



A PATH TO
*Redeeming
Love*

A 40-DAY
DEVOTIONAL



UNCORRECTED
PROOF

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

FRANCINE RIVERS

WITH KARIN STOCK BUURSMA

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REDEEMING LOVE

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INTRODUCTION



Hosea's story in the Bible had a great deal to do with my decision to give my life to Jesus Christ. I had grown up in the church, but like others, I was able to sit in the pews for years and never allow my heart to be touched by the gospel. Knowledge is fine, but it's love that transforms us, Christ's love. After I studied the book of Hosea, I saw how patient and how deep God's love is for me—and everyone. How could I not fall in love with God through His Son, Jesus? Why had I rebelled and resisted for so long?

At this point in my life, I'd been writing love stories for almost ten years and realized how much deeper God's love is for us than what we read in romance novels or see in romantic movies. God's love is a consuming fire! His passion for each of us is beyond our understanding. His love is so high, deep, and wide that it necessitated the blood sacrifice of His own Son to atone for our sins to make the way open to Him. The love He

offers each of us is forever strong. It never wavers with feelings or circumstances. He is faithful, trustworthy, and the lover of our souls, offering us a marriage consummated by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When we say yes to Jesus, we are *in* Christ, sealed and secure no matter what happens. He will never lose us.

While studying the book of Hosea, I felt the Lord nudging me to write His love story. The prophet's life gave me the plot. As I studied God's character in order to develop the character of Michael, I prayed readers would see the difference between what I had been writing about (*eros*, or sensual love) and what real love looks like—passionate, sacrificial, unchanging, and eternal. When readers wrote to me and said they longed to meet a man like Michael, I would write back, "You can! His name is Jesus!" This is why I wrote *Redeeming Love*: so that you would know how greatly you are loved and that no matter what you've been through, God loves and wants you. He can make beauty out of ashes. He makes all things new.

Karin Buursma and I have worked together to take the truths of God's never-ending love that are highlighted in the novel and expand them into a devotional format. Each devotion begins with a scene from *Redeeming Love*, tracing Angel's journey from despair and rejection to rescue, redemption, and ultimately full restoration. We pull out key spiritual themes in the story—such as the gift of hope, the reality of God's presence with us even in hard times, and the transforming power of God's forgiveness—and consider what they mean in our own lives.


The devotions are grounded in Scripture because we want to continually point you back to God's Word. It is our best

source of truth about what God is really like and how He wants to interact with His people.

While our circumstances are undoubtedly different than Angel's, we all share the essence of her journey. We too often feel rejected, believing no one can love us for who we are. Our past hurts, along with a distorted understanding of God, can hold us back from fully embracing His love and believing that He can redeem the hard things in our lives. Our prayer is that when you finish reading this book, you'll be able to see more clearly who God is and how He is calling you to be restored in Him. May the truth of God's redeeming love bring you hope and joy as you draw closer to Him.



REJECTED



W E ALL EXPERIENCE REJECTION. Sometimes it strikes in subtle ways, and other times in a blatant way. I look back over my life and remember the pain of it. When I was a small child, I stood in the doorway of my mother's room as she told me, from her bed, to stay out of the room and away from her. I retreated, crushed and convinced that my mother didn't love me. Other mothers hugged and kissed their children. Mine didn't. The only person I saw my mother kiss was my father. That early rejection was the first and most severe, but others followed:

- I felt like an outcast because all the popular students lived in town and I lived a couple miles away.
- I was bullied and called names.
- I heard people refer to the rural road on which I lived as "chicken alley."

- Girls sneered at my homemade dresses and hand-me-downs from cousins.
- I strove to win an end-of-summer swim contest, only to have the blue ribbon go to my visiting cousin.
- I had a giant crush on a boy who liked girls who were prettier and smarter girls than me.
- I didn't have the necessary test score or grades to make it into the college that was my first choice.

