

# PROVEN

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WHERE CHRIST'S ABUNDANCE  
MEETS OUR GREAT NEED

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ALLEN

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## ENGAGE WITH YOUR SMALL GROUP

An important part of personal growth is community. Together we will deal with the way we view God and how we are to spend our lives individually for Him. You may even need time outside of this small group to process with others your passions and gifts and purpose. Be intentional about pursuing deeper conversations with others throughout this process.

## COMMIT TO BEING CONSISTENT AND PRESENT

Commit to being present at your group meetings, barring an emergency, and arrange your schedule so you do not miss any part of this journey. Complete your lesson and Experiences before you come to the group meeting.

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# GROUND RULES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

## BE CONCISE

Share your answers to the questions while protecting others' time for sharing. Be considerate. Don't be afraid to share with the group, but try not to dominate the conversation.

## KEEP GROUP MEMBERS' STORIES CONFIDENTIAL

Your group members will share sensitive and personal information with you, not with your husband or other friends. Protect each other by not allowing anything shared in the group to leave the group.

## RELY ON SCRIPTURE FOR TRUTH

Conventional, worldly wisdom has value, but it is not absolute truth. Only Scripture provides that. In your times of discussion, be careful not to equate good advice with God's Truth.

## NO COUNSELING

Work together to protect the group by not directing all attention on solving one person's problem. This is the place for confessing and discovery and applying truth together as a group. However, at times a member may need to dig even deeper with an outside counselor or talk with a friend outside of small group time. If that is you, don't be afraid to ask for help, or be sure and follow up with a member of the group.



# INTRODUCTION :: 1

ARE YOU TIRED?



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Last week, after years of tutors and tears and so much hard work and so little reward, my child received a diagnosis:

Dyslexia.

When I sat down to tell her, her eyes filled with tears. I was so worried this moment would define her view of herself for years to come.

And it will. But what I didn't expect is that the moment would set her free. After putting her head in my pillow and crying quietly for a few minutes, she looked up at me and said, "So there is a reason all this has been so hard for me?"

Her tears were relief!

The diagnosis helped explain the tension she's been feeling, why everything felt confusing no matter how hard she worked. It also meant the beginning of access to real help to meet her special needs.

Here's the thing, we begin this Bible study journey with words that may hurt initially. These diagnostic words are the opposite of everything Pinterest and Instagram are telling you. You may not like these words at first, but I think the truth in them will change everything.

**You are not enough.**

We aren't. None of us. It's a universal diagnosis. But after we absorb the initial shock and hurt of that truth, it's usually followed by a wave of relief. We understand there is a reason we all feel a deep-in-our-bones problem. Then and only then can we allow Jesus to meet our enormous need.

I am so full of hope. Though we've been looking in all the wrong places for freedom, the door to true freedom is now found in a difficult diagnosis. It's a door to the most tender, kind, freeing, full hope.



A stark truth made my kid more free and full of hope than I've seen her in years. I'm believing the same for all of us.

### UNFORCED RHYTHMS

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

#### **MATTHEW 11:28-30, MSG**

Are you tired?

Worn out?

Burned out on trying to measure up? Trying to prove yourself?

Maybe we are doing this life all wrong.

What if instead of waking up feeling empty, you awoke so full of wisdom and joy you couldn't help but give it away?

What if instead of living insecurely, you were watching God move through you in ways you couldn't believe?

What if instead of living in fear, you lived seeing potential?

What if instead of craving things you can't ever seem to get, you were fully satisfied and at peace?

What if instead of numbing out because you are tired of striving, you were at peace and could enjoy your life?

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Jesus has a plan for our emptiness, our fatigue, our inadequacies, our sin.

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.

### JOHN 7:37-38

Jesus is saying, *Keep coming back to Me and I will keep satisfying you. And out of that life with Me, you will overflow and bring life to others.*

### WHY ARE WE HERE?

We are here because it seems everything in us is fighting to keep us from getting to the water we are so thirsty for. We are here because we need each other in this fight and we need to remember there is water, and it is worth fighting the war currently blazing against us. I see it in every one of your eyes when we sit and talk about how you are really, actually doing. *War*. We hesitate to use the word because it sounds dramatic on a Tuesday, when the thought before this one was that tomorrow is trash day. But you feel it.

We want to think the war is out there, out there on the Internet, out there on the news, out there in other countries, out there in prisons, out there in everyone else.

So we say, "I'm okay." We think that and say that and try to mean it.

