

# *Faces of Friendship*

Growing Relationships God's Way

Debi Pryde

 REGULAR BAPTIST  
**Press**

## *Dedication*

To my friends, who have inspired me to know the Friend of friends.

*Faces of Friendship: Growing Relationships God's Way*

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# *Preface*

The absence of friends and family leaves a huge gap in people's lives, both physically and spiritually. Current research is concluding that those who are disconnected from close friends or family have serious physical consequences beyond the emotional ones we already understand. This research gives new meaning to the Bible proverb that tells us a merry heart is good like a medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones (Proverbs 17:22). Science is revealing that lonely people have significantly higher blood pressure readings, shorter lifespans, more heart disease, and lower immune systems that make them more susceptible to illness. At the same time, the US Census Bureau reports that the percentage of persons listed in the category of "unrelated individuals" (those who do not live in a family group) has tripled in the last forty years. Most of these people live alone.

In one university study, one in four respondents reported they have no one with whom they talk or share their joys and sorrows. How can this be in an age with an unprecedented number of ways for people to connect? Perhaps our busy way of life, too much screen time, smaller family units, or our sound-bite way of communicating is to blame. Or perhaps we have simply forgotten the importance of cultivating genuine friendships and the fact that God has designed family and friendship, not technology, as a provision for loneliness.

Right from the beginning, God declared that it was not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). God's solution? A companion for Adam. In Psalm 68:6 we read that God sets the solitary, or lonely, in families. The family unit, as well as the church family, is one of God's provisions for our need. The Scriptures declare that relationships are God's gift to human beings, who

were created in His image and therefore can laugh and cry, communicate, love, forgive, and enjoy companionship. The Bible teaches that it is our responsibility to build relationships rather than neglect them. What an awesome privilege this is! Though we often take relationships for granted, it is truly amazing that we have been given the ability to commune with both God and other people and then to enjoy all the emotional (and physical) benefits of doing so.

The best-selling book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie was written almost a hundred years ago. It was an instant best seller in 1936 and still ranks eleventh on Amazon's list of highest selling nonfiction books. What makes this well-known classic so wildly popular to people everywhere? It seems to be cross-cultural, gender neutral, and appealing to any age group. While many scratch their heads at Carnegie's seemingly magic formula, the book's success should not be a huge mystery to believers. Many of Carnegie's simple principles concerning human relationships are as old as the pages of the Bible. Don't criticize, condemn, or complain; give honest and sincere appreciation; look at things from another's point of view; listen to others with genuine interest; smile; remember a person's name; draw out the other person's interests. All these suggestions have Biblical correlations.

Even a popular self-help book like Carnegie's cannot compare with God's Word. The Bible contains a vast treasure of priceless information about relationships that is unmatched by anything we might find in the self-help sections of our local bookstores. Never have there been more books available that rely on human reasoning to unlock the mysteries of human relationships and motivation. Yet, as interesting and inspiring as some are, they lack answers that satisfy the soul. As Isaiah said, "It is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20). Books are at best miniscule imitators of the real thing. In other words, muddy water might keep us alive, but water from God's

cool, clear springs will satisfy our hearts and make us thrive. Let us go there instead and drink deeply!

I am excited to embark with you on a study that will take us straight to the life-changing, refreshing Word of God for answers about friendship challenges of every kind. I am certain you will find that the wisdom of God far excels anything found in your local bookstore. Better yet, it has the power to transform our lives and relationships with eternal results. The power of a friend is breathtaking, for good or for evil. Friendship is a subject we need to understand. Let's get started!





# *God's Plan of Salvation*

Carefully ponder these Scripture verses, as they explain how you can have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. God loves you and wants you to enjoy the abundant life He offers you.

- *John 3:16*. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”
- *John 10:10*. Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

All people are sinful, and their sin separates them from God.

- *Romans 3:23*. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”
- *Romans 6:23*. “For the wages of sin is death [spiritual separation from God].”

Jesus Christ's death is the only provision God has made to pay for people's sin.

- *Romans 5:8*. “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”
- *John 14:6*. “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

You must receive Jesus Christ as your Savior before you can personally experience His love for you and the abundant life He has planned for you.

