

JOURNEY WITH A GIANT

CHOOSE YOUR GUIDE, PURSUE YOUR PURPOSE,
AND GROW IN YOUR WALK WITH GOD

LORI G. MELTON





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To Bryan, the love of my life.
Thank you for inviting me to walk with you so many years ago.
Here's to many more miles ahead.

Yours always,

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INTRODUCTION TO THE JOURNEY

Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

—Hebrews 12:1–2

What does it mean to walk with a spiritual giant? To spend a few months or even a few years intentionally learning from a single spiritual mother or father? Is this practice biblical? How can it deepen our faith? Can it really bring us closer to God? Will it help us discover and pursue our purpose?

As believers, we long to become all God created us to be. We know God has called us to a unique purpose meant to give Him glory and point others to Him during our years on earth. Yet a gap often exists between the purpose God designed for us and our knowledge of how to fulfill it. How, then, do we get from where we are now to where God intends for us to be? What practical steps can we take to pursue our purpose and deepen our relationship with God?

In the book of Hebrews, we read about a “cloud of witnesses”—spiritual giants who have gone before us and stand in heaven cheering us on as we run our own races today. This cloud includes men and women from Jesus’s time to the present—martyrs, prophets, missionaries, educators, social workers, homemakers, nurses, and other heroes of the faith who have completed their life’s pilgrimage. Having faithfully walked their sacred path from birth to eternity, they have much to offer

those of us still on earth. Their writings, art, teachings, and life stories are gifts waiting to be received along life's trail—gifts that will help us figure out who it is God has created each of us to be, what it means to be human, and how we can fulfill our individual purposes. As imperfect humans themselves, these pilgrims aren't meant to be venerated, but they should be embraced as examples of people who can help us fix our eyes more fully on Jesus and bring glory to God.

The practice of walking with a spiritual giant isn't a new concept. For centuries, believers have studied the Scriptures, pored over biographies of strong Christians, and read texts such as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* to learn and grow in their own faith. Generation after generation of our Catholic brothers and sisters have studied the lives of the saints as part of their faith tradition. And over the years, seminal works by faith leaders such as Saint Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther, Susanna Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Elisabeth Elliot, and Dallas Willard have become pivotal reference guides for countless believers across Christian denominations.

In the same way that amateur athletes can improve their game by studying the tactics of seasoned players, we can gain fresh perspectives and be strengthened for our race by journeying with the heroes of faith. The example set by these men and women can give us the courage to act when we're terrified, help us stand when we feel weak, encourage us to speak when our mouths feel like sawdust, and teach us how to focus when we're distracted. As we run the race set for us, our eyes on Jesus—the Author and Perfecter of our faith—our spiritual giants can help us take our next step . . . and our next and our next, until we cross that finish line.

WHY THIS JOURNEY?

I know what you might be thinking: *Why should I do something like this when I already attend church, participate in Bible study, and even read the occasional Christian biography?*

I had some of the same questions when the professor of my spiritual formation class introduced me to this ancient practice. To be honest,

when she told us to pick a person of faith from history to “walk with” during the course, I was worried that I would get sucked into something that resembled what I thought might be saint worship. Shouldn’t I be focused only on Jesus?

Thankfully, my instructors were patient with me and my concerns. I quickly learned that walking with a giant was similar to having a mentor or spiritual director—someone older and wiser whom I could learn from while we both followed Christ. As Paul urged the Corinthians, “Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1, CSB). I also learned that walking with a giant was not about focusing my eyes on them in worship but being strengthened by their example in my own faithfulness to Christ. Over time, it became clear that choosing a giant was often less about my own decisions and more about the miraculous leading of the Spirit—who knows more about what we need than we do.

As I embarked on my journey with a giant, I began to see benefits in my life. Was I smiling as we shared the trail? Was that a quote from my giant strengthening me in my struggle? Was I really thinking about how he lived as I wrestled with my decisions and calling? And it didn’t happen only for me. I watched as God divinely worked in similar ways in the lives of my classmates as they journeyed with their giants (including Saint Benedict, Madeleine L’Engle, and John Wesley).

