



## Season 11: Episode 5 | Gary Thomas | How Does Scripture Renew Our Minds?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today I have the privilege to bring to you a conversation that I had with author Gary Thomas. Gary Thomas is a best-selling author and international speaker whose ministry strives to bring people closer to Christ and closer to others. He has sold over 2 million copies of his books, translated into over a dozen languages, and won many awards, helping establish him as a thought leader in spiritual formation, marriage, and parenting.

Gary served on the teaching team at Second Baptist Church in Houston for 11 years and currently is on the teaching team at Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. His ministry has led him to speaking events in all 50 states, nine different countries, and numerous television and radio programs around the world.

Enjoy this conversation with Gary.

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# Scripture Untangled

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**Joanna la Fleur:** Gary Thomas, welcome to Scripture Untangled. We're really glad to have you on the podcast today.

**Gary Thomas:** Well, thank you, Joanne. I'm delighted to be here.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Now, of course, I think many of our listeners or our viewers, they may know you through some of your books like *Sacred Marriage* and *Cherish*.

But for those of you listening who are new to Gary and his work, Gary, can you describe yourself? Like, how would you describe your ministry focus and your work?

**Gary Thomas:** The tagline for my ministry is closer to Christ, closer to others. And it's just a passion I have to help people grow in their intimacy toward God, which I believe will result in greater intimacy with each other. I think our relationships with people are an outgrowth of our relationship with God.

And so, I focus primarily on first on growing that relationship with God. First John 4:19, "We love because He first loved us." And when we learn to walk in the Father's love and receive the Father's love, that's what helps us show love to each other.

But then doing that, Jesus made it very clear, "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another." So, if we really love God, we're also focusing on loving others.

**Joanna la Fleur:** I love that.

I can't help but use the word love. I love this. It happens to be just like such a central verse in my own personal life.

So, I mean, you're already jumping into Scripture. You're on a podcast called Scripture Untangled, but you've sold a few million books. And you've spoken across international borders in, I think, every state.

Am I right? You've been to every state. And, you know, how is Scripture itself, since we're Scripture Untangled, how has Scripture or the Bible been at the center of that journey for you? I mean, obviously, you just quoted Scripture to us. It's in you.

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But where does that kind of play out in how you've gone on this journey in ministry?

**Gary Thomas:** Joanna, I think Scripture is what keeps me sane. I believe we're in a culture and an age that has a lot of malicious lies. It's whispering to us, like the very first temptation, did God really say? And a lot of Christians drift away from God because that's the beginning.

Did God really say? And so, when I read Scripture, I know I'm reading God's truth. I believe what my mentor, J.I. Packer, told me. I went to Regent College up in Vancouver.

**Joanna la Fleur:** That's right. Yes.

**Gary Thomas:** When the Bible speaks, God speaks.

Now, we need to interpret it correctly. We don't read poetry as didactic material and what-not but properly understood and interpreted. I know I'm reading the truth.

And so, I keep going back. And I tell you this, I've sort of become known for reading the Christian classics. I've been doing that for 45 years.

And I've read probably as much of the Christian classics as anyone. But I'll tell you this, one paragraph of Colossians from Chapter 3 can feed me more than an entire book of the best of the Christian classics. There is something uniquely powerful and life-giving about Scripture.

The older I get, the more I appreciate it. I just read a great essay by John Bunyan. People remember him as *Pilgrim's Progress* writer.

This is a different book called *The Fear of God*. And I love this emphasis he had. One of the corollaries of fearing God is fearing Scripture.

And it's sort of like this. If young kids don't listen to their parents' words, it's that they don't fear their parents. There's no—maybe a better word is respect for their parents.

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The same way, if we don't approach Scripture with reverence, an appropriate fear that this is God's words to us, there are some comforting words, there are some challenging words, it's really our attitude toward God himself, because it's our only direct, infallible revelation from God. And so, our attitude toward Jesus is reflected in our attitude toward Scripture. Jesus says, if you are ashamed of me and my words, I will be ashamed of you.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Yeah, wow. Well, and I think your ministry has been tracked by that idea of blending Scripture, church history, as you said, the Christian classics. And if you could give us a starting point.

I mean, not everyone knows what that means, the Christian classics. Give us a couple titles if someone were to start. We're not talking about your book at the moment, but somebody else's book.

What would be a couple of those books that someone—you know, the books you should read before you die list?

