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TIPS

The Dressing – April is Here – by Marcy Lytle

Pastels are everywhere when Easter rolls around, in the plastic eggs, for table décor, and even hanging on the shelves for anything home and anything to wear! Sweaters are probably being put away by now, at least the heavy ones in the dark fall and winter hues like browns and oranges... However, pastel sweaters are great to have in your close this month to wear now, and even into early summer if you're lucky to live in a fairly cool climate. I found some that I love, along with a few other spring ideas to share with you!

Blue vintage – This blue sweater with vintage buttons in a pale blue color is a favorite. Adding pops of bright colors in a headscarf or a pin brings it into the spring season with flair. Sweater from Ross.

Green and white – It's not pastel, but the white daisies against the green speak soft fields of wildflowers, and this sweater is a fave! Open with a graphic tee is one option, but I even wore it buttoned up backwards one day. And check out all of lovelybydani earrings that are only \$5 each! Also from Ross!

Lavender blue – This pullover, super lightweight sweater is a great find. Wearing it now over a button up, and can be worn later alone, with high-waist jeans. Ross!

Pink and yellow – Easter colors, for sure! This pink corduroy hat is so fun, and I'm pairing it with a yellow sweatshirt (lightweight) from Walmart, on top of a plaid button up from Target. It works!

Purple waffle weave – I love a waffle weave shirt and this one is super lightweight, with cool sleeves. A great fun top from Walmart for spring. The color just sings!

Pinkish long vest – I've had this vest a long time, as it's a classic. Now, it's over a long sleeve tee, but it works well on into summer over crisp white short sleeves!

Vintage Scarf – Hit the vintage shops and find some scarves for spring! Wear them tied to the side, roll the windows down, and enjoy the ride!

Neutrals against black – That black dress hanging in your closet – wear it with a straw bag, wooden earrings, and neutral slides – and a stretchy belt slung at the hip. I got a pack of these belts from Amazon. A fun look, for sure!

Spring has arrived now, and flowers are blooming, temps are warming up, and we just want to be outside in something cute, cozy, comfy and crisp – for lunches, lounging, learning and enjoying life!

Seven for You – Spring Refresh – by Marcy Lytle

Hopefully winter is in our rearview mirror by now, and nothing but fresh flowers and sunshine (with a few rain showers mixed in) ahead! We asked our panel of women to share with us ways that they bring this new view into their homes. Do they hang new dish towels, put out spring pillows, add plants, or what? We all need a little inspiration to bring color back to our homes, and fresh scents of all things new! Hope you enjoy, and are inspired too...

As the season comes to an end and I find myself longing for spring, (or summer, autumn, winter) I begin to change little things mostly in my kitchen/living area where I spend the most time. I change out the flowers to something more seasonal. (No real plants because my cats eat them). I also put out seasonal kitchen towels. In my guest bath, I have a frame where I put pictures from old calendars that I love. I change these out by season too. Then I move on to a new wreath for the front door, and a seasonal doormat. I just put out bluebonnet items. I even bought a new bluebonnet doormat! - Beth

Spring for me means planting and happy colors. There's something about growing plants that reminds me of hope and possibilities. My plants are combined in my vintage planter collection. It's easy to add little decorative touches like this rare Brush/McCoy bumblebee to your planters. You can find butterflies, Easter bunnies, or eggs that they sell on sticks to add decor for the holidays or just because they make you smile looking at them.

I also replace my indoor and outdoor mats....starting new with a fresh happy rug is one inexpensive way to cheer up my front door. My rug was one I found at Target last year for 13.00. It was sold out and I waited until it finally came back in stock. I love the shape and the beautiful floral colors. I have one outside my front door and another as my entryway mat as well. – Cathy

Springtime feels like new beginnings - I like to declutter, open the blinds and let the sunshine in — winter is often gloomy — put new colored pillows at the firepit. My favorite is refreshing the flower beds and adding a little color. – Edith

I'm a college student so I don't necessarily have the space or funds to "refresh" a lot of things around my apartment however I do store seasonal candles throughout the year so after putting away all of my winter/valentines decor I definitely bring those out! I also tend to do a lot of DIY projects...usually I store all my used up candles throughout the year and then boil water and pour it into the jars so that the wax at the bottom melts and rises. I leave the water in the jars until it cools and the wax hardens at the top and then I use that wax in my wax warmers around my apartment. After this I clean the jars out and recycle the ones I don't want and then repurpose the clean ones...I recently discovered a local coffee shop in my city that sells very reasonably priced plants so I will definitely be making plans to go pick some up and repurpose my candle jars for plants! – Sofia

The year before my husband passed away we decided that we would work another year and put all our earnings into remodeling and updating the house. Flooring in some rooms, painting the entire inside of the house and remodeling a weird bathroom. When he got sick, all that got put aside and stayed put aside until this year...2.5 years later. So now, I have beautiful paint throughout, new hardwood floor in the family room (some things fixed that never were done

when he built the house 20 years, ago, etc.) and it looks amazing. My only problem is...now the fireplace looks outdated and needs to be redone, as do the kitchen cabinets. Will I be truly happy then? That's the question, but for now, I'm enjoying the newness of fresh paint and flooring. I'll plan for some future upgrades as well, but for now, I'll be thankful and content and say that God is so good! - Debbie

Three Moms – The Bathroom – by The Cousins

The kids' bathroom might be room in the house that every mom hates to enter, to clean, to present, or to visit on any given day. From all the bathtub clutter, to toys, to dirty clothes, to toothpaste on the sink, and all the things...keeping this one particular room "pretty" might seem near to impossible. We asked our three moms to share their tips on bathroom cleanup, refresh, organizing, etc. They have some good tips!

Mom of Three

It seems that our guest/kids' bathroom has always been a priority. And being the guest bathroom as well as the kids' bathroom is frustrating. I want it to be "fun" but to always look nice for guests. This has called for creativity with storage so that the kids' "things" are not all over the counter, or a mess. So we clean often, especially with boys! And...we only have one small cabinet.

By the tub, I have three hooks where their towels hang, to keep them off the floor. We have a two-tiered tray in the corner on the counter for my daughter's hair products so that they are organized and off the counter. I love the two tiers! Also, under the sink each kid has a shower caddy – which they can pull out, use their things, and put them back. Inside is their toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, etc.

Of course, they don't always put things back! So we rotate chores in the house, and every Friday one kid has the bathroom as their chore. He/she cleans the counter, the floor, the toilet and the tub. We do help with the toilet! Taking care of their bathroom gives them ownership, so this happens weekly. We also make sure they put their individual things away before the cleaning takes place, so that the one who cleans can just clean. The caddy is my favorite thing, and keeps stuff off the counter.

We also have fresh towels, and a nice soap pump. Otherwise, the counter is clear and clean, with a little artwork on the walls. Easy storage (that suits them, not me!) has worked for easy storing and cleanup. This also reduces frustration among the kids! Our littlest was age 4 when he started, as he began with wiping down the counter!

Taking ownership, letting them clean, getting them organized, helps them and me, as their parent!

Mom of Two

Our bathroom is nothing special, and it's also our laundry room and our guest bathroom. Therefore, it's not decorated only for the girls. I have to be creative with storage and for practicality when guests visit!

The girls are ages three and five and love bath toys. We love these mesh bags that stick to the walls, which is great for when guests visit, so that they're not stepping on toys. The girls just use our towels and don't have their own, but they do have a rubber mat in the bathtub to keep them from slipping.

Toys, like cups, are the best – because they love to pretend to cook. There is some fun bathtub paint by Crayola that washes off super easy and does not stain. There are also dissolvable tablets that change the water to different colors, and the girls also love shaving cream for kids – a foamy cream to put on the tub walls. It's also an easy cleanup!

https://www.amazon.com/Skip-Hop-Stack-Buckets-Rinse/dp/B012CBD47K/ref=sr_1_1?crid=IUNJSNUXD4WI&keywords=skip+hop+stack+pour+buckets+bath+toy+-+5pc&qid=1647433659&sprefix=skip+hop+stack%2Caps%2C199&sr=8-1

[https://www.amazon.com/Bathtub-Paint-Kids-Bath-Toys/dp/B09NZ3CCR8/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?crid=NB9QG8L626QI&keywords=bathtub+paint+for+kids&qid=1647433733&sprefix=bathtub+paint%2Caps%2C246&sr=8-1-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzS05KTFJCNzA3U1BTJmVuY3J5cHRIZEIkPUEwOTE2NjIxMTJFOVAwTVFRUU5UUCZlbnNyeXB0ZWRBZEIkPUEwNTAyNDIzMUq1WIAzMvc0WUdaVyZ3aWRnZXROYW1IPXNwX2F0ZiZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZ0NsawWNrPXRydWU="](https://www.amazon.com/Bathtub-Paint-Kids-Bath-Toys/dp/B09NZ3CCR8/ref=sr_1_1_sspa?crid=NB9QG8L626QI&keywords=bathtub+paint+for+kids&qid=1647433733&sprefix=bathtub+paint%2Caps%2C246&sr=8-1-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzS05KTFJCNzA3U1BTJmVuY3J5cHRIZEIkPUEwOTE2NjIxMTJFOVAwTVFRUU5UUCZlbnNyeXB0ZWRBZEIkPUEwNTAyNDIzMUq1WIAzMvc0WUdaVyZ3aWRnZXROYW1IPXNwX2F0ZiZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZ0NsawWNrPXRydWU=)

https://www.amazon.com/Mr-Bubble-Bubble-Colors-Assorted-Bathwater/dp/B095N8FDMX/ref=sr_1_5?crid=3Q7MHUWZKE8ML&keywords=mr+bubble+fizzy+tub+colors&qid=1647433692&sprefix=mr+bubble+fizzy%2Caps%2C490&sr=8-5

I do have a rule that they need to keep the water IN the tub, but there is a towel on the floor in case water splashes!

Maybe one day, the girls will have their own bathroom, but for now it's a multi-use space, and that's okay!

In the Kitchen – Salad and Soups – by Marcy Lytle

Spring makes me want to make a picnic, so I can't wait for the first one in a park with basket in hand! Preparing for picnic days means searching out good sandwich and salad recipes that can be enjoyed at home or away, with your family or just for two! I've made all of the below recipes in the past month and they are all delicious! Enjoy...

Bacon Guacamole Sandwich

I saw a picture of this sandwich my daughter had made, and she shared the recipe with me. So good!

Ingredients (per each sandwich)

- 2 slices bacon
- 2 slices sourdough bread
- 1 T butter room temp
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup jack and cheddar shredded
- 2 T guacamole
- 1 T crumbled tortilla chips

Directions

Cook the bacon and drain. Butter one side of each slice of bread and sprinkle half of the cheese onto one unbuttered side, followed by guac, bacon, chips, the remaining cheese. Then top with the other slice, buttered side up. Grill over med heat until golden brown and cheese melts, about 2-3 minutes per side.

Italian Orzo Salad

This is a great spring salad, and tastes even better the next day or the next...

Ingredients

- 12 oz dry orzo
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup halved cherry tomatoes
- 2/3 c chickpeas drained and rinsed
- 1 med cucumber peeled and chopped
- 1 T fresh chopped basil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ red onion chopped
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup packed baby spinach
- 1 c Italian dressing (make your own or buy)

Directions

Place orzo in a pot, cover with water, and stir in $\frac{1}{2}$ t salt...bring to a boil. Cook 8-9 minutes until tender, drain and rinse with cold water.

In a large bowl, combine orzo, tomatoes, chickpeas, cukes, basil, onions and spinach and toss.

Toss with dressing and serve immediately or cover tightly and chill, then toss with dressing just before serving.

Roast Pork Sandwiches in the Slow Cooker

This sandwich is so darn good, so flavorful, and pretty.

