

Faith That Breathes
(for Women)

REAL STORIES,
REAL FAITH

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W E E K O N E

*a woman
of faith*

change is inevitable

“In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish,
but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment.
Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded.
But you remain the same, and your years will never end.
The children of your servants will live in your presence;
their descendants will be established before you.”

—PSALM 102:25–28

Life. It's filled with wonder and discovery, and it's defined by change—as you probably know all too well. Yet for most women, change is both a comfort and a curse.

As a young teen, I (Vanessa) remember how intrigued I was by all the older girls racing through the halls at school—each so unique and varied in appearance and stature. I couldn't help wondering how I was going to turn out. Who was I becoming? What challenges lay ahead for me? How would I handle the many changes I'd encounter as a woman? Most important: How would I fit into that vast sea of faces?

I'll never forget finding one of those books that lists hundreds of different names along with their meanings.

Some names meant “gift of God” or “mighty warrior” or “blessed of God.”

Cool! I thought. *I wonder what my name means?*

I quickly flipped through the pages, searching for my “identity”—convinced that I was about to uncover an eye-opening clue about the woman I was destined to be.

My fingers slid through the Vs, then stopped. *Vanessa*. Bursting with excitement, I began to read: “Butterfly.”

Butterfly?

My jaw dropped and I slumped back in my chair. *That’s it? This can’t be right! I’m a butterfly?*

Yet there it was in stark, black print. The book explained that the name *Vanessa* was Greek for the word *butterfly*. And that was all it said—nothing more. I was stunned.

Why didn’t my name mean something grand, something larger than life—something filled with splendor? Why didn’t my name speak of a woman who is connected to God in some special way?

Not long after that humbling experience, I spotted a butterfly one summer afternoon flitting around in my backyard. I paused and watched it carefully. “So, this is me,” I reminded myself.

It certainly was a beautiful creature, yet it was still just an insect! It wasn’t all that spectacular. It wasn’t even significant enough to change the world. Frankly, it wasn’t anything to get excited about.

But as the weeks passed by, I began to learn more

about these fluttery creatures. Gradually, I became fascinated by what I'd read—especially by all the changes that take place during a butterfly's lifetime. It comes into the world rather ugly and pitiful looking—a caterpillar!—certainly not something you'd want to touch. Then it changes. Stage by stage, it is transformed into an entirely different creature, eventually becoming so beautiful that it graces the heart of nearly everyone who sets eyes on it.

And, believe it or not, butterflies are strong. Despite their fragile appearance, monarch butterflies migrate every year from Canada to South America—and then back again. (I can't even imagine traveling that far on foot!)

The truth is, the life of a butterfly means *change*. Constant change. Just as in my own life—and in the life of every woman.



As we begin our journey into womanhood, we're often unsure of who we'll become, how we'll look, what paths we'll follow. Yet somewhere between youth and maturity, we begin to realize that life is full of uncertainty. *Who will I become today, tomorrow, next week—next year?* We identify, ever so slowly, the changes taking place in our lives, shaped by internal and external forces. Men are often lauded for their courage, but it also takes a lot of courage to be a woman in our ever-changing and uncertain world.

Here's something wonderful to consider: As

women, we have an opportunity to practice our faith in a mighty way. The faith we need to step around every new corner—nearly always uncertain of who He is shaping us into—is a rather enormous character trait, isn't it? This alone should instill us with confidence.

Above all, we must hold the hand of the One who loves us and accepts us for who we are as we face life's challenges and uncertainties.

With Jesus by our side, each new day brings a new adventure—a journey we can embark upon without fear. The Lord's voice whispers confidence and truth to us along the way. He offers a strong arm that we can lean on. He gives us a shoulder we can cry on. He extends a hand that guides us through each stormy sea and every quiet meadow in life. He is the lover of our souls.

Despite all the fierce storms I have weathered in my life—the disappointments, the trials, the hurts—I will never regret a single day that I have walked with Jesus, those priceless moments when I have held the hand of my Savior. Somehow He makes the bitterest slices of life so sweet.

