

Chapter 10

Trouble with Barry

Yes, indeed, there is a new man in Fran's life, and she has been amazed at how comfortable it is to be with Barry and how well he gets along with her kids. Jesus has warned Fran to take this relationship slowly and not allow it to get out of control. There are many bridges yet to be crossed, many unanswered questions, many pitfalls to be avoided. So, Fran and Barry have agreed to limit their time together so Fran doesn't neglect her children in any way. And they have agreed to limit their time alone to avoid temptation.

But for the past few weeks Fran's feet have hardly hit the ground. She is definitely "in love" and Barry, too. She can't find anything about him she doesn't like; it seems like a perfect fit.

This evening her good friend, Lynn, who lives close by, has stopped in and eventually the conversation gets around to Barry. "He's just a really special man, Lynn," Fran says. "I want you and Chuck to meet him; maybe you could come over for dinner here soon."

"Sounds lovely, Fran," Lynn agrees, "but tell me, how long have you known him?"

"He's been working at the office about two months now, and we've been going together—well, almost two months," Fran answers.

"That's not a very long time," Lynn quietly adds.

"No, but we communicate so well. I don't know, I feel like I've always known him," Fran says.

"I'm happy for you, Fran," Lynn says, "but I just want to put a small bug in your ear. Remember my sister, Donna? Before she married Al, she thought he was just right for her. He was a Christian and everything, but as I've told you, their marriage has been very rough. In fact, he's talking about a divorce now. I could see it coming; they have very little in common, and they married so quickly. They thought because they were in love they could make it work. So, just be careful, that's all."

Fran is taken back by Lynn's warning. "We are," she assures her. "We're not talking about marriage yet."

"Oh, I know," Lynn says, "and I'm not trying to rain on your parade, believe me, Fran. But since you feel as strongly about Barry as you do, and I presume it's the same on his part, both of you must be thinking about where the relationship is headed."

"I've thought about it," Fran admits with a grin, "but we've never discussed it."

"Remember, you've got all the time in the world," Lynn says. "And Barry's the first man you've dated since Jim died. Even more reason to be cautious. I was just reading Proverbs 4 today,

and there's a verse in there that caught my eye, something about *guard your heart carefully for it is the...*"

Fran interrupts Lynn, "It is the *wellspring of life*. I know the verse."

"I'm sure you know what you're doing, Fran." Lynn smiles as she gets up to leave. "And we'd love to meet Barry; just set a date, and we'll be here."

After Lynn leaves, Fran finds herself getting angry at her. "She hasn't even met Barry, and she's already picking him apart. Doesn't anybody want me to be happy again?" Fran thinks.

"*Having a pity party, are we?*" Jesus says to her, catching her off-guard. As much as Fran has grown in her relationship with the Lord over these past few years, she is still often startled to be reminded again that he is always there, always knows what's happening, and always cares. But there are times Fran wishes to be by herself—those times when she's not proud of how she's thinking or behaving.

"Pity party? No, just a little irritated, that's all," Fran says defensively.

"*Well, Lynn simply told you the truth, and she said it kindly. You know she loves you,*" Jesus says. "*Sometimes the truth hurts, doesn't it?*"

"What truth? You mean about Donna and Al? That's the truth, but Barry and I aren't like them," Fran says.

"*Maybe not, but shouldn't you be willing to listen to advice from a trusted friend?*" Jesus asks. "*It could save you a lot of heartache.*"

Fran feels like her bubble has been busted. She starts to dial Barry's number to talk to him.

"*Why not talk to me first?*" Jesus asks.

She puts the phone down—well, it was probably closer to slamming the phone down—and folds her arms in frustration. Everything in her wants to talk to Barry right now, to hear his comforting voice, to be reassured about their relationship. She picks up the phone again.

"*Don't you trust me, Fran?*" Jesus asks quietly.

It's a question he asks her often, and she's been amazed to discover how often she wants to be in control instead of trusting Jesus. But she's made some progress in learning how totally trustworthy he is, and in learning to ignore her emotions at times because they are not always reliable. This is one of those times.

"Yes, Lord, I trust you," and she put the phone down. "Sometimes it just feels like in order to trust you I have to abandon all my dreams and all my desires and be a..."

"*A martyr; is that what you're thinking, Fran?*" Jesus replies. "*I understand your feelings. Giving up control is never easy; but hopefully you truly believe the plans I have for you are*

good, not evil, and I only want what is best. Love and marriage, after all, are my inventions, so I'm not trying to deny you that happiness. But you need to learn to take it slowly."

"Take it slowly. I guess that's the lesson for today," Fran says. "Okay, Lord, but you'll have to help me. I'm not the type to take it slowly. You know me; I tend to move very quickly."

The next morning she heads into work as always, but it's more exciting than it used to be because Barry works in her office. She usually sees him once or twice during the day, and it's fun to have him close by. The day goes fast with lots of work to do, and she realizes she hasn't seen Barry all day. Just as she is getting ready to leave, he pops into her office. "Hi, haven't seen you all day," he says.

A smile breaks out on Fran's face. "And my day is a lot brighter now that I see you," she replies.

"Me, too," Barry says. "Listen, I need to talk to you. You know, we had planned to be together this weekend, but I think I may have to cancel. My friend is coming in town, and I guess I'll be pretty tied up. Sorry, I just found out."

Fran senses the uneasiness in Barry's voice. "Your friend?" she slowly responds. "Where does he live?"

"Down in Texas where I used to live; we're just old friends. You know how old friends are," he responds, but again he seems so nervous to Fran.

"Would you like to bring him over for dinner some night? I'd love to meet him," Fran suggests.

"Naw, I don't think that'd be a good idea," Barry says. "Thanks anyway. We'll probably do some sightseeing—you know stuff like that."

"Is something wrong, Barry?" Fran asks.

"No, nothing. I just hate to miss being with you," he says, and that wide grin of his gets to her again.

"I'll miss you, too, but it's just a weekend," Fran says, trying to sound brave.

"Tell the kids I'm sorry," Barry says. "I know Drew was counting on some batting practice Friday night, but I'll make it up to him soon."

"Okay," Fran doesn't know how to respond. "And if you change your mind about coming over, just let me know."

Leaving work that day, Fran feels more than disappointed; she has a queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach that Barry didn't tell her the whole truth. Something's wrong.

When she tells Drew and Alice about the change in plans for the weekend, Drew is very upset. "But he promised me, Mom," Drew says. "Why can't he bring his friend over? The three of us could play ball."

"Listen, Drew," Fran says, "Barry is not obligated to be with us. He's just a good friend, and if he can't come over, that's just the way it is."

Fran tries to sound nonchalant about the whole thing, but she realizes just how much Drew has become attached to Barry already. It's been wonderful for him to have a male presence in his life, and Fran is hurt to see how disappointed he is.

That night she waits and waits for Barry to call, as he usually does, but no call. Finally she calls Lynn and tells her what happened. "What do you think, Lynn?" Fran asks.

"I have no idea. Didn't he tell you anything about this friend? What's his friend's name?" she asks.

"I have no idea. He told me nothing about him, and I didn't feel comfortable asking. He really didn't want to talk about it," Fran says.