Ingredients

2 lbs boneless pork shoulder cut into four chunks

1 T fennel seeds coarsely ground

1 small sprig rosemary

1 bay leaf

4 cloves garlic smashed

5 T olive oil

1 large loaf Italian bread

8 thin slices provolone cheese

1 c chopped giardiniera, plus brine for drizzling

8 jarred pepperoncini thinly sliced

2 cups baby arugula

Directions

Season the pork generously with salt and pepper and rub all over with fennel seeds. Transfer to 6-8 quart slow cooker and add rosemary, bay leaf, garlic and olive oil. Cover and cook about 7 hours til meat is browned in spots and tender.

Pull pork apart with 2 large forks and discard any chunks of fat, and the rosemary and bay leaf. Toss the meat in juices, season.

Cut the bread and split open. Toast if desired. Drive cheese among bottom halves, top with meat, leaving juice in the cooker. Top with giardiniera plus a drizzle of the brine, the pepperoncini and arugula.

Strain juices from the cooker and pour into small cups for dipping.

Philly Cheesesteak Sliders

I recently made these for dinner when my son stopped by. They were so easy, so tasty and so so cute!

For a dozen...

- 1 large green pepper, sliced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ large sweet onion, sliced
- 2 tsp olive oil
- 1 package Hawaiian sweet rolls
- $\frac{3}{4}$ lb sliced deli roast beef
- 6 slices provolone cheese
- 3 T butter
- 1 t minced dried onion
- 1 t Worcestershire sauce
- $\frac{1}{2}$ t garlic powder

In a skillet, cook the peppers and onion over med high heat til tender, about 8-10 min.

Without separating the rolls, cut them in half horizontally and place the bottom half in a greased 8X8 baking pan. Layer the roast beef, pepper mixture and cheese, then place on the top half of the rolls.

In a saucepan, melt the butter, add in the dried onion, sauce and garlic powder...drizzle over the rolls. Cover and refrigerate 8 hours (I didn't do this – only an hour or so and they tasted great).

Preheat oven to 350, remove rolls from fridge 30 minutes before baking. Bake uncovered 15 minutes, then cover with foil and bake til cheese melts, another 10 minutes.

Chickpea Salad

We packed this for a Sunday picnic with pita bread and avocado – adding lettuce and tomato too. It was so light and fresh and tasty!

Ingredients

- 1 can chickpeas drained and mashed
- 2 stalks chopped celery
- 1 small chopped onion
- $\frac{1}{2}$ c diced yellow pepper
- 5 T mayo
- 3 T dill or sweet pickle relish
- 1 T brown mustard
- 1 T lemon juice
- 1 t paprika

- $\frac{1}{4}$ t cayenne (optional)

Add chopped veggies to mashed chickpeas, and the rest of the ingredients to mix. That's it!

Tried and True - Last Month's Learnin' – by Marcy Lytle

Every month, this column is for sharing what I've been learning – little tips and fun facts and life changing things, sometimes. It's so fun to share, I hope you find it so fun to read!

Don't assume you know how to pronounce the names of small towns. Recently learned that New Ulm, Texas (which we had been rhyming with plum), is actually New Ul-em!

When making apple cake or pie, use a variety of apples instead of just one – it enhances the flavor!

Tucking a long tee in your jeans? You can actually tuck a piece through your belt loop and tie it – this keeps the tee from riding up during the day!

Pretzel rods spread with peanut butter (on the top third) and rolled in chopped trail mix is such an easy, pretty and oh-so-tasty appetizer!

Cat 5 is not just a term for a bad hurricane; it's also a term for an Ethernet patch cable! (I am learning so much in our remodel!!)

It's SO much fun to eat peanut M&M's slowly by biting off the end, then grabbing the peanut with your teeth to eat it, and then the bottom. I do this at the theater.

There are the cutest pocket folders in tie-dye hues with small tabs that are great for traveling and corralling all of your paperwork – at Target!

Divine knowledge...it's the kind that sinks into your deepest soul...all of the character of God...namely, that he is inherently GOOD.

Have you tasted halva? Google chocolate halva and try the recipe. Had it at a restaurant and it was so good!

The little candles in the Target dollar spot are the best – for decorating – for placing on your table to fancy it up – for gifts – and they switch them out often – and they're all so cute!

Those cute little serving retro dishes are really invalid cups for sick folks in hospitals that couldn't sit up to drink!

When getting carpet replaced, instead of removing all clothing from closets, just tie them up with garbage bags from the underneath to protect them from the dust. Tip from the installer!

There's a fun app called ToonArt that can take a photo and make that person a cartoon character – so fun!

Pickles, lemon juice and black pepper, mixed with mayo - makes the BEST tartar sauce!

When packing for a trip, snap a pic of all of your outfits (with shoes, accessories, etc.) and place them in a grid, and save. This makes getting dressed so easy while you're gone!

HEB (local grocery store here) has cinnamon sugar Churro almonds – so delish!

Crucible Coffee, according to my husband (who is a coffee connoisseur), is the best coffee around!

One can hang overalls on the wall for décor but...would one really want to?

Sugar and Spice – Green with Energy – by Angela Dolbear

Welcome to **SUGAR + SPICE**, and everything nice in the world of beauty.

Not just because spring is in the air, but also because it is one of my favorite colors: green!

Whenever I am considering adding an eye shadow palette to my collection, I always scan the pans of color for a green...either matte or shimmer (not so much pressed glitter, as I am kind of over glitter at the moment. Get back to me on this as the holidays approach).

A dash of green eyeshadow, especially an olive with gold undertones is so flattering. It adds a vitality and healthy glow to the eyes. It also neutralizes any eye redness, which is a bonus for those of us who often contend with eye allergies.

My current favorite eyeshadow palettes that feature beautiful greens are both from [ColourPop](#); the Star Wars "[Mandalorian](#)," and "[The Child](#)" palettes. I was excited when these palettes came out, not only because I am a big Star Wars fan, but also because the color story of each palette is so beautiful and versatile, offering a variety of looks. And the greens are so lovely! The "Darth Vader" palette is due out soon, so stay tuned...

ColourPop is one of my favorite cosmetic companies. Their products are excellent and affordable. Since I am currently on a "cease fire" from purchasing eye shadow palettes (I have so many...I mean SOOO many), I don't feel bad for picking up one of their mini palettes like the Star Wars series, especially when they are on sale, and so cute!

[ColourPop lippie stix](#) are excellent lipsticks too. The colors are rich, and the formula is creamy. The lippies stix are long tubes of lipstick which provide a precise application, so I often swipe a color on without using lip liner first. Just blot with a tissue, and go!

DESERTED ISLAND product:

Not that I would wear make up on a deserted island, not even for the cute side-walking crabs, or the mysterious mermen swimming in the sea just beyond the rocks off my island. But if I did, I would keep a tube of [Carmex](#) in the pocket of my sarong, so my lips would never be cracked or chapped when I was ready to apply some lipstick. In movies about people on deserted islands, their lips are always so chapped and flaky. I would want to prevent that. Blessings to you!

Angela Dolbear, Beauty Editor, is the author of contemporary spiritual novels, such as [THE GARDEN KEY](#) Series, and [THE TORMENTOR'S TALE](#), as well as many short stories, which are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). She is also a self-proclaimed beauty junkie, and has been since long before her mother allowed her to start wearing makeup at the age of 14. She keeps UPS and the USPS busy delivering small boxes on a regular basis from Ulta, Sephora, Amazon, and many independent cosmetics companies to her home Nashville, TN. Please connect with her at www.AngelaDolbear.com



HOME

Practical Parenting – Family Fun – by Marcy Lytle

It's April, already. In a few short weeks, summer months will be looming and before we know, the kids will cry, "I'm bored," and we'll be frustrated again with what to do, how to do it, the funds to make it happen, and all the things. We thought it would be fun to put together an idea list for you to draw from, to make some family outings or experiences that won't break the bank, will be fun, and you'll be set so you can enjoy it all yourself...as the parent!

Plan a themed dinner – Find a movie for the family to watch (animated or not) and pick one that's perhaps set in another city or country, and have themed food to go with the movie! Let the older kids research and then take them to purchase the ingredients. For example, *Back to the Outback* is an Australian film. Think about baking Australian soda bread, and make a charcuterie tray to go with!

<https://www.hirokoliston.com/damper-australian-soda-bread/>

Plan a fancy dinner – make a list of the fancy things and let the kids set the table: candles, cloth napkins, all pieces of flatware, flowers in vases, music playing. Assign each kid one of these items. No cloth napkins? Purchase bandannas from the dollar store in different colors – they're great! No flowers? Let the kids cut small branches from bushes or take a wildflower drive and pick. The menu? It can be anything, because it all tastes good when it's fancy!

Puzzle night with snacks to delight - Set up say four areas with four 100-piece (or more) puzzles. Allow two people per table, then after 15 minutes, everyone moves spots. Provide four easy snacks like chips/dips, fruit kebabs, brownies, and little sliders. It will be so fun! When the puzzles are complete, snap photos and give high-fives for jobs well done!

Day trip away – Pack up snacks and a map and head out on a day trip with the family. Find a park, perhaps a museum or a historical site, an ice cream stop, maybe a zoo...include three to four stops on your way out and back in, and call it a vacation! Print out a map, give the kids a highlighter, and let them chart where you go each time! Heck, give them a notebook to store all the trips in, with receipts and photos!

Picnic near the water – Is there a lake within driving distance to your house? Pack a huge picnic, include some Frisbees and games, along with reading material and grab an early spot by the water. If there's room to roam, bring kites. Make this a regular thing that you do every two weeks, if you want! Make a list of all things picnic and let the kids help you gather and pack, each time. The Dollar Tree is great for cute plates/napkins to match, even pretty trays and plastic cups. Use a big blanket for your spread. Visit the library before you go!

Board games and baked potatoes – Like you did the puzzles above, set up four areas of board games – easy ones to play that you can visit while you move your piece. Examples might be Candyland, Checkers, Pass the Pig, etc. – whatever you have – or buy a new one for the mix! Have baked potatoes warmed and ready, and halfway through the night stop and top them with all the trimmings and enjoy. Employ the kiddos for ideas for toppers – cheese, bacon, brisket, black beans – so many options!

Those are just six ideas and they will keep you busy, for sure. Make a list of family outings and keep it in full view, so that when that day arrives on the calendar – everyone knows what's coming! Plan out these family events now, so that preparations can be made and anticipation can be enjoyed. Happy end of school year and soon to be summer!

I Don't Do Teens – Four Points – by Marcy Lytle

On the news in our area is a story about a club formed at a local school, one where the kids are seeking out all of the books that were banned from the school library, in order to read them anyway. In other words, just because these kids were told not to read these books has piqued the kids' interest, and it makes the books all the more enticing to read. What is it that the adults are wanting the kids not to read?

While my initial reaction was "what is wrong with our kids today," I remember as a teen myself having this insatiable desire to know more and explore more and experience more of the things my parents banned from my life, as well. We had rules that made no sense to me, or my brother, and we bucked a few. In fact, I'm guessing most teens push the boundaries and want to know what it is their parents are keeping them from, and they don't like being told no to things that seem enticing.

But back to the book story. I recall being upset when my own son was in middle school and his required reading list included nothing but books with "problems," in my estimation. He had to choose a book from the school list, but after looking through them, all seemed to have issues and contain material we didn't want our son to be exposed to. A wise friend suggested we choose one and read the book with our son, discussing it and talking over the questionable material.

I suppose it's just bound up in our hearts, as humans, to want to explore, do what we're told not to do, and take risks, especially if there's someone telling us to stay put, abstain from this, or don't do that because it's dangerous. My kids never wanted to wear helmets while riding their bicycles, and you know what? They often missed out on fun rides because they chose to stay in, if they had to wear a helmet. We didn't budge on the rule, and they forfeited a nice ride.

One of the perks and privileges we have as a maturing adult is to finally realize that not all authority is out to stifle our fun; that many rules are set into place for our freedom and protection, and some things that we're told not to do provide life...not restriction. At least that's the hope...