In addition, the importance of choosing only one giant for an extended period of time became abundantly clear. Longing to walk alongside someone who was holy but also human, I wrestled with whom I should choose. Finally, I landed on Francis of Assisi, who appealed to me because of his love for simplicity, nature, and people. While I may have learned bits about his life and perhaps gleaned a lesson or two from reading a biography and a few of his works, it was the two years spent by his side that led to profound transformation and a new depth of spiritual growth. Because of my time with Francis—which introduced me to the full gamut of his spiritual practices, habits, strengths, and weaknesses—I gained new perspectives that brought healing to my relationships, a deeper intimacy with God, and more empathy for myself and others.

Over time, the Holy Spirit used the journey with my giant to work

the changes in me that I had always longed for: to discover and take new steps in my purpose, to overcome hurdles—where I’d been stuck in my faith and relationships—and to become more of the person I was created to be. Years after the conclusion of my first giant journey, I’m still amazed at how, almost daily, God continues to shape my life through the lessons I learned while walking with Francis of Assisi.

A year after that experience, when I realized I missed having a giant in my life, I decided to choose another one. This time, God led me to Mister Fred Rogers, and the resulting journey has had a tremendous impact on my life. I kept a careful record of my year with Mister Rogers, and those notes sparked the creation of the book you now hold in your hands. My prayer is that, through these pages, you will learn as much as I did from this extraordinary man and that my experience will guide you on a journey of your own.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book provides a template for the yearlong “giant journey.” You can walk alongside me month by month with Mister Rogers, or you can choose a different giant and follow the principles and steps I lay out. Whatever you decide, your experience is certain to be filled with wonder, adventure, discovery, and growth.

Consider inviting a friend, someone with a spirit of adventure to join you on this journey. Though not required, a friend can multiply the joy and help you stay on the path so you don’t miss the spectacular vistas ahead.

To keep the steps in the journey more manageable, the book is divided into four seasons, with each chapter representing a month of the journey. Each month has a unique theme and is further broken down into four weekly articles with journaling prompts. You can begin your journey at any time. As you follow the year format, your relationship with your giant will grow with the changing seasons.

SEASON ONE: DISCOVER

The first season is all about discovery, curiosity, and excitement, beginning from the moment you choose your giant. As you set out on your journey, get to know your giant through an easy-read book, film, YouTube video, or podcast series. Take it slow, being intentional not to rush through this early stage. Consider picking up a biography or other deeper-dive resources as the season progresses.

SEASON TWO: PERSEVERE

After getting to know your giant in season 1, you'll dig even deeper, moving beyond casual acquaintance to true friendship and appreciation for what this person is bringing to your life. You may not have spent this much time studying one person before, so you may be wondering if it's time to move on. But hold steady. This is where the journey gets good, as you move from gathering information to experiencing growth!

SEASON THREE: PLAY

After six months of careful study, use this season to step into the sunshine for a season of play! In this “comfortable” stage of your relationship, take the pressure off big intentions and allow yourself to follow rabbit trails. Explore your giant's journals, artwork, hobbies, or music—or even the writings of their friends and mentors—and discover the influences that transformed *them* even as the divine work continues in you during this relaxed season.

SEASON FOUR: TRANSFORM

By the last stage of the journey, you'll have covered all the broad categories and many of the nuances of your giant's life, unearthed fascinating facts, and collected compelling quotes. The changes that your spirit has been longing for from the beginning of the journey will begin to rise to the surface, inspired by persistent themes and characteristics of your giant as well as by the Spirit's shaping. You might see your prayers for change, healing, and deliverance answered or notice yourself looking

at people, the world, and your life differently. After months of faithful work, you will begin to notice transformation.

WHAT TO EXPECT

To ensure this journey is easily accessible, each month follows a predictable format, with the aim being consistent engagement and step-by-step growth alongside your giant. In light of these goals, each month begins with these helpful sections:

- **Steps Along the Trail:** an overview of instructions and tasks for the month
- **Journey with Fred:** a list of suggested Mister Rogers resources to explore in that month*
- **Trail Guide:** a template for recording your focus and goals for the month ahead, keeping track of the resources you plan to explore, and jotting down your reflections and experiences throughout the month's journey

Once you have a clear picture of what to expect for the month as a whole, you can dive into the weekly sections, which include . . .

- an opening quote
- the topical essay for the week, often incorporating a story from Mister Rogers's life
- one or more journal prompts for reflection

Within each month, you'll also encounter brief testimonials from other pilgrims who have experienced the giant journey. These segments usually correspond to the primary focus in the week or month where they appear, and they are meant to inspire and encourage you in your own journey.