"If I were in your shoes, I'd want to know more," Lynn says. "You and he are close enough; I think he owes you more information."

As she goes to bed that night, Fran prays, "Lord, I need wisdom. Why do I have this knot in my stomach? Please help me know what to do." The tears begin to flow and pretty soon her pillow is wet. Is something going wrong with this wonderful relationship? The thought breaks her heart.

Now it's Friday morning, and as Fran gets ready for work, she can't think about anything else. Why did Barry act so suspiciously yesterday when she questioned him about this friend? Her son Drew says, "I still don't get it. Why can't Barry bring his friend over tonight? I already told Ryan he could come play pitch with us. This ain't right."

"And he promised me we'd go for ice cream," Alice chimes in.

"Now listen you two," Fran replies, "I don't need to hear this all weekend. He's not going to be here so deal with it."

They continue grumbling as she gets them in the car and takes them to school. She tries to be brave with the kids and not let them see her own disappointment, but as she drives away from school, her own emotions surface, and the tears trickle down her cheeks. "I just don't understand, Lord," she says out loud.

"I know you don't, Fran," Jesus replies, "but you must be patient and wait on me."

"I'm not good at waiting," she answers.

"No, I know it, but when you're in the waiting room, you tend to look up," Jesus says to her. "And remember, I'm always there with you. I will never leave you or forsake you, Fran."

"Thanks, Lord," she says as the tears start to flow. "I'm so glad to know nothing can ever come between you and me. I guess you're the only One I can totally depend upon." And with some more encouraging words from Jesus, Fran pulls into the parking lot and heads into her office.

At work Fran looks for Barry, but he is not to be found. His assistant says, "Oh, he just called and said he was in a client's office and might not be in for the afternoon." That sounded strange to Fran—not like Barry.

He was so good about staying in touch—just brief messages throughout the day to let her know he was thinking about her but not this day.

It was a long day, and Fran was glad to see it end. She headed home with the kids after work and spent some time playing their favorite games with them. Drew started to grumble again about Barry not being there, but Fran cut him off. She didn't want to hear Drew expressing what she felt!

All through the evening she had one ear on the telephone, thinking for sure Barry would call since they had not seen each other all day. But he did not call Friday night or Saturday. She tried to keep her spirits up, but frankly, she felt depressed.

Sunday morning she looked for Barry at church. Much to her astonishment, he was a no-show at church, too. Sunday night, after putting the kids in bed, she sits quietly listening to some praise music, trying to keep her mind focused on the Lord and not Barry. The phone rings; her heart stops. But it's not Barry.

"Hi," Louise says. It's her good friend from work. They chat a few minutes, but Fran can tell Louise has something on her mind.

"What's up, Louise?" Fran asks.

"I'm not sure I should tell you this, but I know if I were in your shoes."

"Tell me what, Louise?" Fran urges her.

"I went out for lunch with some friends after church today, and I saw Barry," she pauses. "He was having lunch with someone."

"I know; his friend from Texas," Fran says.

"Oh, so you know about her?" Louise says, sounding relieved.

"Her?" Fran's voice breaks. "Did you say her?"

"Oh, no don't tell me! Didn't you know it was a woman?" Louise asks.

"No, Barry said it was a man...come to think of it, he just said it was a friend, and he was very evasive," Fran says.

"Well, it was a woman, but it could have just been a friendship, Fran. I wouldn't jump to conclusions," Louise tries to encourage her.

"Right! Did he see you?" Fran asks.

"I don't think so. We were on the opposite side of the restaurant, and it was crowded," Louise adds. "Funny thing, it looked like she was crying."

"What is this all about?" Fran asks, as she tries to get hold of herself. "What did she look like?"

"About our age, I'd say. I couldn't get a close look but she looked petite, blonde, and wore a nice suit," Louise tries to describe her. "She looked nice."

"I guess that explains why I haven't heard from Barry all weekend," Fran says, and she realizes she is losing control. "Excuse me, Louise, but I need to go."

"Sure, I understand," Louise says. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you."

"No, you did the right thing," Fran assures her. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Fran gets very little sleep this Sunday night, crying, imagining, wondering what Barry is up to. She goes back over every word he said to her, everything that's happened since Thursday and realizes that Barry has been deceptive with her. There is something going on with this relationship with this petite, pretty blonde, and Fran bounces from anger to hurt to confusion most of the night.

Should she confront him? Should she act like she doesn't care? Should she never see him again? The next morning, she gets up early and spends extra time with the Lord.

The verse which has run through her mind all night keeps coming back: Matthew 6:33 *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* Jesus says to her, *"It's very easy when you're 'in love' to lose your sense of priorities."*

Confessing to Jesus that Barry has become too important to her, she promises not to let anyone take over the throne of her heart. In her confusion and hurt, she can feel his healing balm and comfort. Once again she is reminded that her best friend is Jesus, and he is the only One who is totally dependable.

She feels very nervous at work that day, wanting to see Barry and dreading it at the same time. Around mid-day he unexpectedly drops into her office and catches her offguard. "Hi, Fran. It's good to see you. I missed you this weekend."

She glares at him, and decides she's too angry to say anything. He says, "Could we have dinner tonight? I need to talk to you."

Fran decides it will be best to get it all out on the table, for better or for worse, so she accepts his invitation, and they meet for an early dinner. Barry begins, slowly without looking Fran in the eyes.

"I owe you an apology," he says. "I didn't tell you the whole truth. My friend—the one in town this weekend—it was a woman I dated for a few years. I didn't invite her; she just called and said she was coming, and I didn't know what to do."

They talked for a while, and Barry explains one of the reasons he wanted to move was to get away from this relationship. He did not want to make a commitment to her, and she assumed he would.

"Have you told her how you feel?" Fran asked.

"I've tried, but..." Barry stumbles.

"But you've led her on?" Fran puts it to him.

"That's what she says, but I didn't mean to," he sheepishly replies.

"So, how did you leave it with her?" Fran probes.

"She was so upset that I didn't want to upset her anymore. So, last night I wrote her a letter, and I'm mailing it today, telling her about us." Barry explains.

"You mean, she doesn't know you're dating me?" Fran is incredulous.

"She was so upset." Barry tries again to explain.

"I get the picture, Barry. And you know what, before I say things I'll regret saying, I'm just going to leave. See you at the office." And with that Fran walks out of the restaurant, leaving Barry with his head hung low.

As she arrives home with the kids, she tries not to let them see the tears in her eyes. As quickly as she can, she puts them to bed. Then she sits down with some quiet music on, and all the emotion that has been flooding her mind pours out in sobs. "He lied to me; he's not the man I thought he was," she weeps. "Dear Jesus, how could I have been so foolish?"

The phone rings, but Fran lets the answering machine catch it. She hears Barry leaving a message: "Fran, I know you're there, but I don't blame you for not answering. I should have told you about Marylou. But believe me; I'm breaking off that relationship. I hope you'll give me another chance. What I feel for you is real; I have not deceived you about that, Fran. You know you can call me anytime day or night. Again, I ask for your forgiveness."

As the phone message concludes, Fran sits in stunned silence.

What is the truth about this man? He said he dated Marylou for several years. Why didn't he make a commitment to her or do the honest thing and break off the relationship? Fran has heard many stories about single men who lead women on; is that the kind of man Barry is?