Our parents told us to wait until marriage for sex. We have our own children now, and we know – either from experience or maturity or both – that this wisdom was indeed wise. We say the same to our kids.

Our parents told us to get enough sleep, eat healthy foods, and drink lots of water. And maybe they told us some other things that seemed just preference, and not truth. But as we matured, we realized that some of those basic foundational healthy habits were so important for living a healthy adult life. We no longer found ourselves able to party all night and go to work and function the next day. What they said about sleep was true!

I guess what makes me sad the most is the attitude behind why we all want to do what we're not supposed to do, and we can't seem to do that which is good for us. I think there's a verse in the bible about that somewhere...oh yes! Paul mentioned this same dilemma. Always in a quandary over sticking with lifegiving wisdom, or wandering off a cliff without a parachute.

What's the answer for this next generation that wants to read all the books that have been banned, or bend all the rules they've been given, or explore places and drive roads that are full of potholes and blinking lights?

It's the same answer Paul gave after he thought about his own frailty when it came to doing and making the best choices in life.

- He acknowledged the war within him.
- He voiced the inner delight he truly had in God.
- He realized he needed a rescue.
- He gave thanks for Jesus Christ.

Our best defense, our one and only hope of salvation for our kids and for ourselves is to truly know and be known by Jesus. When we take those four steps above, we surrender our misunderstandings, our wanderings, our desires to buck and run, and all of the things that hold us back or make us feel trapped. We surrender all of that in favor of a relationship with the Father that entrusts all of our shortcomings and failures to the One who guides us like a Shepherd into good places and green pastures.

Kids are going to always be intrigued by what we say no to, and we will always be on our knees praying for our kids to obey and be safe. Banned books might open the door to all sorts of evil, if our kids read them. Or there might be one they pick up that changes their lives. And we, as parents, can only do the best we know how to do when it comes to navigating the waters with teens in tow.

Our best is to teach them the best we know how, pray hard that they take delight in Jesus and knowing Him, and trust that the God who formed them before we even thought of them is able to keep them from falling into pits of darkness and despair. He's a faithful father that allows us to run from his house to the places where the pigs eat slop, but his arms are always open when we realize the provision in his house that awaits our return.

An Adage A Day - Wishful Thinking – by Carole Gilbert

Springtime is a time of growth, hopefulness, and wishing. Everything is blossoming and coming out after the winter. Whether we like to travel, plant, or just enjoy the warmth and sunshine, we are all wishing for something. We have thoughts of what we would like to have during the warmer season. Is there something you are wishing for? I'm wishing for lots of good produce, especially after seeing a large major grocery store without bananas!

Have you ever wondered if God wishes? What in the world would He wish for? Maybe He's wishing we would do a little better taking care of His world, His creation. Do we wish for God's creation to be a better place?

"Wishful thinking" is an odd idiom. It started around the 1920's and, although the thought had already been around for some time, the idea was first put into words and communicated by Sigmund Freud.

"Wishful thinking" doesn't mean what you would think. It means that you wish for something to happen that is probably unlikely. You're hoping for a pipe dream, or you're on the way to never-never land. You're getting your hopes up for nothing. This idiom started with a negative meaning. I admit, I've used it this way a couple of times, myself, especially while raising my children. There were times they had wishful thinking over something that I knew was not going to happen and I told them so. They knew it too, but, as they would say back to me, "It never hurts to wish."

So, do we use "wishful thinking" as it was intended, or do we put our own meaning to it? Do we think outside the box when using it? I hope I do! I hope I use it positively instead of negatively. I hope I use it as my cup's half full and not half empty.

My little granddaughter in the picture was thinking outside of the box, her brother's box shaped room that is, when she was having wishful thinking that day. Her mama found her sitting on her brother's little table in his room just staring out the window. But the window blinds were closed! She couldn't see outside! But she knew what was there, outside the window. It wasn't never-never land. It was obtainable. And she was having positive wishful thoughts about it.

That makes me think of God. We can't see Him, but we know He's there. And heaven is not a never-never land! It's obtainable. Our God doesn't really fit into the meaning of wishful thinking. We can have Him, positively, with no wishing. We only have to believe and have faith. A synonym for wishful is hopeful. There's no need for wishful thinking with God, all we need is His real, living, hope. Jesus is the living hope! And this hope is a sure-fire, done deal, no uncertainty, kind of hope. And that's a positive!

The Bible says, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1 NIV)

A wish to our God can come true and He can fulfill our other wishes if we believe with confidence. I have a positive wishful thinking that the grass will be greener on my side. That there will be more than two peas in my pod. And that an apple a day WILL keep the Doctor away.

My granddaughter's wishful thinking of seeing the sun and sky, grass and trees, and everything else outside did come true that day, also. Her mama did open the blinds and I'm sure my granddaughter even got to go outside, later.

What are you wishing for?

Photo Allison Gilbert

Tiny Living – Random Adjustments – by Leyanne Enterline

Hot, cold, hot, cold...that is the way I bounce back and forth in our tiny space! And I feel I need to write *again* about the temperature in our tiny space!

It has been very hard to regulate the temperature in the trailer with how random the weather has been this past season...and to still be able keep everyone in my family comfortable.

Since the winter was so cold this year we had to run the heater a lot more. With that came the possibility of running out of propane. While running, it heated up the place pretty well, so much that it started to turn our tiny home into a furnace! We did try to run these little plug-in heaters that work fine, but even that became tricky at night.

At night for bedtime, I put the plug-in heaters in the bedrooms and shut the doors. Well that makes the living area a freezer! So we have to turn the actual trailer heat down to 58 - that way it doesn't warm up the rooms too much when the heat kicks on. Whew! Who would have guessed so much was involved into keeping a trailer at a decent and comfortable temperature! Same goes for the summer, though we don't have to worry about running out of propane then, thank goodness! Especially, with how hard it's been to get the propane. Now we're told our tanks have to get an inspection before we fill them next time. I never knew they even had an expiration date.

Oh, the things we have learned.

In the summer, we just have to keep the air set to 68 and plug in fans, pretty much on our faces, at night to keep us comfortable. There are no ceiling fans, so mini fans are all over the place, and this does help. We have to keep the vent fans running as well, because for some reason bees can get into those and fly around! So with the fans running, the breeze keeps them away or cuts them up! I also try and keep bird feeders close to the trailer in hopes that the birds help keep a few of the bees away, as well.

Every day I feel like we learn something new or try to adjust to some random strange experience that can happen in a trailer! We are constantly adapting. One would think smaller space equals less problems. But it's really smaller space *in a not normal home* equals more adjustments.

There are so many things I could talk about, like our fridge leaking randomly or the freezer getting frost bite, or how we cannot plug the coffee pot and a heater into the same breaker area. I could write about the rubber lining in the kitchen popping off the floors or the shower cracking, or the blinds flying off the door... on and on. However, I'll save some of those stories for another month.

Until then...

remember love grows best in tiny spaces.

A Night to Remember – Two Bad Guys - by Marcy Lytle

Luke 23 might be the most incredible story of forgiveness ever, and it's one our kiddos need to know. So why not tell it and demonstrate it to them this Easter season? It's found in verses 32-43, and it's a great read as we remember Jesus' death on the cross, but look at the events that took place just before that death. In fact, it won't only help the kids visualize and experience God's love; it might help renew the same for us, the parents!

Preparation: You'll need some toothpicks – three pairs tied together to form crosses, a blob of Play Dough, some teddy grahams and a bit of cake icing for "glue."

It's almost time for Jesus to die on the cross, the very reason he came to earth, so that the perfect sacrifice can be made so that we who believe in Him can live forever. And he's about to be hung on a cross in a cruel death. However, there are three crosses on the hill where Jesus is being taken.

Stretch out the playdough on a tray to make a base, and insert the three toothpick crosses.

Why were there three crosses, instead of one?

It seems that two other guys were going to be hung on either side of Jesus, and these were really bad guys – criminals. These guys are observing Jesus and his walk toward the hill where he would be put to death.

The first thing they hear from Jesus is a prayer to his Father to forgive the people that are leading him to his death. Jesus had done no wrong, except obey his Father and love people, yet he was being killed by the evil rulers of the day. Yes, his love for these evil rulers caused Jesus to ask his Father to forgive them.

Has anyone ever treated you badly? How did it make you feel about them?

The second thing that happened, which these two criminals observed, is that these evil rulers were sneering at Jesus and mocking him. To sneer means to be very rude, and to mock means to laugh at someone meanly.

How would you feel if someone were laughing at you, pointing at you, and making fun of you? What would you want to do to them?

So these two guys and Jesus were then hung on the crosses, ready to die. Two for the horrible things they had done, and one because he was obeying the will of his Father to lay down his life for the world – including you and me.

Hang the gummy bears on the crosses using the icing as the glue.

One of the criminals next to Jesus joins in the mocking and demands that Jesus save them and himself if he is really Christ, the son of God. But look what the other criminal says. In verse 41 he realizes that he deserves to die because of all the horrible things he has done, and that Jesus has done nothing wrong and is dying right beside them.

Two criminals, both observing the same events, and yet reacting so differently. One is demanding that Jesus save them, and show his power...the other one is humbly realizing the beauty of what Jesus is doing and how he needs a savior.

Do you know why we all need a savior? Because the bible says we have all sinned – done wrong – and need forgiveness in our lives. Have you ever disobeyed or done something wrong?

The second criminal looked at Jesus and humbly asked to be remembered when Jesus' kingdom came – and guess what? Jesus gladly answered him with a big YES – and said the guy would be with him forever in paradise. Paradise is a perfect place free of death, sickness, pain and suffering. It's a place with God of peace, joy and love.

Look at the three crosses and think about those two criminals on either side of Jesus. Remove one of them and go toss it in the trash. That's what the guy with the sneering, mocking attitude got – death without hope. Move the other cross right next to Jesus. This is what the humble guy received for observing Jesus' character and believing in who Jesus was, asking humbly for forgiveness – which Jesus gladly gave.

This Easter season let's decide which guy we are most like. And let's decide to be like the one that observed Jesus' love for those that were against him and his humility as he hung on the cross, so that we might live.

Family prayer:

Jesus, thank you for obeying your Father and dying for our sins. I too am a sinner, because I have done wrong things many times. I ask you to forgive me, and help me to forgive those that mock and sneer at me. Thank you for saving that bad guy, and all the bad guys in the world. I pray for them, that they would know your love and experience your grace. Thank you for dying, and then rising from the dead so that we can all live forever in peace, joy and love!

Chipped China - The Fog of Indecision – by Jennifer Lytle

Many years ago, I became fascinated with a couple of passages from Isaiah. One [passage](#) says,

*Awake, awake,
Put on your strength, O Zion;
Put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city;
For the uncircumcised and the unclean
Will no longer come into you.
Shake yourself from the dust, arise,
O captive Jerusalem;
Rid yourself of the chains around your neck,
O captive Daughter of Zion.*

Another translation says that last stanza this way: loose the chains from your neck...The call here is to step into the freedom already available. The beautiful garments are already this daughter's possession. Her strength is already known. For whatever reason(s), she has remained passive.

Have you ever gone into a situation knowing it would be temporary? As I think through my answer, I recognize several such situations. I intended to reflect on one example in particular and only now identify this as a possible issue which regularly yields me ineffective . . . at least when viewed through this instance.

It's hard for me to tell this story. Primarily because I haven't seen the other side of my story. I'm going to try.

God opened a door for me. On the other side of the door was a duty, an opportunity, an assignment, and a gift (possibly, gifts, but please see the above paragraph to conceptualize my ambiguity). I knew my appointment time and approximate duration. As time went on, I became despondent about the assignment and the ongoing nature of the duties. I felt ineffective, pressed down, yet I also was contemplating extending my stay for various reasons which all seem perfectly logical and sensical, and in fact, downright appropriate. That was the start of the real trouble for me. I found myself a bit lost and foggy. It was difficult to understand why I was so groggy and I mostly accounted physical tiredness as the culprit. I was fussy and grumpy and snippy, but I have often struggled with these deficits in character.