- *John 1:12*. “But as many as received him, to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to those that believe in his name.”

You can invite Christ into your life right now by an act of faith.

- *Ephesians 2:8–9*. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Are you ready to receive Christ as your Savior? Use the following prayer as a guide to help you express your desire to God: “Lord God, I know I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe Jesus died for my sins. Right now I receive Him as my Savior. Take control of my life, and replace all the restlessness and anxiety with peace and contentment.”

If you have prayed this prayer, tell your Bible study leader or a friend who has been trying to help you.

Learn to trust God's Word—not your feelings—when doubts come.

- *Romans 10:13*. “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”
- *1 John 5:11–13*. “And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.”

# The Gift of Friendship

WHO OF US HAS NOT DREAMED of having a perfect friend who would love us unconditionally, always be there when needed, and always have just the right encouraging words. She would never gossip about us, judge us harshly, or become jealous, unkind, or thoughtless. She would be happy, fun, thoughtful, and loyal. We imagine life would be so much happier and fulfilling if we had such a friend. Long after childhood's playground cliques and best friend squabbles have ended, women still long for that elusive relationship that doesn't involve any disappointment at all. Why is this? Because even the crustiest old woman living alone and aloof from others desires to be loved and accepted.



## Study the Word

*Read Luke 1.*

### The Gift of Friendship

If we lived in a perfect world without sin of any kind, relationships would not be a problem for anyone. Everyone, including republicans and democrats, would love each other completely and unreservedly. Pride and selfishness would cease, and joy would abound. In reality we don't live in a perfect world, but in a world that has been cursed with sin, which has touched everything, including our relationships.

Friendships are works of art in process. Thankfully, our loving God has provided His Word to guide us in developing them.

There is no better way to learn the art of friendship than becoming better acquainted with friends in the Bible. May we learn from their stories, and grow to be better friends to one another as a result.

## **The Giver of Friendship**

God gave Mary, the mother of Jesus, an understanding, special friend at a time when she needed one most. Imagine Mary's emotions upon learning she would be the virgin mother of the promised Messiah. Mary did not know whether Joseph would reject her and break off their relationship, whether her family would believe her, or whether she would be sent away. But she did understand that the normal rhythm of life in Nazareth was about to end. Her pregnancy would become big news and could spark a firestorm of opinions, accusations, misunderstanding, disbelief, and rejection. It was a crisis of epic proportion, and Mary knew it. Where could she turn to find an understanding friend in this time of great need?

Mary left Nazareth, traveling to the distant home of her cousin Elizabeth. This relative had conceived a son in her old age by God's power and was now six months into her pregnancy. She would be someone Mary could confide in, who would believe that Mary had been visited by an angel. Though Elizabeth was old, she was just the right friend for Mary at just the right time. God's timing was perfect.

1. Read Luke 1:36–45. What do you believe made the friendship between Mary and Elizabeth especially encouraging for Mary?

Mary simply believed God and trusted His promises and character: He knew what lay ahead and what Mary needed. When she saw Elizabeth and heard her greeting revealing she already knew Mary was the mother of her Lord, Mary received instant confirmation of all she believed. Her heart was so full of relief, gratitude, and wonder that she broke out in a heartfelt song of praise to God. He was not only fulfilling the long-awaited promise of a Savior, but was tenderly involved with the littlest details in the lives of two humble, unknown, but godly women.

2. Read Mary's praise to the Lord in Luke 1:46–55. What did she say about the Giver?

Our friendships are gifts from God that flow out of our relationship with Him. While friendships cannot ever replace our need for the Lord, God may use a friend to encourage and comfort us; and He will comfort us. Our hope must be in Him, not in people. When we understand that our true need is for Christ, not friends, we discover that Christ meets all our needs and blesses our lives with sweet friendships. I like to think of it this way: Coffee and chocolate are sweet delights, but they are not necessary to our survival. Water, however, is essential. Friends are the dessert, the chocolate chips in the cookies of life (or the nuts in our brownies). The Lord Jesus Christ is the life-giving water that we must have every day to stay alive.

