

LIVE IN SAFETY

I can't help but hear the quirky tune of "Safety Dance" in my head. Even if you're not a fan of '80s music, you may know the song. The lyrics make little sense, but the song says "we can dance if we want to." Since I began to work on this topic, the tune has followed me around and reminded me that I can dance in safety while loved by the Father.

You don't have to fear dark shadows lurking behind every corner. Love allows us, as believers, to face each day knowing that God upholds us.

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."
(Isaiah 41:10)

Since I find the above verse written in Holy Scripture, I know it's true. Yet there are times when I fear, and I can actually feel the oppression by the enemy crushing and disabling me.

Scripture also warns:

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world." (1 Peter 5:8-9)

The enemy is real, so anyone who underestimates him risks falling for his schemes. His intention isn't simply to hinder; his objective is to destroy us as believers. Since he can't steal our salvation, he settles on damaging our walk, crushing our spirit, and causing us to doubt.

I recently went through a dark season where opposition got the best of me for a while. At the time, I wasn't sure what was happening. I just knew something was dreadfully wrong. When it was over and the sun reappeared, I sat one morning and asked God what had happened. A conclusive answer never came. Beyond the fact that the experience has allowed me to write this chapter from an up-close and personal perspective, I don't think I will ever fully understand.

When no answer came, I did the next best thing: I asked how to prevent it from happening again. From there, during my quiet time and through Bible reading, the Lord outlined some safety principles for me to follow. I have to believe they will benefit anyone who reads this since we are all susceptible to the wiles of the devil. I know there are many more principles than what I'm offering here, ones unique to you, but these will get you started. Remember, when facing a tough season of your own, ask questions through prayer. God will give you your own warning signs to watch for.

Safety in Numbers

We need the many. To think any of us can remain an island unto ourselves and maintain spiritual health is dangerous and opens us up to the enemy's attack. If you consider the real-life application of a safari, you will see the comparison of how we are safer in fellowship with others.

I once had a small-group leader share how, on a safari, the people are instructed to remain together. When in transit, for example, if a lion sees the group in a vehicle, he sees them as a whole, not as individual members. To that lion the collective group is a bigger-than-him foe, so he will not attack. Let the group stop and one member wander away, and the lion won't hesitate to pounce.

Spiritually, it's the same with us. When we are attached to the body of believers, we are formidable foes. Alone, we are an attack and fall waiting to happen.

When viewing my recent difficult situation through the lens of safety in numbers, I realized I had allowed myself to become isolated. My husband and I are attending a new church, so I feel disconnected.

I'm not yet surrounded by people I know as my church family. I know it will take time for bonds to form and to feel at home there, so in the meantime I must make sure to surround myself with other believers in the form of family and friends.

We need the few. I've been privileged to experience this firsthand. First, through the intercessory prayer of two godly women who, during a previous season of spiritual, mental, and emotional weakness, held me up until I was strong enough to walk again, just as Aaron and Hur did for Moses (Exodus 17:8-16). And second, through two friends and co-laborers in the faith who help keep me on track in the midst of this overwhelming book project. Their continued encouragement has enabled me to keep going when I am tempted to give up. God used them to drive this point home.

Recently, I had fooled myself into believing that no one believed in what I was doing with this book, specifically the two friends and co-laborers I mentioned who are working with me as I write. Through a misplaced email, an unanswered text, and my own doubts, I assumed I had lost their support. That wasn't the case with either, but that was the flaming dart the enemy shot toward me. In my unsuspecting and alone season, that arrow landed and spread like wildfire, allowing natural self-doubt to consume me and render me paralyzed for some time.

We believers sincerely need others. If you are anything like me and tend to withdraw into your own little world, then this warning is for you: The enemy waits and watches for an opportunity to catch you wandering from your safari group. He will pounce the moment he's given the chance. I can't encourage you enough to keep strong believers in your corner to walk with you on this journey through life.

I kind of roll my eyes at myself now, as it seems pretty ridiculous that a comedy of communication errors could so easily cripple me. There was more to the story, however. Besides my being isolated, I had fallen for something that is a recurring issue for me: I cast more than a quick peek toward tomorrow.