A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with my husband. I talked about my logical conclusion of extending my assignment and he softly expressed a sincere concern for my well-being. The constant demand was already having an effect.

His comments gave me renewed clarity about my initial intention and I arrived at work without the daze and fog. I stepped on the proverbial (and yet, actual) scene to address a situation that had gone unchecked for months. The situation was perhaps like Apostle Paul's thorn in his side, only it was both personal and communal. Several of my colleagues had grumbled and complained and gasped at the scenario, though no one felt it was their duty, or no one was equipped to make the necessary changes.

In that instance of supernatural clarity (it could only be such as prior I too had grumbled, complained, and considered why the scenario was left openly inappropriate), I walked up to the problem, and with certainty and love, I told that problem it had all of today to remain, but it would never again cross the threshold of the campus. To be as clear as possible, I identified the consequence and walked away to follow up in writing with my expectation and commitment.

It was only after acting, did I realize how ineffective and disoriented I had been. It was only after going back to my original point of clarity and intention that I recognized the utter fog, almost stupor, I had been walking in previously.

Is there an area you are walking around in that renders you ineffective, emotionally "stuck," or disoriented? I wonder if it's time for you too to set your mind and walk in the power and strength freely offered to those who will?

Father, we thank you for the ability to remove chains from ourselves. We recognize your complete provision and present help. We thank you for the promise of freedom and light burdens. We offer these cares, these yokes, and yield them to you. We thank you for purpose, strength, and clarity. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.



YOU

Inner Strength – Finding Joy in Play – by Michelle

Miracles happen all the time that make me smile. I am blessed to say that my boys have taught me how to appreciate our Creator's miracles and enjoy them.

If we slow down long enough, we can all recognize and appreciate each one.

Thanks to my kids, the following phrases they say bring a smile to my heart as I feel a new appreciation for God's miracles:

Look at the moon!

Look at the stars!

That cloud looks like a butterfly!

The moon and the sun are out at the same time!

The sky is orange!

It's raining leaves!

Look at all these crystals! (Tiny pieces of ice that haven't melted yet)

Listening to these phrases of innocence distracts me from thoughts and feelings that the only way to really relax requires getting away.

Not only is it appreciating God's miracles that my boys have taught me, but it's also learning how to find joy in play. God wants us to have joy in our lives. My kids show me how to do this if I'm open to learn. For example, building a castle using paper cups then looking down into the middle of it is so cool!

Baking a cake, freezing an object in water, making a rainbow out of blocks, playing delivery by hiding in a box...I could go on and on. These are all simple ways of getting joy out of life that my boys have taught me.

Sometimes I think,

"Do I really want to play? I'm tired. It's hard to get on the floor."

Once I do though, it's the best! In fact, sometimes I turn into the one that does not want to stop playing. Just the other night, my seven-year-old turned picking up one of his many balls into practicing soccer tricks, and he invited me to play soccer with him. It was too enticing to say no even though it was close to bedtime. (We play an abbreviated version, so we don't break anything indoors.)

With all the pressures we as parents sometimes face, I encourage us all to allow our kids to teach us how to appreciate God's daily miracles and find joy in play.

Thank goodness for the blessings of children - their innocence, open minds, vibrant expressions, and light in their eyes.

I will always be appreciative of the lessons that my kids teach me every day!

Life in a Nutshell – Hundreds Watching – by Jill Montz

As I am writing this it feels like our world is a very scary place. But that is nothing new. That sentence could have been written two months ago...two years...two decades...or even two thousand years ago.

Ever since Adam and Eve first walked in the Garden this world has had evil lurking at every turn...tempting our thoughts, twisting the truth, telling bold lies, and just basically taking its best shot at turning souls against God.

We are told in 1 Peter 5:8...

“Be alert and of sober mind.
Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion
looking for someone to devour.”

Yes indeed...our world is a very scary place.

But we have hope. And God continues to remind us of that daily.

A few Sundays back I was asked to lead the scripture reading and prayer time with my dear friend, Cyndi, during our 8am worship service. We have two services on Sunday and I usually attend the 10:30am one but I agreed to come in early and do my part. Cyndi was going to read a scripture of her choice and I would pray.

The Saturday of our selected weekend, Cyndi sent me her verses and I agreed they were most appropriate. Neither of us is big on public speaking but we were encouraged that we would be standing together on the church stage the next morning.

Sunday morning rolled around and I got dressed for church. I was still a bit nervous but I prayed for God to calm my nerves and just give me the words He wanted me to say that day.

I met Cyndi before the service started and we agreed we were glad to be doing the 8am service. It isn't as full as the 10:30 service and the earlier service is not streamed live on Facebook or linked on the church website. Cyndi had her scripture ready to go and I was just hoping God would give me the words when I opened my mouth.

The service started. We stood to sing. Then the preacher got up and said he would be doing the scripture reading and prayer this morning.

Cyndi and I were a little confused but then...

He read the EXACT scripture Cyndi had planned to read.

Such a God thing!

Proof God wanted that scripture read...and that He has a sense of humor!

Later that morning, before Sunday school, our pastor came to our class and apologized he had gotten the information wrong about who was supposed to read in each service. The pair that

was supposed to do it in the 10:30 service had called to let him know they were sick and couldn't come. He just got the service times mixed up.

Then he asked, "Would y'all like to read and pray during the 10:30 service?"

My brain was screaming, "NOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

But when I opened my mouth the Holy Spirit made me say, "Sure." (It had to be the Holy Spirit because the Good Lord knows my fleshly self was not up for that time slot!)

As the service drew closer, I was becoming more and more nervous. Hundreds of people would be in the pews. Several more would be watching online or would watch later via the website. I needed more than a prayer...I needed a miracle not to pass smooth out right there in front of the worship team, congregation, and God Himself. If that were to happen, I don't know who would have been more embarrassed...me or my 14-year-old daughter. (Probably her. Her embarrassment meter is quick to accelerate these days.)

When it was our turn, we walked up front and I scanned the crowd for friendly (and sympathetic faces). Then Cyndi read her verses...John 16:32-33

"A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home.
You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me.
I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.
In this world you will have trouble.
But take heart! I have overcome the world."

As Cyndi finished, I asked the congregation to bow their heads and pray with me. To be honest, I don't remember what I prayed that day. I do know my voice was a little shaky. I do know that when our worship leader, Brian, started playing low soft chords on his guitar as background music I was thankful for the accompaniment to my vibrato style prayer. I also do know that I did have peace just like the verse said.

All I could think about was I could "take heart" because God was with me.

He understood my uncomfortableness but He also understood my heart. While my "trouble" at the moment was a first world problem for sure, God still cared and I still felt His presence. And in that moment I knew this too...

God is there...as the people flee from the Ukraine or from any type of violence in this world.
God is there...as those who are trying to help render aid to the victims.
God is there...when the phone call comes in from the doctor's office with bad news.
God is there...when the money is gone but the bills are not.
God is there...when the new mother walks the floor at night with a crying baby.
God is there...when family members hold the hands of their loved ones as they take their last breath.
God is there...when the parents try to figure out where they went wrong with their kid who has taken the wrong path.
God is there...when the mom smiles and waves as tears streak down her cheeks as her daughter drives off to college.
God is there...when the pregnancy test is negative...again.

God is there...when the pregnancy test is positive...and unplanned.
God is there...when the couple smiles and says I do.
God is there...when the judge sighs and says the divorce is final.
God is there...when everything is going right.
God is there...when everything is going wrong.
God is there...for everything.

He never leaves us or forsakes us. We truly can have peace knowing that while we will face trouble in this world, Jesus sits at the right hand of His Father because He overcame this world and death, and one day we will be with Him in Heaven.

Can I get an Amen?

Healthy Habits – Just Plain Tired – by Marcy Lytle

Have you ever felt that way? You're just tired, you don't know why, but you're just done. You need a nap, you need a boost, and you need and escape from the doing. Because all of the doing has made you tired...or at least something has! Maybe it's a health issue, but more often than not we're just plain tired for reasons that we can do something about – little changes – to make ourselves feel spunky again!

If you're just plain tired, maybe consider these reasons and see if one of them might be *the* reason. Try asking yourself these questions, or reconsider the idea, and see if you find yourself ready to go instead of ready to crash!

How old is your mattress or your pillow? Maybe it's time for a new one.

What did you just eat? Did you overeat? I have a friend that places half of her meal in a to-go box before she starts eating. Smart lady!

Have you enjoyed the sunshine regularly? Missing vitamin D can affect so many things!

Are you feeling depressed or stressed? Talk to a friend and ask her to pray with you, or ask for help!

How much caffeine are you consuming? Read the results of drinking too much and how it can make you tired, instead of giving you energy!

Hard to maintain your hydration? Do something to change your habits – buy a new water bottle, set out bottled water on your desk, keep a log, stay accountable to someone.

How much do you sit? It's spring now, so change your habits and get off the sofa and out of the chair and move. Workout to a video, take daily walks – make moving a part of your daily routine.

Kids not sleeping? This makes for tired parents! It's not a crime to let them sleep with you if that helps them stay asleep. There's no guilt in asking your spouse to take turns with you, getting up. And there's no shame in taking a nap when they do, to catch up – if you can!

Worry got you wide-eyed? Imagine, picture it in your mind, placing each care – name them – at his feet. Read scripture. Set your mind on the truth as you nod off...instead of the latest news.

Weary from well-doing? It happens. Maybe you're a caretaker, you give of yourself and it takes a toll on your emotions, but you can't seem to get a break. ASK for help. Something hard to do...but do it.

There are all sorts of reasons for being tired, and sometimes we need a health checkup. But sometimes we just need to read a list like the one above, and stop at the one that screams "Yes!" that's you! Tired people make bad decisions, speak rudely, and are not fun to be around. So let's do us all a favor and see what's making us just plain tired, and do something to change our norm into something new and good.

Life Right Now - Meant to Stand Out - By Jennifer Stephens

We've all seen her. Some of us might even be her. She's the one awkwardly standing off to the side, fussing with her shirt while trying to simultaneously disappear into the wall *and* capture the attention of someone, anyone, willing to start a conversation with her. Or she'll avoid people altogether, sitting on the floor, making friends with the dog at every social gathering. That's me. I gravitate to the furry guests. Every. Single. Time. Because...I don't fit in.

At least it feels that way. Sometimes. Most of the time. Watching everyone else effortlessly work the crowd, my mind becomes a tangled mess of memories. The one always picked last in junior high PE class. The one who never wore the "cool" clothes (I was the girl in the cheap jeans from Sears Surplus while the popular kids donned designer denim). Insecure. Awkward. Out of place.

It's not that I don't have friends. I do. Really good ones. Friends that I know will be there in times of crisis. Friends that will cheer for my successes and overlook my failures. But I've never really had a girl group. Never had my own squad or ever been on a girl's trip.

If my life were a TV show, I would be the "extra," the "friend of." When Monica, Rachel and the gang meet up at the coffee shop, they'd let me sit on the couch if I *happened* to show up, but they wouldn't think to call first. I don't have a lead role in the ensemble cast.

People tend to gather with others just like them – but where do I fit? Too old & childless for the young mom's group and too young for the ladies at the senior center.

What do we do when that dreaded feeling of not belonging creeps in? Even the most outgoing person wants to belong – we all do.

"But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world." 1 John 4:4

Those of us oddballs, the "extras" in life, we actually DO fit in – we belong to God. He loves us. He invites us. When we feel like we don't belong in this world, well, we DON'T. We're not supposed to!

God didn't create us to be exactly the same. His desire is for us to be more like Him. He created us to be unique individuals meant to stand out. So, let's embrace it!