* As a reminder, if you have chosen to journey with a different giant, you can skip this section or use it to spark ideas for the resources you could use with your own giant.

Since the giant journey is similar to a physical pilgrimage, each month closes with a Pilgrimage Principle—a creative imagining of the Camino de Santiago in Spain, which allows you to see the progress on your spiritual and emotional journey as it relates to a physical pilgrimage. The principle is followed by a Mile Marker—a space to pause and reflect on the figurative distance you have traveled before you step into the next month. This section includes . . .

- **Final Steps on the Trail:** suggested tasks for concluding the month
- **Reflection:** journal prompts to record the highlights of the month
- **Pilgrim Prayer:** a blessing to end that month's journey and to carry with you into the next
- **Travelogue:** a free-flow writing space to journal any thoughts or revelations

YOUR JOURNEY

Perhaps you picked up this book because you're feeling stuck in your spiritual life, boxed into your small cul-de-sac of faith, or wounded by circumstances that have caused you to wander away from God. Maybe your heart longs for a revitalized relationship with Him. Or you might feel strong in your faith, but you're eager to go even deeper. Whatever your story looks like, this practice is for you.

When your journey is complete, you will have traveled a year with your giant. You will have learned about your giant's life, been introduced to their mentors, and witnessed how they overcame challenges and strengthened their faith. Along the way, you will likely have deepened your relationship with God, unearthed insights about yourself, and taken new steps in your purpose.

Every journey is unique. However yours unfolds, may the Lord guide and bless you during this year with your giant. May He awaken you to the active part He desires to play in your life, illuminate the purpose He has for you, and draw you ever closer to Himself as you move forward

on the path of becoming all He has created you to be
Enjoy the journey!



MONTH ONE | AWAKEN

DREAM, PLAN, PREPARE

My introduction to the idea of spiritual giants was profound. It was as if I were a child standing out in the cold, looking in the windows at a world full of color, sound, warmth, and wonder. As amazing as my walk with God had been for my first fifty years, this was an invitation into something I had only felt a longing for, without knowing what it was I had been missing. Here were people who lived in a way I wanted to learn how to do. Voices calling me deeper.

—CHRIS SLABBEKOORN, spiritual director (Giant:
Hadewijch
of Antwerp, poet, mystic, 1200–1260)

STEPS ALONG THE TRAIL

As you take the first steps of the journey, remember to start slow, using the focus points below as a guide:

- ☐ Choose your giant.
- ☐ Become familiar with the trail guide.
- ☐ Decide how you will begin your journey and set your focus for the month.
- ☐ Complete the weekly journal prompts and the trail guide.



JOURNEY WITH FRED



Check out these resources if you've chosen Mister Rogers as your giant:

- *I'm Proud of You: My Friendship with Fred Rogers* by Tim Madigan
- *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, 2019 film

TRAIL GUIDE

Focus: What is your primary focus for this month? How is God directing your journey?

Media: What are you reading, watching, or listening to as you engage with your giant this month?

Quotes: What meaningful quotes would you like to remember from this month?

Experiences: What new places, activities, or events are you experiencing this month because of your giant?

Faith: In what ways has your giant drawn you closer to God this month? What spiritual practices have you engaged in as a result of your giant journey?

Sticky Points: What questions or topics might you want to explore more later?

WEEK ONE

CHOOSING A GIANT

As iron sharpens iron,
so one person sharpens another.

—Proverbs 27:17

A giant can come from any area of your life. He or she just needs to be someone who inspires you, exhibits characteristics you greatly admire, and possesses sincere Christian faith. You can trust the Spirit to guide you to the person you most need to learn from in your current season, whatever it may be. Even if you don't feel complete clarity about the giant you're drawn to choose, remember that many times God is working in ways we don't fully understand. He can use anyone and anything to transform our hearts and renew our minds.

After years of walking with different giants, I started keeping a list of powerful heroes of the faith who I thought I might want to journey with one day. I had grown accustomed to sharing life with spiritual companions, taking them my questions and fears, and letting their lives speak into mine. Before learning this practice, I navigated my Christian walk with an individualistic mindset; now I felt lonely without a giant by my side.

