

WEEK 1: Life's Roller Coaster

"We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation." (Romans 5:3-5, NLT)

During my ministry at a missions and discipleship school, I had the opportunity to lead a devotion early one morning. The students were right in the middle of their annual 'boot camp', where they are exposed to the natural elements by sleeping outside. They have to do 'drill sessions' and the food is limited. We did this to test their character and to see how far they can be pushed. All this was in preparation for their outreach into the mountains of Lesotho. I shared the above Scripture with them, and as they marched down the road in one of their drill sessions, they were shouting: "Trials develop endurance, endurance develops character and character develops hope."

When we run into trials or problems, we need to use it as an opportunity to become more like Christ and to develop our character, so that we can reflect hope to a hurting world.

Life has been a roller coaster filled with amazing highs and dreadful lows. I have found that in my walk with God, the darker the valley I have walked through, the deeper the lessons I have learnt; and the harder the time I have endured, the deeper and more intimate my relationship with God has gone.

Over the next few weeks, I will share with you from personal valleys I have faced and how God always shone His light into them. He has always taken my brokenness and made it a masterpiece.

WEEK 2: Today Is the Day of Salvation!

"... 'At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.' Indeed, the 'right time' is now. Today is the day of salvation." (2 Corinthians 6:2, NLT)

I was far from believing that I had worth, until I met Him... Him being my Faithful Lover, Jesus Christ. He began to show me the worth in me when I really thought that I had none. I was in a lifestyle that consumed me – a filthy gutter filled with regrets, lost dreams and false hope – it seemed like there was no future dream anymore.

One evening, while I was at a friend's house, our same routine of drinks and dancing began. I can barely remember anything of that night except that I almost gave up my purity to a random man that I didn't know at all. By the grace of God, his mom walked in the room and stopped us. In my parents' eyes, I was this little angel who could never do anything wrong, and I really didn't want them to be hurt by my careless actions.

I wore a huge cloak of shame for many days after that, and I cried myself to sleep every night for about a week. One evening, as I lay in bed, I couldn't bear the pain and shame of what I had done anymore. I cried out to God in desperation, and as the tears rolled down my cheeks and hit the pillow, I whispered, "Lord, if you are real, as I have been learning in my youth group, save me from this and I promise I will live for You!"

I know that God's salvation comes without a condition and it is a free gift and He does not need our promises... but this was the cry of my heart that evening, a desperate plea from the heart of a broken girl. I awoke the next morning with a new sense of strength and boldness – I was going to take full responsibility for my actions. I phoned the lady who had kept on threatening me to apologise for what I had done, but all she wanted to do was fight with me. After this call, I never heard from her again. I ran directly to my mom, and with my eyes filled with tears, I began to tell her everything that had happened, and the lifestyle I was leading. She looked up at me, and with a soft, gentle smile, she said, "Don't feel unworthy or think less of yourself – we all make mistakes." I was expecting an angry, condemning mother, but instead I got words of comfort and love. I realised that this could only have been from God.

He saved me that day and I promised to live for Him every day of my life after that. Every morning since then, I have woken up with a sense of hope and purpose in Christ, knowing that He loves me and that I am forgiven.

God hears our cries at just the right time and acts on our behalf. We serve a great God!

WEEK 3: To Whom You Belong

*"You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family."
(Ephesians 2:19, NLT)*

Due to my past and the lifestyle I lived before I came to know Christ, I still carried around the shame of everything I did. I felt as Paul did in 1 Timothy 1:15 where he says, "I am the chief of all sinners."

I once heard a man give this illustration and it spoke deep into my heart. He held up a R20 note and asked who wanted it – most of those in the room lifted up their hands. He then went on to say that this R20 note could have been in the hands of many people: it could have been used to buy drugs, alcohol, hire a prostitute, or it could have been part of a bribe. Then asked who would still want the R20 note. Once again, most of the people in the room raised their hands. He then asked the crowd: "How do we know R20 is worth R20?" Someone answered: "Well, because a higher source, the government, gives that note its value."