When I was a little girl, I cried over being rejected. By fourth grade, I learned to pretend it didn't hurt. I became better at swallowing rejection as I grew up. Don't most of us try to walk through the pain until it dissipates?

Rejection is a wound. Sometimes it heals quickly. Sometimes it takes years. In either case, it doesn't take much to reopen the wound, to feel afresh the lacerating pain and trickling blood. Sometimes rejection becomes an infection that sickens and weakens a life.

Yet sometimes there is another side to the rejection we experience, a side we would never guess until light shines on it and we seek the love and acceptance we have longed for since the womb.

DAY 1



Longing for Approval

ALEX STAFFORD STARED down at Sarah. His mouth was pressed tight, and he studied her silently. Sarah stood as still as she could. She'd stared at herself in the mirror so long this morning, she knew what he would see. She had her father's chin and nose, and her mother's blonde hair and fair skin. Her eyes were like her mother's, too, although they were even more blue. Sarah wanted Papa to think she was pretty, and she gazed up at him hopefully. But the look in his eyes was not a nice one. . . .

The parlor window was open, and she could hear voices. Sarah wanted to sit and listen to her parents. That way she would know just when Papa wanted her to come back again. If she was very quiet, she wouldn't disturb them, and all Mama would have to do was lean out and call her name.

"What was I to do, Alex?" her mother said. "You've never spent so much as a minute with her. What was I to tell her? That her father doesn't care? That he wishes she had never even been

born?”

Sarah's lips parted. Deny it, Papa! Deny it!



We long for approval from those we admire. But what happens when we don't get it?

Sarah had idolized the idea of her father for years. She hoped he would love her the way she had always dreamed he would. That he would be proud of her, would pay attention to her, would even delight in her. The truth she overheard—that her father wished she had never been born—crushed her. And Alex's rejection had far-reaching shadows. His words seeped into Sarah's heart and formed the deepest truths she believed about herself: she was worthless and unloved, and it would have been better if she had never existed.

Rejection is a heavy burden for any person—child or adult—to bear. Yet we all carry it. Whether this burden came from a parent or a friend, a teacher or a peer, we have all experienced moments when others have weighed us in the balance and let us know, by their demeaning words, scornful looks, or excluding actions, that they have found us insufficient.

What words of rejection have sunk deep into your heart?

- “I don't love you anymore.”
- “You're not pretty enough or smart enough.”
- “You're boring.”
- “No one likes you.”

When we don't care about the speaker, these words can roll off our backs. We shrug or roll our eyes, and the cruel words are gone. Forgotten. But more often these words linger in our minds and become part of us. We pull them back out and examine them again and again, and each time we do, we believe them a little more.

Over time, our brains can turn "I don't love you" into "No one will ever love you." "You're not good at this" can become "You're just not good enough" and then "You're worthless." The messages become broader, encompassing more of us and eroding our sense of worth. We wonder if our lives are mistakes.

How do we move forward if we let others' rejection of us define us? David's psalm speaks truth over these lies:

You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.

(Psalm 139:13–16)

These words speak powerfully of how God created us, fashioning us deliberately. Do you wonder if it's a mistake that you're alive? *God formed your inmost being and has ordained your days.* Do you question your own worth? *You are fearfully and wonderfully made.* Do you feel you are hopelessly flawed? *God wove you together.* Do you feel unknown and alone? *God sees you.*

Sarah's father considered her a mistake, an annoyance, a burden he wished to be rid of. Her mother loved her imperfectly, viewing her as an obstacle to Alex's affection. But the way her parents saw her didn't line up with who she really was.

The deepest truth about us is that we are created by God. We are loved. We are known and seen. Even beyond that, God delights in us!

The way Zephaniah 3:17 portrays God is almost startling:

The LORD your God is living among you.

