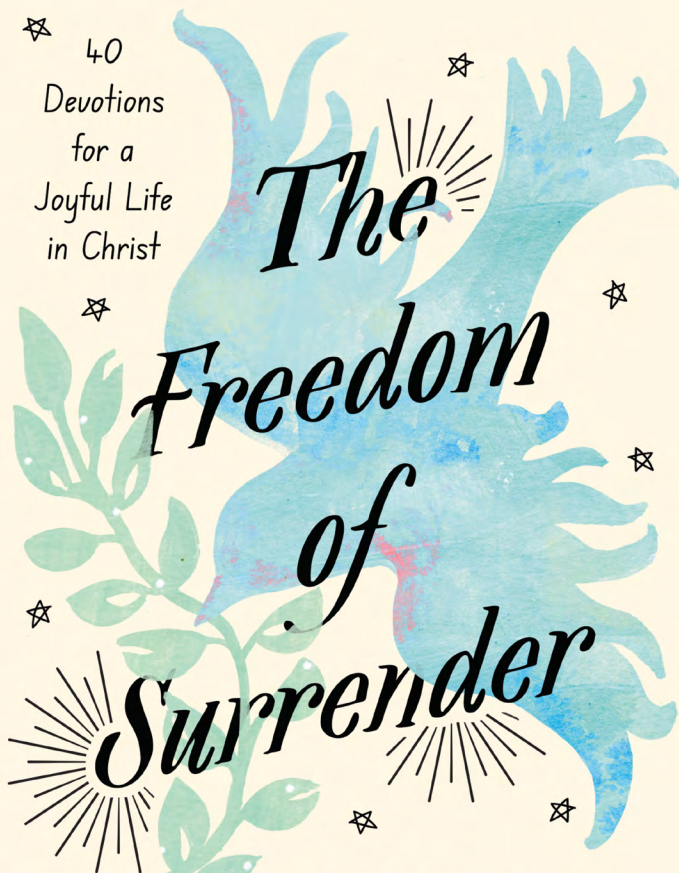


☆ 40
Devotions
for a
Joyful Life
in Christ



The
Freedom
of
Surrender

MARY DEMUTH



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INTRODUCTION

Why Surrendering Is a Necessary Spiritual Practice

IT ALL STARTED THROUGH an acquaintance of mine. Paul is a gifted artist living in another region of Texas. It had been his practice to create a piece of art every day during Lent, which he shared on Instagram. His illustrations stunned me (they were so beautiful), and they helped me understand the Lenten journey in a more nuanced way.

Something stirred in me, a giftedness I had once found superfluous. I have always processed the world through doodling and lettering—so much so that my late grandmother predicted that I would one day have a greeting card line. “You will call it ‘Love, Mary Cards,’” she had told me after she opened yet another of my greeting creations. Throughout my growing up years, I was creating with pen, ink, watercolor, and a heart bent to encourage.

But life took over. A degree. A husband. Some kids. And that part of me slowly emaciated over the years. I had forgotten the joy that came when I sat down and created, how time slipped away as I completely forgot the hours. So, with my friend Paul as my inspiration, I created a piece of art every day for Lent. It’s been my spiritual practice for a decade now. At first, these were personal pieces, kept solely for me. But eventually I dared to share some of them with my email list to encourage people in their own spiritual journeys. As the years continued, at the behest of a vocal few, I shared the illustrations more widely until I eventually produced a

packet of Scripture cards every year, then sold them through my Etsy shop.

I have no formal art training, which, of course, makes me feel highly insecure every time a painting makes its way into the world. But the process of creating has brought me so much joy, and people do seem to be encouraged by the juxtaposition of Scripture and imagery. This last time through my art journey, I combined the theme of surrender with daily illustrations. What if I surrendered something every day of Lent as a spiritual practice and then painted it? And what if I could write a prayer for each surrender? What you're holding in your hands is an expanded iteration of that practice—forty readings on surrender that are a great fit for Lent or any time of year.