Safety in the Present

Speculating over the future is nothing new for me. Every self-respecting control freak does it. We have to in order to know what's coming so we can get a handle on how to manipulate it. Does that sound familiar? Sure, we look toward tomorrow pretending to be wise, but it's less about planning with wisdom and more about us ensuring the outcome that we desire.

The future is a dangerous place. Over the years I have found that a prolonged visit will only disable, disillusion, and disappoint me (more on these topics in the next chapter). Why I keep allowing my mind to future-gaze, I'm not sure. For many believers, though, that's a recurring theme, looking ahead toward a future we can't alter at the expense of our sanity today.

Another misstep that led to my oppressive season was allowing my dream for the future to become an expectation. I took my own vision and credited God with giving it. When I found that my project wasn't going to work out the way I had expected, I became disillusioned and was soon derailed. I thought a particular direction had been God-given, but it wasn't. My misunderstanding Him in such a colossal way snowballed and had me wondering if I had ever heard Him at all. Crazy how mishearing one thing can give the enemy enough ammunition to do the wide-spread damage he did to my confidence.

Now that I've experienced the fallout from my misguided expectations, I've learned a valuable lesson: In my daily work life, I try to accomplish that which is in front of me without regard for what will become of it or the direction it will take. Rather than considering the outcome of what I write, I have to trust that when I write anything at all, God will use it for His purposes, big or small. If I am surrendered to Him, isn't it His decision to use or not use me?

On a personal level I have to learn to do the same thing. Each day I try to make the most of the day given me. That applies to me as a wife, mom, and daughter. All of those titles invite me to worry about the future for my husband, kids, and parents. To consider the distant future in any of those areas will only usher in disabling fear, disillusionment, and disappointment.

You have a similar obligation to glance toward the future in order to make tentative plans, but only a quick peek is safe. There will be holidays, vacations, school and job choices to make, and retirements to plan. Since our future is often crafted by our choices today, it makes sense to consider the future with some

forethought. Just don't allow forethought to become an extended stay. What's the point of trying to figure out the elusive tomorrow when you're only promised today?

Today is a guarantee. Live in it. Thrive in it. Make an impact here in the now. For me personally, if I can do that, then by the end of each day I feel a sense of success that brings peace. Each today blazes a trail toward your future and sculpts what it will look like. If you really want the future of your dreams, it all begins with living in the safety of the present.

Safety in God's Word

Through carelessness of my own, I lost sight of the importance of safety in numbers and safety in the present. However, the one place I knew I was safe during my time of confusion was my daily dwelling in Scripture. While abounding in doubts over my call and abilities, I trusted God's inspired Word.

Sometime during those weeks when I faced such obvious opposition, I was led to Matthew 4. What landed me there was the desire to hear the words of Jesus Himself. Because I couldn't rely on my own feelings or what I thought I was hearing internally, I sought out Scripture, red-letter words I knew could be trusted. When you arrive in the New Testament, Jesus' wilderness experience is the second set of red-letter words you encounter, the first being the record of His baptism.

The moment I began to read the wilderness account, my first thought was how accurately it described what I was experiencing in my own life. To label it a valley season didn't feel accurate. I wasn't exactly in a low place; I was in a barren place. In hindsight, I now look at it as a season of oppression rather than what I had considered opposition at the time. Opposition is an opposing force, one to be expected from the enemy, while oppression actually takes you hostage and renders you ineffective. The fact was: Opposition became oppression because I allowed it. I didn't fight back with truth. The enemy deceived, and I ate.

I'm not saying I was led by the Spirit to some kind of wilderness temptation season like Jesus, but I will admit I accidentally dragged myself there through my own carelessness and overzealousness.

No matter how I ended up there, my best means of enduring it was to view Jesus' account and model that. WWJD, right?

"It is written..." (Matthew 4:4)

Those were the first words Jesus spoke each time when confronted with the devil's temptations. Jesus knew His best defense was the written Word of God. It's our best defense as well.

Don't miss the underlying point. Jesus knew Scripture and was able to combat every temptation thrown at Him by the enemy. Every word He spoke was yet another commitment to His call. Yes, He was God, the Word made flesh (John 1:14), but as Man, He had studied Scripture and internalized every truth. Only when we know the truth are we protected from the enemy's lies.