"Lord, what do I do?" she asks out loud.

"Slow down, give it time, but be willing to give Barry a break," Jesus says. "Real love, Fran, is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs. It always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres." Jesus reminds her of the true meaning of love as found in 1 Corinthians 13.

"I thought I really loved him," Fran begins.

"Whether Barry is your 'love' or not, you should love him with my kind of love—the patient, longsuffering kind," Jesus says. "Even if he didn't handle things well, it doesn't mean he has to be discarded. Everyone falls short of the glory of God, Fran."

"Okay, Lord, I'll try to be patient with him, but you can be sure of one thing. I'm backing off and cooling it down," Fran decides.

"Sounds like a good idea," Jesus responds.

Closing

Well, what do you think? Should she give Barry another chance? Is he afraid of a commitment? Will she get hurt like Marylou? We'll just have to wait and see. How good to know in the midst of these relationship upheavals, Jesus is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

And the same is true for you, if you're experiencing the breakup of a close relationship, or if you're going through some rocky times, Jesus is still there; he can comfort and heal you, and he will give you the wisdom you need for right decisions.

Stay in his Word; spend time in prayer. Use that relationship struggle as an opportunity to improve your relationship with Jesus. That way, you can't lose.

Chapter 11

Breaking Up with Barry

Fran has just come through the Christmas season, and January was recovery mode, just trying to get life back to normal after all the holiday activities. But in the last couple of weeks, Fran has been doing a lot of serious thinking—thinking back over the past year and looking forward to the year ahead.

On this Monday morning, as she is getting ready to go to the office, she is feeling a bit melancholy. She thinks, “Just seems like my life is a continuing cycle, a roller-coaster ride, and I can’t get off!”

“Got the new year’s blues?” Jesus asks in his quiet way. Since he never leaves her, his presence is always there to help her think clearly and see things the way he sees them.

“The new year’s blues?” Fran says. “I don’t know; I guess you might call it that. But I think, quite honestly, Lord, it’s more like the Barry blues.”

“You’re disappointed in him, aren’t you?” Jesus comments.

“Honestly, I thought I’d get a proposal and a ring this Christmas. After all, we’ve been dating for over a year. He says he loves me, and you know he spends a lot of time with me. I just think it’s time he made a commitment. I mean, how long can we go on dating like this without a commitment?”

“Good question,” Jesus responds. “This is a topic you need to dig into, Fran. It’s time you asked some of these questions.”

Jesus’ response catches Fran by surprise. After all, Barry is a Christian and a good one. “Lord,” she says, “don’t you think Barry would make a good husband and a good father for the kids? I mean, I just assumed you were pleased with our relationship.”

No answer seems to come. The room is silent. Sometimes Jesus is that way, Fran has learned. He doesn’t always give her a clear explanation but instead challenges her to think deeper and learn more about him and about herself through some personal introspection. Seems like this is one of those times.

She gets ready for work, takes the kids to school and heads into her office, but she has that queasy feeling in her stomach. What did Jesus mean by what he said about Barry?

Today, as so often is true, she has lunch with her friend, Louise. Louise is someone Fran can be totally open with so she says, “Louise, I have to tell you I’m really bothered about my

relationship with Barry. You know how attentive he is to me, how he says he loves me, and I don't think there is any other woman in his mind or heart. Yet, even after dating for over a year now, he hasn't popped the question. What do you think is keeping him from making a commitment?"

"Fran," Louise says, "you know how men hate to make commitments. That's what all my single women friends tell me all the time. It's just a man thing, I guess."

"But I can't buy that, Louise," Fran says. "There are plenty of men who are willing to make commitments. Why not Barry?"

"Well, don't get mad at me for saying this, but maybe you make it too easy for him, Fran," Louise responds. "He knows you're here waiting for him, so what's the rush?"

"Do you really think that's it, Louise?" Fran asks. "I'm not into playing games, so if that's the way he's thinking, he's not the man for me."

"Have you talked with *him* about it, Fran?" Louise asks.

"Tell me, what am I supposed to say?" Fran says. "'Hey, Barry, why didn't you give me a ring for Christmas?' I don't think so."

"No, but you ought to be able to talk about where this relationship is heading," Louise says.

"I keep waiting for him to bring up the subject. Seems like he ought to make the first move, don't you think?" Fran asks.

"I guess you're right, but you know what, Fran," Louise continues, "I'm about convinced that this whole dating thing is a crazy way to try to find a mate."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Fran asks, greatly puzzled by her comment.

"Just think about dating. We pair off with some man or woman whom we find attractive, spend lots of alone time together, expose ourselves to all kinds of temptations, often allow ourselves to become too involved and intimate with that person long before we have the vaguest notion whether this is a person we might think of marrying. Then when the relationship goes sour, we're left with a broken heart and all kinds of painful memories that we drag into our next relationship," Louise explains.

"You're not kidding about this, are you?" Fran asks, astonished.

"Well, I've been reading a new book on dating, and I'm about convinced it's a pretty lousy idea."

"I don't get what you mean," Fran says. "How can two people get to know each other if they don't date?"

“That’s a long discussion. Want to have dinner together tonight?” Louise asks.

So Louise and Fran make plans to get together later for an in-depth discussion of the pros and cons of dating. All afternoon Fran finds her mind drifting to what Louise said about dating. She had never thought of it before, but the more she thinks about it, the more she’s inclined to agree that dating can be difficult, painful, and cause more harm than good.

Louise comes over and spends some time with Drew and Alice. They’ve grown to love her, and she thoroughly enjoys them. Finally, Fran insists they have to go to bed, and so with a quiet house, she and Louise sit down with a cup of tea for a long talk.

“So, back to what we were talking about at lunch,” Fran says to Louise, “I’ve been thinking about this custom of dating. It does seem a little awkward.”

Louise agrees. “And it can just set you up for pain because you go into it without any agreement as to its purpose, its boundaries, and so forth. When I think of all the men I’ve dated, I realize my life could have been much simpler had I been much more selective. Had I seen dating from a different perspective.”

Fran and Louise are both thinking about the short but painful affair Louise had with Ben at the office. “I could have avoided that whole mess with Ben had I been willing to rethink this whole issue of dating,” Louise says quietly.

“Look at me and Barry” Fran says. “I guess I’ve just assumed that because Barry dated me and only me, and because he says he loves me, he was working up to asking me to marry him. But obviously he’s not exactly there. Was that such a crazy assumption on my part? Am I just a marriage-crazed woman?”

“No, of course not,” Louise says, “but the problem is you and Barry haven’t talked about where you want this relationship to go. Lots of people date just to have someone to be with, and others date for intimacy and sex. I mean, there’s all kinds of reasons people date these days; it doesn’t necessarily mean a commitment will follow.”

“But we’re not sexually intimate,” Fran responds.

“I know that, Fran,” she says, “but you are close, and I’m sure Barry enjoys your company. You do lots of nice things for him, right?”

“Well, yeah, I love him,” Fran says.

“Right, but you haven’t yet talked about the future of your relationship, not in so many terms,” Louise remarks.

“He’s hinted about our future,” Fran says, “but no, we’ve never explicitly talked about it.”

