

*#9 – “Stronger”*  
*By Mandisa Hundley*  
*Album: What If We Were Real?*

Good evening! I'm glad to see you all got the message about moving the study to Tuesday this week. I hope this didn't cause too many inconveniences. I know of several people who said they wouldn't be able to make it tonight and I was hoping that it wouldn't turn out to be everybody! For those of you who weren't here last week, I'll take a moment to explain what exactly we'll be doing week to week. I feel God inspired me to create this Bible Study not so much because you all needed to learn about what these songs had to say, but because I needed to do the learning. And as a result, this study really became MY journey through these songs. All I'm doing is sharing the things that I've learned and experienced with you in hopes that maybe, somewhere along the way, you'll hear a message that God is trying to lay upon YOUR heart as well. I am not a preacher and have no formal training on how to teach from the Bible. But as I studied these songs and the circumstances under which they were written, I found myself digging deeper...asking questions about what God had to say in His Word. There is certainly a lot to be learned...from these songs, from Jesus' teaching, and from each other.

Last week we talked about forgiveness. When we watched the video of the #10 song, “7 x 70” by Chris August, it was pretty obvious (just from the video) that the song was an expression of an inner struggle. Chris needed to forgive his father for the pain he experienced as a child. As I've been preparing this study, I've come to a clear understanding that these songs are not written to be “hits.” They're not written in hopes that it will lead to a Grammy or a Dove award. No. They are written because the songwriters needed to express what it was they were walking through in their lives. And this week's song is no different. Number 9 is a song called “Stronger” and it was written by a young woman by the name of Mandisa Hundley. Some of you may be familiar with that name because she was on American Idol. And like last week's song, this song is an expression of an inner struggle. But UNlike last's week, you won't be able to figure out what the struggle is just by watching the video. Some of you may already know Mandisa's struggle. You may already be familiar with “the story behind the song.” I kind of thought so, too. But I quickly learned that there's always more to learn.

So we'll begin by watching the music video. It was taped right in the music studio as the song was being recorded for the album. There's no deep meaning behind the visuals you'll see. But the lyrics are SO powerful. We've put them up on the screen, too, so that you'll be sure to get every word. As I said last week – this may not be YOUR style of music. If you were to hear it on the radio you might just keep turning the dial. But it's the words that we're focusing on in this study, and these words certainly have a lot to teach us.

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFY2Hdh7cvA&feature=related>

Last week, a couple of you mentioned that you would have liked to have heard the song again. And as I thought about it, that really made sense. I forgot that just because I'VE heard these songs a bizzillion times, doesn't mean you all have! So I'd like to show you this video again, but this time, we'll hear a little sneak peak of the story behind the song from Mandisa herself.

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk-J2TnFkM8&NR=1>

I found what Mandisa said about the title of the album to be quite interesting. And there's even a "story" behind that! In the midst of recording the album, she had some things to do that she really didn't feel like doing. The pressure from everything had been pushing in on her and she just kind of gave in. She twittered (I don't really know about that twittering stuff but I guess it's just sending out a little message to everybody who cared to listen) that she was sick and tired of it and was going to bed. Low and behold so many people tweeted back saying things like, "I'm so glad you are able to be "real" about how you're feeling. It makes me feel a little better about myself when I see someone, whom I admire so much, is struggling just like me. Keep on keeping it real." Those statements made her think, what if we were all "real" like that. How much could we learn from each other? And that's how the album got its name: What If We Were Real. Tonight I'm going to share just a little bit about MY story, too, in hopes that I'll be "transparent" too (like Mandisa said!)

Now, the story behind this SONG is two-fold. Mandisa was going through a period of her life where she was really questioning God's faithfulness. She felt like God was asking her to do

something, and just when she committed to be faithful to him, he turned his back on her. But also, this song is a result of a life-long struggle – her weight. I think in order to truly understand the circumstances, we need to go way back to the beginning. So that’s what we’re going to do.