When it comes to getting dressed each day, I definitely don't fit in. Oh, I used to. Ten years ago, you'd find me wearing the latest trend and looking exactly like every other teacher at my school. Sometimes, to my chagrin, two or three of us would accidentally show up in the exact same outfit! Unlike my junior high self, who desperately wanted to look like everyone else in expensive Jordache jeans, dressing like everyone else now left me utterly lifeless. If I happened to be out somewhere and noticed someone in a fabulous vintage outfit, I'd longingly wish to be confident enough to dress that way. But I didn't dare. That desire to simply fit in was too great. Until it wasn't.

One day I decided to dip my toe into vintage style even if it meant looking "different." I figured I don't really fit in anyway, so I might as well stop trying to look like I do. Soon, I discovered a local shop that specialized in retro dresses that were new, but looked like they were from the 1950's. And I found the most adorable dress – light blue with pink and blue owls and atomic stars all over it! Of course, I had to get the petticoat to go under it, making it poufy, just like the

dresses of the '50's. This was a dress that just HAD to be twirled! I absolutely loved how it looked and I felt like a princess! And you know what? Some people stared. Some looked at me like I was nuts. But I honestly didn't care. Eventually, that one dress evolved into a closet full of kooky dresses, red lipstick, and an entire collection of vintage cat eye glasses.

Maybe I don't fit in and maybe I'll never find a girl group to go on trips with, but that's okay. I don't need to follow the crowd. Because, you know who else didn't fit in? Jesus. He wasn't concerned with being well-liked. He didn't yearn for a "guy group" to hang out with on the weekends. And he certainly didn't care if his clothing style was on trend!

As long as I know whose I am, I don't need to worry about whose group I do or don't fit into.

Under Pressure – Triple B – by Debbie Haynes

Have you ever felt **betrayed**? It's not a good feeling, and it's one that causes great emotional pain.

Jesus was betrayed in the worst way, by his closest friends. In fact, back in Psalm 41:9 we read the foretelling of how a "familiar friend in whom I trusted" will betray the Lord. Then in the book of John, this event takes place where Judas betrays Jesus. The pain of the betrayal of his friend pierced the heart of Jesus. In fact, almost all of the disciples that had followed Jesus around for years and had seen amazing miracles – fled and hid, fearing for their own lives, that they too might be arrested and killed like Jesus was.

There's another familiar story found in John 17:15 where it says Jesus' heart was for his followers. He prayed for them, that his Father would keep them from the evil in the world, but not take them out of the world. In verse 20 he then prays that all would be saved through the truth and that all would be one in the Father – just like Jesus and the Father were one. What a beautiful prayer...for all of us! Jesus was preparing for his own death, but prayed for and cared for the well-being of those who followed Him.

It was then that Jesus took those friends with him to the garden to pray and these guys couldn't stay awake...at all. Jesus went to the cross alone, with those closest to him now deserting him, denied by Peter and betrayed by Judas. He was innocent, yet condemned to die for the guilty. And there again, on the cross, Jesus' heart was for on the ground those beneath him. And then he yielded his spirit and his soul from his body into the hands of his Father and died. Jesus was **buried**, the tomb was sealed, and guards were set to watch.

In John 20:1 we read that Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb where Jesus had been buried and the stone was not there, the stone that was placed to hold Jesus inside. She ran to Peter and John, to tell them. They looked inside the tomb and saw the cloths, but no body! And in Luke 24:6 we read of the angels' declaration – "He is not here, for he is risen!"

Jesus then showed up to eat with his friends and the scripture says, "Their eyes were opened." They realized he was alive and well. Jesus broke through bars of flesh and bone, conquered death, the grave and hell, and sent us the power of the resurrection.

About six weeks later, Jesus' followers marched into a massive crowd and boldly stated that Jesus who was crucified was raised up by God. Something happened during those six weeks – so dramatic that it confirmed their faith in Jesus – more than all of the miracles they had witnessed the previous years. They had seen Jesus heal the sick, open blind eyes, feed thousands, calm storms and walk on water. But it was Jesus' overcoming death, and their visual of the resurrected Christ, that caused the **breakthrough**.

It really is an unspeakable gift of love – to save a lost world – one in which you and I live. And it really is a reason to celebrate and love the One who first loved us...though he was betrayed and buried. Thank God, for the breakthrough and the power that resides in us, when we simply believe.



MARRIAGE

In This Together – Grace for Myself – by Bekah Holland

I always love to write...almost as much as I love to read. And when I dream of being a writer, I picture myself in a big cushy chair, by a large window with sunlight streaming through the glass as I sip tea and masterfully put pen to paper. The reality of me writing at this very moment is at my desk in my home office, where I just shut the blinds because the sun is blinding me and I can't see my computer screen, with stacks of bills beside me, a cold cup of coffee, approximately 17 trillion open tabs and tasks on my computer, while fielding messages from people needing all the things. Not quite as glamorous and relaxing as the picture I carry with me in my head. One caveat, I am currently drinking a fabulous margarita that my husband brought to me so I would stop yelling at my computer like a maniac after another 14-hour day. So there are upsides to reality too, I guess.

And as I sit here, trying to focus while stomping down the ticker tape of to-dos running in my head...kids' dentist appointments, when did we last eat something that didn't come in a to-go container, how much dog food do we have left, how far can I stretch out my strike on dishes until I cave and do them myself....I add another worry to my already overflowing bag of worries. Which, as a "good Christian girl," is a no-no.

"We don't worry. We have Jesus. Worry is just a failure to trust and have faith."

I wish I made up those quotes, but unfortunately, that's a real, ongoing message in our churches. And not only is it a load of poo, all that unsolicited judgement does is make us feel even less than worthy of the forgiveness and peace we preach right alongside it. And this added to every other bit of crazy we're in right now, I find myself wishing I could just run away for a bit. Leave my phone off, lay in silence, read without feeling guilty about everything I *could* be doing, cook something that makes my soul as full as my belly without the joys of cooking for tweens/teens that would rather live on hot Cheetos and boba tea. But since running away is frowned upon, I'm trying to figure out how to take care of my needs while continuing to anticipate the needs of my family. Apparently, I struggle on the balance beam.

I don't tend to do things like normal people. If I'm in need of comfort food, I don't eat just a bit...no, I order the entire Taco Bell menu. And when I'm reading something I love, I can't hear anything other than the movie my brain is playing out while inhaling a story, especially things like the dogs scratching at the door or my teenager who wants a(nother) ride somewhere that requires me to both put on pants and shell out funds. When I'm working, well, that's where my superpowers end, I guess, because I am constantly and easily interrupted and distracted at work, which I suppose is why I feel like I'm always working.

But where is this "balance" we hear some much about?

Is it real?

Has anyone ACTUALLY figured this out? Because my version of balance, is, well, decidedly un-balanced. My husband is finding his own balance, both by participating in more "ticker-task" activities at home, while still finding time to do the things he enjoys and needs. I'm still a work in progress. I say yes when I should say no. Can I help with that project? Sure. Do I have time? Absolutely not, but we'll just make it work. Because saying no brings all of my least favorite things together into one perfect storm-feeling like I let someone down, confrontation, admitting my own struggles, and saying the actual word no. I'm terrible at all of those things! If I feel I've

let someone down, I've not only disappointed someone I care about, but also disappointed myself, and if I let my thoughts go unchecked that quickly spirals down into I've let everyone down, I can't keep this up, I don't want for anyone to see how weak I am, or that I'm really a mess and selfish and judgmental and ugly and wrinkled and lazy and inconsistent and, and, and.

See what I did there? I used to think I was a simple kind of person. I don't have big wants or needs, I'm pretty self-sufficient and just need someone to pet me and tell me I'm pretty every now and then. Turns out, I'm an idiot and not a plant, and I'm way more complicated than that. My poor husband has had to learn all of this and then wait for me to catch up since I have some kind of mental block when it comes to personal growth in myself. Now, I can help *you* grow any day, all day. I can tell you what's important, what you need to do to listen to yourself and take steps to grow and learn. I'm smart like that. However, taking my own advice is, well, challenging, mostly because my advice is annoying, especially when it hits too close to home or makes things uncomfortable. I know the right things. I know what I *should* be doing. But actually doing it? So freaking hard.

Was it Paul who said,

"I do what I don't want to and don't do what I should?"

He's almost calling out a Jekyl and Hyde side of our nature. And it's true! "Take up your cross" doesn't sound like a fun and easy team building task. It sounds awful. I know I should do some things, and shouldn't do others, but I don't always listen very well and do the wrong things any way.

But guess what?

This is where I am so thankful for grace.

And if the God of the Bible, the one who I put my faith in, who I fail over and over again, so freely offers me grace to cover the mess, how dare I offer any less? And I'm not talking about grace for others. I'm talking about grace for myself. It's so much easier to forgive the mistakes of others. But my own mistakes tend to play out over and over in my mind, like a loop. If all I've read and felt and believed is actually true, if the God of the universe offers me unconditional love, forgiveness and acceptance, and I'm supposed to try to be like Him, then shouldn't I emulate who he is?

My husband has gotten pretty proficient at seeing through my "it's fine, I'm fine, everything is fine" mantra and calling me on it. Mostly kindly, but I know some times he has to be stifling an eye roll as he reminds me, again, that I'm working hard, giving it my best. That I'm worthy of rest and peace and grace, and that those are not dependent on perfection. Those are free and without strings. He's awfully smart, and has grown so much in this area. He came from a family and upbringing much different than mine. And despite every struggle, uphill climb and battle scar, he keeps learning and softening and loving and reminding me that I'm capable, strong, valuable...not because of what I do for others, but just because I am. He's seen it. And he never stops pointing me to a better version of me, a more healed and self-accepting version.

This is partnership. It's what relationships should be. Loving each other into wholeness and supporting the work we do on becoming the person we are meant to be.

Find a partner, a friend, a family member. Support and love them. Watch what happens when they support and love all of you, and not just the parts that have been shined up to present to the world. Watch when they love you in all of your messy, ugly, painful, broken and embarrassing glory. Because that, folks, is where home is. The one in which your heart and soul find rest and a safe space to land.

“For the two of us, home isn’t a place. It’s a person. And we are finally home.”

Stephanie Perkins

Date Night Fun – Mondays and Rain – by Marcy Lytle

There's a song that has the lyrics, "Rainy days and Mondays always get me down" – and I suppose a lot of people feel that way. So many people despise Mondays because it signals the end of the weekend and back to work and all the grind. And well, rainy days just ruin all of the outside fun we want to have! So this month...we're offering ideas for date nights on Mondays or on a rainy day! Pick one of the five to enjoy when the weekend is over, or if the sky is falling...and enjoy!

On a Monday – There are usually very few people in the theater on a Monday evening, so this is a great night to slip in and enjoy the big screen without the crowd! Consider mixing some nuts (like honey roasted peanuts, candied walnuts) and some dark chocolate in a bag with popped corn from home, for your snack. Tuck a blanket under your arm, for cozying up when the movie begins. Enjoy!

On a rainy day – If it's just a drizzle with no threatening weather, then grab the umbrella, put on your boots that can get wet, and go for a drizzly walk in the rain. If you don't have a big umbrella or rain boots, then go purchase some before your walk. That would be fun, as well! Walk for about 30-45 minutes enjoying the rain and the puddles, then return home to sit on the porch and observe the clouds and the rain some more. Share each other's play list and listen and comment on the lyrics.

On a Monday – Maybe you spent too much money on the weekend with the other outings you "had" to attend, like parties and family gatherings, and shopping for groceries, and all the things...so there's no funds for Monday night date surprise. No worries! It's light a little later now, so take a drive just outside of town, pack up a simple dinner, and watch the sun set. One the way back, stop and get an inexpensive cone from McDonalds and sit in your car and people watch while you enjoy.