**Gary Thomas:** Well, when I say Christian classic, most contemporary books have a shelf life somewhere between yogurt and milk. They don't just last very long. In fact, publishers will tell you most books will sell 80% of their copies the first four months that they're published.

It hasn't been true of mine, but in general, that's what the publishing industry looks at. The Christian classics are those books that keep getting published throughout the generations because the church recognizes just the powerful message, the hopefulness. Usually, they kind of jump traditions.

It goes back to—I think one of my favorites is *Gregory the Great*. Early on, he was, I think, one of the good popes. I'm not a Roman Catholic.

I'm very much an evangelical, but this was before there was any reformation or anything like that. Just a godly man. Great advice.

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A lot of people are familiar with Augustine, *The City of God* and *Confessions*. I actually recommend people not start there. I just found with Augustine, there's a lot of reading with a few gems, and there are easier ones to get a hold of.

*The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, I think, has been beloved by any number of traditions. An easy place to start that I reread regularly is Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. It's a small little book about how your life can be changed if you learn to intentionally practice being in the presence of God.

I love that one. Francis de Sales is a favorite of mine. He wrote to the elite level of the 18th century French society, which is very similar to today.

Entertainment, fashion, other things. He helped Christians think in a devout way, in a culture filled with distractions and sort of a surface life. What does it mean to love God? Then, although I wouldn't give this to a legalist because it's very hardcore, but I think there's some great stuff.

William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. It's a brilliant book that really challenges my easy believism. It challenges me to, you know, a serious call is a serious call to a devout and holy life.

It's how can I let go of the things that are holding me back from knowing God.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Wow, Gary, you're well read and you're also an author. So, as you're spouting off these books, I think to write well, you have to read.

We have to be well read. And I see that in your work because as you said, you sort of alluded to, most books, they're here today, gone tomorrow. They don't have a long expiry date on the shelf.

They're maybe written for a moment, but maybe not for more than, you know, a few short years of time in history. But as you said, even one of your books, I think, has been in print and is going on for a while. Was that surprising to you? I mean, nobody writes a book for it to be here today, gone tomorrow.

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But was that sort of a surprise that something took off? What do you think has resonated with people? How did that happen?

**Gary Thomas:** There's a funny story behind it. I'd written three books and none of them could break 10,000 copies. And it was frustrating because I put a lot of time and a lot of effort and a lot of research.

Nobody knew who I was. I really didn't have a platform. I'm not the pastor of a mega church.

I'm not the type of guy who's going to start this big ministry. I remember just kind of saying to my wife, well, man, it's this next one. I just don't know if it's worth the time and effort to write a book that's only going to sell 10,000 copies.

And I felt strongly challenged by God, obviously not verbally like this, but just a strong sense. Gary, who are you to tell me you're only going to write a book that'll reach 10,000 people? I was convicted. Okay, Lord, I'm sorry.

I'll do what you asked me to do. If that's going in speaking to three people, I want to do that. I don't want to put a number on it.

Well, that was my fourth book that's now sold, I think 1.2 million copies, *Sacred Marriage*. So, it was amazing to see, and it was never like, you know, they say 80 books, most books sell 80% of copies in the first four months because I wasn't being promoted because I didn't have the sales backlist. It was very unusual.

My publisher told me because it sold more books in year two than it did in year one and then in year three than year two because it wasn't fueled by advertising. It was fueled by word of mouth.

**Joanna la Fleur:** It connected to people.

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**Gary Thomas:** Yeah, it's just people that are engaging with it, feel like their marriages and lives are helped by it and tell others about it. And that was, I got to admit, when it hit a million, that gave me pause. That's a lot of books in this day and age.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Yeah, it is. Well, and a topic that is timely, marriages today need help, but timeless and there's been, you know, marriages go on and each generation, many people hope to be married and want that marriage to be successful and you've resonated with it. I mean, I know we're here to talk about, *The Life You Were Reborn to Live*, but I want to just sit here a little bit longer since we're already circling around this idea of sacred marriage.

So, of course, you've written extensively about relationships and marriages. And could you tell us some of those, like, what are some of those common lies or spiritual lies that you think couples believe that are kind of addressed and countered in Scripture? Like, what are those things? Maybe it's like the things we believe in our marriages or even in our culture and Scripture says a different thing about that.