Just as an aside, you might wonder where I get all of the information about these songs and songwriters. For the most part the internet is greatest tool in my toolbox. I try to stick to articles, blogs, and websites with information that was actually written by the artist. And of course videos and recorded interviews are great, too, because this way I know that the information I’m passing on to you is truthful. You never quite know how much editing has been done when someone else has written it. It’s a bit like a treasure hunt...one article, one video, one picture...leads to something else. And it’s kind of a jigsaw puzzle putting all of the pieces together. Some songs are easier than others to get the full picture. THIS song, was the easiest of all 10 songs. #1 – because there is a ton of information out there about Mandisa. Her experiences with Simon and making it to the top ten of American Idol meant that there are TONS of videos and interviews out there. And #2 – because she wrote a book about her experiences. As I was researching the song and what she had to say about it, I stumbled onto an Amazon.com link to her book, “Idol Eyes.” I quickly ordered a used copy (cost me \$1 plus shipping!) and began to read. This book is not Pulitzer prize-winning writing, but it was a wonderful resource for me and it really helped me to fill in the blanks of her story. I’d be happy to loan it to anyone who’s interested in reading it.

So here’s the story behind the song:

We’re going back to the beginning. Mandisa Hundley was born in 1976 and grew up in Citrus Heights, California. Her parents divorced when she was just two years old and she found herself bouncing back and forth between her father’s home and her mother’s home. This is, unfortunately, the life that many kids deal with these days. Mandisa doesn’t blame any of her problems on the divorce, though. Yes, she can see how a lot of time left alone (due to the fact that her mother worked several jobs to make ends meet) where she camped in front of the television and ate could lead to a problem with weight. But there were deeper things at work in that had a major impact on her life and the result was a real dependence on food. She actually calls it an addiction to food.

One day as I was driving to church (I've found I get some of my best thinking done while driving back and forth to church and for those of you that were here last week, you can see why it was such a waste of my time to be thinking about that speeding ticket every time I drove here) God showed me a picture of tree rings. You know... in third grade science class when your teacher brought in slices of a tree trunk and you studied the rings? Each ring represented a year in the life of that tree. And you could figure out what the tree experienced by looking at those rings. Sometimes the rings were nice and fat and we know that means that it was a good year for that tree. The climate was just right...lots of water, a good amount of sun, no bad storms that caused damage...circumstances were great for the tree that year. But other rings are a bit thinner, and it's clear that times got a little tougher for the tree. The thing I remembered from those rings was how sometimes the tree got scarred. Maybe there was a fire or something and it created an actual scar in the ring of that tree. And you can see clearly by looking at the rings to come, that it took years for that tree to recover...for the rings to grow over that scar. Year by year, the gap in the ring began to close over it. And although that scar eventually was not seen on the outside of the tree trunk, the scar would always be evident in the rings. That's how I began to see Mandisa's life. She experienced a few "forest fires" growing up that left major scars on her life-rings. These scars would have been enough to make anybody just want to crawl into a hole and stay there. But for her, the scars led to a weight problem.

VIDEO: first third of <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTub4UG67HM&feature=related> (up until 3:16 or so when the interviewer wants to hear about her experience with Simon)

So, as a result of the abuse that she suffered as a child, she began to rely on food as her source of comfort. When she needed to feel safe, she turned to food. Now it's no coincidence that at the same time, God began to call her. As you heard in the interview, Mandisa wasn't really brought up in the church. When she was in high school, she had to read a book called *Stranger in a Strange Land*, by Robert A. Heinlein. Mandisa said that "*the book was pure science fiction, yet because it is filled with spiritual symbolism, it piqued my interest in God. The Lord began to woo me,*" she says, "*His Spirit drew me, and I responded.*" When she was 16 she was invited to attend a Christmas program at a local church. It was a story of Jesus' life and at the end, the

pastor stood and explained that Jesus came for all of them. He invited anyone who wanted to accept Jesus as their personal savior to say a prayer with him. Mandisa prayed that prayer that night.