"This book I've been reading," Louise says, "it says dating can be disastrous simply because no kind of commitment is required. Yet the closeness and intimacy of dating can lead to all kinds of heartbreak and baggage. It recommends that as Christians, a better idea is courting."

"Courting? What's the difference in dating and courting?" Fran asks.

"Courting is what two people do when they have decided there is some future potential of marriage in their relationship. Then they begin a courting relationship, with well-established boundaries and accountability, and they begin to spend time together to discover if indeed this is a match made in heaven," Louise explains.

"So, you're saying, if Barry is not ready to marry me, I shouldn't be dating him?" Fran asks.

"Something like that, I guess," Louise replies.

"That's heavy!" Fran says. "So, you think I should talk with Barry and ask him where he is in this commitment process, and if he's not willing to talk about it seriously and at least start down the path toward a commitment of marriage, I should stop dating him? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Obviously that is your decision, but it's just something to consider," Louise replies.

"Maybe you're right. I can see that if Barry and I break up without getting married, I'm going to have to go through quite a lot of pain. That's what I've been dreading."

"Right," Louise says, "so you keep dating to avoid the pain, but if the relationship truly has no future, then the pain will be worse when you finally do break up. And meanwhile you're not open to any other possibilities God might have for you, because you're committed to this dating relationship which is not going to lead anywhere."

"I need to talk to Barry," Fran says.

Fran stays up late thinking about everything she and Louise talked about. Finally she makes a decision about her relationship with Barry. The next morning, even though she hasn't had much sleep, Fran is still convinced she needs to talk to Barry and to end their dating relationship until and unless it truly becomes a relationship with a future going in the right direction.

At work she does something she rarely does - picks up the phone and calls Barry to see if he's available for dinner. "Wow, Fran," Barry says, "either you've got a surprise, or I'm in trouble. You want to take me out to dinner?" From the tone of his voice and his laugh, Fran can tell he is not really suspicious of any problems.

"If you're too busy, we can schedule it some other time..." she begins but Barry interrupts her.

"No way," he says, "I'll be delighted to go out with you tonight. There's nobody else I'd rather be with." So they make plans to meet at 7:00.

As Fran hangs up the phone, her heart is beating fast. She loves Barry's attention; he always says nice things to her and makes her feel so special. Surely he plans to marry her someday, she thinks.

"But you really don't know, do you, Fran?" Jesus says in his quiet way.

"No, Lord, I don't know, and frankly I don't think Barry knows either," Fran replies. "So, I need to break off this close dating relationship. I know I need to do that. But I'm afraid I'll come off like the anxious single woman, trying to trap him into proposing to me, Lord. I don't want to do that. I need your help to know how to approach this subject with him. How do I begin?"

"I'm glad you asked for wisdom," Jesus replies, *"because I have lots of wisdom, and I love to freely give it to you. You're right to consider your words in advance. Put yourself in Barry's shoes, as much as you can, and think what words you could say that he could both understand and accept without becoming defensive or feeling pressured. Why don't you write it out so you'll be prepared."*

"You mean read him a speech?" Fran asks, puzzled.

"No, write it out just for preparation purposes. Remember what Solomon wrote: Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:28). So, you can avoid those reckless words by thinking and praying ahead of time of how you're going to approach Barry."

Sure seems like a good idea to Fran, so during lunch she puts her thoughts on paper. And Jesus is right, as always. After some editing and prayer, she feels she has chosen her words carefully, and she will be less nervous and more careful in her talk with Barry tonight.

Her mom comes over to stay with the kids, and she and Barry get together for dinner that night. As they are finishing up dessert, Barry says, "You seem very—I don't know—strange tonight. Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, but I need to talk with you, and I guess I'm a little scared," Fran admits.

"You're afraid to talk with me?" Barry seems surprised. "What in the world would cause you to be afraid—unless there's someone else in your life." Barry suddenly seems to realize it's something about their relationship.

Fran laughs, "No, when would I ever have time to meet anyone else? We're together most of the time."

"I'm glad to hear that," Barry says. "So, what is it?"

"After some careful thought and prayer, I've decided dating as we are is probably not a great idea. Don't get me wrong. I love being with you, and I've become very attached to you. I think you know that. But to spend so much time together without a clear understanding about where we want our relationship to go, I believe it could lead to heartache for both of us."

"Are you trying to tell me it's time to fish or cut bait, Fran?" Barry asks, with suspicion in his voice.

"I've prayed so hard that you wouldn't hear it that way," Fran says. "Please believe me, that's not the purpose of this talk. I've just become convinced that dating like we are is replete with dangers until we are both ready to make some kind of commitment. I sense you're not there yet, and I'm not sure I am either. So, what I'm trying to say is I want to be your friend, but I think we should suspend our dating relationship, at least for the time being."

Barry says, "You know I love you, and someday I'm hoping that maybe we'll get married. I just don't understand why you have to break up."

"This a much broader decision. It's a paradigm shift, if you please. I just believe I'm asking for heartache and pain by dating someone—you or anyone else—as closely as we have dated over the past 15 or so months without a clearly defined and understood objective of marriage. It is a recipe for disaster, and I want to avoid it."

"I don't want to do you any harm, Fran," Barry says.

"I know that, and I have great love and respect for you," Fran tries to explain. "But we're not ready to talk about marriage and therefore dating like we are just doesn't make sense. I think when you've had a chance to give this some thought, you'll see what I mean."

They talk a little longer, and then Fran goes home. She doesn't like the pit in her stomach, but she still believes she has done the right thing. "It's going to be lonely, Lord," she says to Jesus.

"I'll be with you always, Fran," he reminds her.

"I know," she says, "and I will depend on you. It's just that, after losing Jim, it hurts to lose Barry. I've had enough loss, to tell you the truth."

"I understand your feelings," Jesus says, *"but remember they are just feelings. Don't put too much stock in them. They come and go. You did the wise thing tonight, and I will honor you for that choice. Believe me, I have good plans for you, plans to give you a hope and a future. You can trust me."*

"I know, Lord," Fran says, "I know I can trust you."

Closing

There you have it. Fran and Barry are no longer dating. You know, most everything in our walk with the Lord comes down to this one question: "Do you trust God?" If we really believe he has good plans for us, then we can truly entrust our futures to him without worry.

If you are single, I want to encourage you to give this some very serious thought. Think of your own history. How many broken relationships are there? How have they affected your future relationships? Did you find yourself caught up in a close relationship before there was any understanding of where it was headed?

A marriage decision is second in importance only to our decision to accept Jesus as our Savior and become a Christian. Yet, it is often made via the avenue of the dating customs of our society, and those can be dangerous.

If you are single and hoping to be married, I encourage you to limit your relationships and set strong boundaries so you're not setting yourself up for heartache and disappointment. And so you don't have a lot of baggage to carry into that marriage, when he or she comes along.

Chapter 12

Dealing with Jealousy

On this Sunday morning, after dropping off her children in children's church, Fran walks into the sanctuary looking for her friend Louise. As she stands in the back, who should walk in but Barry. And he's not alone. With him is another woman; well, actually she looks more like a young girl. Tell the truth, she looks like a model! She's gorgeous.

