



The Ministry of Discipling Friendships: *How God Uses Christ-Centered Friendships to Sustain Us in Trials and Help Redeem Our Suffering*

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Godly friendships are vital in the life of every believer. As the wife of Lon Solomon, the senior pastor of the large and still growing McLean Bible Church, and mother to Jill, our daughter with special needs, I've witnessed the spiritual danger of isolation. But I have also seen the power of being carried, encouraged, challenged, and transformed through the ministry of friendship.

It is a testament to God's grace that I survived the heartache of the past twenty-one years. In January 1992 my family began an unforeseen and deeply painful journey. Our sons were fifteen, eleven, and seven the winter that we welcomed our baby girl, Jill, into the world. We were thrilled to have a healthy and strong baby and praised God for our daughter. But three months later Jill started having focal seizures in her hands, and these quickly turned into uncontrolled grand mal seizures. Daily Jill would have many hard seizures. We tried new medications and new doctors, but nothing seemed to help. I felt my life unraveling, and Lon and I were heartbroken. Of course we knew that serving God didn't exempt us from suffering, yet we couldn't help but question why this was happening to our family.

Suddenly our usual dinner times together, sitting on the sidelines at sporting events, and attending church as a family were all but impossible. We grieved the death of dreams and the loss of family time together. As Lon once described it, "The laughter had been sucked out of our family."

The Gift of Godly Friends

The depth of our grief was indescribable, but Lon never faltered. He encouraged us to keep claiming God's promises, and Lon's consistency—emotionally, spiritually, and physically—was essential. But as I look back, I can clearly see that God also provided an intimate network of godly women to support me. Three friends in particular were a part of my spiritual growth and accountability well before Jill was born. And when Jill started having seizures, and weekly—sometimes even daily—trips to the emergency room became part of family life, God sent me another very special friend named Mary.

One morning, when Jill was about two-and-a-half, she had a very hard seizure and I just fell apart. Utterly broken, I fell on my face before the Lord. I begged God to use Jill's life in a mighty way, because what we were experiencing was just too painful to waste. Later that very day, Mary called. Even though we had never met, Mary said that God had told her to call me. Of course she had no idea about the state of mind I was in. I spent two hours crying into the receiver, telling Mary how helpless I felt, how completely drained I was emotionally and physically.



Brenda Solomon



Kristie Jackson

That phone call marked the beginning of an extraordinary, God-ordained friendship. Just dialing me up was an act of obedience for Mary. Many of us are guilty of ignoring the urging of the Holy Spirit by putting it off until it's more convenient or seems more appropriate. But not Mary, she obeyed promptly. I am so thankful that she did, because that call and her friendship changed the course of my life. You see Mary herself has endured years of illness and disability. She is often confined to bed, and I've spent many hours talking and crying with Mary in her bedroom. In fact Mary's room is one of my favorite places in the world, because it is there that this dear saint has spoken, and continues to speak, so much truth into my life. Much of her wisdom has come to birth through her own suffering, and she has a tremendous faith. Mary would tell me over and over again that Jill wasn't a mistake, that God knew what He was doing, and that God was using Jill's life from day one.

"Brenda," Mary would say, "God will redeem this pain, not the way you think but greater than you can ever dream of."

Freedom from Expectations

For a long time conversations with all four of these girlfriends focused on how Jill was doing, and they always listened patiently and lovingly. I knew they would be loyal and not think less of me because of my problems and neediness. Had I not been certain that what I shared would be kept in confidence, I would have been isolated by my grief, keeping my suffering to myself. Ann Voskamp writes in her beautiful book *One Thousand Gifts* that her mother often said, "Expectations kill relationships."¹ As I ponder those early years with Jill, I am so grateful that my core friendships weren't burdened by expectations. These friends loved me just where I was. They knew I was grieving, that I was often holding on by a thread, and that I needed loving encouragement. How different my experience would have been had I not had strong Christ-centered friendships during this time of crisis!

Shortly before Jill was born, God gave me Isaiah 41:10:²

*So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you:
I will uphold you with my righteous
right hand.*

Little did I know that I would soon need to be upheld by God Himself and through His ministers of grace and love—my beloved friends. They brought meals, loved on our boys, came to the hospital to be by our side or to let us go home for a nap. They never waited for me to ask for help; each of them tried to anticipate what I might need. Once in a while that meant just taking me out to lunch. A simple lunch outing can be truly restorative; time with friends away from home is important for anyone who faces circumstances that are isolating.

Cultivating Right Relationships

By God's grace I was already in community with my three girlfriends before my life began to unravel. Each of them was sold out for the Lord Jesus, committed to studying Scripture and living a life of obedience. Over a period of years before Jill arrived, we had been meeting together on a regular basis and had developed a high level of trust. We had a desire and willingness to be transparent and a spirit of trust and confidence in the group, essential elements of heart-level openness. We not only shared with one another our deepest hurts and burdens, we also lifted one another up in prayer and challenged one another to live according to God's Word. Ephesians 4:15 inspired us: "speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." I feel so blessed to have seen this verse play out in my life and the lives of my friends.