*“From that day,” she says in her book, “I began to dig deep to discover what following Christ was all about. No one had to remind or nag me to attend services; I was STARVING for knowledge about the Lord and what the Bible says about the way we should live.”*

After high school, she moved to Nashville to attend Fisk University as a music major. She knew she wanted a career as a singer, and this seemed the best way to go about attaining that. When she graduated, however, it became clear to her that she had a degree but no job, no money and no place to live! She recalls a time when a friend showed her a new gadget called a GPS. The satellite signals enable the machine to figure out where the car was and where it needed to go to get to the goal. Thinking back about this time in her life, she recalls that *“After my graduation from college, I trusted the Lord to direct my path like some sort of heavenly GPS system, but I hadn’t heard a word about my destination – or even my direction. The screen on my internal GPS was completely blank. I needed direction, and I needed it fast.”*

But she clung to the things she’d been learning since she first went to church. She relates that this scripture was one that kept her from “losing it”. This was the verse she held onto: Proverbs 3:5-6. *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart; lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your path straight.”*

It wasn’t long before she discovered a company called LifeWay which had Christian bookstores all over the country. They were located right there in Nashville and they were advertising some job opportunities in their music publishing department. Well, she jumped on it. It couldn’t have been clearer to her: God was leading her to the goal that he had for her life – he was laying the path before her and all she had to do was follow it! So she applied...and waited. She actually turned down a few offers from other companies because she was SO sure of God’s plan for her. Finally, she did get a call from LifeWay. She was interviewed and a few days later the call came in...they had a job for her...in data entry! You can imagine what she thought of that. She was

expecting some kind of job in the music industry and instead, a mindless typing job is what God had in store for her. It was humbling. But, with other avenues kind of exhausted, and still feeling like God had a plan for her there, she took the position. And she learned to be content.

As she typed each day at work, she listened to music with her headphones on. Little by little people began to notice her singing along with the CDs. As she gradually worked her way out of data entry, into phone orders and then telephone sales, she also began to be noticed MUSICALLY. She was asked to sing at the employee worship services which led to an invitation to fill in for a singer at a LifeWay conference. That led to be asked to sing as a background singer for big-name Christian artists, which led to session work for many recording companies. Little by little, God began to reveal a bit more of how He would use her gift of music in new ways. He had been leading her all along, she just couldn't see far enough down the road to understand what was in store!

This is where, as I read her story, I began to compare her experiences to mine. And believe me, I could relate. I, too, was a music major. A sacred music major actually, and then an organ performance major in grad school. And there were a lot of times when I began to think, where is this all going? Plenty of people would say, "Oh, you're an ORGAN major. What will you do with THAT?" Todd and I both had our share of struggles, career-wise. Here we were in Kentucky...I had a part-time church job and Todd was a public school band director. Now the further south and west you go, the more you realize that marching band is serious business. Bands compete big-time and it is all-encompassing. They practiced every day but Sunday throughout the marching season, had practice all summer long. The practice payed off...we made it to #2 in the entire state of KY, but it was hard on a young family. It was easier before when it was just the two of us. I went to all of the rehearsals and was able to be with Todd, at least geographically, as often as I could. But when we had Lauren, it became more and more difficult to have a "family life" at all. Our lives centered around marching band. I'll show you some pictures (just for fun) to give you an idea of what our life was like.

1. Lauren's first public outing – a football game where the band played
2. Lauren at state finals (all bundled up)

3. Lauren “conducting”
4. Lauren riding the band tractor
5. Us eating supper in Todd’s office

It’s clear from the pictures that we learned quickly – if we wanted to see Daddy, we had to go to him. And we knew right where he would be...at the bandroom! We knew that the schedule was just too tough on our family life and so Todd started applying to elementary positions, knowing that the time commitment would be much less strenuous. We were clear in the understanding that God did not want our marriage to fail and this was what he wanted us to do. Elementary band is not glamorous like high school band. Much like the data entry position for Mandisa, an elementary band position was not terribly appealing. Let’s face it...it’s a lot of honks and squeaks and otherwise not so pleasant noises instead of the beautiful music that Todd was used to producing. But we felt that this was what God wanted us to do and we were willing to do it.