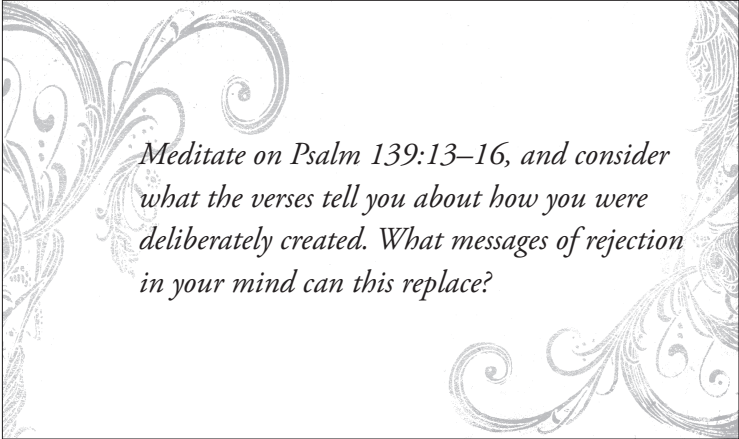
He is a mighty savior.

He will take delight in you with gladness.

With his love, he will calm all your fears.

He will rejoice over you with joyful songs. (NLT)

If the One who created us delights and rejoices in us, we can know that we're never unwanted or worthless, no matter what anyone else says. If you're struggling with feeling rejected, let others' harsh words turn you toward the only One whose acceptance matters. Let the truth of *His* words sink deep into your heart and permeate all aspects of who you are. You are valuable. You are wanted. You are loved.



Meditate on Psalm 139:13–16, and consider what the verses tell you about how you were deliberately created. What messages of rejection in your mind can this replace?

DAY 2



A World Devoid of Kindness

CLEO TOOK A long drink and swallowed down the tears and misery and let the bitterness and anger rise and flow. "All men want to do is use you. When you give them your heart, they tear it to shreds. None of 'em care."

Sarah stared at her with wide frightened eyes. She trembled violently. Cleo eased her grip. "Your mama told me to take good care of you," she said. "Well, I am going to take care of you. I'm going to tell you God's truth. You listen and you learn." She let go and Sarah sat very still.

Glaring at the little girl, Cleo dropped into the chair by the window and took another swig of rum. She pointed, trying to steady her hand. "Your fine papa doesn't care about anyone, least of all you. Sooner or later, he's going to get tired of your mama and toss her into the trash. And you with her. That's the one thing you can count on."

Sarah was crying now, and she reached up to wipe tears from

her cheeks.

“Nobody cares about anybody in this world,” Cleo said, feeling sadder and more morose by the second. “We all just use each other in one way or another. To feel good. To feel bad. To feel nothing at all. The lucky ones are real good at it. Like Merrick. Like your rich papa. The rest of us just take what we can get.”



When we see the world through the lens of our experiences, our view can end up horribly distorted.

Eight-year-old Sarah’s comfortable world had already started to crumble around her when she met her father and realized he was not the man she’d hoped he’d be. It crumbled further when her mother sent her away with Cleo, who clearly found her a burden and wished she wasn’t there. Already feeling rejected and alone, Sarah was hit hard by Cleo’s bitter speech. It made her question all she knew about life, including the warmth and love she had experienced with her mother. Was none of it real? Did no one in this world genuinely care for anyone else?

In our bleakest moments, many of us have asked these questions too. When we feel desperately alone, we wonder if genuine compassion even exists. We become cynical, assuming others have selfish motives for everything they do. Thinking this way has ramifications for our hearts. When we believe the world is a cold place that runs on selfishness and rejection, we begin to turn inward. We trust no one. How can we? No one cares, everyone is looking out for herself, and kindness is an illusion.

We come to believe a significant lie: we have to watch out for ourselves because nobody else will look out for us.

We find a beautiful antidote to this lie in Scripture:

Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me,
And the LORD has forgotten me.”

“Can a woman forget her nursing child
And have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget, but I will not forget you.

“Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My
hands.” (Isaiah 49:14–16)

The Lord doesn't gloss over the fact that human relationships fail. Some of us have experienced rejection or indifference from those who should love us most, and it hurts us deeply. But even then, even in the worst circumstances, we are not abandoned to make our own way in the world. God Himself will *never* forget us. Our names are permanently marked on His hands. He loves us “with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). God's care and compassion for us have no end.