On a rainy day – Maybe it's pouring outside, storms are brewing, and strolling in the rain is NOT an option. And you don't really want to drive in the storm, either. Shut all the blinds, grab the pillows and blankets off the beds, open the umbrella and lay it on the floor and set out snacks, games and books for a date night indoors. Place your snacks on trays under the open umbrella. Pick a movie or play a game, and even enjoy a fire – if it's still cool enough to do so – for one last time. No fireplace? Light lots of candles. Enjoy!

On a Monday - You're exhausted from the first workday of the week and you have no energy to plan a "date night." So here's the plan for you. Remove your shoes, and put on cozy socks. Order takeout to be delivered and eat it in the car, right in your driveway! Allow NO talk of work or woes, only sharing blessings and wows. Think over the past week of the goodness of each day and talk about it. Savor each bite. Lay back your seats and hold hands and look out the sky light in your car, or place your feet on the dash, and just hold hands in silence as you give thanks.

After 40 Years – The Seesaw – by Marcy Lytle

When's the last time you and your spouse got on an old seesaw on a playground and enjoyed that playground fun? Have you ever? It's harder and harder to find these retro pieces of fun, as most have been removed from the modern playgrounds. Maybe it's because one too many kids got bonked in the head when stepping off their side...I don't know. However, we have stopped in small towns a few times just to swing or sit on a seesaw for fun.

I was thinking of how in my marriage I often spring up and down like a seesaw in the prayer department, concerning our relationship with one another. And when I do, I'm the one that gets bonked in the head when I finally step away...but it's a good bonk...like a reminder of sorts!

Here's what I mean...

I place my worries about life, my relationship with my husband, all the concerns of the day into the hands of my Father first thing in the morning and this enables me to push off the ground and soar high...for a second! 24 hours later (or sometimes an hour!) the other "thing" on the other side then pushes off and I crash to the ground hard! And that thing is fear.

Fear dares to sit on the other side of the seesaw with my emotions and plays havoc with me all day long. And when fear is sitting on the other side of the seesaw, it's like a huge imbalance, like when a large adult tries to seesaw with a toddler. It doesn't work! The large adult will hurt the child if he pushes too hard and the child will fly off, and hit the ground hard!

I often wake up and place my cares at his feet, like the Good Book says to do, and I get up from my desk and feel ready to conquer the day, like the seesaw is in perfect balance. His love sits on the other side and we gently enjoy the ride throughout the day as he and I gently move to the rhythm of our feet, my trust offering balance to his love.

However, maybe my husband walks in and gets in the way while I'm trying to unload the dishwasher (yes, something that trivial) or he talks too loudly on the phone, or forgets to do something I asked him to do, or isn't excited when I tell him my story, or any number of things - small or big. Those small things then turn into bigger ones throughout the day, and by nightfall I crawl into bed frustrated with the man I adored just 24 hours earlier. Have you had this happen?

Suddenly, the seesaw of trust/love with the Father has turned into a flying off/hitting hard ride with fear and frustration. And that's not a seesaw ride anyone wants to take!

Just this morning, I placed my cares once again in my Father's hands and purposed to leave them there, and invited him to be my partner for today's ride. He's gentle, kind, is aware of all surroundings, knows just how to move in rhythm and make today a good one. I realized that I had once again picked up every care I'd given him only a few days before and had started carrying them on my shoulders, causing me to be way off balance and heavier than usual. In doing so, I had invited fear to replace trust, and all of a sudden I flew off and landed hard.

The seesaw. It's a fun ride, but only if the partners are in good rhythm, gentle and kind, balanced and secure. And it's a scary one with injuries that result if the one seated on the other side is way too heavy.

I am totally grateful this morning for His love and patience with me as I dismount, unload, and invite him to take a seat with me on this seesaw called "today." And I'm also thankful for a husband that lets me fly off, land hard, and invites me to dance...when I've said, "I'm sorry."

Find a seesaw in a park somewhere, and sit on one side and invite Jesus to sit on the other. Visualize him balancing out the heaviness, lightening the load, so that the ride is one of glee and joy, like it should be for all who dare to ride...

For Better or Worse - Future Spouses – by Kaelin Scott

Have you seen the *Redeeming Love* movie yet?? I went on opening night with one of my friends, and it was so much fun. I still love the book the most, but the movie stayed true to the storyline and was really enjoyable.

If you haven't read the book or seen the movie, *Redeeming Love* is a fictional retelling of the Biblical book of Hosea. Set during the California Gold Rush, it tells the story of Michael Hosea, a man of faith who God leads to marry a prostitute named Angel. Over the course of the story, Angel leaves him for her old life several times, while Michael remains steadfast in faith, prayer and forgiveness. I won't give away any more than that, but it's a really amazing story.

I remember being in eighth grade and reading it for the first time. I kept thinking, "I want to marry a man like Michael Hosea one day." Praise God for blessing me with a wonderful husband, whose qualities do match those of Michael in a lot of ways. I don't know if reading that story impacted my marriage or not, but it did help give me a framework for what type of man to marry.

Thinking about this, I realize how important it is to know what you're looking for in a spouse. My daughter is only six years old right now, but I want to teach her what true love looks like. I want her to have high standards when she gets old enough to date or get married. I want to make sure she knows what to look for in a husband and be confident her own worth as a wife. I also hope that she sees a good example of a godly wife when she looks at me. I know I'm not perfect – nowhere near it, actually – but I pray that I can use my mistakes as teaching moments for her. Along those same lines, I want my son to be a godly husband someday, and I'm so thankful that he has such a wonderful example in his daddy. He might only be three years old, but he's old enough to be a gentleman.

It's never too early to prepare the younger generation for healthy marriages in the future. Obviously, I'm not pressing the subject too hard right now since they're so little, but living by example goes a long way. (Not that I execute this well all the time. I'm still learning and growing too!) I've just been thinking about how important it is that young people know what to look for in a spouse, and they also need to have training in how to *be* a good spouse.

So where do we find the outline for this? The Bible, of course. There are so many wonderful passages that teach us about godliness in marriage. Proverbs 31 is the most popular, but Titus 2 is wonderful too. Some other good ones are 1 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 5, Genesis 2, and Song of Songs, just to name a few.

In a world where so many marriages are broken or severed, let's show the younger ones what true love looks like. Let's give them a reason to hope for lasting marriages, strong marriages, marriages that point others to Jesus. Let's teach them what marriage should be, and let us also *show* them. Oh, and we need to pray for them, too! Having a healthy idea about marriage from a young age is so important, and it's up to us to impart that wisdom to the next generation.

Also, if you haven't read or watched *Redeeming Love* yet, you really should! I promise you won't regret it.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Rooted in Love - Tummy Trouble – by Kaelin Scott

I have a confession to make.

I've often dreamed of spending the whole day in bed, reading and writing and taking lots of naps.

Recently, I got my wish...only it wasn't a dream come true.

I was down for the count thanks to the stomach bug. It kept me in bed all day. I didn't have the energy to roll over, let alone read a book. I did, however, sleep away a good portion of the day. Thankfully, my kids didn't destroy the house while I was zonked out. Since my husband was out of town, I had to crawl to the kitchen to get food for them, because standing up made me sick. And my head felt like it had a jack hammer going crazy inside of it. Getting sick at 30 is way worse than I remember it as a kid!

Needless to say, my day spent in bed wasn't enjoyable, whatsoever. I would gladly take a redo – you know, without the crawling back and forth between bed and the toilet and sipping nasty Pedialyte.

It was a truly terrible day, one I hope not to repeat. But by the grace of God, we all survived. We made it to the next day, and I felt so much better. Isn't it amazing what God can do in a day?

While I was sitting on the bathroom floor, in that awful few minutes before you get sick when your stomach won't stop churning and your heart starts racing and your body overheats, there was only one thought in my mind.

"Please, Jesus, get me through this."

And He did. He really and truly did.

No, that day wasn't fun. Not at all. But it served as a good reminder for me. A reminder that my own strength isn't enough. I need to cling to Jesus every day, whether I'm sick or busy or having fun or resting or working. He's the true reason why I make it through each day. His love is the only reason I'm even here. How foolish of me to ever forget just how much I need it.

I definitely don't want to go through that ordeal again, but I am grateful for what it showed me. I know it sounds strange to be thankful for a rough day, but that's exactly what we're urged to do in James 1:2-4. Even though it doesn't feel good at the time, our trials produce good fruit in our hearts. They remind us how much we need Jesus, and teach us not to take Him for granted.

Sometimes, when we're busy and life is good, it's easy to forget how good God is. We don't mean to, but we kind of let Him fade into the background. Sometimes it takes one of those nasty, awful, yucky days to bring our focus back to Him. And thankfully, those terrible days don't last forever. He always brings us through them, and He never leaves our side.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,
because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.
Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete,
not lacking anything."

James 1:2-4

Firmly Planted - Every Good Thing – by Dina Cavazos

As I write this, I'm sitting in my favorite papasan swing chair hanging from a beam on the patio. My view is a sad garden--sadly brown and sparse, waiting, I imagine, as eagerly as I am, for spring, when rain and warm sun will revive the dormant life residing in the roots and branches of plants that look dead, but are not. There is lots of work ahead: removing piles of leaves, cutting dead growth down to the ground, clipping, trimming, fertilizing, and replanting. It will require time and effort to get my garden flourishing again, effort that will be well worth it.

Pushing myself off the nearby cedar post to start a gentle swing, I think about the effort every worthwhile thing seems to require. Haven't we heard variations of "Anything worth doing requires effort" our whole lives? Noticing what's around me, I think about the effort it took to make the chair I'm sitting in. The chair is woven and wrapped with strips of polyethylene material made to look like rattan. The cushion is sewn from fabric and stuffed with poly-fill. Not simple processes when you think about it. I can't even trace all the steps the chair went through to get to me: the idea, people, materials, instructions, transport, advertising, and more. Without the effort of many, I wouldn't be enjoying the gentle soothing motion of a hanging chair. Ditto for the cedar post, the bird feeders, the bird seed, etc. etc.!

All these things that surround me and make my garden more enjoyable originate in some way from God-given materials. The cedar post came from a tree; the saw used to cut it is made from metal mined from the earth. Even polyethylene plastic is a carbon-hydrogen molecule. It's made up of ethylene molecules with 2 carbon and 4 hydrogen atoms. Mind-blowing isn't it?!

I am one who believes that there is no conflict between faith and science, because Truth is *true* and will line up in the end. There are ancient writings that contain truths we don't understand, and science, for all its astounding discoveries, often operates on theories because there is so much still unknown and undiscovered. I believe that as more of spiritual reality and scientific truth is revealed, they will be in agreement.

One thing we do know and can agree on is that the earth is rich with resources. Besides, the obvious plants, animals, water and air, there are precious metals and stones hidden in the depths. Without time and effort expended to bring them up and make them useful, they are inaccessible. Many medicines come from or use components of plants, and even animals. God has provided every good thing we need to live abundantly on this earth, but we have the responsibility to discover, retrieve, develop, and utilize them. God created a paradise for an earthly home; but how about our heavenly home—the place we live in Christ?

Ancient words in Ephesians 1:3 say this:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*

This truth is like a salve to my weary soul. Because Jesus lives in me and I in him, I have access to every spiritual blessing: forgiveness, freedom, wisdom, grace, and much more—every good thing I need to accomplish his purposes for me, to live life well, to love others, to remain hopeful when all seems lost, to live in Light rather than darkness. But, just like the materials God has provided in the earth don't construct themselves into chairs, I can't just expect spiritual blessings in the heavenly realms to materialize in my life without the work of prayer—diligent, faithful, believing prayer powered by the Life of Christ in me. This is my spiritual work, which, symbolically, can be very much like the work required to get my garden flourishing again.

Moving Forward – Start Small – by Pam Charro

I heard a great quote:

It is not the happy who are thankful, but the thankful who are happy.

I don't know who came up with it, but the older I get, the more I agree. Thankfulness may not come naturally to most people, but it certainly is a discipline worth cultivating.

