

Set the Captives Free Devotional Guide

by Tim Nichols

Introduction

You've probably noticed by now, but these songs aren't just songs; they're doors. These are the kinds of songs you get when someone goes into God's presence to worship, and then punches a doorway back into our world from the other side so we can join them.

The songs you'll hear on this album are filled with familiar truths. We all know, if we paid attention in church, that God is faithful, kind, compassionate, loving, just, and so on. We can say all the right words. But when God begins to draw us toward Himself, He usually begins with experience. As we experience God in our lives, we come to know, down in our bones, what those words *really* mean.

These songs are written from that place, and every one of them is a door to an encounter with God. Meet Him here. Hear His voice. Reflect on your experience with Him, revisit the truths He's given you, and maybe, from your perch here amid the music, come to know Him in a new way.

Blessings,
Tim

Enter This Place

"Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and...knelt down on his knees before all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven.

When Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD'S house.

(2 Chr. 6:12-13, 7:1-2)

When Solomon finished building the Temple, it was just wood and stone and metal. It was a house for God, and it was beautiful, but God wasn't in the house yet. No fire on the altar, no glory cloud.

When God took possession, everything changed. The fire on the altar was kindled, not by a priest with a tinder box, but by God Himself. His glory filled the the temple so intensely that the priests couldn't go in and work; it was too bright in there.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians that we are the temple of God. We can take care of ourselves, build our lives and relationships well, be in every way good stewards of what God has given us, just like Solomon was a good steward of all the building materials that had been given to him. But no matter how well we build, it's just an empty building until God moves in.

And let's be honest: much of the time we don't even build that well. It's more a broken mess than an *Architectural Digest* photo op, you know? But here's the beautiful thing, the part where your life is different than Solomon's Temple: God doesn't just want to move in after you get everything fixed up and ready for Him. *He wants to be the construction crew.* He's not waiting for you to make it perfect; He's waiting for you to invite Him in.

You invite Him in. He will provide the glory.

Awaken

"To the Chief Musician. Set to 'Do Not Destroy.'
A Michtam of David when he fled from Saul into the cave.
Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me!
For my soul trusts in You;
And in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge,
Until these calamities have passed by....
Awake, my glory!
Awake, lute and harp!
I will awaken the dawn.
I will praise You, O Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing to you among the nations."
(Ps. 57:1, 8-9)

Ever just feel hollowed out? Tired, used up, worn out? Like you've been strong for too long, taken too many hits in a row, lost too much, and now there's just nothing left? You no longer have it in you to...well, anything, really. Just done with it all. This song is a prayer from that place. It's not a request to just scrape by, or go back to how things used to be. No, this is asking God to fill your heart with fire and your mouth with praise.

When things are hopeless, that's how we need to respond. Of course we don't have it in us to generate the praise and passion we need in that moment—but God can do it in us. So sing along with this one as a prayer, and look forward to *new* life. Count on it: what comes next will be *more* than what came before: stronger, deeper, more alive than ever. That's the way God works.

Where are you completely stuck, worn out, done? Ask God to give you something to look forward to. Ask Him to show you some of the good that you're trusting Him for. And then, while you're waiting for Him to deliver on what He has promised, praise Him. You'll be glad you did.

To Trust You

“You will keep him in perfect peace,
Whose mind is stayed on You,
Because he trusts in You.
Trust in the LORD forever,
For in YAH, the LORD, is everlasting strength.”
(Isa. 26:3-4)

Remember the story where the disciples are caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of the night, and Jesus comes walking up to them on the water? Peter says, “Lord, if that’s you, command me to come out on the water!”

Jesus says, “Come on!”

Peter jumps out of the boat. What’s he thinking?

I think it’s very simple. Peter has decided to follow Jesus in absolutely everything. If Jesus is preaching the kingdom of God, then Peter wants to be preaching the kingdom of God. If Jesus is healing and casting out demons, then Peter wants to be healing and casting out demons.

Tonight, Jesus is walking on water—whaddaya thing Peter wants to be doing?

So he jumps out of the boat with nothing in his mind except that this is what Jesus is doing, and so he wants to be in on it. And Jesus just *loves* that.

Of course, you know the story, so you know that a few steps into the adventure, Peter started looking at the waves and the wind around him—looking at the facts—and decided, like a responsible adult, that people don’t walk on water. Then he started to sink...

But even doubting and sinking, Peter knew what to do: “Lord, save me!”

And Jesus did.

The moral of the story, of course, is that you should not let the facts distract you from what God is actually doing.

But there’s a second moral of the story that we often miss: even when we get distracted, Jesus is there. He loves it when we trust Him. But when we are faithless, He remains faithful. Knowing that, we are free to take steps of faith that are really much too big for us.

