I'm Still Here

For three years, I was in a pit. Not a physical one like Joseph was thrown into by his brothers in Genesis 37. No, mine was a deep pit of depression that I lowered myself into by isolating myself from everyone who loves me (including God), and making bad choices that resulted in overwhelming shame.

Have you ever been there; in a pit of despair? Whether you were thrown in by someone else, or you lowered yourself in, a pit is a pit. It is dark, lonely, and often feels like there is no way out.

But there is! Our compassionate God specializes in reaching down into dark pits and pulling His children out. He'll do the heavy lifting; our role is simply to look up and grab a hold of His hand.

Here are 3 things that God taught me about how to come out of a pit:

1. Freedom Flickers—While darkness can feel all-consuming, it only takes a flicker of light to dispel it. Light can be found in countless ways: scripture, an encouraging comment, a song on your local Christian radio station, etc. It only takes a spark. Ask God for that, then keep your eyes open for it.

2. Family Flames—God calls us to community for a reason. As I sat, day after day, by myself, listening to the lies of the enemy, and my own negative self-talk, I sank deeper and deeper into darkness. I thank God for surrounding me with "Light People" who prayed for me, called, pounded on my door, and eventually accosted me at a movie theater parking lot. Like Jesus, they loved me just as I was, but too much to leave me that way. The members of the Body of Christ (meaning the family of God) are God's hands and feet. If you don't have people like that in your life, ask Him to send you some, then keep your eyes open for them.

3. Focus Forward—As long as I focused on the mistakes I made in that season of darkness, I would stay stuck there. Instead, I choose to look forward. I set my mind on the grace and forgiveness of God, and rather than thinking about how far I have to go, I simply take that next step of obedience. What is that step for you? Once you think of it, take it.

I'm still here, and so are you! That means that our stories are still being written, and I believe that the best is yet to come!

Psalm 40:2-3

Unfinished

I beat myself up...a lot. I would never talk to anyone the way I speak to myself sometimes. Ask me what my best qualities are and it would take me a long time to compile a list. But ask me what I don't like about myself and buckle up, because I can rattle off that list in 3.5 seconds flat! I know I'm not alone in that harmful habit. I believe it is time for the children of God to stop wallowing in shame and regret, and start living lives of freedom, power, and authority. We do that by taking those destructive thoughts captive, and making them obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

In Luke 4, Jesus was hounded by the devil in the wilderness. Rather than getting in a philosophical debate with Satan, each time Jesus was tempted, He simply spoke the Word of God and kept it moving.

“But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone.’ ” Luke 4:4 NLT

“Jesus replied, “The Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him.’ ” Luke 4:8 NLT

“Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the LORD your God.’ ” Luke 4:12 NLT

If it worked for Jesus, it works for me! Now when I hear those negative thoughts in my head, I am learning to respond with the truth of God's Word.

When I sin and want to pull away from God in shame, after I repent, I'll proclaim that, "I confess my sin and know that God is faithful to forgive and cleanse me. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those that belong to Christ Jesus, like me. I am more than a conqueror, and nothing can separate me from the love of God!" (1 John 1:9, Romans 8:1, 37-39)

When I look in the mirror and don't like what I see, I'll declare that, "Because I look to God, I am radiant, and not covered in shame. I have a true beauty that goes beyond outward appearance, and shines from the inside out. My heart displays an unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God." (Psalm 34:5, 1 Samuel 16:7, 1 Peter 3:3-4)

When I feel anxious and hopeless that I'll ever overcome the struggles that I always seem to face, I'll speak life by saying, "I celebrate the truth that God began a good work in me, and will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. I am not a mess. I am not a failure. I am not a mistake. I'm just unfinished." (Philippians 1:6)

Bleed the Same

I'll never forget July 4-7, 2016. July 4th was Independence Day in America. I recall that because the events that transpired the rest of that week made me question just how free we truly were. There was a fatal shooting of a Black man by police officers in Louisiana on July 5th. There was a fatal shooting of another Black man by police officers in Minnesota on July 6th. Finally, there was a fatal shooting of 5 police officers by a Black man in Texas on July 7th.