**Gary Thomas:** Well, I think one of the ones that I do address in *The Life You Were Reborn to Live*, and I, you know, Joanna, I think I kind of heard this in the church.

I'd almost call it the idolatry of the family. When I was getting into the Scriptures, if we take Jesus' words at face value, as I believe we should, it was shocking to me how He promised that at times He would come between family members, that we would have to choose Him over our families. Several gospels mention if you love your father or mother, one of them says wife or son or daughter more than Me, you are not worthy of Me.

Now, here's the trick. I found that when you have an entire family who are following the Lord and surrendered to the Holy Spirit, that mission and worship will bind that family together like nothing else. But Jesus also warns that because following Him is exclusive, if somebody is following the Lord and the other person isn't, that can break up a family.

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And it doesn't mean that the loving, that the Christian isn't loving. It means that the other one, if they're rejecting Christ and you put Christ first, they're going to reject you. And sometimes Jesus could even seem callous.

You remember when Jesus was busy and somebody said, hey, your mother and brothers are outside, and they want to see you. What did Jesus say? Who are my mother and brothers? They're those who listen to My words and obey them. We're never told if Jesus went out to see His Mom and His brothers.

I suspect He did, but that's speculation. The Bible told us it wasn't important enough for us to know that. What was most important is Jesus is saying, my family are those who are joined around faith and obedience more than around blood fealty, which is a radical thought.

But I think it's how we have to organize our lives, that we are part of the family of God and that love for God needs to be the North Star of everything we do. Loving our family is a subset of what it means to love God, if we want to love them best.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Right.

Well, and so this whole topic, what really inspired you to write this book? Like why this topic? Why now?

**Gary Thomas:** Yeah. Well, can I tell you a story about that? My granddaughter, she's six now, but when she was three, we were walking with her in her hometown and a fire truck comes out, the lights are flashing, the sirens are blaring. And I mean, she just scrunched up her eyes and her ears, and she starts crying.

And I thought, well, I mean, she's got little ears. It's loud. It could be scary.

I'm trying to comfort her. Two days later, we're still there visiting, and I see her do that same response. And I couldn't see a truck.



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I couldn't hear a fire truck. And way off in the distance, there was this siren that I could barely hear. I thought, boy, she's been traumatized by this or something.

This is terrifying her. Well, we went back three months later. We're walking to the same town.

They lived actually not too far from a fire station. But the thing comes out again, and I look at my granddaughter thinking, oh, no. And she just looks at me with all this peace saying, it's "Ok, Papo."

"They're just going to help someone." She's got great parents. And they just responded to her trauma by saying this, "Anna, this truck isn't a threat."

Rather than seeing it something that you should be afraid of, they're actually going to help someone. And the sirens and the flashing lights are just asking people to move out of the way because they're in a hurry to help someone who needs them. So, what she saw, something that she thought she should be afraid of and threatening, actually became an assurance.

The world is a safer place than I thought. If I get in trouble, somebody will be coming really fast to help me and people will move out of the way. I mean, I thought it was brilliant parenting.

But I found that there are these truths with God. I've spoken so much on marriage, but the subtitle of *The Life You Were Reborn to Live* is dismantling the 12 lies that rob our intimacy with God. And that is, if we believe lies, what it does, those lies have an agenda.

They're spiritually malicious lies. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In John 8, he calls Satan the father of lies.

Jesus traffics in the truth. And Satan does what he did with Adam and Eve. Did God really say? He wants us to believe lies about God so that when they don't come true, and when we're frustrated with them, we then reject God.

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He doesn't care what the lie is. If the lie makes us bitter toward God, or angry toward God, or question God's goodness, or power, or love, that's all he cares about. And so, I want to expose 12 of these lies that really can get people.

This isn't always true, but it's true more often than not. I see this as a pastor. If somebody is bitter toward God, or frustrated toward God, they've believed a lie about God.

And the key, Romans 12:2, that's really a key verse, do not be conformed to the pattern of this world. Another translation of that in the Greek is age. But be transformed.

Why? How? By the renewing of your mind. The Christian faith isn't only cerebral. We need practices that will follow up.

But it does begin with the mind, I think. We can't build a successful, mature life on the lies. That's following Satan's strategy.

We have to practice so that it's not just knowing the truth, but it has to begin with knowing the truth.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Well, I love what you're saying, you're answering questions I have here, because you're talking about this idea of, you know, how do we define what is a spiritual lie? But then Romans 12, this key Scripture that you're using in the book, it's one of my favorites too. And I love Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, you know, don't get so accustomed to the world that you fit in without even noticing, you know, this idea.