Around that same time, my Mom called saying that the high school band director in Milford (who’d been there forever) had decided to retire. She knew Todd had started looking for another job and so she **STRONGLY** urged us to apply for the Milford position. Now, we really did NOT want to up-root and move to slower-lower Delaware. We were happy in our life just outside the city of Cincinnati where we could enjoy a quiet, rural home-life combined with the conveniences of a city just moments away where we could go to the symphony or theater, or even catch a major league baseball game whenever we wanted. And I’m sure Todd wasn’t thrilled about the idea of moving into the in-laws backyard, so to speak! But in order to appease my mother, we sent a resume. It wasn’t like they would even bother to consider someone from as far away as we were anyway, right? Well, it wasn’t long before Todd got a call for an interview. At that point we sort of just looked at each other, asking “What do we do NOW?” Hadn’t God shown us that what He wanted was for Todd to be in an elementary band position – not another high school position? How could this be the right thing to do? But it’s not like we could tell my mom, who was itching to have her little girl back near her, that we got a call for an interview but chose to ignore it! So Todd came all the way out here for the interview and the next thing I know he’s on the phone saying he’d been offered the job! What now? I would have to quit my job, we’d have to sell the house, pack everything up and move to Delaware where no

job awaited me. I was trained to be a full-time church musician and I was moving away from any potential of that happening. I mean, what church in Sussex County can afford to have a full-time church musician on staff?! 😊

But we accepted the offer anyway, feeling strongly that God was “making our path straight.” We just had to trust him. So we did, and here we are! That’s not to say that it was easy or that there weren’t a lot of bumps in the road. On the contrary, there were times when we thought, “Why did God DO this to us?” It was like that for Mandisa, too.

Her life had settled into a comfortable pattern by 2005. Though she was content in her work-life, she was still struggling with her addiction to food. Just like in her childhood, she spent a lot of time in front of the television, eating. Some of that time in front of the TV was spent watching American Idol. She’d always wondered what would happen if she auditioned, but was too scared to do anything about it. *“Though I wanted to go out and follow my dream,” she said, “it was easier by far to stay home, munch on my favorite snacks, and watch someone else’s dreams come true on television in the comfort of my safe living room.”*

But one day, as she surfed the internet, she found a site that advertised a regional audition for American Idol through an Atlanta radio station. Now I’m not an Idol watcher, really, so I don’t really know the ins and outs of the auditions but apparently there are some where you don’t have to go through the trial of standing in line for days, sitting in a huge sports arena full of people who are also auditioning. There are actually some “jump to the start of the line” auditions where you can skip all of that nonsense and speed your way through the process. This audition, the one that Mandisa saw on the internet, was just such an audition. And she didn’t have to go anywhere to do it! All she had to do was make a telephone call, answer a few questions through an automated service and then sing 1 minutes worth of a song. THIS she could do, she thought! So she did it. A couple of days later she got a call from that radio station saying that she’d been chosen as one of the top three who’d called. But, she needed to come into the station to sing so they could choose who’d be going. She managed to clear her schedule so that she’d be able to drive to Atlanta to do this, but was scared silly the whole way. What if she didn’t make it? Her dreams would be crushed. What if she MADE it? She’d have to face Simon and whatever

comments he'd be sure to make about her weight. She plowed ahead, though, knowing that if God wanted her to do this, he'd MAKE a way for her to do it!

And that's just what he did. She ended up winning that day, and four days later, found herself in Chicago, preparing to go through the next round of auditions. There are several preliminary auditions that you first have to go through in order to actually sing in front of the REAL judges. But, step by step over the next few days, she was able to sing her way through each round until she found herself just outside the final judging room. Her prayer time leading up to this had her feeling like God was telling her she'd do well and go further than she could even imagine. He'd already laid the path for her, hadn't he? Yet, her doubts still kept crowding in. As she walked into the judging room she was, as you can imagine, a nervous wreck. But like any good actress she didn't show it. She casually sauntered in, announcing that she was "Just Mandisa" and thought she just might be the next American Idol. She sang for them. And they loved her.

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4w9osiCiWA> (until 0:55)

She was obviously thrilled. And who wouldn't be? All of her fears leading up to this final audition...fears of failure, fears of rejection, and most of all...fears of Simon opinion of her size...were cast aside. God had proven himself faithful to her. And Mandisa decided then and there that she would use this show as a mission field. She wanted God to use her to reach and teach others about Him. And she knew that He would be there to help her.