Can I be honest with you? As a follower of Jesus, and a woman with Black nephews, as well as a brother who is a police officer, I'm a little scared to speak freely here. I remember the fear that hovered over our country then. I remember the hate being spewed on social media that week. I remember wanting to say something, and knowing I would offend someone either way. I didn't say much on social media that week. I did however, say a lot to God.

I'm a big believer in praying scripture. Here's how I turned a very familiar verse into a prayer that week:

“Father, I come to you now on behalf of my beloved country, and pray according to 2 Chronicles 7:14. There are many people in the USA who call ourselves by Your name. So on behalf of Your children here in America, I pray that we would humble ourselves before You, and our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Holy Spirit, give us a burden to turn our arguments into prayers, and rather than seeking our agendas, help us to seek Your face. We have turned away from your ways, God. Would You forgive us, and supernaturally empower us to turn from our wicked ways? Then, I stand on Your promise that You will hear from heaven, forgive our sins, and restore our land. I ask this in Jesus’ Name...Amen.”

Shortly after the events of that week in July, my songwriters and I wrote “Bleed the Same”. My brothers, TobyMac and Kirk Franklin share a similar heart for unity and love in the Body of Christ. Our prayer is that God would use our song to truly make us an undivided, holy nation, under God.

Daniel 9:17-19

John 17:20-23

2 Chronicles 7:14

Good News

I prayed for my brother John's salvation for decades. I even wrote a song about it on my ‘Overcomer’ album. The bridge of "Dear John" says,

"It's not a list of do's and don'ts

Not a record of your faults

He gave His life to pay it all

He loves you just the way you are

You are forgiven by His scars

Just open up your heart"

There were days when I would pray with boldness and authority concerning John. Then, there were days when I wondered if my prayers were falling on deaf ears. I knew that God desired for my brother to have hope for eternity even more than I longed for it. But at times, I wavered in unbelief. After my friend Lakisha died from cancer, I stopped praying for anything. I figured that God had His own plans, so He could just leave me out of it. It was in that season of dark hopelessness that my brother called me up, and essentially asked, "What must I do to be saved?" On July 13, 2016 I led my brother in the prayer of salvation, and in an instant, John became your brother too! I immediately recorded a video and posted it on all of my social media sites proclaiming the good news that he who was lost had been found!

That's the thing about good news—we can't wait to share it. And somehow, hearing it shouted from the rooftops encourages those of us walking a similar road. My prayer is that, by sharing John's story, it will build the hope of many of you who are standing in the gap for your loved one whose salvation you are interceding for.

As your sister in Christ, I want to assure you that, your heavenly Father hears your prayers, and is working beyond what your human eyes can see. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. Keep loving. Keep sharing. Keep believing. And when that day comes where your faith becomes sight, tell the world all about your "Good News"!

2 Peter 3:9

1 John 5:14-15

Acts 5:42

Prove Me Wrong

“..for the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart. The LORD has already appointed him to be the leader of his people...” 1 Samuel 13:14b NLT

Do you ever wonder what made David "a man after God's own heart"? I realize that Jesus is only one perfect Man who ever walked the earth, but come on! David? The same man who used his authority to have an affair on a woman, got her pregnant, and then had her husband (who was fighting in his army) murdered? That David was the one God says was a man after His own heart?

Admittedly, while I can think of many things that would cause God to bestow this incredibly honoring title on David, I suspect that one of those reasons is that David walked in close relationship with God. I believe that the best relationships are those of complete honesty, and common sharing of feelings. If David did nothing else, he was certainly honest with God.

After watching my friend Lakisha die, my hope was deferred, my heart was sick, and I was anything but honest with my feelings toward God. I shut down and ignored Him. I can learn a lot from David. Maybe you can too.

1. Be honest with emotions—David was regularly grumbling to the Lord about things he felt God and other people did to him. I'm not suggesting we make a habit of complaining, but if we're going to do it, it seems to me that it is better to voice it to God than anyone else.

2. Be quick to repent—David made a lot of mistakes in his life, but he when he was confronted with it, he was very quick to admit his wrong, repent, and receive God's forgiveness without wallowing in shame.

3. Be joyful in praise—David was a worshipper! It seems that he was always dancing, singing, and loudly proclaiming the goodness of God. I imagine that he'll be a blast to hang out with in Heaven!