I love how he says it. But I mean, how do you see that Romans 12:1-2, shaping Christian life today?

**Gary Thomas:** Well, it's how we push back.

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If you listen to the way that Paul writes it, don't be conformed to the pattern of this age, or as Eugene says, without even realizing it, we should assume we're being lied to. We should assume Satan is trying to lead us astray. He didn't retire after Adam and Eve.

He didn't retire. Even after Jesus rose from the dead, he's still trying to pull us away. And so, what do we have to do? Be transformed.

That's an active word. Being conformed is a passive word. If we're not second-guessing the premises we grew up with, and if we're not testing, frankly, the teachings we receive in church with Scripture, which is the only infallible guide to what God says, then we're likely believing lies that can wreak havoc in our personal life.

If it wreaks havoc in our relationship with God, it will wreak havoc in our relationship with others as well. So, expect, assume we're being lied to, and then we go to Scripture. What does God really say? What does He really promise? Can I give an example or two?

**Joanna la Fleur:** Yeah, please do.

I was going to say, can you give us an illustration of it, maybe even a personal one? How is this worked out?

**Gary Thomas:** Well, I think one of the best things about being a Christian is having personal peace. Peace is a sense of well-being. It's the removal of anxiety, always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And when you go again to Scripture, it's amazing how many passages in the Old Testament talk about how the Messiah will bring peace, and that God is coming to bring peace, and it prophesies peace. And then when it's announced that Jesus is coming, what do the angels say? Peace on earth, goodwill toward men. And Jesus says, "My peace I give you, My peace I leave with you."

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I'd encourage people just open up a concordance. They might be shocked. I don't know if people still have concordances.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Yeah, I was going to say, they can go to ChatGPT maybe, as the concordance, or they can go online and find the digital concordance.

**Gary Thomas:** Yes, but they'd be shocked. And peace is so wonderful because it is one of the best blessings about being a Christian.

And I think it's so helpful for outreach because we keep talking about salvation, which people can't see, and some are suspicious of. And so, for me, it'd be like somebody's trying to say, hey, Gary, here's an album, it's called *The Best of*, I don't know, a singer that I don't like. Well, if it's a singer I don't like, I don't care if it's their best, right? They don't see the value of salvation.

People will recognize peace. And if we know the path to peace, they're going to say, how can you have peace in such a chaotic, hurtful, and fallen world? And so, for me, in the chapter I lean on here, the classic I lean on, another one of my favorite classics, Henry Drummond wrote an incredible book called *The Greatest Thing in the World*. And he's got a chapter called *Pax Vobiscum*, which is peace, the pathway to peace.

And he talks about the recipe for peace. And basically, the problem that we have with understanding peace, and why I didn't have peace, is that I thought peace meant God is fixing everything that's wrong in my world. All of my family is healthy.

They're all following the Lord. I have a little bit of financial security. I'm in good health.

I don't have any enemies. Everything seems to be peaceful. And so, we think if that's, we want peace, and if we think that's what peace is, we try to make every one of those things come true.

But Drummond points out that's what pushes peace away. And he also points out; they will never all be true.

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Jesus said in John 16:8, "In this world, you will have trouble." That's a promise. I don't see it on too many refrigerator magnets.

I don't see it on posters, you know, God, you promised I'd have trouble. I haven't had enough yet. But that is a promise.

Peace isn't situational. It's relational. It's learning to define yourself by the fact that God is in control, and Jesus has a personal interest in your welfare.

The way that Kate Warren put it, I love it. "Even if it's not okay, I'm okay." Now, we don't have time to get into the recipe, and it takes a while, but I just found it really helpful to look at peace as something that's relational, not situational, because then I was able to experience true peace.

One other example, and this one, it's a little embarrassing. Again, if I want to live by Scripture, I got to live by Scripture. I think I had, and I would have rejected this, but maybe an overly materialistic worldview.

I mean, of course, I know God is a supernatural God. And so, I would reject that, but I had never talked about angels. Because if I talked to some of my non-believing friends and said I believed in angels, they would follow up with, oh, and Gary expected a visit from the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy.