Our worth works exactly the same way. No matter what we have done or been through – just like that R20 note – we have worth! Not because of anything we could have done, but because of the worth that God places on us. This worth is seen by God sacrificing His one and only Son (Jesus Christ) for YOU and me! God determines your value and your worth, and He found you so worthy that He left His throne in heaven where He was loved and worshipped. He came to earth in the form of man – God, in flesh, died so that you could live. He bought you with the highest price: a price that is far above all the precious jewels of the earth combined.

Our worth as children of God is not defined by our mistakes, our failures, our pasts, our parents, or our peers. Our worth is defined by Him to whom we belong, and that is God. Know this today: YOU ARE WORTH IT! YOU ARE LOVED! YOU ARE VALUABLE! YOU ARE ACCEPTED! YOU ARE WORTHY!

WEEK 4: Moulded by the Potter

“And yet, O LORD, You are our Father. We are the clay, and You are the potter. We all are formed by Your hand.” (Isaiah 64:8, NLT)

As I walked with God and started to spend time with Him, I began to notice horrible things within myself. Things like greed, pride, lust, selfishness and hatred. I could not bear who I was, especially knowing that these things break God’s heart.

At one point, I took a look to see how clay is chosen, prepared and moulded. It is quite a process. First, the potter chooses his clay according to his preferences. Some potters prefer to use darker stoneware clay – this can give work more character and texture. Each type of clay has a different consistency and character. After selecting the clay, the potter has to prepare it. This is a very important step because if they do not knead it properly, air bubbles could be left in the clay which would cause it to explode in the fire. Once the clay is prepared, it is placed on the centre of a wheel and the potter starts to shape it to his desire.

Once the forming of the clay is completed, a string is used to cut off any excess clay. It is then left to dry. When the clay is a bit harder, the potter trims the piece: this gives it a more refined look and feel. Potters then usually add their signatures to the bottom of their work, showing the admirer to whom it belongs. Once the clay is completely dry, it is then put into the fire to harden and set so that it cannot be easily broken. Finally, after the glaze firing is complete, pieces usually need a quick sand or grind to ensure that any sharp edges are removed. Then the potter has his masterpiece completed, reflecting the work of his hands.

Over the past few years, the Lord has been taking me through a process of moulding and shaping, getting rid of all my ‘air bubbles’ and ‘kneading’ me to reflect Christ. It has not been an easy process. I also understand that the process is not yet over, but what I do know is

that one day when I see the Lord face to face, every valley, dark moment, kneading, stretching and trial I have faced here on earth will all be worth it.

Take courage when you face difficult times – it might be the Lord kneading you into the image of His Son. May you be strengthened in your faith and stand strong till you see the Lord face to face.

WEEK 5: This is what Dreams are Made Of

“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.” (Romans 8:28, NLT)

As a little girl, I had huge dreams: I dreamt of becoming a famous singer who would make a difference in this dark world. I was determined to leave a mark in this life to be remembered for generations to come.

I was always a big dreamer... And one day my dreams were about to come true as I walked down the hallway to my first Performing Arts class in college. I loved every moment of each class, but as the week progressed, I felt my heart become heavier and heavier. The Lord was speaking deep into my heart and I knew if I continued with this course, my heart would soon be far from His.

I went home for the weekend deeply distressed and confused. Had not all my dreams just come true? I had a meeting with my pastor and his wife that Sunday after the morning service and after I poured my heart out to them, the pastor looked at me and just said, “I don’t need to tell you what to do... you already know.” I went home and spent the afternoon crying. That evening, I left my room and announced to my family that I would be leaving the college – and my dreams.

I spent the next year serving my church and struggling with God. “Lord, what do you want from me?” I asked Him. One Sunday morning, as I faithfully sang on the worship team, we had a guest speaker from a ministry called *INcontext*. After the service, I approached him and his wife and he mentioned that they would be visiting youth groups and said that I was welcome to join them. I did. A year later, I found myself at a missions and discipleship school that I was introduced to on this very special trip.