But the fight is always right here with us. So many of us stay thirsty, even though cold, living springs of water are right over the hill, completely available to us. Pretending to be at peace never ended a war. Engaging. Fighting. Coming together for great purposes. That is what ends wars.

*Proven* is about taking hold of that which has already been given to us.

*Proven* is about reminding ourselves from Scripture who we are in Christ.

Jesus is enough, so we don't have to be. In fact, it is downright arrogant to keep trying to be. The reality is that He is the enough we could never be.

I don't have to prove anything because Jesus proved everything.

But we barely know what that means, much less how to rest in that truth. Instead we strive, we perform, we work harder, or we numb out. Why? There is an enemy deceiving us, telling us to go anywhere except the water. Not only are we never satisfied, we also end up depleting every gift and person God has given us here to enjoy.

### IF I WERE YOUR ENEMY...

*If I were your enemy, this is what I would do:*

*Make you believe you need permission to lead.*

*Make you believe you are helpless.*

*Make you believe you are insignificant.*

*Make you believe that God wants your decorum and behavior.*

*And for years these lies have been sufficient to shut down much of the church.*

*But now, many of you are awake. You are in the Word and on your knees. God is moving through you, and you are getting dangerous. You are starting to get free and lead other people to freedom. The old lies no longer bind you.*

*So if I were your enemy, **I would make you numb and distract you from God's story.***

*Technology, social media, Netflix, travel, food, comfort. I would not tempt you with notably bad things, or you would get suspicious. I would*

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*distract you with everyday comforts that slowly feed you a different story and make you forget God.*

*Then you would dismiss the Spirit leading you, loving you, and comforting you. Then you would start to love comfort more than surrender and obedience and souls.*

*If that didn't work, I would attack your identity. I would make you believe you had to prove yourself.*

*Then you would focus on yourself instead of God.*

*Friends would become enemies.*

*Teammates would become competition.*

*You would isolate yourself and think you are not enough.*

*You would get depressed and be ungrateful for your story.*

*Or,*

*You would compare and believe you are better than others.*

*You would judge people who need God.*

*You would condemn them rather than love and invite them in.*

*You would gossip and destroy and tear down other works of God.*

*Either way you would lose your joy, because your eyes would be fixed on yourself and people instead of on Jesus.*

*And if that didn't work, **I would intoxicate you with the mission of God rather than God Himself.***

*Then you would worship a cause instead of Jesus.*

*You would fight each other to have the most important roles.*

*You would burn out from striving.*

*You would think that success is measured by the results you see.*

*You would build platforms for applause rather than to display God.*

*Then all of your time and effort would be spent on becoming important rather than on knowing Jesus and loving people. The goals would be to gather followers, earn fancy job titles, publish books, build big ministries rather than to seek the souls of men and the glory of God.*

*And if that didn't work, **I would make you suffer.***

*Then maybe you would think God is evil rather than good.*

*Your faith would shrink.*

*You would get bitter and weary and tired rather than flourish and grow and become more like Christ.*

*You would try to control your life rather than step into the plans He has for you.*

The enemy is telling you that freedom is only found in finally proving to yourself and to the world that ...

you are important;

you are in control;

you are liked;

you are happy;

you are enough.

We must remember: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). So we have the most epic eternal battle on our hands every moment of every day. But Jesus says, *I have come to give you life and to give you life to the fullest.*

This is a fight for your hope and joy and peace and satisfaction. Strike that. This is full-on war to steal the core of who you are and who you were meant to be. It is a fight for your life. It is a fight for our lives.

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Hear the promise of God:

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

**ISAIAH 43:18-19**

Jesus.

He is the way in the desert. He is the new spring, containing all we crave and long for. We are going to look at Jesus' life throughout the Book of John: the way He lived, what He valued, where He went, why He went, what He hoped for, what He wanted. And then we are going to dream a little, step out of the accidental boxes we have erected around us, and live like Him.

Revolutionary concept: live like Jesus.

Fully engaged with our whole hearts, minds, bodies, and emotions. Fully connected to the people around us. Fully present through the pain and the joy. Fully aware of the need around us and the part we could play in meeting it. Jesus is not only our means of salvation, He is also the example of how we should live.

Jesus lived overflowing God and it was the most compelling life ever lived. And then, He shockingly called us to live life just like Him. But like a lot of other humans we settle for a lesser life.

My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

**JEREMIAH 2:13**

Christian, inside of you flow streams of living water. Why would we ever go back to storing water in broken man-made places?