Over the years, I have encountered many changes—some I have welcomed; others I have dreaded. And, like it or not, for better or worse, change has shaped my life. But through it all, I've learned that I don't have to fear change as long as I stay close to Jesus. I can accept—I can actually appreciate!—what He is accomplishing in my life. *Everything* is in His sturdy and capable hands.

Sometimes change is hard. Sometimes it is. Come

to think of it, the butterfly that struggles to emerge from its tiny chrysalis would no doubt agree. But I have learned to walk with Jesus and say, “Bring it on!” I have learned to seek and embrace change on a daily basis.

If it’s true that “the only thing constant is change,” then I would encourage every woman to pursue those changes that will lead her upward and onward, toward goodness and truth, and closer to Jesus.

A FAITH THAT BREATHES

- .. *knows that if our security is in the world, we’re in trouble.* The world will always change, and the things we hold so tightly today may fall out of our grasp tomorrow.
- .. *is confident that the Lord remains the same—yesterday, today, tomorrow, forever!* He promises to be our guide, our stability, our hope.
- .. *welcomes the changes that God sends our way.*
Strive to welcome change with open arms. Embrace it as the priceless gift that it is. Learn to stand hand in hand with Jesus and declare, “Bring it on!”

N I C O L E C . M U L L E N

God Is Faithful

Change certainly defines my life. Holding down a family and a music career involves more challenges, surprises, and changes than any person could ever want. Yet through it all, I've learned to lean on Jesus Christ—the one Person who never changes—for comfort and direction.

I grew up in a Christian home in Cincinnati, Ohio, listening to Amy Grant—and imagining one day having my own recording career. I'll never forget what my sister once told me. She came to me one morning and said, “I had a dream. In it, you were on stage singing with Amy.”

My response: “Yeah, right—whatever!” Then I sort of put it out of my mind. But a few years later, my sister's dream became reality. After I signed my first recording deal and released my first album, *Don't Let Me Go*, I received a phone call from—guess who? That's right—Amy Grant's managers!

They asked if I'd audition for her Heart in Motion tour. So I did, and they liked me—and the rest, as they say, is history. My life began to change in dramatic ways. Not only did I get to tour with my favorite singer—I was a backup vocalist and choreographer—but my own music career really began to take off.

Many years later, my greatest goal as an artist is something that has never changed: I want people to walk away after my concerts feeling excited about their faith. I want them to see the world from a new perspective—God's perspective.

I want people to see that I have hurts and struggles, too. But I've learned to pick up and move on. Through it all, God is always faithful.

pursuing Christ

“I am the good shepherd;
I know my sheep and my sheep know me—
just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—
and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

—JOHN 10:14-15

I (Tess) grew up in a very conservative church. It was a small country congregation where women wore long skirts and long hair, the pastor preached long sermons, and the Sunday school classes were devoted to a long list of rules on how to attain personal holiness.

I was taught that if I stayed in church, followed the rules, and didn't do the “don'ts,” then I would experience holiness and the fullness of Christ. In other words, I'd be acceptable to God.

I did my best to always be a “good girl,” and I was very proud of the fact that I was also a good Christian. *God must like me very, very much*, I convinced myself. I thought I had Him in my back pocket and the entire Christian life figured out by the time I was fifteen.

Then it happened. I lost Him. I completely lost track of Jesus.



One day when I was in college, I spent time in reflection,

examining my heart, yet the Lord seemed to be nowhere near me. I searched and searched, I prayed and prayed. But the deep coolness, the placid emptiness of my heart remained. It wasn't just that I couldn't feel God's presence. I soon realized that I couldn't really feel *anything*. I didn't laugh or cry or feel sad or happy. I just *was*—and I felt very alone.