Fran's heart stops beating. Barry had been attending another church after they broke up. Why has he shown up here today? And did he have to bring a date? As they walk past her, Barry turns to say hello, as though he's surprised to see her. Fran is certain he has paraded in front of her to make her jealous. What a way to begin a worship service!

After nodding a quick hello, Fran manages to find her friend Louise and sit down for the service. She can feel the blood rushing to her face, and she's fighting with everything in her to keep the tears from flooding her eyes.

Louise senses something is wrong and whispers, "You okay? You look a little red."

Defensively, Fran replies, "Of course I'm okay!" And of course Louise knows right away that she isn't.

Then Louise sees Barry and puts two and two together. She reaches over and touches Fran's hand to let her know she understands and prays silently that God will give her peace.

Throughout the service, Fran is a nervous wreck. She tries her best to sit still and concentrate on the sermon, but her eyes keep turning toward Barry and his friend. He sat near enough so they were in her line of vision, and again she's certain it's all a plan on Barry's part to make her jealous. What a miserable morning.

As she and Louise walk out, Louise says, "Want to get a pizza?"

"Thanks, but we're supposed to go to Mom's for lunch. I'd rather just go home and be by myself, but it's too late to back out; mom would be hurt," Fran replies. She looks at Louise, and the tears won't hold back any longer.

"I saw him," Louise says. "I know what you're feeling."

They find a quiet corner to talk. "Why did he have to come here with this gorgeous date? He doesn't attend our church any longer. He was just trying to make me jealous," Fran says.

"Maybe, but that young woman does go to church here. I think her name is Megan. I've seen her several times in the singles class," Louise advises her.

"He could have been more considerate of me," Fran says. "And how did he meet her anyway? Does he come to our singles functions?"

Fran has not been involved in the singles ministry as Louise has, so she doesn't know what's happening there. "He came to our retreat this Fall. I saw him there, and I think that's probably where they met."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Fran asks, obviously hurt. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Warn you about what? It's not my job to keep up with Barry for you. And did you think he would never date another woman?" Louise asks. "It's been over a year, and remember, you are the one who broke off the relationship."

It hurts Fran to hear it, but she has to acknowledge the truth of what Louise is saying and nods her head. Louise puts her arm around her. "I know," Louise says, "it still hurts. I know."

Somehow Fran manages to collect the kids and get them in the car, but all she can think about is Barry and that beautiful young woman he had with him. "Men," she thinks, "they always go for the lookers; that's all that matters to them." She is so wrapped up in her own jealous thoughts that she doesn't even follow the conversation at the dinner table.

After eating, as she is helping clear the table, her mom says, "You're very quiet today. Something wrong?" Somehow moms always know!

"Nothing really," Fran tries to sound casual. "I'm just tired, I guess."

But her mom keeps probing. "Did something happen to upset you? Something with one of the kids? I sense you're upset, hon. What is it?"

"No, mom, the kids are fine," Fran says, "but I just had an unpleasant experience at church today. It's nothing really."

"Must be something," her mother says. "What was it?"

"It was Barry. He paraded into church this morning with another woman, just to make me jealous, I'm sure."

"Guess he succeeded," her mom comments.

"Why should I be jealous?" Fran answers angrily. "After all, I broke up with him."

"Well," her mom continues, "did you think he wasn't going to date anyone again? And you do live in the same town, work at the same place, and go to the same church."

"No, he's been going to another church, so you see what I mean. He came to our church today just trying to make me miserable," Fran's rage continues.

"And he succeeded," her mom says again.

This makes Fran even angrier, even though she knows her mom is telling the truth. "Wouldn't you be angry?" she asks. "He picked the prettiest woman in the church to date and sat near me just to make sure I noticed."

"Fran, you can't be sure of that," her mom says. "Barry has a right to date anyone he wishes to and sit in church wherever he wants. I just don't believe Barry would try to hurt you intentionally. He might not have been the guy for you, but he's not that kind of a man." Her mother defends Barry.

"You just don't understand," Fran comes back with the standard retort when you know you're wrong but won't admit it.

"Yes, I do," her mom says. "I remember what it's like to be jealous. Your dad and I broke up once for about three months because I saw him talking to a pretty girl at our church. Made me so mad. I accused him of all kinds of things and told him I never wanted to see him again," her mom recalls it with a smile.

"You did?" Fran is surprised. "You were really jealous?"

"Oh, hon, jealousy is a common emotion. Most of us experience it many times in our lives," her mom replies. "What was that verse in Proverbs I was reading this week about jealousy?" She quickly finds her Bible and turns to it. "Here it is: Proverbs 27:4: *Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?* I guess what Solomon was telling us is jealousy is a very strong emotion that can bowl you over pretty quickly. Yes, I remember what it's like to be jealous."

"I really don't think it's jealousy on my part so much as just being taken by surprise," Fran defends herself. "I'll be fine; I just need some rest."

So, she hastily finishes the kitchen work and starts to leave quickly. The kids, however, don't want to go home yet. They love spending time at Grandma's and Papa's house, and they beg to stay.

"Why don't you let the kids stay a little longer," her mom suggests. "We can bring them home later." Fran realizes that her mom is trying to help, and that is indeed helpful. She's in no mood to fuss with the kids.

Commentary

If you've ever had a fit of jealousy, you know how Fran feels. Jealousy is a consuming emotion. Paul wrote to the Romans that they should: *...behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy* (Romans 13:13). He puts jealousy in the same list with some pretty horrible things.

A person who does not learn to control her jealousy will find herself in some pretty horrible situations. First of all, it is one of the most miserable feelings in the world. Makes you feel awful. Secondly, it will lead you to say and do things that are childish, tacky, stupid, and irrational; in other words, it will cause you to make a fool out of yourself. And third, it indicates an area where God's Spirit is not in control of your life. In Galatians 5 Paul lists jealousy as an evidence of the sinful nature.

Any jealousy in your heart? You need to get it out in the open and deal with it before it takes you down the wrong road.

Part 2

In Romans 13 we read: *Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh* (Romans 13:13-14).

I can understand why the Apostle Paul lists drunkenness, sexual immorality, and debauchery, but how can he put jealousy in that same list? Jealousy is a common emotion, and we've all struggled with it, haven't we? Paul warns us against it because he knows how much damage is done when jealousy runs amuck.

Fran wakes up on this Monday morning feeling physically sick, and the first thing she thinks about is Barry and that woman. In her mind she blames him for feeling sick. She thinks about them together, alone, having dinner, laughing, enjoying each other—who knows what else they were doing. Her mind goes wild with imaginations, and she starts her day in a worse state than she finished in last night.

She skipped her time with the Lord this morning. She's in no mood for that today. Hurriedly, she gets the kids off to school and heads to work with a horrible attitude. As her day begins, Louise stops by. Louise is her good friend who was with her in church yesterday and realized how hurt Fran was when she saw Barry with his date. "You feeling better today?" she asks.

"Of course," Fran tries to be convincing. "I'm fine. After all, what Barry does is no business of mine."

Louise senses the hostility. "You better deal with this jealousy quickly. It can consume you."

Louise's comment makes Fran angry. "I can handle it. Don't worry about me."

"Nobody can handle jealousy on their own. Don't let it ruin your day. It's not worth it. Barry's not worth it," Louise tries to give her some good advice.