It is in the darkest night that the stars shine the brightest. God works all things for good, even the things we don’t plan for. He knows best!

WEEK 6: Death, Where is Your Sting?

"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55, NLT)

One afternoon, I sat at my computer, on Facebook, in my pyjamas, and I heard my gate rattling with vigour. Before I could even get off my chair, a friend that lived around the corner came running into my house in a complete panic and with tears flowing. It took me at least a few minutes before I could understand what she was trying to tell me. I could hardly believe what she said, and I found myself in the same state of panic. Without a moment to lose, we ran down the road.

We approached a huge bus that was standing still. To the right was a large group of people, encircling someone. As we wiggled our way through the crowd and my eyes recognised my best friend lying on the ground with a pool of blood around her head, my world fell apart... She was 18 years old when she passed away. She didn't even have a matric ball or graduate high school. We had planned our futures together – we were going to study to become air hostesses and travel the world. "What now?" I thought to myself. All my plans were gone in an instant. My world was shattered and I was left with no best friend, and no future... All I had left was God. And God comforted me during this time of grieving.

I had one of two choices: I could be angry and bitter towards God, or I could submit to His plan and believe that He can use all things for good. I chose to truly believe the latter. Through my best friend's death, God gave me purpose in Him and drew me closer to Him. My relationship with God blossomed during this trying time, and God used my best friend's story for His glory. I came to know my Lover in the deepest, darkest parts of my life. Through my best friend's death, I realised that life is short. We have to make each day count and there is something greater than just living to die... there has to be more. I am thankful to God for her life and His faithfulness in saving her about a week before she passed away. These events played a major part in my journey in getting to know Christ more intimately, birthing in me a desire to honour God in every aspect of my life.

May you embrace the trials and hardships that life may send, knowing that you are in the hands of the Almighty God. May you know His comfort like never before during the darkest times of your life.

WEEK 7: Faithful in the Little

"If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities." (Luke 16:10, NLT)

After I completed my first year at the missions and discipleship school, I returned for a second year. All the seniors who returned had to volunteer at a school for disabled children in the mornings and do classes in the afternoons. While many of the students helped teachers with entire classes, I was allocated to tutor a Grade 2 boy who had autism. His

name was Joshua. I walked into the classroom on my first day, full of excitement and hope for the new year and what God had in store for me. However, I really was not prepared for what I was about to encounter.

I sat next to Joshua and tried to help him where I could, but he did not take very well to me – like many children with autism. My first day was filled with shouts of “I HATE YOU!” “YOU ARE NOT MY TEACHER!” and “NEVER COME BACK!”, not to mention all the bite marks on my arm. When the day was done, I ran to my room and just cried. “Lord, why?” was all that I could say through the heartache and tears. I realised that without God, I was NOT going to make it through the year.

Every morning before I walked into the classroom, I would pray for Joshua and for strength. Each day became easier and easier. I started to love Joshua with all my heart and my time with him became the greatest blessing I could ever have asked for.

Every day after school, when Joshua’s father picked him up, he would ask me: “How was your day with Joshua and is everything okay?” Every day, my reply would be the same: “We had a great day!” One day, he stopped me in my tracks and said: “I know what it is like to work with Joshua. How are you always so happy when I fetch him?” Without hesitation, I replied, “This is where God wants me to be, and the good times with Joshua far outweigh the bad times.”

Every day after that, without fail, Joshua’s father would ask me questions about God and faith. We would have long discussions and chat. Soon after, Joshua’s father and family came to know the Lord. “Joshua” means “salvation”, and through Joshua’s autism, his family was saved.

All I did was be faithful where God had placed me, even though it was difficult and even though I didn’t understand the bigger picture of what He was doing. Where has God placed you now? Are you faithful with the little He has given you? He wants to use you in a mighty way... for now we see but a glimpse... but He sees the whole picture.