If you know anything about American Idol, you know that after the nationwide auditions, only a small group of people (maybe 150 or so) actually make it to Hollywood. But the pare-down process doesn't stop there. There are several more rounds of solo and group auditions that must be endured before they whittle the group down to a group of 44. But Mandisa managed to make into that elite group. However, the auditions wouldn't air for almost a month and Mandisa was not allowed to say anything to her friends or family about what had happened in California. And she was dying to tell them! Even though she couldn't TELL them what had happened, her friends still knew SOMETHING was up. Actually, commercials had been airing, to promote the up-coming shows and one had a clip of Mandisa's triumphant exit out of the audition room.

They KNEW that she had made it and they wanted to celebrate with her. On the night that the auditions would be televised, her friends decided to throw a huge party. They had t-shirts printed up to commemorate the occasion, they bought Mandisa a tiara to wear, and prepared to celebrate her success. Mandisa was so excited to be able to share her good news, FINALLY, with all of them and was so grateful that they all (around 40 of them in total) cared enough about her to be there that night. Little did she know how much she would need them.

You see, Mandisa knew that her singing had impressed the judges...even Simon! But what she didn't know is that Simon had a lot to say about her once she had left the audition room. THIS is what aired that night to millions of viewers across the country...

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4w9osiCiWA> 0:45 to end.

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTub4UG67HM&feature=related> from 4:44 to 5:37

Mandisa later came to realize how blessed she had been to be in that roomful of friends when she first heard those words from Simon. She says in her book that, *“If I had known what he was going to say, I would have stayed home and watched the show by myself. Then I would have sulked for days, if not weeks. Inevitable I would have driven through the Krispy Kreme drive-through and soothed my sorrows with a dozen hot glazed donuts. The next morning I would have awakened and felt horrible, awash with shame and guilt. After so many hours of feeling terrible, I would have indulged in a medium Papa John’s pizza and a gallon of ice cream. ...I would be a little girl again, secure on my couch and surrounded by my comfort foods, afraid to risk hurt and ridicule. But God knew what I needed. Because I was with Christian friends the night of the premier, my pain was eased almost immediately. They surrounded me in prayer and reminded me of what was important. My hurt feelings weren’t that big a deal – lots of people get their feelings hurt every day, and they survived.”*

She began to realize that she had a choice. She could allow Satan to use this tough time in her life, or she could allow God to use it - for good. She chose the latter. This is what happened...

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTub4UG67HM&feature=related> from 5:37 to 6:42

Needless to say, she went on to make it to the top 24 singers, and eventually to the top ten. Along the way she held Bible studies with several of the other contestants. She spent a lot of time in prayer. She continually turned her life over to God, asking Him to use her however He saw fit.

Up to this point, she had been singing pop songs, primarily because they were pretty much the only ones that fit into the theme for each week. But as the next week approached, Mandisa felt God asking her to do something drastic: sing a Christian song. She decided to sing one of her favorites: a song called “Shackles.” The song was a very bold expression of the liberating power of God’s grace. As her music began, and she walked onto the stage, she said this to the thirty million or so people that were listening that night:

*“This song goes out to everybody who wants to be free. Your addiction, lifestyle, or situation may be big, but God is bigger.”* The crowd loved the song, but much of America misunderstood what she had said and a storm began to brew. When she said “addictions, lifestyles or situations” she had been referring to her struggle with food and her need for a lifestyle change. But the world interpreted her use of the word “LIFESTYLE” as a reference to homosexuality. Many people began to think that what she was saying was that if you were a homosexual, you needed God to save you. And though she did agree with that (don’t we ALL need God to save us from our struggles with sin?), that’s not what she had been trying to say. But still, it began to snowball. And by the next week, there was a huge back-lash of anger towards HER for what she had said. America had voted, and they had not voted for HER. She was sent home.