"Please, I'm not jealous of Barry. He can do what he pleases; it's none of my business," Fran says, but the tone of her voice gives her away. She is jealous. She knows it, and Louise knows it. But right now she doesn't have ears to hear Louise's good advice.

As the day progresses, Fran's attitude becomes worse and everybody irritates her. She manages to bite off a few heads with hasty words and unkind reactions. She even speaks harshly to her manager. Anyone who knows Fran knows something is eating her up inside. You see, you can't hide jealousy. It pops up all over like the measles. And it's uglier than the measles.

Jealousy is listed in Galatians 5:19-21 as one of the evidences of our evil nature. So, when you're in the grips of jealousy, you're allowing sin to have control in your life. You can't hide it; it shows

She goes home Monday evening in a foul mood and takes her frustrations out on her kids. "Why haven't you finished your homework, Drew?" she raises her voice to him. "It's almost 9:00. You should be in bed, and you're still dilly-dallying here with homework."

"I told you I don't know how to do it," Drew answers pitifully.

"It'll just have to wait, Drew; it's too late to do anything now," she says.

"But it's due tomorrow," he reminds her.

Angrily, she gets involved with Drew's homework assignment and helps him finish it. "Now, don't let that happen again, you hear me, young man?" Again her voice is full of frustration and anger as she puts him to bed, and she can see the hurt in his eyes.

Immediately, guilt sets in because in her heart she knows she is wrong. But she's not ready to give in yet. You see, jealousy is such a strong emotion it can bowl over and swallow you up and cause you to do all kinds of things that are wrong. And usually the innocent people in your life suffer most when you're consumed with jealousy.

For the next three days, Fran barely manages to hold it together at home and work. She lets an important ball drop for one of her clients and has to work late Wednesday night to correct her mistake. She speaks in curt tones and words to everyone and isolates herself as much as possible. On Wednesday she sees Barry at a sales meeting, where he gives her a pleasant hello, and she interprets it to be a spiteful reminder of his date with that gorgeous woman.

You see, jealousy unchecked causes you to imagine all kinds of untrue things, to be self-absorbed, to have a lot of pity parties, and in general to be a miserable person. No wonder Solomon wrote in Proverbs 27:4: *Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?* It's a stronger, more uncontrollable emotion than anger or fury.

It's now Thursday evening, and after putting the children to bed, Fran feels restless and begins to pace, talking to herself. "Why did he do that to me? Why is he trying to ruin my life? Why me?" She starts the same line of out-of-control thinking and shifting of blame.

This pity party continues for quite a while, until suddenly, like a flash of light, she hears herself. As though someone has pulled back the blinders on her eyes, she sees how utterly sinful her behavior is. She sees herself and abhors what she sees.

Within a few minutes she is on her knees by the sofa. "Lord, I'm sorry," she sobs. Those are the only words she can utter, but in her heart she is going over the last five days, asking forgiveness for all the things she did and said that were unkind, ungracious, unloving. She is truly sorry for her behavior; it breaks her heart to think of how she has grieved the Lord.

"Can you please forgive me, Lord? I'm so sorry," she says again. Finally she gets her Bible and looks up all the references to jealousy she can find. It shows her what a powerful emotion it is and how quickly it robs you of good sense. She realizes how wrong she was to blame Barry for her jealousy. It's so clear to her now.

"Thank you, Holy Spirit, for revealing truth to me," she says, as the peace that passes understanding begins to flood her heart once again. She wonders what caused her to finally come to her senses when the phone rings. It's her mom, calling to tell her she's been praying for her all week.

Fran says, "God has answered your prayers. I've had a miserable week and made a lot of other people miserable, too. But I see how foolish and sinful I've been. You were right on Sunday. Jealousy is a terrible thing. But I've finally gotten things settled with the Lord."

"I knew you would, hon," her mom says. "I'm glad it was sooner rather than later."

Then Fran calls Louise. "Louise, I want to apologize for the way I've behaved toward you this week. I've been so jealous, and I just hate the way I've acted. I hope you will forgive me."

They talk for awhile and Louise readily forgives and understands what Fran has been going through. Fran finally gets a good night's sleep and wakes refreshed the next morning. At breakfast she apologizes to Drew and Alice for being such a poor mom all week.

"Mommy, you haven't been so bad," Alice says. "We always know you'll get over it soon."

"Yeah," Drew adds, "even though you were upset, you still helped me with my homework. What was the trouble? Something at work?"

"No, something wrong in my heart," Fran explains. "You know, when we allow sinful feelings to take over our hearts and we refuse to let God talk to us, we always end up hurting ourselves and others. I just let a sinful feeling overwhelm me, and it took me awhile to ask God to forgive me."

It's a good teaching moment for Fran with her kids, and she silently thanks God that he's still able to take her ashes and turn them into something beautiful.

Closing

Fran's had a miserable week, but hopefully she's learned some good lessons about dealing with jealousy. It is self-inflicted suffering. I encourage you to deal with any jealousy in your life right now before it ruins a lot of good days for you, as it did for Fran.

What jealousy are you struggling with? Could it be you're jealous of another person's success? Or maybe you're jealous of a relationship someone else has, which you would like to have but don't. Maybe you're jealous of what someone else owns, their material possessions that you covet. Or someone else's talents and abilities.

Remember Proverbs 27:4 which says: *Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy.* Jealousy is a strong and dominating emotion, and when you allow it to get a foothold in your life, it will bowl over you; you won't be able to stand against it.

How do you fight jealousy? First, admit it. Don't let five days go by, like Fran did, before recognizing and admitting you are jealous. Then confess it as sin to God and ask him to not only forgive you, but also to give you the moment-by-moment strength to overcome it and let it go.

Remember that jealousy will often cause you to make a fool out of yourself, so before you let that happen, give it over to the Lord. Learn to be content where you are and to accept what you have. Release it to God, ask him for strength, and you can know victory even over that green-eyed monster of jealousy.

Chapter 13

Dealing with Loss

As a single working mom, Fran has struggled, like many of us do, to live out her faith on her job, and be a good mom as well as a good daughter. She has lots of hats to wear, and it certainly hasn't been easy. But she has learned a lot, grown in her faith, and has a deep sense that God is guiding her steps and protecting her and her children. Thankfully, she has wonderful parents who live nearby who have been with her through everything, and she often phones her mom for comfort and her dad for advice.

It's Thursday afternoon and, as Fran is busily finishing up an important presentation for tomorrow's meeting with a new client, her cell phone rings. It's her mom. "I can just call her back on the way home," Fran thinks. But something prompts her to answer the call. Her mom rarely calls her at work, so she figures it must be important.

"Hi, Mom," she says cheerily, "how's it going?"

"Fran," her mom's voice is shaky, "they just called me from your dad's office, and he fainted or something. They're taking him to the hospital. I was just wondering..."

"Fainted at work? That doesn't sound good, but I'm sure it's nothing. I'm on my way, Mom. I'll come by and pick you up. I should be there in 15 minutes." She doesn't want to alarm her mother, but she is concerned. It's so unlike her dad. He's always the strong, healthy one. With her heart skipping a few beats, she picks up her purse, leaves everything else scattered on her desk, and heads to her car.