I was still very much in the dark when I wrote "Prove Me Wrong"; a song that expresses my heartbreak at Kisha's passing. Interestingly, months later, when I was out of the dark and listened again, I felt as if the Holy Spirit whispered to my heart, "Mandisa, you challenged me to prove you wrong. I just did." I can't help but wonder if finally bringing my broken heart to God, allowed Him to heal it, and usher in the grace He longed for me to have. I think David was onto something!

Do you carry any anger, resentment, or disappointment towards God? I encourage you to take some time as you read these scriptures to honestly express your heart to Him. He can handle it. He might even delight in it, and see those who do it as men and women after His own heart.

Acts 13:22

Psalm 13:(1-6)

Psalm 38 (1-22)

The One He Speaks Through

It all started with a billboard. I can't remember what it was advertising now, but I do remember that the name of the brand was "Jenni's". It was that unassuming billboard that prompted a random thought of an old friend from high school. Jenny's face flashed in my mind as I was driving down Interstate 24, and I actually commented out loud, "Hmm...I haven't thought about her in ages." Over a decade to be exact.

But, on that rainy Monday morning, I couldn't get Jenny out of my mind. So I prayed for her. I wasn't sure exactly what to pray for, so I asked the Holy Spirit to intercede through me (He does that, you know!) After I said "Amen", I wish that I could tell you that I later heard an amazing story about how Jenny was on the brink of disaster when God intervened, performed a miracle, and Jenny put her faith in Jesus on the spot. That would be a cool story, wouldn't it?

But the truth is, I never heard anything about Jenny. As a matter of fact, I hadn't thought much about that moment until I sat down to write the song, "The One He Speaks Through". I may never know if that billboard and my subsequent prayer was simply a coincidence or God supernaturally loving on Jenny through my act of obedience. I've asked God to let me know when I finally get to Heaven. In the meantime, I rest in the fact that in light of eternity, no whispered prayer, act of service, or loving gesture is ever wasted.

When God wanted to show the world His love, He sent His Son, Jesus, in bodily form. When Jesus ascended, He said that WE are the Body of Christ! Our Heavenly Father uses His children (that's you and me), to be His very hands and feet. As His representatives, let's make the most of every opportunity to reconcile the world to Jesus. The Holy Spirit can use our prayers and our actions to shine light into darkness. So ask the Lord to attune your heart to feel His nudges, and hear His whispers. You can be the very one He speaks through.

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Romans 8:26-27

Ephesians 5:1

Back to Life

I have read, meditated on, and heard messages on Ezekiel 37, the valley of dry bones, for as long as I can remember. It's one of those passages that I've heard so many times, I wasn't sure what else I could possibly get out of it! But after experiencing my own valley of dry bones, and inhabiting a pit of despair for several years, God has illuminated this familiar passage for me.

God very easily could have spoken to the dry bones Himself, and seen them come to life. Instead, He commanded Ezekiel to listen to His words, then repeat them to the bones. It was only when Ezekiel obeyed and spoke life that the bones responded.

Similarly, I find that this is how God lifted me out of the dark. Rather than experiencing immediate deliverance, God lifted me out bit by bit, allowing me to learn valuable lessons in the process. He taught me how to prophesy His words over myself:

• I breathed out shame, and breathed in grace

• I breathed out fear, and breathed in peace

• I breathed out weakness, and breathed in strength

This is not to say that I felt these things immediately. But in the beginning of this process, I knew I needed to do what Ezekiel did—prophesy God's truth over what felt dead. As my friend TobyMac says, I needed to speak life!

I ended the deluxe edition of my 'Out of the Dark' album with a worship song that illustrates this process perfectly.

"Shame and depression

And all anxieties

They have no power over me

Addiction and strongholds

And every disease

They have no power over me"

Even as I recorded those words, I felt shame. But as I repeated those words over and over, the shame lifted. Sometimes our behavior follows our acts of faith. For reasons we may not fully understand, there is great power in God's word, and in worship. When I least feel like opening my mouth to praise or proclaim Truth, is when it is most important for me to do so. By magnifying Jesus, our circumstances grow smaller in comparison. In those moments when we feel like all signs of life are gone, proclaim the breath of heaven into that situation, and watch God bring those dry bones back to life.

Ezekiel 37:1-10

Proverbs 18:21