So before we begin, we have to soberly assess where we are.

Maybe you're like me, so hard on yourself. My broken cistern is that I try to be enough in myself, leaving me exhausted. Or perhaps you are someone who thinks, *I will go out and get enough. I will fill up broken cisterns and make a way for myself.* But again we end up depleted and empty and tired. Why? Because this world does not have what we are craving.

Or perhaps you are just over it altogether and have numbed out because it feels impossible to even hope that there could be satisfaction.

Consider: The problem with being numb is that it is less detectable than sadness or anger or joy. People don't often even think about it, except that usually just under the surface, there is a nagging sense that something isn't right.

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*As we begin this journey together, take 10 minutes to answer the following questions.*

What consumes most of your thoughts? Why?

What consumes most of your time? Why?



What are you most often afraid of? Why?

Are you striving? In what ways?

Are you numbing? Why?

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How are you and Jesus right now?

What do you hope for in this study?

## A VISION FOR PROVEN

A person who holds even a smidgen of faith can be a powerful, radical, dangerous force in the kingdom of God, seeing the impossible take place (Matt. 17:20).

A sincere faith in Jesus and all He wants to do around us wakes us up, rattles our lives, shifts every perspective, issues hope in pain, and ignites mission.

I am praying that this Bible study would make our God so big that any moment we miss of Him and the life He has for us is the greatest loss to us.

Jesus, move a generation to draw near to  
You and believe You at Your word.



FULFILLED :: 2  
THE END OF THIRST



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When I looked up *joy* in the thesaurus I found a list of fantastic words, the sum of which are actually better descriptions of what I want us to discuss here.

*bliss*

*cheer*

*delight*

*wonder*

*elation*

*glee*

*satisfaction*

Several years ago, my husband, Zac, and I prayed, “God, we’ll do anything you want us to do,” and since then our lives have radically changed. Just about every part of our lives is different. And I would never go back. Our son Cooper, born in Rwanda, is in our family because of that prayer. I am writing these words along with many before them because of that prayer. My husband is in Ethiopia today helping build businesses and jobs because of that prayer. IF:Gathering exists because of that prayer. I would never go back. However, over these years an urgency to please and obey God has strangled much of the wonder, delight, elation, satisfaction, and just plain fun out of my life.

Like a pendulum, I swung from life is about my happiness to life is about difficult things.

And so as we approach this week, the question before us is ...

Does God want us to be fulfilled and happy here?

It’s my fear that we have somehow subtly picked up the belief that it is wrong to be happy. Maybe it’s caused by the suffering of friends nearby or the suffering all over the world. Or perhaps we’re influenced by the crushing pressures of work and life. Maybe it’s because fun has become more of

an escape than an attribute of people who know God. Or could it be that following Jesus has become duty rather than delight?

Jesus lived with purpose and joy, delighting to do His Father's will. He called others to follow Him in this kind of life. He was clear about where the fulfillment they looked for would be found.

Satisfaction comes when we lay down this life and live for the next.

Jesus had His mind full of hope for the next life; He came from heaven and knew it well. However, even with heaven in clear sight, Jesus lived fully in this life. He created experiences for the people around Him to see more of God—turning water to wine as they celebrated a wedding, eating unforgettable long meals with strangers and friends, celebrating the extravagance of perfume being poured out for Him. Jesus created moments that those He loved could never forget. And He chose to enjoy the people around Him and the work He had here.

Are we living the same way?

# STUDY ::

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Read JOHN 2:1-12



## CULTURAL CONTEXT

In Jesus' day, weddings were a community affair that lasted many days. They were hosted by the bridegroom and his family. It's likely Mary was related in some way to the groom's family, which is why she felt so responsible for this mistake. Running out of wine would have been a tremendous embarrassment to the family.

## RESPOND

What do you notice about Jesus' actions and words in this passage?

What do you learn about Jesus' priorities?

Describe the details you observe about:

The setting:

Mary:

Jesus:

The other people present:

The bridegroom:

The jars Jesus had the men fill:

The wine:

How did those who knew Jesus performed the miracle respond?

Why do you think Jesus did this as His first public miracle?

The world operates completely differently than Jesus. He was bringing an entirely unfamiliar, wholly other system into place, and He launched His new way right out of the gate with a symbol. Water to wine. But not just any water to wine. He chose to turn the water found in the ceremonial religious cleansing jars to wine for a wedding. And not just typical cheap table wine but the very best wine.