But when I got into Scripture, Joanna, and I'm sure you know this, in every major story of the Old Testament, angels are predominant at the very start. And then you get into the New, and you have angels telling Mary, this is what's going to happen. And angels meeting with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's husband, an angel turning Joseph back, and angels telling the shepherds what's going on.

And then Jesus dies and rises from the dead. The disciples don't get it. And angel says, "hey, don't fear, here's what's going on."

And then in the Book of Acts, angels releasing Peter from prison, angels talking to Paul, "don't be afraid, you're going to give testimony." I mean, there isn't a portion of

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Scripture where angels don't play a significant role. Now, do we think angels retired 2,000 years ago? Hebrews tells us they didn't.

And I remember I had early readers for this book, and one was a widow. I never thought of this application. And she read this, and she said, Gary, I've been crying tears after this.

She goes; I lost my husband at 55 years. I think it was 55, it was a long time. And I always felt just kind of vulnerable.

I've been used to having a man in the house when I'm going to sleep. And she goes, when I realized that God sends his angels, his servants to protect those who believe, she goes, the assurance I felt, the comfort, she was experiencing fear she didn't need to experience. She had anxiety she didn't need to have, because she realized God says, if you will put your faith in Me, I give you, my servants.

I set protection around you. And it changed the way that she looked at life. And knowing that angels are out there, I've been in some traditions where they focus on demons so much and casting this out and limiting that.

And the Bible does mention demons a few dozen times. So, it's not insignificant. But if you count how many times demons are mentioned and angels, it's a ratio of about at least five to six times more, referring to angels.

So, if we have the Biblical priority, we will speak about the protection of angels, the comfort of angels, the fact that we can go on the offense because of angels, more than we're worried about attacks of demons.

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**The Bible Course:** Taking a moment here out of the conversation with Gary Thomas to tell you about The Bible Course, because whether you're a seasoned Bible reader, or you're just starting on the journey, The Bible Course offers a superb overview of

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the world's best-selling book. This age testing course will help you grow in your understanding of the Bible.

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That's Bible course . ca . And as always, the links to this and anything else will be down in the show notes.

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**Joanna la Fleur:** Well, what it makes me think of is recently Tom Holland, the historian, not the Spider-Man. Tom Holland wrote a book called *Dominion*, which has been hugely popular.

But the book looks at how Christianity has been part of how we can't understand history without understanding Christianity for the last 2000 years, and how it's shaped global culture, thinking, politics, education, healthcare, every aspect of our lives. But he basically challenged Christians in the room to know, why do you hide away from the strange bits, meaning things like angels, demons, miracles. He said this is, he says the morality stuff, lots of other parts of society can give someone morality of some kind, but he said, why are we afraid to talk about angels? Why are you afraid to talk about a miraculous thing that happens, signs and wonders and things like this? So, it's just as you say, it's sort of just another angle of emphasizing and agreeing with what you're saying, even from maybe a secular perspective.

People want to know about this part of our faith. It's more than just a moral set of teachings. There's something alive about it.

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But in your work, there's sort of maybe this idea of peace, as you've just described, how do we seek true peace? But then the other side of that, maybe not opposing, but is this idea of spiritual and being spiritually adventurous. So, I don't know, those things don't have to be opposed, but maybe they might sound like, well, adventure sounds risky, and peace sounds, well, peaceful. So how do you think about that idea of spiritually adventurous?

**Gary Thomas:** This was one of my favorite discoveries.

And again, this one, again, is a Christian classic that opened me up to this, because I always thought I want to control things, I want to plan things and whatnot. And that leads to a boring life. It's the difference of do you think of the Christian life as living in a jungle, or in a factory with an assembly line? Now, if I put it that way, most people think an assembly line is a boring life.

It's an inferior life. But it's not as scary. You know, if there's good safety features, you're going to be pretty safe.

A jungle, you never know what's around the corner. But here's how Jesus said it in John 3.8. He says, "the wind blows where it pleases. And you hear it sound, but you don't know where it comes from, or where it's going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

We're getting back into the supernatural element. Jesus is saying, when you become a Christian, he sends you His Holy Spirit.

We don't know where it comes from, we don't know where it's going. And so spiritual adventure is where you wake up and say, "okay, God, this day is about you." Matthew 6.33, "I want to seek first the Kingdom of God."

It's not about my enrichment, it's not about my reputation, not about my comfort, not even about my happiness. It's, I'm here to be used by You. And maybe You'll bring somebody into my life, they need a word of encouragement.