Mandisa is very quick to say that there is no way to know WHY she got sent home...WHY America had not voted for her like they had been all along. It could have been that they didn’t like her last song – the judges hadn’t really liked it. It could have been that they just liked the other singers better. OR it could have been that they thought she was a “hater” and didn’t want anything to do with her anymore. It certainly seemed to her as if the latter were the case, since all any of the interviewers wanted to know was “why do you hate gay people?”

She said, *“Where had these accusations come from? Why had it they come at all? God knew I didn’t hate gay people, so why had He allowed this insane thing to happen?”*

As she began to head home, stopping at a hotel along the way, she ordered a ton of room service and turned her back on God. When she got home, she ignored the phone when it rang, she didn’t answer her door. Her friends, who desperately wanted to comfort and help her, could not reach her. She had crawled into that “box” that we spoke of earlier and had give up. She said *“If I could have flown to a place where not even God could go, I’d have been first in line to buy a ticket.”*

But God was still wooing her! She kept hearing the words to the song “Shackles” – the song that had caused all of the trouble. These are the lyrics:

*“Everything that could go wrong  
All went wrong at one time  
So much pressure fell on me  
I thought I was gonna lose my mind  
But I know You want see  
If I will hold on through these trials  
But I need You to lift this load  
“Cause I can’t take it any more.”*

*“I hung my head and wept,” she said in her book. “I’d sung that song so many times that the words were as such a part of me as my skin, but I wasn’t living what I’d sung. Everything had gone wrong, and instead of holding on through the trials, I had let go.”*

A familiar verse came to mind and stuck there (1 Corinthians 13:11-12): *“When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly as in a cloudy mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.”*

She realized that when she thought she had been hearing God clearly, and counting on Him coming through with what SHE thought was going to happen – she had been using her human ears. *“I stood on the imperfect side of eternity, with mortal ears and strong desires. Sometimes God spoke and I heard him; at other times I heard what I wanted to hear. Maybe I filled in the blanks of God’s silence with what I wanted Him to say. I had asked God to use my offering of the song “Shackles,” but I wanted him to use it according to the scenario I had dreamed up.”*

I think we all do that sometimes, don’t we? Todd and I certainly did. We were so set on what we thought God had planned for us in Kentucky, that we would have likely turned our backs on the opportunity in Milford. But here’s what I think...I think that if we had turned our backs on this situation...if we had continued to acknowledge God in “all our ways,” seeking his guidance with each step we took...even if we had misinterpreted his plan for us...he would have blessed us. He put us on this earth with brains – with the ability to choose! And He’s GOT to know that we’re going to choose incorrectly sometimes. But I hold strongly to that verse from Proverbs: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart; lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your path straight.”* It might lead straight up a mountain, and the going might be tough, but he’d make it straight and he’d be there to walk it with us.

Mandisa HAS learned to trust. And God has straightened out her path. She’s able to look back on all that has happened in her life and know that God did not abandon her in those dark times. That God was walking her through them, sometimes carrying her through them. He had placed people in her life to help guide her. He had been her source of comfort time and time again – and would continue to be a far greater source for that comfort than food EVER COULD be. As a result, this album is full of songs that speak to that truth. But she realized, as she was writing these songs, that she couldn’t be singing about how God can help you through anything...she couldn’t urge others to lean on him, while at the same time she herself was still depending on food to bring her comfort. So she’s been working on her weight. And by the time this song was released, she’d lost 100 pounds. Not through surgery – the old fashioned way. And she knows she didn’t do it (and can’t keep doing it) alone. She knows that she’s going to continue to mess up at times. But she knows, too, that God answered her prayer to use her time on American Idol

as a time to witness. What a HUGE mission field! And as she walks through this tight-rope act know as FAME, she strives to continue to lean on God as her source of comfort and holds strongly to these words from Hebrews (12:1-2, 12-13) which are REALLY the story behind the song:

*“Since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. So take a new grip with your tired hands and stand firm on your shaky legs. Mark out a straight path for your feet. Then those who follow you, though they are weak and lame, will not stumble and fall but will become STRONG.”*

VIDEO: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFY2Hdh7cvA&feature=related>

*(last half maybe)*