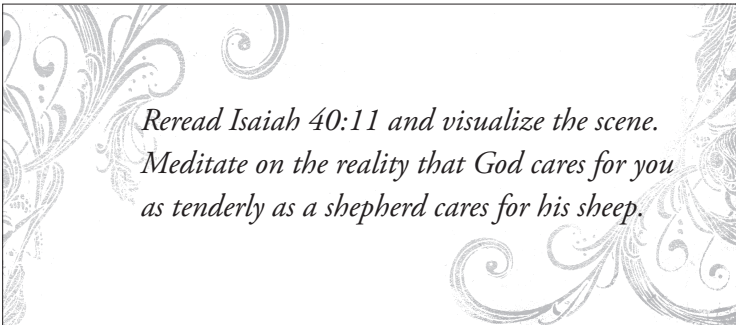
Yes, we will encounter people who hurt us, forget us, or try to use us for selfish ends. Those realities are part of the fallen world we live in, and we grieve because of it. But that's not all there is. The world cannot operate wholly on selfishness because it was created and is ruled by a God who operates on love. In those times when we feel rejected, when we wonder whether anyone cares, and when we struggle to see glimpses of love and goodness in the people around us, we must turn to God and let Him recalibrate our worldviews.

Cleo thought she was telling God's truth, but her view was distorted by her own painful circumstances. Isaiah 40:11 presents a compelling picture of what the world is *really* like for those who trust in God:

Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

If you wonder whether there is any love or altruism in the world, hold on to this image of God caring for you as tenderly as a shepherd leads his sheep and carries them close to his heart.

When we feel alone, rejected by people's unkindness or indifference, we can remember that God's love, not people's selfishness, is ultimately the driving force in our lives. When we believe this, we can let go of the need to protect ourselves and to always look out for our own interests. When we're convinced that God has our backs, we are freed from fear of rejection and can live at peace in the reality of His unchanging love.



DAY 3



Seeking Forgiveness

WHEN THEY REACHED the door, Mama took a deep breath and knocked. A woman came to answer. She was small and gray and wore a flowered gingham dress covered by a white apron. She stared and stared at Mama and her blue eyes filled with tears. "Oh," she said. "Oh. Oh . . . "

"I've come home, Mother," Mama said. "Please. Let me come home."

"It's not that easy. You know it's not that easy."

"I've nowhere else to go. Please, Mama."

The lady opened the door and let them in. She showed them into a small room with lots of books. "Wait here and I'll speak with your father," she said and went away. Mama paced, wringing her hands. She paused once and closed her eyes, her lips moving. The lady came back, her face white and lined, her cheeks wet. "No," she said. One word. That was all. No.



Have you ever desperately needed mercy and received none? That kind of rejection causes a deep wound that is slow to heal.

Sarah's mother was desperate. Years ago, she had gone against her parents' wishes and everything she'd been taught, leaving it all behind to for a man who wasn't her husband. Love—or what she thought was love—blinded her to everything else. She ignored the warnings and ran headlong down a path that turned out to be a dead end. The handsome, charming man she chose lacked basic decency and kindness. Eventually, he abandoned her. She returned home to throw herself on her parents' mercy, asking if she could move back in.

They said no.

It didn't matter to them that she was sorry. It didn't matter that she acknowledged they had been right all along. It didn't matter that Sarah, an innocent child, would suffer. And it didn't matter that in refusing shelter to their daughter, they were condemning her to an even worse fate, making it inevitable that she would become the very thing they most feared. She had made a mistake, and now she had to pay. There was no going back. No forgiveness. No mercy. Only rejection that hurt Sarah to her core.

We've all felt the weight of unforgiveness. At the very moment we need mercy most—when we're hyperaware of our own failings and the heaviness of our wrong choices is almost more than we can bear—we look for someone who can help us move forward. Someone who will extend grace and love us despite what we've done. Someone who will tell us that all is

not lost. That there's a way out of what seems like a dead end and that our wrong choices will not define us forever.