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Maybe they need a few dollars. Maybe they need, it's a chance to share my faith. But it's living with this adventurous spirit that God wants to use us.

We're not saved just for our own salvation, and then to hold on until we get to heaven, and everything will be fine. And what I found, Joanna, is that one, people get bored without spiritual adventure. If Christianity is about going to church once or twice a week, reading your Bible four or five times a week, and rote prayers, that gets boring.

But being used by God is what we were made to do. It thrills us. I think one of the best things parents can do if they're listening, is help their children experience spiritual adventure.

When teens realize what it is to be used by God, they're ruined to the world. Because it's a whole lot more fun to love than to hate, to supernaturally encourage than to gossip, to bless than to take. Those are things that are delicious to a heart that's been redeemed by Christ.

And so, teaching them how to do that. And I found that it's so helpful for marriages. We started out talking about marriages.

I see marriages go on the rocks when they become too inward turned, when they're about each other's happiness, instead of living for others. When Jesus said, to save a life, you have to lose your life, you have to die. That was said to individuals, but I think it's just as true of marriages.

The best marriages live for something greater than themselves. And when husband and wife are joined together saying, God, how will You use our marriage to reach this world? They have a reason to pray for each other and with each other. They have excitement as they see God use each other, which creates new respect, its new adventure, and its new fun.

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And so, this notion of it seems scary to not be able to control your life. But think about it, it's the life Jesus lived. How many times in the Gospels, the woman at the well, the woman who was bleeding for 17 years that touched him, does Jesus's life seem like a series of spontaneous encounters and that God uses Him so powerfully? Now, some were planned.

The cross was planned, picking his disciples were planned, but so many ministry adventures seem like they just arose. And Jesus is saying, thus it will be with everyone who follows Me.

**Joanna la Fleur:** You talk about this, whether you mentioned raising kids, giving them spiritual adventure, how to have an outward focus marriage.

But your book talks about the opposite of maybe you could position the opposite entitlement. And you talk about entitlement mentality as a real dangerous trap, a spiritual trap in our times. Tell us a little bit about why you're so concerned about that.

**Gary Thomas:** One, I think we discount the fact that we have been rescued. If we could go to seminary for a little bit, when the Western Church broke from the Eastern Church in the 11th century, called the *Great Schism*. At the time, then there were some other issues.

It was the role of the pope and other ones. But theology was kind of emphasized differently. The main issues stayed the same, the Trinity, Jesus's death and resurrection.

But in the West, there was a form of the atonement called penal substitutionary atonement, where we are guilty, Christ absorbed our wrath, He died to remove the wrath, so it would be acceptable to God. I believe that's true. I believe there's more than half a dozen Scriptures that talk about it that way.

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In the East, it talked about *Christus victor*, Christ is our victor. And it relates to Scriptures that said, we were slaves to sin, we were powerless to be obedient. And again, there are a number of passages that talk about God as our rescuer.

Now, theologians sometimes like to battle each other. I don't think they're in opposition at all. I think penal substitutionary atonement exists with *Christus victor*, that Christ had to absorb my wrath, I was guilty.

On the other hand, I'm a victim of sin, I couldn't resist sin on my own, I needed a rescuer. So when I understand the depth of that rescue, and what I was facing, slavery to sin, an eternity fully separated from God, the suffering left to myself, I realized when Jesus rescued me, He doesn't have to do any other thing, I've already been treated better than I deserve. And Scripture is so honest about this.

In the book, I just say, what does the Bible tell us that we can expect? One, Genesis chapter three, relationships are broken, and they're going to be hard until the day we die, that we deserve God's wrath. First Corinthians 15 says, we will get sick. If Jesus doesn't return, we will face a physical death.

We're told by Jesus; there will be persecution in this world. When you look at what the Bible is very clear about, it really removes entitlement. And I believe that when entitlement drops, happiness rises, because if you think God owes us salvation, and affluence, and perfect health, and the world's acclaim, and every relationship is easy and happy, you're going to be bitter toward God if one of those doesn't come true.

If you think God treats you better than you deserve, that he has rescued you from a lifetime of slavery to sin, and eternal death, every little thing is an extra blessing. There's a story I'd love to tell if you've got time on this. Fyodor Dostoevsky is widely considered one of the greatest novelists of all time, certainly of the 20th century.