Is it possible that the reason we are so unfulfilled, even those of us who say we follow Jesus, is that we are still going to religious jars or drinking cheap wine, when the new way and the new wine is fully available?

## RELIGIOUS JARS VS. JESUS

The nature of religion is that it insists upon a moral requirement. You measure up and you are accepted. The jars at the wedding were a part of the religious system at the time. The stone jars Jesus asked the servants to fill with water represented the Jewish purification traditions, not those prescribed in the Old Testament, but the man-made rules the religious leaders had added to the law. Do you think it was coincidence that these

were the jars Jesus asked the men to fill? He leaned in specifically to a symbol of their striving and working to earn God's favor.

We have these same tendencies—often inadvertently striving and trying to win God's favor. Without even realizing it, we begin to perform for God, rather than enjoy God. We subtly begin to fear disappointing God, rather than rest in His steadfast love.

Religion and living in the rhythms of this world have taught us that we must measure up. We must hit the mark. We must be awesome. This leads to feelings of failure and regret and fear seeping into our relationships with Jesus and taking captive our thoughts and emotions. We let this happen, because we are still going to jars of religion rather than the flowing delight and fulfillment of Jesus' new way.

Wine in the Bible is often used as a metaphor. In fact, it's used as one of the most significant metaphors for the most important event in history. Near the end of Jesus' life, at the final supper with His disciples, He poured wine and said of it, *This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood. When you drink of it, remember Me. Every time you drink or eat, remember that My body was broken for you and My blood was spilled for you, all to fulfill a promise, to confirm a new covenant between God and you* (Luke 22:17-20).

So what is the new covenant?

The wine would be a symbol of the greatest news on earth.

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

**JEREMIAH 31:33-34**

In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

**HEBREWS 8:13, ESV**

The death of Christ, remembered with wine, promises the opportunity to be near to our God, to be in relationship with Him, to know Him, and to receive His grace.

Forever the new wine would mean:  
the end of our sin;  
the end of measuring up;  
the end of proving ourselves;  
the beginning of what we were made for—nearness to God.

### CHEAP WINE VS. JESUS

Until we regularly enjoy the rhythms of grace Jesus is promising, we tend to wear out from striving. We move from our own futile effort to becoming numb.

We were built to crave pleasure, joy, happiness. God built us for it, and when we don't find it in Him and come to the end of ourselves, we look for something to numb our reality.

As a culture, our God-given craving for fulfillment has driven us past God Himself, who was meant to be the fulfillment of our desires, toward a drug that helps us cope with our discontentment and inadequacies: entertainment. As a generation, we are addicted to it. We have a constant need to occupy our minds and time with diversions and amusements. For some, that may be alcohol and for others exercise. For some, it may be sports for their kids or vacations or gossip. It could mean chasing a job that is more challenging or a marriage that seems more exciting. Some even seek that diversion in meaningful work or charity, even religious activity. Some seek it by refreshing Facebook and some through the rush of pornography.

Joy: the emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something exceptionally good or satisfying; keen pleasure; elation.<sup>1</sup>

Entertainment: an agreeable occupation for the mind; diversion; amusement.<sup>2</sup>

But just like the metaphorical cheap wine, these pursuits never satisfy us. These are the drugs of the day, and, friends, we are all wasting our lives on them. But what is the exchange? If we lay down the drug of our day which diverts us from God and actual wonder, delight, and joy, what are we to pick up? Look ahead at a moment when Jesus is speaking of this war for us—the war for our minds, our salvation, our well-being. Jesus describes Himself as the shepherd and us as His sheep.

Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

**JOHN 10:7,9-11, ESV**

In these verses, what is Jesus after?



What is the thief after?

What is the only door to the abundant life we were built for?

How do these verses affect your view of Jesus' desires for your life now?

Scripture is clear we are saved once and for all by grace and through faith in our great Shepherd, Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:4-9), and our eternal place as children of God is secured by the loving, gracious hand of our God (John 10:27-30).

But I believe that until we get to heaven, every day we decide if we will walk through the door that provides the very best wine—the most abundant, freeing, fully focused, un-numb, joy-filled life. Or, do we listen to the unrelenting voice of the enemy and choose the addictive and unfulfilling cheap wine?

Have you ever tasted Jesus' abundant fulfillment here?

Write some examples of times you have experienced Jesus fulfilling you.

WHO ARE YOU, LORD?



WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR ME?