“I trust God,” you might say to yourself, thinking about a big risk it seems God wants you to take, “but I don’t trust me. When I get in the middle of this, I’m gonna start to doubt. I’m gonna wonder if I really heard God. I’m gonna wonder why I was crazy enough to believe this impossible thing could really happen.”

Don’t talk yourself out of it. Jesus loves it when we trust Him. He loves it when we take the risks He calls us to take, even when they really are too big for us.

And when we doubt, He is there to catch us and pull us to safety.

You don’t have to trust *you*. Trust *Him*.

No Other Way

“Behold the proud; his soul is not upright within him,
But the just shall live by faith.”
(Habakkuk 2:4)

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.”
(Hebrews 11:1-2)

“Tim, what is faith?” Jamie looked at me intently. We were sitting at a picnic table outside a conference where we happened to bump into each other. Jamie is a wild man, a world traveller, and the man who taught me how to hear from God. Last I heard, he was in Jerusalem—then on the first night of the conference, I looked to my right, and there he was, 20 yards away. The next day after lunch, we found a quiet corner outside for a little face time. And this is what he asked me.

“Well...it’s trusting God,” I said.

“But what does that actually mean?” He pointed at Hebrews 11:1, in the Bible on the table. “If you don’t get all theological about it, what do the words actually mean?”

I looked confused.

“What’s a substance?” he asked, rhetorically. “It’s a thing, a solid reality that’s here right now.” He rapped on the table, illustrating. “If we take this statement seriously, then it says that faith is the solid, right-here-right-now reality of what we hope for.”

I just looked confused still.

“So what does it mean to walk by faith? It means that you ask yourself, ‘If I knew for sure that God was going to come through with what He promised, what would I do *right now?*’ — then you do that. That’s faith—the right-now reality of what God promised to deliver.”

The same thing works with the second half of the verse. What’s evidence?

Suppose you got jumped by a thug on the sidewalk. You fight back, and lucky for you, a couple police officers walk around the corner 30 seconds later. They break it up, and your attacker points at you and yells, “I’m gonna press charges!” He starts telling the officers how he was just standing here minding his own business when *you* attacked *him*.

Now you know that he’s lying, and he knows he’s lying, but the police officers didn’t see how it started; you were already fighting when they walked around the corner. So they’re going to need evidence. They’ll listen to your story and his story, and see if one of you is obviously lying.

They’ll look around and see if the security camera outside the bank down the street captured the beginning of the fight on video, and so on, right?

What is the purpose of the evidence? It’s not to convince you—you already know what happened. The purpose of evidence is to help other people come to know what you know already.

And faith is the evidence of unseen things. Your faith is how other people can come to know things they can't see for themselves. What the verse is telling us, if we just take it at face value, is that we ask ourselves, "What would I do today if I knew for sure that God was going to come through with what He promised?" Then we do that, and when we do, other people come to know that God's promises are real.

So what has God promised you? What would you do today, right now, if you knew that God's promises would not fail?

Do that. Drop me a note and let me know how it goes.

Set the Captives Free

"So [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah, and when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.'

Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'"

(Lk. 4:16-21)

When you walk with Jesus, you can't stand still, because He is going somewhere. God is on a mission to save the world, and Jesus is about His Father's business. When He came to Nazareth early in His ministry, Jesus had an opportunity to tell them what He was about, and setting the captives free is a big piece.

What does that mean for you? It means that the part of your life where you think you can never grow, the place where you will always fail, where your own weaknesses and sins will always drag you down—that is exactly the place where Jesus wants to set you free.

Of course, we want Him to do it instantly—just make the problem disappear. Sometimes He does that. I've seen it in others and I've experienced it in myself. Sometimes Jesus really does just magically transport you out of whatever prison you're trapped in. But often, He lets you walk

out. He breaks the chains; He opens the doors; He makes a way. And then He says, "Come with me," and if you'll follow Him, He will walk with you to freedom.

So what is the prison you're trapped in? Maybe you've been a Christian for decades, or maybe you're still not too sure about this whole Jesus thing. Doesn't matter. Whatever that place is for you, today, Jesus wants to set you free. Ask Him.

Into Your Loving Arms

"Keep me as the apple of Your eye; Hide me under the shadow of Your wings"
(Ps. 17:8)

I remember once hearing lifelong missionary, author and speaker Elisabeth Elliot make fun of singing about surrendering to Jesus. "I didn't know He was attacking!" she chuckled.