My journey through these verses was what gave me the most hope, along with the realization that God had a plan to use my difficult days to reach others. I want to believe that my season of doubt strengthened my commitment to what I know I am called to do. I may never fully understand why it happened, but I don't have to. I just have to trust Him to use every moment of my uncertainty for His glory. If it was solely to share this truth with you, my reader, then it was all worth it.

Safety in God's Plan

God loves me. I never doubt that. Love is still love when discipline factors into the way He deals with me. We so often think a difficult or testing season shows God's disapproval. However, I believe there are times when His approval is what leads us to the wilderness. In Jesus' life, His season of temptation came immediately after His baptism and God saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

When you face a tough season, don't make assumptions based on what you are feeling. The testing of your faith is God's handiwork in crafting His vessels for His purpose.

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”
(James 1:2-4)

In my own journey through the wilderness, in part, my lack of patience is what landed me there in the first place. Notice in the verse above the role patience plays in making us complete. If we compare this to the wilderness verses in Matthew 4, we will find the third of Jesus’ temptations was based on patience. When the enemy offered to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, he was offering Jesus a shortcut, the impatient way out. Jesus didn’t fall prey to the temptation but instead replied with another “it is written” statement. Patience was having its perfect work in the perfect Man.

That thought resonated with me. In the time prior to my season of oppression, I had wanted God’s plan for me to be fulfilled in my time and way and not His. When my expectations were broken, I was hurt and frustrated.

The fact was, and still is: God’s timing and plan are perfect. When, and only when, we are ready (complete and lacking nothing) will He bring about His best plan for us in a particular situation. I have to believe if we continually hinder the growth process with our own little bouts of pouting, like I did, we will never be ready. Since I believe that, I have to change my approach and allow patience to have its perfect work in me as the verse says. I can help the maturing process by learning from this season and agreeing with God that His timing and plans are indeed perfect.

You can do the same. Allow Him to have His way in you, even if what you’re waiting for still hasn’t or doesn’t arrive. So often, we cry out, “Now, God!” Instead, we must be ready to accept His wait or no, all the while knowing His purpose for us is perfect.

Safety in God’s Presence

Because of my many safety violations, my once steadfast trust in the Lord plummeted. I was afraid to listen for His leading since I feared getting it wrong again. Without realizing what I was doing, I took my eyes off the presence of God, an action on my part that completed the perfect storm in which I panicked and sank.

Peter’s example in Matthew 14:22-33 comes to mind. Before I make the comparison, I will say that I admire Peter for getting out of the boat to begin with. Just like Peter, I thought I had stepped out in faith and believed I was taking the right steps. My intentions were good and my faith was strong. Trouble was, I was stepping out on a word of my own.

I was in panic mode in most areas of my life because I couldn’t see Jesus. He hadn’t moved; I had. There was a barrier I had created because of disillusionment and doubt. It was like I was shouting over a wall when I prayed. The warmth and intimacy I’ve known with Him for so many years felt cool and distant. I was within touching distance, yet separated by a wall I didn’t even know I had erected.

It was all me. I had gone into protection mode and wouldn’t allow myself to hope or hear. Since I had fabricated my own future plan, when that plan went awry, I was afraid to trust anymore. I was more afraid of trusting myself than Him. It was never that I thought God had failed me. I was disgusted with myself and my own imagination and feared I had missed Him in other ways.

More detrimental than disconnecting from the body and my encouragers, I had withdrawn from the One I am created to abide in. That was the true culprit, the reason I was such an emotional and mental mess. That one realization unlocked the door in the wall I had built. I walked through and things were almost immediately back on track.

Soon after that day, a moment happened with my editor. I tried to explain what had happened and how I was so crippled because I had gone the wrong way. The way she simplified my conundrum made me feel pretty silly. She said, “So you misheard and went down the wrong path. So what? We all do that. Just back up and go down another path.”

Her words were simple and her advice wise. We all get ahead of God’s plan at times. It can be our excitement or impatience that causes it. Whatever the case, we can’t allow it to hinder our willingness to try again. Instead, we can trust that He will use the times we mishear or misunderstand to grow us or work through us, as in the creation of this lesson on learning to “safety dance.”