People might remember, *Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, a number of very famous novels.

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**Joanna la Fleur:** Nice light bedtime reading there.

**Gary Thomas:** You know what, if you want to go to sleep, it's really hard because the Russian translations, they have the names.

And if you don't know Russian, as I don't, you don't realize that there are four different names for each character that is talking about the same character, until you get familiar with it. Sorry, that's a bunny trap.

**Joanna la Fleur:** No, it's good.

**Gary Thomas:** He almost didn't get to write any of those novels, because when he was in his late 20s, he was arrested with some colleagues. All he'd done is written a couple pamphlets.

He was arrested for what was called anti-government activities. And it was a capital offense. He was sentenced to death by firing squad.

So, he's standing there in a line. He can see the gun barrels that will end his life. And he's expecting, this is it.

I'm going to die. And we don't know why, but there was this last-minute reprieve where the Russian government decided to sentence him to four years of hard labor in a Siberian camp. And we kind of joke about a Siberian labor camp as the worst conditions, because it kind of is.

I mean, nine months of winter, no day off. Every time it's light, you're out there. It's brutal.

But Dostoevsky lived with joy and gratitude, because he wasn't comparing Siberian labor camp to Santa Barbara on the beach. He was thinking, I should be dead. God spared my life.

I get to be alive. And compared to death, the Siberian labor camp is better. And this theme came up in some of his novels and throughout his life.

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Well, if we could see the spiritual gun barrel staring us down, what we really deserve, what Jesus really saved us from, we would live as we have been rescued. We'd want to tell everybody; we've been rescued and then asking God for more on top of that. I mean, it's unthinkable.

I never would have thought of myself as rescued. But when I realized how I was, I realized it was stealing joy. It was stealing worship.

It was stealing a lot of happiness. When I realized that God doesn't owe me anything else, he's already given me more than I deserve. I have so much more joy.

I'm such a more vigorous worshiper because my identity is one who has been rescued from the worst fate imaginable. And how good God has been to do that.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Well, Gary, I think the last lie I want to talk with you about, and because you're demonstrating the opposite of it already, and no one could accuse you of being apathetic.

But I think one of these lies that we're seeing you address in the book is particularly apathy for the church. People who have maybe say, I like Jesus, but not the church, or they have been hurt by church. I have lots of friends in that category who have a hard time participating in a local church.

What would your advice be for someone listening who's maybe in that position? They aren't in a church, or they have struggles going, they've left, they're thinking of leaving. How do we engage with the church in all of its complexities?

**Gary Thomas:** She is the bride of Christ. And the bride might be wearing a dirty dress, but she's still a bride.

And she's still the apple of Christ's eye. If we love Christ, we must love his church. Do you have time for another story? We got one more.

**Joanna la Fleur:** No, I love this. We want another story.

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**Gary Thomas:** May 1942, Czechoslovakia has been taken over by the Nazis, but there's a resistance there. And the Czechs wanted the world to know they may have our land; they don't have our hearts and our allegiance. And Reinhold Heydrich was third in command of the Nazi regime.

And it's hard to say any of them was more wicked than the other, but he was the architect of what they called the final solution, the plan to wipe out all Jewish people in Europe. They literally wanted to eradicate Jews from the face of the earth. I mean, just as evil as it gets.

And so, he was coming through Czechoslovakia, and the resisters made a plan to assassinate him. Now, I hate to use assassination as an example in a Christian book, but if ever there was a reason to kill a man, all right, they're trying to save millions of lives.

And so, he was coming through. And so, they sent in some parachuters and whatnot. And I'll never forget this.

As they landed, the Nazis believed in what they called corporate responsibility. If they captured someone to get somebody to confess, they would kill an entire town. They just really had no respect for life.

And so, the resistors knew if we're captured, we will be tortured beyond imagination. And we might give away who's helping us. And then the whole resistance movement will collapse.

So, they handed out cyanide tablets. And when the guy handed it out, he said to his fellow patriots, our mission isn't to get home safely. Our mission is to kill Heydrich.

And I was so moved. They're saying that we're here to take out an evil man who's destroying the world and is taking away our country. And so, our first concern isn't that we do this and get home safely.

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If we do this, and they were successful, they wounded him. It took him three days to die. They eventually rounded up all of the guys and every one of them died, some by the cyanide tablet. But they knew they didn't dare to be caught alive, because they might betray their fellow resisters.