WEEK 8: More Precious than Rubies

“Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is more precious than rubies.” (Proverbs 31:10, NLT)

I met my husband Damon at church and began to attend the same cell group as him. He was very quiet and only spoke a few times, but when he did speak, I admired him. You could just see that he loved God so much and that he was wise with his words. Damon began to give me guitar lessons and I began to fall in love... from there, the rest is history.

He began to notice that I had been struggling to love myself and that I had a low self-esteem. It was a very dark time for me. He would always quote the above Scripture to me for encouragement, but it never really sank in.

On the 22 August 2015, Damon took me on a date for my 'birthday'. We went on a picnic to this huge rock high above the ocean and formed something like a pier going into the sea. As we ate strawberries and chocolate and heart-shaped sandwiches, Damon pulled out a devotional book as a gift, titled "You are Worth More than Rubies".

He then handed me a huge box. The huge box contained a smaller box, rose petals and a small poem about something he loves about me. The smaller box again contained rose petals, a poem and a smaller box. About five boxes later, Damon pulled out the smallest box and opened it... before I looked at the ring or even allowed him to finish his sentence, tears filled my eyes and I jumped up into his arms and said "YES!"

The ring had a purple tanzanite stone with two curved pieces of metal going around it, creating a circle around the stone. He said that the two curved pieces of metal represented me and him, and the stone represented God being the centre of our relationship.

An interesting feature about the ring was the purple stone – purple has never been a colour I have liked, but purple in the Bible represents royalty. God used this event to remind me that I am 'royalty' and that I have worth. You too are precious and worth far above all the jewels of the earth. Do you believe it?

WEEK 9: God Collects Our Tears

"You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle, You have recorded each one in Your book." (Psalm 56:8, NLT)

Just after my engagement to Damon, my beloved grandmother Judy passed away. I was her favourite of six grandchildren and we really had a close relationship. She would spoil me with her love and full attention. I remember giving her my hand-made Mother's Day card instead of giving it to my mother. When she came to visit, she would talk to me about the Bible and prayer. These were precious moments, but looking back now, I can see that I did not fully understand what she was talking about back then.

I believe she played a major role in planting the seeds in my heart that have blossomed into a relationship with the Lord today. She supported me with acceptance as well as finances: for the mission trip I went on to China, as well as to Egypt. She passed away a week before I went to Egypt and the funeral was on the day we departed. My heart longed to be at her funeral, but I knew where she really wanted me.

So as I departed for Egypt, I knew I was doing what would make her happy. But my heart could not bear the pain. I know the Lord caught each tear as it fell and that He cared about

my heartache and comforted me. In the middle of your sorrows, may you know that God cares about each tear drop you shed to the point that He collects them in a bottle and keeps count of each one.

May this Scripture be your comfort: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." (Revelation 21:4, NLT)

WEEK 10: God Remembers Us

"Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for You are close beside me. Your rod and Your staff protect and comfort me." (Psalm 23:4, NLT)

Sometimes we reach a point in life where we feel like we are in a waiting room. God has called you to a certain place, but now it feels almost as if He has forgotten you there. You see everyone taking their turn to achieve greatness and everybody seems to be going places, while you sit there waiting for your name to be called... but it never is.

I went through a very tough season in ministry, where I just felt like the Lord had left me. I struggled with knowing that He loved me and still wanted to use me. I went on many walks trying to understand God and what He was doing. I became so frustrated and felt like life came to a standstill. I felt led to journal my experiences and to make a record of Scriptures He was giving me, and I started to compile a book about my identity in Christ and practical ways of applying the Scriptures.

Just like how God remembered Noah after the flood, how He remembered Rachel and Hannah when they could not bear children, and how He remembered His covenant with Abraham, God remembered me. He used my journaling and experiences through this tough time to develop a book titled *"Far Above Rubies"*, which has been published. Every copy that was printed was sponsored. I know that this is only by His grace and is not a result of anything I did by myself. I needed to know I was remembered by God, and I hope people might be touched in the same way by the material in the book.

I was never alone – God was always close beside me, protecting and comforting me. Don't throw away any experiences you may have encountered or endured through. God is in the business of trading beauty for our ashes. Believe it today!