*Read Ephesians 2:4-10. In light of what you read, answer the questions above.*

## DIGGING DEEPER (OPTIONAL)

Some of you may want to pursue deeper Bible study. This section is for you.

Jesus intentionally chose to make wine for His first miracle. Throughout Scripture, wine is used as a symbol of joy.

*Look up the following verses and make notes on how wine represents joy:*

Genesis 27:27-28

Deuteronomy 7:13; 33:28

Psalms 104:14-15

Ecclesiastes 9:7; 10:19

Jeremiah 31:12

The people at the wedding would have known these Scriptures. How do you think this affected their understanding of Jesus' miracle?

We also see Jesus talk about wine in Matthew 26:29. When does Jesus say He will drink wine again? What will that day be like (Rev. 19:6-9)?

## EXPERIENCES

I find it interesting that when Jesus was laying the law down He didn't leave it at "love the Lord your God." He was clear that we are to love Him with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds (Matt. 22:37). He was specific. But often in our study of God's Word we let loving God with our minds be enough.

In the next few pages you will find a variety of experiences. These experiences are an effort to take what you learn with your mind and move it into your heart and soul and into your everyday life. Some of these things may seem silly to you or make you feel uncomfortable. I suggest reading through all of them on the first day to gather any supplies needed and to make plans to do all of the experiences at some point during the week. Hopefully these experiences will push you out of numbness and nearer to Jesus.

## BE

In his great work entitled *The Mortification of Sin*, John Owen says, “Be killing sin, or it will be killing you.”<sup>3</sup> I believe a prominent way the enemy numbs us and addicts us to entertainment rather than joy is with technology.

*Choose a day this week to take 24 hours and fast from electronics such as your TV, phone, iPad, computer, and so forth. Hide your devices. Don't touch them for 24 hours. It is nearly impossible to completely do this. But unless you do it completely, you will probably get sucked back in.*

### SUGGESTIONS:

- If you have children, instruct the school or childcare to call your spouse or relative if something happens.
- If you have work commitments that require use of technology, you may need to do this activity on a weekend. Plan accordingly.
- Set up an email responder that you are out for the day and will return emails the next day.
- Do not announce your “fast” on social media or to anyone. Scripture is clear about this (Matt. 6:16).

3. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin* (Trinity Press, 2013), 9.

*At the conclusion of the 24 hours, write what you observed about yourself, God, and technology below.*



## CREATE

Jesus is a masterful experience-creator. He is never boring, never what everyone is expecting.

Create an experience for some of your friends or family just for the fun of it!

The only guidelines are:

It has to be fun.

It has to be inexpensive.

It has to contain something you all have never done or tried before.

It has to be memorable.

Some of you are naturally creative and you love this! Others of you may need to brainstorm with someone—that is okay. Seek out help if you can't think of something. I promise you will not regret the time you take to enjoy life a little more and make some new memories.

What are you going to do?

When are you going to do it?

## MEDITATE

*Spend some time alone with Jesus. Here is a passage to read and pray through.*

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. But those who seek to destroy my life shall go down into the depths of the earth; they shall be given over to the power of the sword; they shall be a portion for jackals. But the king shall rejoice in God; all who swear by him shall exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

**PSALM 63, ESV**

What does it mean to earnestly seek God? Is that the status of your heart right now?

Are you currently in a dry and weary land? Explain.

How is it possible to have joy even in the midst of such a time?

## RISK

*Sit down with someone close to you, a good friend or family member, and ask them these questions. Be brave. I know this will make you feel vulnerable, but better to risk a conversation like this than to be stuck for years.*

Do I seem joyful to you?

If not, why do you think I'm not?

Do you see any patterns in my life that may be stealing my joy?

When have you seen me most fulfilled?

What is one thing I could change in the next month that would cause me to live more content?

Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

**HEBREWS 3:13, ESV**

# CONCLUSION

Friends, what if abundant joy, bliss, wonder, and pleasure were ours, but we just kept missing those things because we're either trying to work our way to God or numbing ourselves with fleeting entertainment?

I am learning to pick up books that show me more of Jesus, instead of turning on Netflix. I am learning to call friends over for chili instead of surfing Facebook. I am learning to look my kids in the eyes instead of stare at my phone. Our family is choosing to eat outside and laugh and have game nights and I am learning that the rhythms of gracious living are sacred and pleasing to Jesus. I want to enjoy God's gifts but never give them too much power in my life. I want to see that Jesus is better, better than any cheap substitute I may crave.

I am getting there and I pray the same for you.