I'll be the first to admit the lady has a point. At the same time, though, doesn't it sometimes feel like an attack? Jesus tends to go a lot further than you thought He would. You ask Him to help you redecorate the living room one afternoon, and the next morning you wake up to an awful racket coming from your front yard. You run outside, and there's Jesus with a bulldozer. "I looked over the living room," He says, "and I'm sorry, but the foundation is bad. It's all got to come down." You stare at Him in disbelief, and He claps you on the shoulder. "Don't worry; we'll rebuild it together."

It's a hard thing, trusting Jesus in a time like that. "Surrender" is actually a pretty reasonable description. At times like that, it's worth reflecting on two things in particular: what Jesus has already done for us, and what we're trusting instead.

We're never just trusting nothing. If we're not trusting Jesus, we're trusting our own decisions, our own judgment, our own strength. And we are masters at "healing the wound lightly," at treating the symptoms but not going deep enough to get the underlying cause. Jesus goes for it all—"Even now, the ax is laid to the root of the tree." But here's the thing: He made us, and He died for us. No one knows what we actually need better than He does, and He loves us with an everlasting love that pursued us when we were His enemies. We can trust Him.

Jesus is not attacking you. But where do you need to surrender?

God Who Sees

“When Sarai treated Hagar harshly, she ran away. Then the Angel of the LORD found Hagar by a spring in the wilderness on the way toward Shur. And He said, ‘Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?’

She said, ‘I am running away from my mistress Sarai.’

The Angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her. I will overwhelmingly multiply your descendants, so many that they cannot be counted. Look, you are pregnant, and will bear a son. Call his name Ishmael (“God hears”), because the LORD has heard your affliction. He will be a wild man — his hand against every man, and every man’s hand against him — but he will live in the presence of all his brothers.’

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; because she said, “Here I have seen the One who sees me.”

(Gen. 16:6-13)

We live in a very appearance-conscious culture, and so we are used to being looked at. But we are not really used to being *seen*. It can be intimidating to discover that someone really sees your need, your desperation, your dark secrets.

But when we get really desperate, we don’t care anymore. When you’re really injured, the paramedics cut away your clothes to get to the wound, and you don’t even notice; you just want help. In our deepest need, we crave being seen and known. We want to know that someone notices how hurt we are, how much we need help.

Someone does.

God doesn’t just see your needs. He sees *everything*—your temptations, your dark secrets, your fears, your strengths, all of it. You cannot surprise God. And every good thing God ever said about you, all the many good things He has promised you—He made all those promises *knowing all your dark secrets*. So don’t get shy about asking Him to deliver because you think you’re not worthy. He knows. He’s the one who makes you worthy. How can He just disregard your flaws like that? Well...that’s the next song. For now, trust that He does, and He loves you.

Where do you need to come to terms with being seen?

Power of the Blood

“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD. Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they will be white as wool.”

(Isaiah 1:18)

“Therefore stand, having put on the breastplate of righteousness”

(Ephesians 6:14)

What faults does God see in you?

As you read that question, are there a few things that come to mind? Does that make it hard to believe—like the song says—that God sees no fault in you?

Like the prophet said: come, let us reason together. All the accusations you will ever face—from other people, from the powers of darkness, and even from yourself—all of them break down into two simple categories. True accusations, and false accusations. The false accusations don't matter, because they're false. God knows the truth, and if you listen to His voice, He will tell you the truth.

But what about the ones that are true? That's what really gets us, isn't it? Paul gives us the answer to all accusations in Ephesians 6 when he tells us to put on the breastplate of righteousness. The problem is, we don't know what that actually means. The first thing we should know is that Paul is reaching back to Isaiah 59:17 (which you should read. Go on, I'll wait.) God is getting ready to go to war, and it says He put on righteousness as His breastplate. So when Paul tells you to put on the breastplate of righteousness, he's not talking about you doing good stuff. The armor is not *your* righteousness; it's God's righteousness, that He gives you to put on.

Great...but nobody uses the word “righteous” anymore except surfers, and they don't mean quite the same thing by it, right? What does “righteousness” even mean? In Scripture, righteousness is the quality of being in the right, of being vindicated. It's the judge saying, “Not guilty.” It's the principal saying, “You're ok; you can go now.”

Righteousness means that when you're accused, God says you're ok. And since it's God's righteousness, God says you're as ok as He is. That's pretty ok.

And that is what the blood of Jesus bought. When we crucified the sinless Son of God, every dark thing, every weakness, every sin was nailed to the cross with Him. When He died, all those things died with Him, and were buried in the heart of the earth with Him. And when He busted out of the grave three days later, He was not dragging a Hefty bag full of your sins—they all

stayed buried while He rose to a new life. You are raised to a new life with Him, and God says you're as ok as Jesus is.

And that's your answer to every fault: "God says I'm ok." When the accusation comes—from you, from someone else, doesn't matter—the answer is, "God says I'm ok." Say it out loud. Now say it again, like you mean it this time. Because God does mean it. He sees no fault in you.