Of course happening into this kind of community of disciples is uncommon. Most of the time discipling friendships must be cultivated with intentionality. Greg Ogden, who has written a number of books on this topic and leads discipleship seminars, recommends groups of three or four. A one-on-one group invariably puts one person in the role of teacher-mentor and the other as student. And an ordinary small group, which has its own important role in building a community of believers, can become too large to develop true discipling relationships. Groups of three or four people bring a variety of perspectives and experiences, yet the group is small enough to engage at a deep level.

The more-than-twenty-year journey of my foursome has been nothing short of amazing. We've grown together in countless ways, clinging to each other and to the Lord Jesus in times of sorrow, and yet celebrating great joys as well. Paul writes in the book of Romans that we are to "rejoice with those who rejoice; [and] mourn with those who mourn" (12:15). Mourning with

those who mourn comes naturally in biblical community, but our group is also able to truly rejoice over one another's joys. When the Holy Spirit is at work binding you to one another, envy and comparisons become less and less of a struggle.

I am so grateful that my friends helped me survive the dark days, encouraging me along the way to never take my eyes off my Savior. Things are better now. Not perfect, but better. We've watched one another graduate and marry off our children. They've rejoiced with me as I've watched each of my three sons become a daddy himself. And after years of multiple daily seizures, Jill can now go several weeks without a seizure or a trip to the emergency room. Caring for her is still taxing, and Lon and I will never know the joy of seeing her grown-up and self-sufficient. In fact, without a miracle, Jill will remain the ever-smiling, delightful but stubborn twenty-one-year-old toddler we know and love today. But God has brought us through the storm.

Jill's House

Not only has God sustained us; He has also redeemed our suffering in ways we could never have imagined. That day when I cried into the phone, Mary recognized that my most immediate need was for a break, and she helped organize an anonymous support group for our family. That group not only prayed for us, but also provided a caregiver to give us a break from caring for Jill. This amazing and desperately needed gift of grace came not a minute too soon.

Until this point Lon and I had not slowed down. We were depleted. Once we got respite, we finally got some sleep, we spent much-needed time with our other children, and we were able to make better decisions regarding Jill's ongoing medical needs. Respite changed our lives and reenergized us so we could keep going. Respite gave us hope and instilled a vision and longing to help other families like ours.

This led to the development of Access Ministry, which aims to serve children with special needs. It was started at our church in 1996. The first week brought four children, but the program doubled the next week and kept growing. Today Access Ministry serves several hundred families each month through various programs.

Early on we had a desire to expand the services we offered to include overnight respite, and in October 2010 this vision became a reality with the opening of Jill's House. Jill's House is a short-term, overnight re-

spite center located in Tysons Corner, Virginia, for children with special needs, ages six to seventeen. And it is bigger and better than I ever imagined it could be!

The mission of Jill's House is to be a safe haven in our community where parents can entrust their children with special needs. But Jill's House was not built just so that parents could get a break. We built Jill's House because we wanted to build an exceptional place for these amazing children. There is an art room stocked with inspiring supplies, and a music room, with various instruments and ample space to dance. There are themed sensory rooms, a library, and a computer area. Jill's House has a playground, a gymnasium, and an indoor swimming pool all built with special needs in mind. The water in the pool sparkles as the sun shines through the windows, and the surrounding walls are painted with beach-themed murals. It feels like a vacation destination, filled with fun activities and a lot of laughter and love.

Many, many people have prayed for and given sacrificially to Jill's House. Already more than one hundred seventy-five thousand hours of respite care have been provided to families and their children with special needs. Lon and I know that these children are near and dear to the heart of God. Jesus said, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Luke 14:13-14).

As I look back at the journey, from feeling hopeless, defeated, and exhausted to a place of renewed strength and confident hope, I have much to thank God for. For His Fatherly love and faithfulness to me in the darkest hours of my life. For godly women who walked beside me through my sorrow. For clearly answering our prayers, redeeming so much pain and drawing us all closer to each other and to Him in the process. And not least, for using Jill's life in such a powerful and redemptive way.

I agree with Greg Ogden that "for the truth of God's Word to be released in its transforming power, it must be pursued in the context of trusting, intimate and lasting relationships."³ Without them, we lack a major channel of God's grace.

Do you know the blessing of "trusting, intimate and lasting relationships"? If not, may I humbly encourage you to seek them out in a prayerful and intentional way? Discipleship resources are available at most churches and through the C.S. Lewis Institute. I am confident the time and energy you invest will reap heavenly rewards.

Notes

1. Ann Voskamp, *One Thousand Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 169.

2. Scripture quotations in this article are from the New International Version.

3. Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 9.

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