But too often that's not what happens. People can't resist reminding us of what we've done, rubbing our sin in our faces. We hear the messages loud and clear:

- "I told you so."
- "You made your bed; now you have to lie in it."
- "'Sorry' isn't good enough."
- "It's too late."

Our imaginations may not be big enough to see there is more to the story. But God isn't done yet, and our imperfect choices don't have to be the end.

Psalm 103 paints a beautiful picture of God's mercy:

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
 Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
 He will not always strive with us,
 Nor will He keep His anger forever.
 He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
 Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
 So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
 As far as the east is from the west,
 So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

(verses 8–12)

"He has not dealt with us according to our sins" (verse 10). God, in His mercy, does not keep reminding us what we've

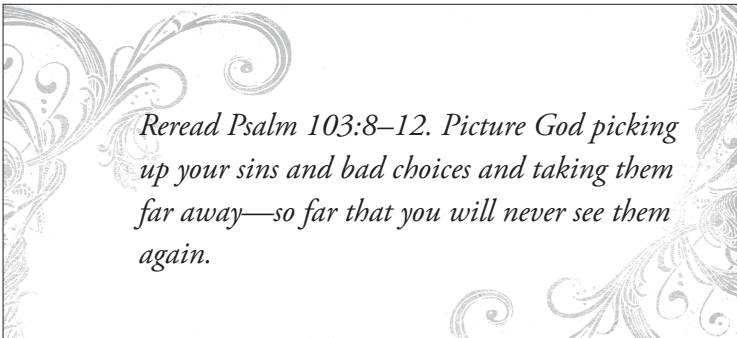
done wrong after we've confessed it. He does not sit back, uninvolved, and watch us suffer the consequences of our sins. He responds to us with compassion, giving us more than we deserve—more love, more grace, more mercy.

He has not “rewarded us according to our iniquities” (verse 10). God does not operate on a barter system, making us pay for what we did through penance or suffering. He responds to our repentance with grace and compassion, abounding in love.

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (verse 12). This doesn't mean we don't deal with consequences, but it does mean that after we have come to Him in repentance, God doesn't continue to hold our sin against us. He forgives us and lets the past go.

“The LORD is compassionate” (verse 8). His response is not to shame or reject us. Instead, He loves us.

If you're stuck in unforgiveness and rejection, realize those traps are not from God. People might fail to extend mercy, but God will not. Their harshness can remind us to find our forgiveness in Him, for He promises us forgiveness. He promises that when we come to Him, overwhelmed with our own sin and grief, He will lighten our load and extend mercy to us.



DAY 4



What Good Is God?

THE MEN BEGAN wrapping Mama in a sheet.

“Wait a minute,” said one, and pried the rosary from Mama’s fingers and dropped it in Sarah’s lap. “I bet she woulda wanted you to have that, honey.” He finished the stitching while Sarah ran the beads through her cold fingers and stared at nothing.

They all went away, Mama with them. Sarah sat alone for a long time wondering if Rab would keep his promise to take care of her. When night came and he didn’t come back, Sarah went down to the docks and flung the rosary into a garbage scow. “What good are you?” she cried out to the heavens.

No answer came.

She remembered Mama’s going to the big church and talking to the man in black. He talked a long time, and Mama had listened, her head bowed, tears running down her cheeks. Mama never went back, but sometimes she would still sift the beads

*through her slender fingers while the rain spat on the window.
“What good are you?!” Sarah screamed again. “Tell me!”*



What good are You, God? If we're honest, who among us has not asked this question to some degree? We might have asked it apologetically, with less anger than Sarah, but we all ponder what difference God's presence actually makes in our lives.

Sarah asked this question after seeing her mother's life fall apart and end in despair—despite all her prayers for help. Now Sarah was alone, a helpless child with only a drunk to watch over her. She felt abandoned and rejected. Again. What good was God? Had He turned His back on her?