I was led to Mister Rogers after viewing a film about his life. Inspired by the powerful way he lived, his love for people, his slow way of talking, his gift of listening, his deep faith, I was eager to know more. I knew the Spirit was nudging me to learn from this amazing man.

For you, the giant you're called to might be someone from history who fascinates you, someone you read about in a book, or someone you heard mentioned on a podcast. The person you choose should also be

someone who has completed their race. In other words, just like the spiritual giants in Hebrews 11, your giant for this journey must be someone who has already passed on to heaven.

After you've completed your first giant journey, you can always come back to the beginning and choose a new giant. One of the joys of this practice is that it will be vastly different with each new faith hero you pick. So don't worry too much about choosing the "right" person for your first journey.

Here are a few basic guidelines to help you narrow down your choice: First, ask God to give you wisdom and lead you to the giant He has chosen specifically for you. Second, think about what characteristics you find yourself eager to grow in, what purpose or calling you've been sensing from God, what wounds have been keeping you in dysfunctional patterns, and what diverse voices you've been longing to learn from to broaden your own perspective.

Once you clarify your longings, calling, and struggles, research the believers of the past who may have wrestled with similar things. Imagine how God might want to shape you through the example of a faithful believer who has gone before you and whose life could inspire you to become who He created you to be. Think of it this way:

- If your heart burns for world peace, what if you spent a year with Martin Luther King, Jr.?
- If you're a woman in authority, what would you give for a year at Queen Elizabeth II's side?
- If you're a mother longing to pour God's love into your children, what would it mean to have a year with Susanna Wesley or Ruth Bell Graham?
- If you're an artist struggling to do your work well, what would the transformation within you look like after spending twelve months immersed in the wisdom and creativity of Madeleine L'Engle, Beethoven, or Michelangelo?
- If you're called to courageous leadership, what could you learn from a year with George Washington, Desmond Tutu, or Harriet Tubman?

To spark ideas, review the list below and circle anyone who appeals to you. These are just a few of the many worthy spiritual giant candidates you might choose, so don't feel as though you have to pick someone on the list. As I mentioned in the introduction, you're also welcome to journey alongside me, with Mister Rogers as your giant. The principles will be the same.

POSSIBLE SPIRITUAL GIANTS

A. W. Tozer	Friedrich von Hügel
Abraham Lincoln	George Washington
Augustine of Hippo	George Washington
Brother Lawrence	Carver
C. S. Lewis	Hannah More
Catherine Booth	Harriet Tubman
Charles Spurgeon	Henri Nouwen
Chief Joseph	Hildegard of Bingen
Clara Swain	Howard Thurman
Corrie ten Boom	Hudson Taylor
D. L. Moody	John Calvin
Dallas Willard	Jonathan Edwards
Desmond Tutu	Josephine Butler
Dietrich Bonhoeffer	Julian of Norwich
Dorothy Day	Katharina von Bora
Edith Schaeffer	Madeleine L'Engle
Elisabeth Elliot	Martin Luther
Eric Liddell	Mother Teresa
Eugene Peterson	Norman Vincent Peale
Evelyn Underhill	Oswald Chambers
Fannie Lou Hamer	Queen Elizabeth II
Fanny Crosby	Rich Mullins
Francis of Assisi	Sojourner Truth
Frederick Douglass	Susanna Wesley

As you continue to reflect on your choice of giant, consider these ad-

ditional questions:

- Is there anyone else from history who fascinates you and who you're eager to learn more about?
- Are there any real-life people that you've read about in books or seen in movies who profoundly inspire or intrigue you?
- Have any Christians you greatly admire "shown up" in your life one way or another more than once lately?

Is one name flashing in neon lights? If not, that's okay. Give it a little more time and prayer and observe over the next few days who rises to the top. Wanting to choose the right person can feel unsettling, but try not to worry. Hold the process lightly and allow God to guide you to the giant He has chosen for you.

When you finalize your choice, write your giant's name on the line below.

My spiritual giant for this journey will be

JOURNAL

- Why did you choose this giant? What drew you to him or her? What characteristics, passions, accomplishments, or struggles led you to this choice?
- What three things are you most interested in gleaning as you walk with this person?
- What is your prayer for your journey?

WEEK TWO

LET'S DO THIS!

When I think of Robert Frost's poems, . . . I feel the support of someone who is on my side, . . . someone who says, "I've been there, and it's okay to go on."