How Deep The Father's Love

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? The One who gave up His own Son, not holding Him back—how would He not give us everything else along with His Son?

(Romans 8:31-32)

If you've been around much in American culture, you've heard that Jesus died on the cross for our sins so we can go to heaven, and not roast in hell. That's true as far as it goes. But it doesn't go nearly far enough.

When Jesus shouted "It is finished!" from the cross, it really was. The power of sin was broken for all time. That settled your eternal destiny, but it also freed you from the power of sin in this life. He didn't say, "It *will be* finished (when you get to heaven)." He said, "It *is* finished." And it was.

The Father didn't just give His Son to populate heaven. He gave His Son to free us *now*. And if He already gave His Son, what would He withhold from us? Whatever you need to navigate this life, whatever problem you're facing, whatever lie or accusation is tripping you up—your Father already has the solution. He loves you, and He's ready to give you everything you need.

What are you facing today that it would be good to get Dad's help with? Ask Him. Go on, ask Him. He loves you. He wants good things for you. He isn't going to hold back.

The Good Shepherd

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life,

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

(Psalm 23:5-6)

We all know the 23rd psalm, but we tend to focus on the front part, where the image is a sheep following the shepherd. Can I point out something obvious? Sheep don't eat at tables, drink

from cups, or live in houses. In the last few verses, the image changes. Here, the psalmist is a servant of the king, living in the king's house and enjoying the king's favor. He still has enemies, but he's just not worried about it.

We have a hard time with that. We understand the presence of an enemy as a high-priority situation that needs to be solved. We wouldn't try to build anything, or start anything, or enjoy anything in the presence of our enemies. But God isn't worried about it. It's not like they can do anything without His permission. Remember, this is the same God who guarded you through the valley of the shadow of death. So when God the Warrior King decides He wants to make you a meal, He sets the table. Sure, you have enemies scattered about. So what?

"Dad, how am I supposed to enjoy all this when *that* guy is *right there*?"
"Let Me worry about him. Sit down; I made pot roast."

As they watch, He sets the table in front of you and offers you the seat of honor. As they watch, He anoints you with the fragrant oil of His favor and blessing, and there's not a thing they can do about it. As they watch, you share table communion with God—even though they're sure you don't deserve any of it. As they watch, He pours the wine—celebration and rest in a cup. He fills your cup to overflowing.

Your enemies stand watching in disbelief. How can you possibly be getting everything they want? They gnash their teeth, they pace back and forth. They plot and scheme. But our God is king. He will give whatever He wants, and there's not a thing they can do about it.

What has He given you today? Right now, name three things. Thank Him for them, and rest in His care for you.

Doxology

"It is good to sing praises to our God;
For it is pleasant, and praise is beautiful."
Psalm 147:1

Some of my earliest memories are from The Church of the Lighted Cross in Riverdale, Maryland, which my father pastored. They had a tiny little building adorned—true to the name — with a lighted cross at the apex of the roof over the door. Or at least that's how I remember it. To be honest, the mulberry trees that grew by the side of the building stick in my memory better than any other detail about the place. I used to gorge myself, stuffing my face with purple-stained fingers.

I also remember that they closed every single service with the Doxology. In that little church, the words of this song were engraved on my heart forever. The lyrics are simple enough; there's no complex theological reasoning here. All blessings flow from the Triune God, and He is worthy of

our praise. More important than the words, the *habit* of praise was engraved on my heart forever. Whatever we're doing, it is good to finish with praise.

I was much older when I learned the story of the hymn. The tune, called Old Hundredth, was originally composed for Psalm 100 in the 1551 Genevan Psalter. In the year 1560, William Kethe created the English-language version. It goes like this:

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,
Him serve with joy, His praise forthtell,
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

Know that the Lord is God indeed;
Without our aid He did us make;
We are His folk, He doth us feed,
And for His sheep He doth us take.

O enter then His gates with praise,
Approach with joy His courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless His name always,
For it is seemly so to do.

For why? The Lord our God is good,
His mercy is forever sure;
His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from age to age endure.

The lyrics we know as the Doxology today were written in 1674 by Thomas Ken as part of a larger hymn, and were later taken as a stand-alone hymn and set to the tune of Psalm 100.

For hundreds of years, God's people have been singing this tune. Many of them have died and gone to heaven, and who knows? Perhaps they're singing the Doxology before the throne right now.

God's people have a long history of praise, for good reason. We serve a God who is worthy of it. For the next month, end your day with the Doxology. Just try it. I dare you. See what happens. If you want to get really crazy, try Psalm 100 with the same tune.