The spiritual encouragement, love, and acceptance that Mary received from Elizabeth was a sweet gift of God that she would treasure in her heart and remember for the rest of her life. Mary experienced many lonely days when friends were scarce and accusers were plentiful. God may not have always given Mary encouragement in the form of a friend, but He always gave Mary exactly what she truly needed. He will do the same for us who put our trust in Him.

3. Read John 19:25–27. Who stayed with Mary and supported her at the cross? What was each one's relationship to her?

The Lord gave Mary a special friend, Elizabeth, at a crucial time in her young life. Then many years later, the Lord provided Mary with understanding friends who were with her at the cross—another extremely difficult time. Jesus' last act of tender love toward Mary was to instruct John to care for her as he would his own mother. In this we see the loving heart of our Lord toward His own. Just as God provided for Mary, He will provide for you if you are His own dear child.

4. (a) Read Matthew 12:48–50. (a) What point was Jesus making?
  
- (b) How does Jesus' point assure your heart that He will provide the same care for you that He gave to Mary?

## **The Perfect Friend**

God is the perfect and forever friend. His love, grace, and mercy have built a bridge between Himself and sinners. Religion tells us that God will love us if we change; the gospel, on the other hand, tells us that receiving God's love and forgiveness as a gift will change us.

We humans lost our original relationship with God because of sin, but it is restored when we are reconciled by the sacrifice of Christ. Our longing for intimacy was designed to be satisfied, first and foremost, by our relationship to God. When we ignore this truth, we find ourselves disillusioned by others and dissatisfied with the quality of our relationships. To enjoy true

intimacy with others, our relationship to them must be secondary to our relationship with Christ. Like Mary and so many believers like her, we must turn our eyes toward the promises of our God and Savior, finding our greatest joy and comfort in Him. Then we can fully enjoy and love the friends that God brings across our paths, imperfect though they might be.

5. Read 2 Peter 1:2. How can we have grace and peace multiplied in us?

It's not hard for us to understand the human longing to be known, accepted, and loved. We cherish anyone who touches us with kindness and genuine understanding. We also want someone to listen with interest, with the goal of understanding what we long to communicate. The more our communication leads to understanding and unity, the more delightful and intimate it is. When we are assured we are loved, accepted, and understood, we open our hearts and share our lives, our hopes and dreams, our thoughts and fears, our ideas, joys, and sorrows. Mary and Elizabeth shared a mutual love for God and the Scriptures and an awareness that God was at work in their lives in miraculous ways. Notice how Mary sought out not only someone to share her good news with, but someone she knew would understand. Their faith found an understanding "kindred spirit"; and, consequently, their hearts were filled with joy. It feels good to be understood, but it feels even better when understanding is mutual!

Today God desires a sweet relationship with you and me. He wants to commune with us and share His life with us. He knows us, right down to how many hairs are on our heads (and what color they really are). In fact, no one in the world understands us like the Lord Jesus Christ! Mary and Elizabeth both would

have known Psalms well. Because they listened to the message of Psalms and received God's Word, they knew God well.

6. Read the following psalms and identify what Mary and Elizabeth knew about God.

Psalm 33:4

Psalm 34:4

Psalm 44:21

Psalm 50:15

Psalm 86:5

Psalm 116:2

Wow! God's children are known and loved immensely! The apostle John exclaimed, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God" (1 John 3:1). No wonder Mary and Elizabeth expressed great joy and gave glory to God for His great love!

7. Is your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ mutual? He loves and understands you, but do you know and love Him? Do you listen attentively to Him, with the goal of understanding?

One-sided relationships are not mutually satisfying. The real sweetness comes when both friends know and understand one another.

8. What is the difference between knowing about someone and knowing that person intimately as a friend?



9. Read Jeremiah 9:24. God wants us to do more than learn facts about Him or memorize favorite passages of Scripture. After pondering this verse, what do you believe He wants you to know?



## **Consider This**

We were made to share our lives. We were made to walk in the light of God's love and to enjoy fellowship with one another, just as Mary and Elizabeth enjoyed one another. We were made with a deep desire to be understood and to communicate. God wants to hear and enjoy your voice! Proverbs 15:8 teaches us that the prayer of the upright is His delight. Likewise, He wants you to hear and enjoy His voice.