We might doubt God's care because of a crisis in our own lives: the death of someone we love, a financial setback, or a painful rift in an important relationship. So many things seem to go wrong, leaving us frustrated, exhausted, and confused. If we are trusting God, why doesn't He fix our problems and save us from these crushing struggles? Why should we follow Him if we don't receive any tangible benefits? Where is He? Has He rejected us?

Scripture doesn't provide easy answers for the *why* questions we all face. But the Bible does give us truths to cling to while we ask them.

Psalm 34:18 gives this promise: “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” And Deuteronomy 31:8 tells us, “The LORD is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you

or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

When we are at our lowest—overwhelmed, broken-hearted, crushed in spirit—He is nearest. He knows how we feel. He cares. He is with us, supporting us and walking alongside us in our trials.

His presence doesn't answer all our questions. It doesn't take away our problems or make everything okay. Life can still be soul-crushingly hard. But one of God's greatest gifts is that we do not have to go through it alone. No matter how difficult, no matter what circumstance, and no matter whether our problems are of our own making or not, the God of the universe is with us.

Struggles will be an integral part of life as long as we're alive, so don't let yourself believe that your challenges mean that God has rejected you. Instead, focus on the fact that He is the God who cares deeply in the midst of the challenges. Second Corinthians 1:3–4 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction.” We may not fully understand what God is doing, but we can trust His heart of love and comfort.

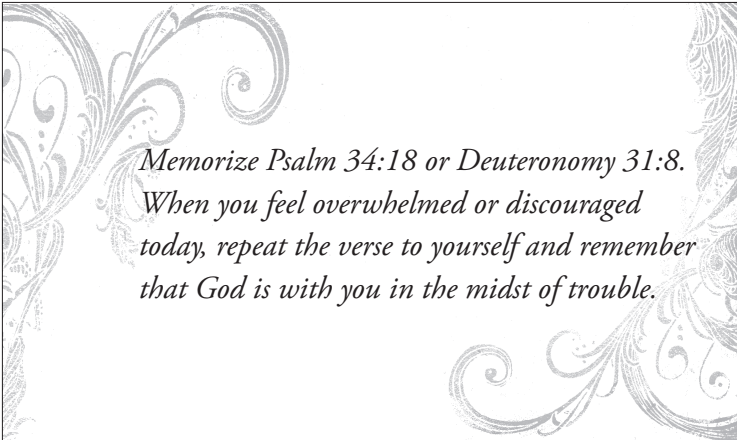
John 11 tells the story of Jesus arriving in the town of Bethany after His friend Lazarus had died. When our Lord saw Lazarus's sister Mary and others with her grieving, He joined them.

When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled, and said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to Him, “Lord, come and see.”

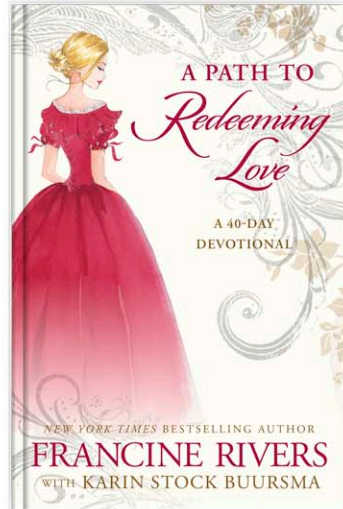
Jesus wept. So the Jews were saying, “See how He loved him!” (verses 33–36)

What’s extraordinary is that even though Jesus knew He was going to raise Lazarus from the dead in mere minutes, He didn’t rush to the miracle. He took time to grieve over Lazarus’s death and acknowledge the sorrow of his friends and family. The pain was meaningful, even when the final result was going to be reversed.

When you wonder where God is or whether He cares, picture Jesus—full of compassion—weeping at Lazarus’s tomb. He grieves with those who grieve. He stays near, and He comforts us in all our troubles.



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