Spiritual growth happens after reflecting, considering the sacrifice of Jesus, and preparing our hearts to remember all that he did for us. Though many people give up things (chocolate, for instance) to help them navigate this intentional celebration, what if our practice instead became surrender in every area of life? And what if that practice permeated our lives throughout the year? To surrender is to let go of what we tightly grip, and that kind of purposeful releasing is the precursor to freedom. When we hold fast to control, things, people, outcomes, fame, money, our way of doing things, or expectations, we don't leave room for God to work in those areas. But when we surrender our stress and worries to him, acknowledging that he is wiser and stronger than us, we are off the hook for fixing our lives. In that place of surrender, God does his best work. What better way to celebrate our beautiful Savior than by letting go of the things that have held us back from fully following him?



This forty-day journey of joyful surrender will cover five areas of your life: your inner life, the past, relationships, daily life, and worries. In surrendering in these areas, you are practicing Jesus' counsel in Matthew 16:25: "If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it." There is great benefit in letting go, allowing God to make something beautiful from the current stress you're walking through. Although we benefit from surrender, and joy is mixed into its practice, please know that surrender is not easy. It is a holy practice that hurts because it involves relinquishing control, personally wresting it from ourselves and letting God have the final say. Think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane whose wrestling with the will of God bent toward agony.

To surrender is to let go of knuckled grip. It is a setting aside of control, a holy pause that says I am in need, and God is the great need-filler. While fretting leads to grasping at anything, surrender leads to standing on the firm, solid foundation of God's great love. I know that sounds like a cliché, and I don't mean it to. In this Christian life, though, there are beautiful truths we can anchor ourselves to. There are realities that are more real than the idols we chase. There is hope that replaces the shoddy promises our world doles out like trinkets.

As you surrender, perhaps you could dare to pick up a pen or a paintbrush—just for yourself—to process your letting go on the page. So often our inner journeys toward Jesus are ethereal, but when we create something concrete, we not only seem to experience our journey, but we also have an art piece we can look back on as a reminder of our growth.



My friend Paul demonstrated this possibility to me, that although it's hard for me to call myself an artist, I am like my Father who is the Creator. We are all endowed with a need to create. And often, it is through the act of creation that God uses our own bents to reshape us. Perhaps as you read this book, the Lord will highlight a new calling or hobby or practice that may feel impossible at first but becomes an enriching part of your discipleship journey. Fear often holds us back from trying new things (I know it did for me). But taking a new leap brings its own joy.

My prayer for you is that this surrender journey you're embarking on would deeply transform you. May you point back to this time in your life as the many-moments-strung-together that changed your trajectory—toward more wholeness, hope, and *shalom*.



PART ONE

Surrender Inner Life

Day One: I Surrender My Sin



When I illustrated the thorns on this cross, I had them emerge from where the cross touched the ground, revealing the earthly nature of sin and the consequences of the Fall. If you look closely, you'll see that some of the thorns look like people surrendering. Once I finished, I felt like the painting needed more, so I added poppies, a symbol for war veterans, showing us the warfare Jesus endured on the cross.



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The beautiful part about surrendering our insides is that Jesus specializes in cleansing us from our sin, the part that messes with our incongruity.

Paul cautions us to “not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God” (Romans 6:13). Our bodies, our lives, our thoughts are all intended to flourish in this newfound way of living. In surrendering our proclivity to sin, we make way for God’s beautiful newness, and we open the door to closeness with him.

The word for sin in Hebrew is *khata*, and the Greek is *hamartia*. While we often think of sin in terms of bad things we do, the simple meaning of these two terms is to fail to make a goal or to miss the mark. In the Bible Project video titled “Khata/Sin,” they say, “So in the Bible, sin is a failure to fulfill a goal. But what’s the goal? Well, on page one of the Bible, we learn that every human is an image of God, a sacred being who represents the Creator and is worthy of respect. And so in this way of seeing the world, sin is a failure to love God and others by not treating them with the honor they deserve.” Put in common terms, to sin is to neglect loving God and others (as Jesus so beautifully reminded us in Matthew 22:37-40).