I'm not saying to ignore difficulties or discouragement. They absolutely must be dealt with and God wants us to bring them to him. I just find that I feel better when I don't camp out on them, and move on afterward to all that I am grateful for in my life.

So how do we get better at being thankful?

I think it can start very small.

Years ago, a woman said to me, "If you can't think of anything to be grateful for, start with the shaker of salt on your table, and then take it from there." That statement has stayed with me for over half of my life and has proven to be words of great wisdom.

Another way I become more thankful is simply by looking around. With springtime approaching, there is so much natural beauty to see and appreciate: New green leaves and grass, birds happily chirping, flowers, and beautiful temperatures. Just being outside for a few minutes, or even gazing at my daughter or my cat when I'm inside, reminds me that God has blessed me with so much good.

But I think the most important key to developing a thankful mind and heart is simply deciding to do it. It isn't really a sentimental feeling so much as a decision to be made, no matter what. Each of us has that power, we can decide to dwell on what we don't like or on all of the good we can find to celebrate in life.

The Bible says, "As a man thinks, so is he." (Proverbs 23:7).

Knowing that I have such say in my own happiness greatly motivates me to choose to focus on everything I can be grateful for. I'm here on earth for a little while so I might as well enjoy it. And that attitude makes me more attractive to others who feel the same way.

So many reasons to think and talk about all that is good in life...I want to do it every chance I get!

Simple Truth – An Adult Growth Chart – by Marcy Lytle

Remember those growth charts that hang (if you have small children) or used to hang (if your children are grown) on your wall? You found great delight in measuring kids, and they squealed too, as they gained another inch and grew taller by the year. We even had pencil markings on the side of our pantry door that just recently got painted over! Growth charts are a big deal for kids and parents!

I was thinking lately how cool it would be to have a growth chart for ourselves, one that marks places we've grown – so that when we're down – we can look back and see the strides we've made. Too often our minds play tricks on us; little voices whisper that we're not making progress, or that we're less than everyone else. It's often not true, so making a growth chart might be a cool and wonderful thing to have where you can visibly read it when you need a boost of encouragement on any given day!

Here's how to make one:

Decide if it's going to be on a notepad, in your iphone notes, written on a piece of paper, or where you'd like to chart your growth – maybe in your planner!

Pick a scheduled time – say once a month – to record your growth over the past few weeks – until you have a full chart of encouragement.

Write a paragraph, bullet points, or just a phrase to signify your growth. Add your own questions. And if you don't see much growth, write down something really small and give thanks. It might be that you drank water instead of a coke. That's good!

If you feel like you're not growing, these questions are meant to encourage you to do so...so just pick an area and be kind to yourself.

Get started...

Ask yourself these questions in order to fill in your growth:

Has your anger at a certain person subsided because you've truly forgiven them? Write it down.

Did you pray about that hurt she caused, instead of telling a friend? What a good decision!

When he disappointed you again, did you talk it over without accusation? Give yourself a check!

Is your faith stronger now in a certain area than it used to be? Record it!

Are you making healthier choices when you eat out? Good for you!

Did you accomplish a cleaning task at home you'd been hoping to do? Yay!

Are you spending more daily time in prayer and meditation on His goodness? You're so wise.

Have you moved on from crying for days over what your kid said or did? You're amazing.

Is your calendar less full of to-do's and more filled in with fun? Now, that's growth!

These are just some questions to help you analyze your own growth, and you can think of more. Each month note the small...and the big. And when you read back over your growth, stretch your legs, stand tall, and give thanks that you're still alive and growing and things are looking up!

Unearthly Thing - Hysterectomy or Lobotomy...Or Both? – by Angela Dolbear

I debated over whether or not to write about this topic. It seemed kind of whiny to me. And I like to write about encouraging topics.

But I was encouraged by a friend of mine. We will call her “Jane.”

Jane told me, “Women need to know they are not alone in this.” She had the same total hysterectomy surgery as I did, and she is battling ovarian cancer.

Reoccurring severe abdominal pains, with a low-grade fever, is how my hysterectomy journey started. I thought I had COVID, but I got tested, and the result was negative (Praise God!).

The pain was so bad one Sunday morning, I just sat on my couch praying, asking God to heal me, and to give me strength to get ready for church.

“Go to the ER,” God answered me, in my spirit.

As much as I don’t like going to the hospital, I learned to do as I am told when I hear the voice of God so loud and clear.

After a couple of hours of waiting in the emergency room, I was given a CT scan, and some morphine. The doctor rushed in with a much more serious face than when I first saw him, and updated me that I was immediately going to be taken by ambulance to the Oncology Gynecology emergency room, in downtown Nashville.

After a couple of days in the hospital, and so much blood drawn (sometimes at 3 AM! Really!), I was told I had a very large tumor in my uterus, and that all my lady bits needed to be surgically removed through a large incision in my abdomen.

I was watching the sun rise outside my hospital room window after the doctor left my room. Before fear started to set up camp in my spirit over my diagnosis, I heard God tell me (so softly and sweetly), “It’s not cancer.”

Thank You, and praise You, I told Him, inwardly.

The surgery went very well. The surgeon told my husband he removed a 3-pound fibroid that looked like it had a heart attack and died, and was making me very sick.

The 13-inch long incision that stretched from my new belly button down to my pubic bone has come together in three months and without any infection, which I am very grateful for. I am still healing in the inner most parts of my mid-section, but for the most part, I am physically healed from my hysterectomy.

But something has changed. I feel off. I am not me anymore.

No one tells you when you lose all estrogen production because both your ovaries are gone that you will also lose your mind.

I lost the desire to do the things I once enjoyed, especially writing fiction and short stories. Utter exhaustion had taken control of me, coupled with the worst insomnia I have ever had. Disinterest and un-motivation have moved into the space where my uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes used to be. Or so it feels like it.

Did I mention the hot flashes have been turned up to HIGH? Each flash begins with a mini panic attack, as if I feel like I'm going to explode out of my skin, and I can't get my sweater off fast enough. SO weird.

And the mood swings...about 10 times worse than when I still had a menstrual cycle. And I was not prepared for a daily battle with thick, heavy depression.

I tried to pray, but my mind was so foggy and full of negativity. I have trouble coming before the throne room of God to ask for help. I know God is always with me, but it felt like He was far, far away. So a deeper depression set in. I found it hard to care about anything, really. I was too tired to do anything about anything. And then, I just didn't care.

I periodically checked in with Jane (and still do). She was going through the same terribleness I was. She was also derailed with exhaustion, no motivation, and the "off-ness" feeling.

When women at my church asked me how I was doing, and I shared a little bit about what I was dealing with, those that had a hysterectomy gave me a knowing look, and nodded in agreement. They had experienced the same thing.

What on earth?? Why doesn't anyone tell women about this?

I thought getting a hysterectomy would be like getting my tonsils or appendix out. The body part that was sick gets removed, and then I would feel better, not totally different.

"Being a woman can suck sometimes. Sorry you're going through it, but I'm glad it's not just me," Jane wrote in one of her messages. "I was starting to feel a little crazy...it's things like this that women just don't talk about."

I reverted to my worldly way of gaining wisdom---I started doing research on the internet.

Bad idea. I read so much discussion about how a patient should keep one ovary for estrogen production (too late for me!), but I also read that it could cause ovarian cancer. The only positive thing I learned is that I might feel better in a year. A year. I have 3 months down, 9 more months to go.

Before I got too frustrated, I recognized the wall of "no progress" going up, so I stopped my research. I stilled my mind and heart. And then I heard God say, "I am with you, daughter. Trust Me."

I am trying to be patient. And learn a new deeper level of trust in my Heavenly Father.

A couple of weeks ago, I read in one of Joyce Meyer's daily devotional that whenever she is feeling negative or down, she tells her emotions that they "don't get a vote" on how she reacts to the day. I love that. And I immediately adopted it.

Whenever I feel depression start to press on me, which is usually right when I wake up in the morning, I tell my emotions, "YOU DON'T GET A VOTE!" And then I purposely turn my mind to prayer, especially for my "hyster-sister" Jane, who is still receiving chemotherapy to fight the cancer her ovaries left behind.

"It makes me feel so sad and frustrated that I 'lost' most of [Jane]," she wrote in another message. "I don't have the desire or motivation to do much of anything I once loved. I try to

force myself and I guess it helps, but I just miss myself. I don't laugh much, I physically don't feel well either (still healing) and just exhausted!"

I completely understand how she feels. And my heart breaks for her.

When I pray for her, I pray with the compassion and fervency only someone who is going through the same situation can.

Day by day, I am feeling better. God has me focusing on new things, and pursuing other avenues of creativity. I have a deeper dependency on Him. And focusing on someone else, like praying for Jane, lifts the fog and thick muck of depression. It also fuels me, and washes over me, filling me with peace.

God works in unimaginable and wondrous ways. *Praise Him.*

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, as well as many short stories, which are available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on [Amazon](#). Angela writes real, relevant, relatable, and reverent fiction, with an aim toward spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, while hopefully inspiring readers to laugh and/or cry. She loves reading, writing prose, as well as writing and recording music with her husband Tim in their studio in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sign-up for news and to read new stories and hear new original music at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!



FRESH THYME

Got 5 Minutes?

I think I wrote an article on this years ago, but it's worth revisiting, because sometimes that's all we have – five minutes. Maybe our days are full, the kids are tugging at our sleeves, or time just gets away...but if we have a list of things we can accomplish in five – well that helps us all!

Here's my updated list for 2022:

1. Unsubscribe from five emails that have ended up in your inbox way too often.
2. Delete as many photos on your phone as you can in the allotted time, and smile.
3. Get tickets to the movie theater – have you been back, yet? Go!
4. Grab a handful of dark chocolate chips for a snack, with a few nuts.
5. Oh, you don't have dark chocolate chips? Write these on your fridge list to buy!
6. Oh, you don't have a notepad on the fridge? You need one – so place a cute seasonal one there – for all to use for grocery items – so you don't have to remember everything.
7. Sit down, rub your hands with lotion and put up your feet and breathe.
8. Read one story in *A Bundle of THYME* (you knew I'd throw this on the list!)
9. Step outside into the sunshine, sit on the front porch, and drink a full glass of water.
10. Text a friend, or two, just to see how they're doing and let them know they're on your mind.
11. Organize a shelf of your spices that have gotten disorganized over the weeks (or months).
12. Light a candle and sit by the flicker, and listen to one song of your choice.
13. Grab that nail polish and paint your toes!
14. Kneel by your bed and pray for a full five minutes for the world, your country, your city, your neighborhood and your family. Place all in His hands.
15. Go outside with a trash bag and clean out the car doors and the back.
16. Eat an apple. Sit by a window and watch people or cars go by.
17. Start a thanksgiving spot on your daily planner, or notepad. Start today and write down three things for which you are thankful!
18. Walk around your yard with snips or scissors. Cut a branch, or several small branches, and place them in a vase.
19. Make your bed.
20. Browse your favorite online store and order yourself a treat – you deserve it.

FRESH THYME – Three Words – by Marcy Lytle

There's a very old film called D.O.A. and the premise is that a man has been poisoned, he has 24 hours to find out why and who poisoned him, or he dies. For some reason, the initials of this film popped in my mind early this morning. But those initials are also the title of a song from the 70's – and part of the lyrics say "it's a shame we have to die." Another line is "bet your life there's something killing you." So, in case you don't know, DOA stands for "dead on arrival," and it's used as a term for being hopeless from the start. A morbid way to start this article...I know.

As I was up early, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders, I started to just pour out my heart to Him, as I often do. And three words I thought of were disappointed, odd, and ashamed. They've been three words I feel have defined me at different points in my life, and imagine my surprise when I realized they too can be abbreviated to DOA.

So let's break down these three words. I think they might be three words that a lot of us are dealing with at any moment in time, in any given week.