—FRED ROGERS, *The World According to Mister Rogers*

Wanting something lighthearted at the start of my giant journey, I ordered *I'm Proud of You*, which tells the story of the friendship between Mister Rogers and reporter Tim Madigan, the book's author. Each night, I read a few pages and just let myself enjoy the experience. Knowing my giant and I had a year together, I felt in no hurry. My focus was simply to read an easygoing story to begin getting acquainted with Fred.

As you begin your own journey, familiarize yourself with the trail guide at the beginning of each month. Using it as a template, prayerfully determine your focus for the month and then add any books, films, or podcasts under "Media." Don't worry about recording any meaningful quotes, experiences, spiritual practices, or sticky points yet. You can fill those in later.

In the first month, begin with the resource that most intrigues you. (Remember, if you chose Mister Rogers as your giant, you can use the resources I suggest at the beginning of each month in the section labeled "Journey with Fred.") As the months proceed, you may be led to delve into other options. Don't worry about checking off any set number of study resources or experiences. One pilgrim chose Brother Lawrence as his spiritual giant because he had written only one short book. Instead

of devouring as many resources as possible, this person was profoundly changed by savoring just one.

To help you get started, here are some options:

- Read a lighthearted book about your giant, a biography, or a book written by your giant.
- Listen to a podcast series about your giant.
- Dig into a YouTube channel that covers the life of your giant or a topic they were interested in.

Try to begin in a relaxed way. If reading a text, avoid underlining or dog-earing pages at this stage. Read *lectio divina* style the first time through, simply enjoying the experience without trying to “get anything out of it.” If you read the book again, be a little more intentional and maybe keep a pen or highlighter handy. Pause with each thought that intrigues you and jot in the margins, write down meaningful quotes, and journal your reflections in the travelogue pages provided in this book. If you come across something that puzzles you or requires more research, include that in the “Sticky Points” section of your monthly trail guide. Keep circling back to the trail guide throughout the month.

As you move forward, spend fifteen to thirty minutes a few times a week with your giant. The most common way to do this is by reading your chosen resource or listening to an audiobook or podcast. Try to find consistent times that work for you, whether that is in the morning, before bed, when you’re driving, or while you do chores around the house. As you engage with your giant, pay attention to the things that stir you. Some days may be delightful, bringing serendipitous moments of connection, while others might be challenging, revealing, convicting, or even painful. Trust that the Lord is leading you in this process and He has you on the right path.

JOURNAL

- How are you feeling led to begin?
- What resource(s) will you be exploring?

DESPERATE FOR A GUIDE

I was in a difficult season of my life—in my late thirties, ten or twelve years into pastoral ministry—and floundering. Though desperate for an older, wiser guide, I'd had trouble finding a spiritual director and felt cast out into the wide sea on a dinghy. Then a little book of Fénelon's letters arrived from a friend.

What could François Fénelon, a French archbishop, born in 1651, who served as an adviser and tutor to Louis XIV's grandson, have to say to this American pastor living in the early 2000s?

As it turned out, Fénelon had a lot to say about the terrain my soul was in as I asked the questions, "What do I do with this darkness I feel? Or this sadness? I want to know God, but I feel like I'm floundering. I'm trying really hard. Where is God?"

I think it was C. S. Lewis who said there were old voices in books who became guides for him. I'm not sure I understood that until I encountered Fénelon. For a season, he was very much that for me.

The experience was actually quite liberating, because it opened my eyes to see that I also have these other voices that are available to me if I allow them to speak into my life.

—Winn Collier, author, Eugene Peterson Center for
Christian Imagination (Giant: François Fénelon,
archbishop, theologian, poet, 1651–1715)

WEEK THREE

YOUR TAGLINE

It's not the honors and the prizes and the fancy outsides of life which ultimately nourish our souls. It's the knowing that we can be trusted, that we never have to fear the truth, that the bedrock of our very being is good stuff. . . . What is essential about you that is invisible to the eyes?

—FRED ROGERS, in *New York Times Magazine* article “The Mister Rogers No One Saw” by Jeanne Marie Laskas

Have you ever seen the movie *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, starring Tom Hanks? It tells the story of reporter Tom Junod and the healing relationship he experienced with Fred Rogers. As I mentioned in week 2, the first book I selected on my journey with Mister Rogers was about a reporter's relationship with him. I assumed the author was the same reporter the movie was based on, because, with all the demands on Fred's time, how could he have had this level of relationship with more than one? But, I was wrong. The reporter in the book was Tim Madigan and the one in the movie was Tom Junod.