Here's my question to the church, Joanna. Do we believe that the Kingdom of God is as important to us as the Republic of Czechoslovakia was to its citizens last century? Is the rule of our spiritual King as important as the rule of their national government? Will we sacrifice for God's work, the Kingdom of God, as much as they would sacrifice for their country? That was the attitude of the Apostle Paul.

There are two sentences I think describe Paul. I am a servant of the church. I work hard for the church.

Throughout his letters, he talks about, I'm doing this, I'm doing that. In one letter, he talks about how he is laboring for a church he has never met. But he prays for them.

He visits them. He travels. And we hear him travel from here to here.

It could be a travel of 200 miles to get from one church to the next. Going past robbers. Going through the heat.

I mean, just terrible conditions. And what I see today is that people are consumers of the church. They're not servants of the church.

Well, this church has good worship, but it doesn't have as good teaching. I like the teaching, but the people aren't as friendly. And my attitude is, we're like trying to suck the marrow out of the church for our own needs.

Paul's attitude was to hold out his arm and say, I'll give my own blood for the church. Here's a blood transfusion. I want to breathe life into the church.

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And when I see today, I can get passionate about this, so you can maybe hold me back if I get too far. People who are consistent critics of the church but not involved in the church. They're a step away from deconstructing their faith, Joanna.

I've seen it time and time again. They just criticize, criticize, criticize, criticize, until they're just done with it. Because they only focus on the church's weaknesses.

And I'm just telling you, as a pastor, I remember talking with a young woman one time, and her beef against the church was legitimate. I couldn't deny that it was true. But my response was, then help us fix it.

Maybe your generation can be the one to leave the church in a better place than where you found it. And I think that's the attitude we have to have. If you read the New Testament, if you read the words of Jesus, you've got to fall in love with the church.

And the worse the church gets, the more we sacrifice for the church. The more we strive to see the church refined and purified. Christ died for the church.

Will we live for it?

**Joanna la Fleur:** As a last question, Gary, I know you've run some marathons in your life. And so maybe as a metaphor, maybe that we can close with, what is it that you've learned or loved about running marathons that connects to what you're describing here in these stories, in this book? What have you learned about perseverance, endurance, pushing through pain? Let's use this metaphor and reflection to close our time together.

**Gary Thomas:** Well, this is a very recent development in my attitude toward marathons.

I've run almost 50 years. I started in high school. I'm 63 now.



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I've done 14 marathons. There's a point where I was doing two a year for weight management, for handling stress, for getting outdoors, for that runner's high. It has been just a joy and mainstay of my life.

But within the last six months, I tore a meniscus in my knee. It happens to most people at my age. I can walk fine, but if I run, I'm hobbling for several days afterwards.

And I remember trying to come to terms with this, saying, Lord, I really don't want to live without the ability to run. And it's still coming back, and it's been as bad as ever. But going to the concept of surrender and entitlement and being rescued, I even said this today.

In fact, I said it about two hours before we started talking. I need God more than I need to run. I need to be thankful to God and live a life of gratitude toward God more than I need to run.

If I let my disappointment at not being able to run become a point of contention between me and God, I'm losing far more than my ability to run. I'm losing the foundation of my being. And so, as much as I love to run, putting it on the altar and saying, okay, Lord, I don't need it as much as I need you, it's a spiritual journey.

I hope that I'm working with a doctor right now that we can find a way where I don't have to say no to it for the rest of my life. But being willing to give it up has been, I would say, one of my bigger, more difficult spiritual lessons at this point in my life.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Well, of course, there's so many of those analogies in Scripture.

It's in Philippians, 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Hebrews 12 says, you know, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely. Let us run with endurance the race set before us." And I see you describing that.

I think it's the inspiration behind your work, but also, I think this book, *The Life You Were Reborn to Live*. So, Gary, thank you so much for your time today. And we're

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going to share in the show notes, of course, where people can find your book here in Canada, and we'll make sure that people who want to get the meat of what you're saying, I can dive into that book.

So, thanks so much, Gary.

**Gary Thomas:** Well, I'm thrilled. I got my master's degree in Canada.

My daughter graduated from Trinity Western. So good. So well, I've never been an official citizen of Canada. I've spent a good bit of my income up there. So, I always feel a kindred spirit there.

**Joanna la Fleur:** Thanks so much. That's awesome.