Disappointed in someone or something or some circumstance is a part of living, isn't it? Disappointed in an outcome is one thing, but carrying disappointment in people is another. Maybe a parent left our family, a promise was broken, friendships we thought were lifelong ended, or any number of disappointing relationships are now over and done with, and we're sad, lonely, and confused. Disappointment is a big deal, when we carry it with us for years.

We are definitely going to be disappointed weekly, or even maybe daily, in expectations being unfulfilled. We can't stop the disappointments from landing on our front porches, like leaves falling from strong winds. But we can keep that pile of leaves swept clean by not allowing disappointment to dominate. Grieve, ask and receive his strength, and take time to heal. Give yourself grace.

Don't let disappointment dominate.

Feeling **odd** is another thing women of all ages deal with, from being odd in our body shape, our marital status, whether or not we have children and if those children are successful, or just having "unpopular opinions" about popular ideas. I've always felt like odd and unique are twins, and that being unique is a good thing. But often, that can move on down the spectrum to feeling odd, left out, like no one understand, and then to thoughts like, "What is wrong with me?"

I once read, "Don't be afraid of being different, be afraid of being the same as everyone else." We know that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, yet when we feel different than the norm, we begin to despise our differences. Sure, there are reasons sometimes that we need to deal with, if our oddity is rooted in anger or something sinister like that. But if we just feel odd because we're different, we can give thanks.

Giving thanks allows us to embrace who He made us to be.

Finally, the A is for **ashamed**, and we don't have time to feel ashamed in this wonderful life we've been given! Maybe we feel ashamed for being disappointed and feeling odd for so long. Perhaps we're mostly disappointed in ourselves and our own shortcomings, failures and ways that we don't meet our own standards, or standards others have placed upon us. Ashamed is close to feeling guilty, and that's a heavy load we were never meant to carry.

Sometimes, I feel ashamed for my lack of trust in God, for the fears that surface too often, and for the time I waste with all of my "ungodly" feelings that a "good Christian" should not be feeling.

Psalm 34: 5 says this, "Those who look to him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces." Isn't that beautiful?

Ask God for radiant joy so that shame is erased.

I felt D.O.A. – dead on arrival – when I woke up this morning, because disappointment, feeling odd and carrying shame had filled my mind before the day ever began.

There's something about beginning a new day by emptying our minds before they start being filled once again, so that there's room for truth to expand and dominate our days instead of shuffling through another 24 hours in defeat. He is faithful, He never disappoints, He delights in his creation, and there is no shame because of the gift of Jesus Christ.

FRESH THYME – Jenga, Anyone? – by Marcy Lytle

We were on the road on our recent vacation, and I turned to him and said,

“Life is like a game of Jenga.”

I then proceeded to describe what I meant, as he smiled and nodded and kept on driving. He knows my mind runs wild in weird directions, but he seems to enjoy listening to me and smiles anyway!

Have you ever played the game?

We all have this tower of blocks, let’s say, that either stands tall or has a few pieces already missing, from birth. Maybe we’re born into prosperity, have two parents that love us, never want for anything, and all things good happen for years...that would be a full stack! But perhaps we’re born into poverty, one parent soon leaves or dies, we lack for so much, and it seems nothing but bad occurs...that would be the stack with several blocks already missing!

Life has a way of pulling out the blocks of which our particular tower is built, one day at a time. And we hope we don’t topple over. I mean, that’s the object of the game Jenga. If we pull out a block and the tower still stands, we breathe a sigh of relief and it’s the next player’s turn. No one wants to be the person that pulls out the block to make the entire tower tumble! That’s a disaster, and the game is over!

So let’s say we find ourselves at a certain age in life. Maybe we’re a mom that’s just had a miscarriage, or a dad that’s lost his job. Or perhaps we just cannot recover after a severe economic loss or horrendous illness. We sit on the table with our tower full of holes, where block after block has been removed – but yet our core is intact – and still we stand.

Then that one block is taken out and we crash! Does that mean the game is over for us?

No, that’s where the analogy ends. There’s this Master Gamer that is skilled in putting fallen towers back together again, and his hands masterfully start building again. And this time, if we let him, he places every block in place with glue – glue, I say! It’s the glue of his love and good plans so that if anyone or anything yanks and pulls or even jiggles a block loose – the core is super glued and will not tumble!

It’s disastrous if you’re the one that causes the Jenga tower to fall, but the cool thing about the game is it can be started over and over again, with each player removing blocks until the tower falls. There’s skill involved, for sure, but sometimes there’s nothing one can do but cause the tower to tumble because all loose blocks have already been removed.

I feel like my tower was pretty secure with no gaping holes when I was a kid. But over the decades, lots of blocks have been yanked loose – either by my own doing or by life itself. And sometimes I stand and look back and see a lot of unsightly holes where they were removed. There are days when I think one more removal might cause me to fall over...and then I recall that Jesus is my strong tower. Remember that verse? It says we can run to him and are safe. He is the core, the glue, the tower inside of me that cannot crumble or be destroyed.

And the fact of the matter is that his skilled hands are so good at building my life back to what it needs to be so that others see the goodness of God in my life and want to run to Him, as well.

Feel like one too many blocks have fallen in your game of life? I understand. Especially these days...we all have missing pieces. But God is true to who he says he is – the master builder, the planner of good and not evil, and our rock on which we can stand – and never fall. Even if all of the earth tries to shake us until we do.

Remember that. Play the game. Smile and laugh if you're the one that causes the tower to fall. And play it again, knowing that's where the analogy ends...

FRESH THYME – Thoughts on Justice – by Marcy Lytle

I love that folks fight for justice, and it's heartwarming to see so many kids rise up in defense of the defenseless or the outcast or the "different." I remember thinking how cool it was that so many of my kids and their peers were searching out careers that involved helping special needs or children without homes or defending those in peril, or showing up to help people in need. It's so awesome to want justice for those who need it, and we need people that care about that.

However, something I've noticed is that there is a lot of justice rallying without any mention of Jesus.

Here's what justice without Jesus looks like:

Protesting for rights without pointing to the Light

Standing up for the abused without introducing the Healer

Showing up to give aid without offering the Solution

Delivering speeches that stir without stirring listeners to Love

Participating in arguments over praying for politicians

I guess I could continue an even longer list with statements of "without" and what kind of pictures we're painting when we fight for justice but leave out Jesus. I've often thought of that scripture that says it's kindness that leads people to repentance. And while kindness, standing up for others, hitting the streets to protest over injustice in the land is all good and admirable...if all of that doesn't lead folks to Jesus, what good are the demands we cry for? The same injustices will rear their ugly heads again, just in different spots, like moles popping up across a backyard to tear up a beautiful lawn.

I grew up in an era where sin was focused on more than the Savior, or at least it seemed so in my little eyes. My list of don'ts was way longer than the list of do's and I grew up thinking that being a follower of Christ meant mostly not having any fun at all. I also grew up with the main focus of spreading the Good News being in acts of leaving little papers on neighbors' doors or inviting others to church, with little emphasis on the relationship so vital in reaching others for Him.

So where's the balance? Focusing on a strict routine and formulas for helping others out of their misery when one lives in just another kind of religious misery, doesn't work. But neither does making signs and showing up and serving in soup lines, without mentioning the name of the One who can actually change hearts and move the minds and hearts of Kings.

I was just thinking the other day how every generation of believers, hopefully, observes the mistakes of their former generation and moves on to better actions and softer hearts in dealing with the injustices of this world. Turning a deaf ear, criticizing those who are unlike the "churched," and cocooning ourselves inside four walls doesn't result in justice. But neither does

offering a hand up or a hand out, if our kindness doesn't lead these friends somewhere to...deliverance and hope.

I don't have the answer, except I know who the answer is. And I don't know how to "witness" effectively in a world that still cries "Crucify Him" because He is so misunderstood and unknown. I'm thinking and hoping and praying that we can combine all of our efforts and spend more time praying and asking and obeying, so that when we show up and give and serve and stand firm for the "cause" (whatever it may be) that somewhere high and lifted up is the name of Jesus.

At the name of Jesus, kingdoms fall.

At the name of Jesus, lame walk and deaf hear.

At the name of Jesus, light shines in the darkest of places.

At the name of Jesus, hard hearts turn to soft pliable clay.

At the name of Jesus, healing happens.

While we raise a fist to fight for rights, I want to among the masses that have found a way to lift the broken and offer them solace and solutions, but then point them to the One that suffered, lost friends, was beaten and bruised and then defeated death - so that we all can live, experience freedom and love effectively as we pray and continue to stand for justice...with Jesus.

FRESH THYME – Not Your Story – by Marcy Lytle

We all have different “bents” toward certain gifts in life. I have a friend that has a gift for praying during the night for those who are struggling in the darkness – like nurses and other caregivers or road workers or parents up with missing children. Another friend has the gift of making the cutest cards and treats to give people that just really brighten their days! Still another friend has the beautiful gift of sharing kind words from Him to others at the just the right time. And I’d say I have this gift (but it often doesn’t seem like a gift) of empathizing with others to the point of no return...

Here’s what I mean by that. If I see a friend get hurt physically, say she cuts her finger while slicing an onion, I physically feel pain in my body. When my husband suffered an electrical shock after we were newly married, I fainted when I saw him shaking from the electricity. I ended up on a stretcher right beside him! I feel others’ pain so much when they are going through hard times that I often hurt when I pray. Is that a *gift*?

I’m realizing that the gift we think we have is sometimes a burden, and we need knowledge and training on how to carry that gift, if that makes sense.

The gift of empathizing, for me, becomes a burden when I pray for that person but can’t let it go, and carry the burden on my shoulders until I too am weighed down. That gift becomes a burden when I think about what if that same tragedy happens to me, and the fear stifles me and hinders my faith. And finally, that gift becomes a burden when the pain of others consumes my time of prayer and I have no energy left for worship.

I was talking to a friend just a few weeks ago that was struggling with fear because she was going through something she’d seen others go through, and worried that her experience might end like theirs. And what I heard come out of my mouth to encourage her was,

“That’s not your story.”

I’ve been hearing those words myself, as I go through my day.

We all have stories. We all have gifts. We all have strengths and weaknesses. And we can barely handle our own story; much less someone else’s alongside! This truth has begun to help me so much!

At the moment, I am healthy and yet I have a friend fighting for his life. There are days I can barely stand to think of his story and I feel limp and weak, as I carry the concern for him and his family. But I’m told to cast my care on Him, and not carry it all by myself. He cares for my friend, that’s his story at the moment, and I can trust that God is in the middle of his story and writing the rest of it in his perfect timing and way.

At the moment, there are no bombs and gunfire being aimed at me and mine, but there is across the world at my friends I don’t know. I can barely watch the photos and images of wrecked buildings and bleeding bodies, but that’s not my story at the moment. He says I can

come to Him and find rest, and trust that He will give rest to the weary across the miles if I just pray and trust...not carry and bust!

There are days and moments where we need to tell ourselves, we who carry the pain of others deep inside and hurt with them, that their story is not ours. It's not callous and mean-spirited, but rather it's a truth we need to believe and receive, so that we pray – yes – but fall over – no.

I don't know what your gift may be, but I do think that often we are weighed down in whatever gift it may be, because we are pressured on every side, there's this lion that roars and lies into our ears, and there's nothing the evil one would like better than to snuff out all of our gifts like candles, in one big huff. And not only snuff us out, but toss us aside into the trash, never to burn brightly in our gifts again.

So if you can identify your gift (whether it's praying for others, giving, creating, serving, etc.) and you feel awkward, tired, worn out, and all the things when you're operating in that wonderful gift...consider this.

You have a story, and it's yours. The stories of others are not yours. You're not meant to carry the weight of either story – it's all HIS.

You are meant to shine brightly as you use your gift and then retreat to your home, and live your life, apart from the weight of the world.

And that's the truth...