Seen this way, then, sin is relational in nature. If we choose to push God out of our lives, believing we are happier when we are in control of every outcome, we sin against the triune God who, as Creator, is best qualified to empower us. If we struggle with condemning self-talk, the sin we commit is against ourselves—and we are image bearers of God who should be treated with respect and

kindness. Or if we gossip about someone, we are marring the reputation of a fellow human being made in the likeness of God.

Take an inventory of your relationship with God today.

- ☆ What are ways I have coped with my life that do not include God?
- ☆ Can I identify a habit that is undermining my connection to God?
- ☆ Is there something I'm neglecting in pursuing the heart of God?

Understanding that sin is not abstract but relational may help you further explore new areas of surrender. The good news is that the God who loves you and wants you to experience a new, abundant life has provided a remedy for sin through Jesus' perfect sacrifice and resurrection.

Jesus, I surrender my sin to you. Please forgive me for not taking it seriously. Help me internalize what my selfishness and pride have cost you. Thank you for going to the cross to pay for my sin once and for all. Help me understand that when I come to you with my confession, you have forgiven me. I don't want to live in self-condemnation anymore. Amen.



Day Two: I Surrender My Stubbornness



The donkey reminds me of Psalm 81:11-12: "But no, my people wouldn't listen. Israel did not want me around. So I let them follow their own stubborn desires, living according to their own ideas." Although I didn't grow up with donkeys, I did have a particularly stubborn horse growing up who simply had her own agenda. And when she no longer wanted to be ridden, she would buck me off, unmoved by rein, bit, or nudge. May this donkey remind us of the dangers of always getting our own way.



During this season of introspective surrender, ask God to show you different areas of your heart that resist him. To be stubborn is to push against God's path and his counsel, preferring your own way of doing things. I illustrated this by painting an animal known for its stubborn ways.

What does it look like to surrender stubbornness? (Hint: it's not easy!)

First, we admit that God is God, and we are not. He spun the galaxies into existence. He wove us together in our mother's wombs. He sent a flood of judgment upon the sin-scarred earth. He created everything we see. He is strong. He is infinitely wise.

Why is it that we think we can run things better without God? Or we know best how to manage our lives? Perhaps it's pride that fuels us to control things on our own. Or maybe fear—that if we truly surrender, God will disappoint us or lead us down difficult pathways. Our Savior chose the path of surrender. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he famously prayed, "Yet I want your will to be done, not mine" (Luke 22:42). He didn't push God the Father to bend to his desires; he surrendered, instead, to a difficult fate.

God often chooses difficult circumstances to refine us. We seldom grow when all is well—we grow through adversity—so sometimes we are called to surrender to pain as well.

Perhaps our fear fuels stubbornness. We fear what would happen if we let go of our grip on our lives. But consider this: where would we all be if Jesus reversed the prayer in the garden to "Not your will, but mine." That act of stubbornness would have robbed us of the miracle of salvation.



Let's continue our inventory from yesterday by looking at ourselves.

- ☆ What current practices or habits have harmed me, my health, or my work?
- ☆ In what ways have I struggled with stubbornness?
- ☆ Is there an area of healing God is drawing me toward but I am afraid to pursue?

It may be hard to discern when or how we're trying to force God to acquiesce to our plans. We can simply rest in King David's words: "O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me" (Psalm 139:1). He knows you. He loves you. He is a gentle shepherd who reveals your areas of stubbornness. Rest there.

Jesus, I surrender my stubbornness to you. Oh, how I think I know all the things and all the ways to live this life. Often, I sink my heels in, defending myself rather than admitting wrongdoing or error and asking for forgiveness. Help me to be open to new things, to welcome change (even when it scares me), and to transform my personal stubbornness into a deep dependence upon you. Amen.



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