It's the longest 15-minute drive of her life as she begins to process this information. Her dad—her strong, capable, godly dad whom she relies on so often—something has happened to him. She tries to pray as she drives, but it's more like a cry. "Lord, please, please..." She doesn't even know what words to use, so she simply repeats the name of Jesus over and over, knowing the Holy Spirit is interceding for her.

If you've ever had a phone call that changes your life, you know how Fran feels. There are times when words just don't work; your heart and mind are so traumatized you can't really pray. Romans 8:26 says, *The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.*

As she arrives at her mom's house, she does her best to bring her own emotions under control so she can be strong for her mom. "Thanks for driving me. I'm not sure it would be safe for me to drive right now," her mom says, trying to be lighthearted but obviously distressed.

As they are on the way, Fran says, “Did they give you any further information? I mean, did he just faint? Was that all they told you?”

“That’s all they said to me, and they encouraged me to go to the hospital for further information,” she says, with the tears now coming down her face. “He told me he was a little dizzy this morning, and he stumbled and almost fell coming down the stairs. He insisted it was nothing. We didn’t think anything about it. What do you think it is, Fran?”

Fran’s mind is racing. *What could it be? A stroke? A heart attack? Maybe just something he ate.* “Mom, let’s not let our imaginations run wild until we see him. Let me pray.” As they drive to the hospital, Fran prays for peace for the two of them and for wisdom for those caring for her dad. Of course, she also prays it will be nothing serious.

Walking into the emergency room, they expect to see her dad right away, but they are told he is with a medical team and someone will give them an update shortly. “Shortly means five minutes, right?” Fran thinks. Unfortunately, this shortly lasted over an hour, and Fran and her mom sit in a room with lots of other people while not knowing exactly where her dad is or what’s happening to him. Several times Fran asks the person at the desk for information. Each time they give her the same answer: someone will be with you soon to give you an update.

She and her mom agree the delay is not a good sign, but they try not to think or talk about the possible bad report. Instead, they silently pray for good news. While waiting, Fran makes a few calls to her aunt and other family members, and leaves a message for the pastor at her mom and dad’s church. She tries not to raise an alarm but merely asks them to pray. But as the minutes slowly pass, their apprehension and fears increase, and it becomes very difficult to remain positive.

Finally they call her mom’s name and are directed to a private room where they meet with two doctors who have attended her dad. “Mrs. Taylor,” they address her mom, “it appears your husband has experienced a stroke, and we are running several tests to get a better idea of the severity, the location, and what the best treatment should be. We just can’t give you much more information until we get some test results. We’re doing everything we can.”

They bombard the doctors with many questions, but they seem reluctant to say anything more until they have more information: it could be hours; they might be able to see him soon; not sure when the tests will be done. They can get no answers to their questions, and are once again left to wait.

Fran’s aunt volunteers to pick up her kids from school and keep them until she’s home. She is very concerned about how to tell her children. Their grandpa is the man in their lives since they were both very young when their dad died. They adore him! It will be difficult for them

to understand, and she doesn't want them to be unnecessarily alarmed. The concerns seem to pile up one on top of another, and her mind is unsettled.

Soon her mom's pastor comes to sit with them, as do some other close friends and family. It's beginning to feel very serious, very ominous, and Fran is trying to help her mom cope with this while keeping herself from falling apart.

Suddenly there seems to be a flurry of activity with doctors and nurses going in and out, and lots of dire-sounding messages on the intercom. A nurse comes to her mom and says, "Mrs. Taylor, we think you should see your husband now. Come with me." She agrees that Fran can accompany her, and they walk into a room where her dad lies with all kinds of monitors and tubes on his body. Fran notices they are beginning to remove the tubes and turn off the monitors.

"Mrs. Taylor," a doctor says to her, "your husband had a massive stroke which eventually led to heart failure. We have done everything we can, but I'm so sorry to have to tell you we were not able to save him. His heart just gave out very suddenly. Our efforts to revive him simply didn't work. I am so sorry to tell you this."

"Do you mean to tell me," her mother tries to speak, "do you mean to tell me that he's gone, and I didn't even get to talk to him." Her knees begin to buckle, and Fran and a nurse catch her just before she collapses; they help her to a chair.

"Ma'am," one doctor says, "we were hopeful he would regain consciousness, but it was very sudden. I am so sorry." His voice trails off as there are just no words that help.

Fran's mind goes into denial: *No, this simply is not true. They've made a mistake!* She looks at her dad, trying to wrap her mind around the fact that he is no longer there. Her dad—her strong and loving hero, the man who made it easy for her to believe in and love her Heavenly Father—lying there lifeless. She would never speak to him again, never hear his voice. How can this be?

Then she realizes she can't think about herself right now; she has to be there for her mom. They want her to remain seated, and they offer her some water. The nurse asks if she'd like something to calm her nerves, but she insists on being near her husband, holding his hand, and talking to him. It's a private moment, and those in the room take a step back as she says her goodbyes to her husband of 47 years.

Their pastor and friends gather and, with many tears, prayers are offered. Someone starts to sing a hymn. Fran stands beside her mom, holding her close. Arms are all around them, offering comfort, but Fran has no idea what they're saying. Her mind is simply not functioning. The shock is more than she can bear. All she can think is that she has to be there for her mom.

Fran and her mom are blessed to have friends and family who stay strong for them, who help them navigate these unknown waters, who assist in making the necessary decisions. Eventually they are ready to leave the hospital. Her mother resists leaving, wanting more time with her husband, feeling like she's abandoning him and she should take him home. But reality sets in and gently Fran and others convince her it's time to go. Her mother's sister will stay with her, so now Fran must go home to face her children with this terrible news.

When life throws you this kind of horrific curve ball and, in a matter of a few hours, life takes a turn into a new world—a world you never wanted or imagined—how do you survive? Many of us have walked this path in one way or another. It may be words from a doctor telling you the bad test results. It may be a mate saying those dreaded words that they are leaving you. It could be a call from the police station that your son or daughter has just been arrested for drunk driving. There are so many sudden happenings that can come out of the blue, bring devastating consequences, and change your life forever.

How do you survive? This is when your faith is sorely tested, and you need others to have faith for you—to step in and, as it were, “loan you” some of their faith. You don't need pat answers; you don't need to hear trite words that, though intended to comfort, instead cause you to be angry. When life comes to a full stop and your mind and heart are unable to cope, you need fellow believers who share your burden and come alongside to hold up your arms—as Moses of old did when his strength was gone. Fran is blessed to have friends and family who are there for her and her mom.

Now she must continue to live and face her responsibilities as a mother and daughter.

Part 2

After making sure her mom is settled at home with her sister, Fran drives herself home where her children await. Her dear aunt picked them up from school and has stayed with them through the long afternoon and evening. She has told them very little except that their mom is with their grandma and grandpa at the hospital, and she'll be home soon. They had many questions, but her aunt has tried to deflect them and keep them busy doing homework, playing games, eating dinner—anything to keep their minds occupied.