For four years I called out to God to come back to me. I did everything I could to get His attention. I did nearly everything on the list of spiritual “do’s.” I went to church as often as possible and even sang in the choir. But all the while my heart felt dead and very much afraid. I couldn't figure out what I had done to deserve this kind of abandonment.

Then, one balmy Florida night—I lived in Jacksonville at the time—I heard a song by Keith Green that caught me by surprise. I was bent over the sink, washing dishes in my little apartment, as the lyrics blasted through my radio: “You pride yourself with all your searching, but why are you searching in the dark? You won't learn a thing until you soften your heart!”

Those convicting words pierced my heart. I instantly realized that I had been searching for a “God of rules”—a God whose love and favor was dependent on something He required—no, *demand*ed—in return. In all honesty, I was looking for a God who didn't really exist. I was searching in the dark.

As my tears dripped into the dishwater, I cried out, “Show me how to love You! Show me how to soften my heart toward You. Change me!” I wept and wept as four

years of numbness began to melt away.

In the weeks that followed, I began to experience a closer relationship with Jesus. I gradually came to understand the principle that would guide my relationship with God for the next twenty years: “I need to fall in love with Jesus!”

I realized that I must pursue Him as I would pursue the heart of my husband. I must pursue Him as my closest companion and best friend in life. I must put all else aside to be with Him. He must be the priority of my heart, even while I attend to the everyday business of life. I must pursue His heart, His passions, His character, and His truth for my life. I must look at Him with love and open my heart to His wooing.

So I began to pursue Jesus. Every moment of every day I called out to Him—reaching out my spirit to touch His and tuning my spiritual ears to hear His voice. Each day as I arrived home, I would walk over to the fireplace and wait. It was a symbolic gesture, signifying that I wanted the fire of His heart and His love inside me. I would wait in the quiet for His presence, and He would come and speak softly and sweetly to my heart. He would remind me of the day, show me my own heart, and reveal my inner being to me. Gently, He began to heal and coax and teach and love me into His image.

As I spent time with Jesus, pursuing His heart, my times of private communion were heightened. I began to listen to Christian albums and to sing to the Lord a new song as commanded in the Scriptures.

Spontaneous songs of sweet love and adoration would come out of my heart to Jesus. I began to see Him as my King and my Lord, my Husband, Protector, and Provider. Jesus became all to me. His presence was sweet and powerful.

I began to see visions and pictures of His will for my life as He prepared my heart for something that was about to happen. Sometimes He would give me a vision of how He was transforming my spirit—or a glimpse of something He was doing in the world around me. He added wisdom and light to my often darkened understanding.

Are you ready to stop searching in the dark? Are you yearning to fall in love with Jesus and begin pursuing Him with all your heart?

A FAITH THAT BREATHES

...*connects daily with the Source.* When I was younger, I used to love watching the original *Star Trek* series. In one particular episode, the crew of the starship *Enterprise* arrived on a planet where a young woman was found to be living all alone. Seeing that it was a barren planet, with no visible resources, the crew asked her how she survived. She told them that she was looked after by the Caretaker. Each day, she would stand in a certain place and invite the Caretaker to come. And each time, this beautiful, sparkling cloud would descend upon her from the atmosphere and

envelop her with its presence and life-giving energy.

- . . . *experiences the raging fury of God's love.* I have seen His heart, His mind, and His incredible passion. I have been enveloped in the cloud of His presence. He surrounds me and covers me. His presence saturates and bathes me. And His love and truth and purity wash me and sanctify and transform me. Always from these moments come repentance, release, and fire.

- . . . *pursues Christ with outstretched arms.* In the time you've set aside today for devotions, open your arms and run to Jesus. Pursue your Savior, completely unguarded and vulnerable to His piercing truth and relentless love for you. He is waiting to share with you His passion. He says to you, "The water I give. . . will become in [you] a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14). Jesus wants to saturate you with His refreshing Spirit. He desires to wash you with the water of His Word and nourish you with His unconditional love. Draw near to Him. Jesus will hold you up in His strong arms.