I couldn't have written these principles from my usual place of trust and intimacy. Any insight I gave would have been a faraway memory from my past. Instead, I needed this recent season of butting my head against the wall of my own making to give me fresh revelation and perspective.

The idea of the perfect storm comes to mind again. All of these principles I've addressed here are vital individually. Even a small fail in any area can wreak havoc in your spiritual life. My great error was that I let my guard down, and every area was affected. The enemy had a field day with my emotions because I let him in. That wall I had unknowingly erected between myself and my Protector placed me on the outside of our safari camp. Of course the lion pounced; that's what lions do.

In all areas you must guard yourself, but no area compares to being vigilant in maintaining your nearness to Jesus. Abiding in Him is the only place of true safety you will ever know on this leg of your eternal journey. There will never be a time in your life when the enemy doesn't prowl like a lion waiting to catch you alone and with your defenses down. The roaring lion may be the king of the jungle, but Jesus is the King of kings and has power over the enemy. Your nearness to Him is your protection. Remember:

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

(Isaiah 41:10)

God upholds you with His righteous right hand. You need to be diligent in staying put. Any moment distance or isolation is felt, you need to begin asking questions. If your spiritual life and quiet time feel stagnant, it may be a sign that you have placed distance between yourself and Jesus. It may be out of fear, hurt, or even unrecognized rebellion. Whatever the cause, the only remedy is to move back in. Open an honest dialogue through prayer. Admit that you can't see Him or feel His intimate presence. I started there, with that simple admission. Healing came nearly a split second after that conversation. It can for you too if you feel at all displaced from the presence of God. All you have to do is lean into the next-to-you Jesus. He hasn't moved.

CHAPTER TAKEAWAY

Key Point:

To underestimate the enemy is to invite his attack.

The enemy is real, and his intention isn't simply to hinder; his objective is to destroy us as believers. He aims to undermine your trust in God and your belief in who you are to Him. Since he can't steal your salvation, he settles on damaging your walk, crushing your spirit, and causing you to doubt.

- 1) Read 1 Peter 5:8-9. What are some ways Peter tells you to guard yourself from inevitable attacks?

- 2) Recall a time when underestimating the enemy led you to a wilderness season. Share its outcome.

Key Point:

Safety in Numbers: Don't venture away from the body.

- 3) What are some reasons Christians might pull away from the body of believers? Have you experienced this?

- 4) How can being isolated from other believers expose you to an attack from the roaring lion?

- 5) Why does having the few, those believers who walk more closely with you, matter?

- 6) Who are your few?

Key Point:

Safety in the Present: Live in today. Thrive in today. Make an impact today.

- 7) Do you see the present as a gift to be opened and appreciated? List some of today's blessings below.

- 8) How can you practically make the most of each day you're given?

Key Point:

Safety in God's Word: Internalizing God's Word is your safety net and ammunition.

- 9) Read Matthew 4:1-11. How can knowing and internalizing Scripture help you during your weakest moments? What are your own "it is written" statements that help you when in crisis?

- 10) Opposition is an opposing force, while oppression holds you down and renders you ineffective. Think of a time when you've experienced both. What have you learned that will arm you for future attacks?

Key Point:

Safety in God's Plan: God's timing and plan can be trusted.

- 11) How have you hindered the work of God in your life by your own impatience?

- 12) Have you ever had to back up and go down a different path after running ahead of God's plan?

Key Point:

Safety in God's Presence: Be vigilant in maintaining your nearness to Jesus.

- 13) Have you ever built walls between yourself and Jesus because of your mistakes or your misunderstanding His ways? Give examples.

When seasons come and you feel at all displaced from the presence of God, the remedy is as easy as leaning into the next-to-you Jesus. He hasn't moved.

- 14) Are you prone to such guilt and shame over your failures that you feel the need to keep rehashing and confessing them? Or do you simply accept God's forgiveness and choose to walk with Him again?

- 15) Develop your own safety principles by noting what can get you off track. Narrow in on activities, attitudes, or actions.