Like Tom, Tim met Mister Rogers because of an article Tim was assigned to write. He flew to Pittsburgh on a Friday to interview Fred and ended up enjoying his company for three days. Fred spent all of Saturday with Tim and then invited him to church the next morning, where Tim sat with Fred and his family. When it was time for Tim to leave, Fred walked him to his car, expressing how happy he was that they had become friends. As he walked away, Fred turned around with a warm call of “Goodbye” and the “friend” hand motion in sign language. Instead of doing the interview and keeping the reporter at arm's length,

Fred had opened his heart and life.

What resided at the core of Fred Rogers was no secret. If asked to create a tagline for his life, you would likely include words or phrases such as *unconditional love* or *kindness*. If your giant is someone like Mother Teresa, you might come up with a tagline that references her heart for the poor or includes the word *compassion*. If your giant is a great leader like Teddy Roosevelt, known for his saying “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” you might create a tagline that centers on the word *strength*.

As you begin to learn what people said about Fred, think about what those you know and love might say about you. What words would others use to describe you? What characteristics pour from your words and actions during your work and play? How do others see you?

Regardless of what others might say about you, what do *you* want your tagline to be? Who you were created to be is wrapped up in your answer. As God shapes you in walking with your giant, may He bring you a few steps closer to becoming that person.

JOURNAL

- How has your giant shaped what you hope your tagline will be?

A FOURTEENTH-GENERATION DESCENDANT

Choosing my giant was a unique journey. In my seventies, I felt a strong pull to go back and live in the same community where I was raised. I'd been pondering the profound effect our ancestors have on shaping the generations to come, and I longed to be a blessing to my living siblings, children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and community.

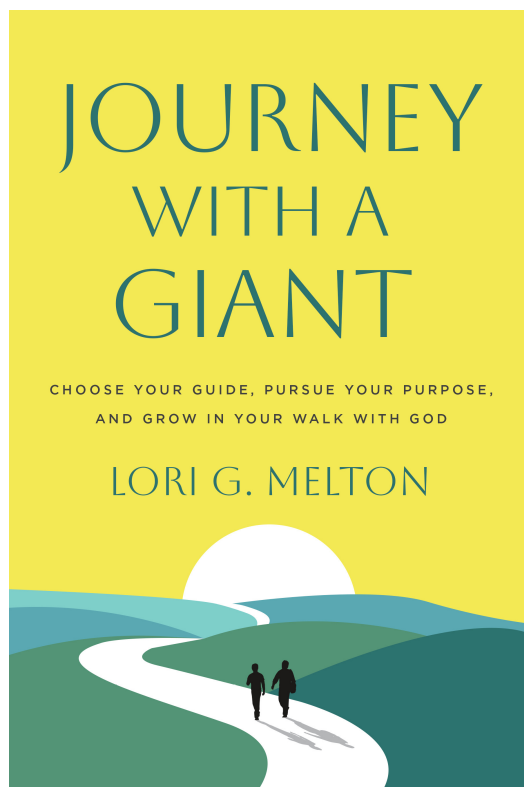
Through a conversation with my brother and a study of the first Thanksgiving, I discovered something incredible: I am a fourteenth-generation descendant of Lizzie Tilly Howland, one of the original 102 pilgrims on the *Mayflower*.

Lizzie was a woman of extraordinary faith. She bore ten children, and today her descendants number in the millions. Her father and husband were both signers of the Mayflower Compact. In her last will and testament, she bequeathed three books: the family Bible and two works by William Tyndale, a Bible translator and martyr.

As I reflected on the long lineage of Christian faith in my family—my own habit of carrying small New Testaments to give away and my involvement in local elections and country government—I couldn't help but wonder if the seeds planted by my great-great-great-grandparents, John and Lizzie, had been quietly guiding my steps all along.

Through this journey, I have been deeply moved and grateful. And so, I wrote these words as a tribute: "Thank you, Lizzie, for your faithfulness to God. With love, from one of your many, many down-the-line granddaughters, Linda Joy."

—Linda Wierenga, licensed practical nurse (Giant: Elizabeth Tilley Howland, *Mayflower* pilgrim, 1607–87)



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