Fran sobs as she drives. As she nears home, she knows she has to gather herself and think of how to tell her children. She remembers the terrible day she had to tell them that their dad was killed. Alice was a baby so she doesn't remember her dad much, but Drew was four years old and, even at that young age, he suffered as any child would who learns his dad is gone. Now, to tell them their grandpa is gone—how does one do that? Parenting classes didn't prepare her for this.

She dries her eyes as she arrives and thinks of what words to say. There are no easy words; how does one soften this blow? She thanks her sweet aunt, who offers to stay, but she thinks it's probably best if she is alone with the children. They begin to bombard her with questions: "Why were you at the hospital? Where is Grandma and Grandpa? Are they okay?"

"Drew and Alice, let's sit down here on the sofa and I'll explain where I was," Fran begins.

"Have you been crying?" Alice asks. "You look like you've been crying."

"Yes, I have, Alice, because something sad has happened, and when something sad happens, we cry, don't we? Let me explain."

With as little drama as possible, she tells her children this sad news and tries to answer their many questions. Abundant tears are shed, and Fran realizes she will have to learn the best way to help them deal with their emotions and questions. Maybe she could use some counsel on how best to do that, she thinks. But that's for another day. Now, the immediate need for burial arrangements, a memorial service—all of that and more—floods her mind. How will she get through these next few days?

Finally the kids are asleep, and she falls into bed to try to rest. Sheer exhaustion takes over, and she gets a few hours of uneasy sleep; however, before dawn she is awake, and the reality of what has happened hits her like a punch in the stomach. It's literally a physical reaction, and she stumbles out of bed to get a cup of coffee and think about what has to be done.

She is about to call her mom when her phone rings; it's Mom calling her. "Fran, how are the children? I've been thinking about them all night. Poor babies—I should have been there when you told them. I want to come over this morning and see them. Is that okay?"

"Of course, Mom. They would love to see you! It would comfort them to see that you're okay and that you are still here," Fran says. "How are you, Mom? Did you sleep any?" They talk a few minutes and make plans for her mom to come over soon.

Fran now begins to just put one foot in front of the other and walk through all that has to be done. If you've ever been in such a situation, you know you exist on adrenaline at first—going through the motions and doing what you must. Her mom arrives. The kids are so happy to see her, and they bombard her with questions, as well. She spends much time with them, holding them and reassuring them of how much their grandpa loved them.

"Why did God take Grandpa?" Drew asks. This is the question no one can adequately answer. Fran and her mom don't try to sugar coat it or use the clichés. They simply say, "We don't know," while at the same time expressing their faith that God does all things well.

Fran looks at the clock and realizes it's time to go to work. She doesn't feel she can go to work, but there's a presentation due today. Quickly she calls her assistant, explains the

situation, and asks if the boss is in. “No, not yet,” is her response, “but I’ll have him call you as soon as he arrives.” Her assistant is very kind, and says Louise, Fran’s coworker friend, had already told them about her dad. She expresses sincere sympathy and asks if there’s anything she can do.

“Thanks for asking, but I just need to talk to the boss about my presentation today. You have all the handouts I prepared, right? I have the PowerPoint pretty much done. I think he could make the presentation for me,” Fran says.

“Don’t worry about it; I’ll cover all that for you. I just feel so bad for you. I mean, you lost your husband and now your father. I think that is just the worst thing. I’m really so sorry. I wish I could do something to help you. But I know you’re very religious and your faith will help you. You’re such a strong person.”

“Susan, I so appreciate your kind words. Just to hear you are concerned means a great deal. And yes, it makes a huge difference that my faith in Jesus is strong, and he will get us through this as he has done before. Jesus is that ever-present friend, Susan, and I truly could not be strong if I didn’t have a personal relationship with him. You and I talked about that once before, didn’t we?”

“We did, and I’ve thought a lot about what you said. We’ll have to talk about it again. For now, don’t worry about this office. It will survive. You just let us know what the plans are for your father’s service when you know them,” Susan says, and Fran can hear tears in her voice.

As they hang up, Fran takes a minute to pray: “Jesus, in the midst of all this sorrow, I can see you will use it for good. Help Susan to really think about her own eternal destiny, and please give me another opportunity to share the Good News with her that she can know you, too.”

The phone begins to ring; the word has gotten out. Her mom returns to her home, and Fran and the children join her there. Much food is brought in, but of course they have little appetite. Friends and family stream in and out throughout the day to offer sympathy and comfort.

One lady from her mom’s church seems to think it’s her job to “preach a sermon” to her mom. She boldly tells her mom not to cry or worry, because her husband is in a better place, for all things work together for good to those who love God. Unfortunately, that brings no comfort at all. Instead, it makes Fran angry and upsets her mom even more, so she tries to find a nice way of ushering her out of the house.

Then a long-time friend of her mom’s comes in, looks at her and says, “Oh, Liz, I’m so very sorry. This is so wrong, so wrong.” The two of them hold onto each other for a long time, crying and sobbing. No more words were said; the feelings went too deep and the despair was too great. But weeping and sobbing with her mom was a great comfort to her.

Closing

Paul wrote that we are to: *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)*. There are no words any of us can say to ease the grief of such a great loss, but by weeping with those who are weeping, we carry part of their burden with them; this makes it a little bit easier for them.

I've been reminded again that death is the enemy, and we cannot escape the sorrow that life on this planet will inevitably bring. But we can be instruments of God's love and peace by simply weeping with those who are sorrowful, sharing their grief and pain as much as we can, and thus fulfilling the law of Christ.

Many years ago my young niece lost her husband of a year-and-a-half to an aggressive cancer that took him quickly. I remember saying to my brother, his father-in-law, "Why did this happen to one so young, with so much hope and life in front of him? How did this happen to us?" And my brother said something I've never forgotten: "Mary, why *shouldn't* it happen to our family? We're not exempt from the sorrows of life, and death is the enemy."

I knew Paul had written in 1 Corinthians 15:55-57: *Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*. I knew that, but I had never before experienced so close to home the truth that death is the enemy. It is the result, the sting, of our sin-cursed world. But thanks be to God for the victory we can have even in sorrow when we are a Christ-follower. We have his peace and comfort to see us through.

As I've tried to comfort some dear friends and a close family member who walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I've been reminded again that we are sojourners here. We're all on a journey that will end on this earth and begin in another place. The important thing to know is that, when the number of our days comes to an end, we have done what is necessary to have victory over death: we have made peace with God now, on this side of death, while there is time to accept the Way, the Truth, and the Life—Jesus Christ—and believe in his redemptive death and resurrection. There's only one way to be assured of eternal life with God, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ.

As Fran now faces the very sudden death of her dear father, she will have a new normal. She won't have an earthly dad to run to for advice or an earthly grandpa as a friend and role model for her children. She will need to be there for her mom, who will experience deep loneliness and need much help in adjusting to her life as a widow. And Fran will have to work through her own stages of grief.

This can be a time of total despair or a time when she will learn to trust God in new ways, to accept the love and help her friends will offer, and to remember this is not the end of the

story. She does not sorrow as one with no hope; she'll see her dad again because he was ready to meet Jesus.

Whatever crisis or tragedy you may be facing in your life, I hope this story will reaffirm to you that God walks with you through every step and every stage of the journey. Take one day at a time; don't try to live in tomorrow. Know that with Jesus, you'll make it, because *he* will make a way for you.