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TIPS

## **The Dressing – A is for Accessories! – by Marcy Lytle**

I'm pretty sure we've talked and shared accessories before, but fashion accessories are always changing and so fun, so here we are again. For the month of August, we're looking at accessories for now...and later...when the seasons start to change. Maybe you're not quite ready to shop for fall clothes, it's way too hot to stop wearing your summer outfits, but you just need a little inspiration on how to add a little "something" to your ensembles! I hope you are inspired with one of these ideas!

Belts – I just recently purchased a set of stretchy belts, which I'm loving, from Amazon. They can be worn now with those maxi dresses or long tunics, and even later in the fall over sweaters. Belts are a great accessory for pulling in something that's loose to give it more shape!

Half tee – I can't say enough about these, and this company is always creating new styles for every outfit. The tees are fitted, hit just below the chest, have all sorts of necklines and sleeves, and are THE BEST accessory for filling in gaps in your clothing. A must-have, for sure.

Scarves – Not just on your neck, but everywhere! Have you tried tying two scarves together for a belt, twisting and wearing as a headband, or doubling over and tying on a loop on your pants? Scarves are so versatile, and I really love the pack of 12 I recently got on Amazon. One for every outfit I wear!

Bags – This is my favorite, and has been since I was a child. I always bought a bag on a vacation, and I often still do! It's a pain to change out purses unless you keep everything inside in a couple of pouches, and then it's easy! And purses are maybe the most fun accessory to shop for, and to style – from cross body, to handbag, to tote, and more!

Hats – I have more bad hair days than good ones, it seems. August heat and humidity are not a girl's friend! Whether you choose a straw hat or a cap, wear it and enjoy the cuteness and how it hides and tucks away all the hair you'd rather not mess with!

Sneakers – Have you ever seen so many options of sneakers on the shelves? Every color and style is available, and why not have several in your closet that will take you on into fall? One with a bit of animal print (Marley Lilly), one in a pop of color (Timberland) or just a pair of new slip-ons from Keds. You pick.

## **Seven for You – Organizers – by Marcy Lytle**

Organization. It seems we're either obsessed with it and are constantly reorganizing and rearranging, or we're completely lost when it comes to keeping things together and neat. Or maybe we're somewhere in between those two, depending on the season! I love to see how others organize their things and discover new products or hints on how to keep things tidy. So I'm thinking you might like it, as well. We asked our panel this month to share their faves when it comes organization.

My favorite organizer that I have is my jewelry organizer! I've never had my jewelry displayed out of fear of it being messy or unorganized, but having it displayed like this really forces me to keep it looking nice. I got these organizers on Amazon by Keebofly as a set for \$30 and they come in white, grey, brown, and black. – Sofia

[https://www.amazon.com/Keebofly-Organizer-Necklaces-Bracelet-Earrings/dp/B07V1RJRvQ/ref=sr\\_1\\_3\\_sspa?dchild=1&keywords=keebofly+jewelry+organizer&qid=1626349910&sr=8-3-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzTFhZV1Q4SkFaWTFNjMvUyY3J5cHRIZEikPUEwNDE3MjM5QjdYR04yU1BUN1NIJmVuY3J5cHRIZEFkSWQ9QTA4OTQ1ODczTEVaUlc2MU5FVDg3JndpZGldE5hbWU9c3BfYXRmJmFjdGlvbj1jbGlja1JlZGlyZWNOJmRvTm90TG9nQ2xpY2s9dHJ1ZQ==](https://www.amazon.com/Keebofly-Organizer-Necklaces-Bracelet-Earrings/dp/B07V1RJRvQ/ref=sr_1_3_sspa?dchild=1&keywords=keebofly+jewelry+organizer&qid=1626349910&sr=8-3-spons&psc=1&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEzTFhZV1Q4SkFaWTFNjMvUyY3J5cHRIZEikPUEwNDE3MjM5QjdYR04yU1BUN1NIJmVuY3J5cHRIZEFkSWQ9QTA4OTQ1ODczTEVaUlc2MU5FVDg3JndpZGldE5hbWU9c3BfYXRmJmFjdGlvbj1jbGlja1JlZGlyZWNOJmRvTm90TG9nQ2xpY2s9dHJ1ZQ==)

I love trays for organizing, in different spots around the house. I have one by his coffee maker for his cup, honey and coffee grounds. There's another tray in a corner in the kitchen with three clear canisters that hold granola, pasta and popcorn. Trays are great for grouping three items and making them look neat on a counter or shelf. I've bought them at Target, and even at the Dollar Store.

A cute rope basket is great for corralling magazines or mail, and looks SO CUTE on a shelf...from Target. I've seen these everywhere lately, sitting below entry way shelving, on kids shelves in their rooms, or atop a bathroom counter to hold rolled up towels.

<https://www.target.com/s?searchTerm=rope+basket>

I just recently found this purse organizer at Marshalls, but I'm using it to organize by book tote, and it works great! It gives a bit of structure to the tote, and keeps the books/magazines/pens, etc. organized as well. Yay! I'm including a link for a similar one from Amazon.

[https://www.amazon.com/OMYSTYLE-FASHION-Organizer-Neverfull-Longchamp/dp/B07SCN46GZ/ref=sr\\_1\\_6?dchild=1&keywords=purse+organizer+insert&qid=1626350147&sr=8-6](https://www.amazon.com/OMYSTYLE-FASHION-Organizer-Neverfull-Longchamp/dp/B07SCN46GZ/ref=sr_1_6?dchild=1&keywords=purse+organizer+insert&qid=1626350147&sr=8-6)

I found these hanging cloth organizers at Target and decided to use them in my laundry room on the wall. They're great for holding cleaning supplies and I think they're cute! They even have little pockets on the side. I like keeping my weekly cleaning supplies in one place, easy to access.

I love to organize, but one probably couldn't tell it by looking at my closets or pantry. Everything in our home has a place and is usually in that place. I have two main items of organization, and both can be found at Bed, Bath, and Beyond. *First*, is my Lazy Suzan tray for my spices. I actually have two because I have a lot of spices. This tray is a great invention and is so helpful! I just twirl it around and pick my spices. *Second*, is my jewelry box. I used to have one big box, but it got so heavy with all my jewelry. Then, I found this wonderful set of jewelry trays. I love them because I can set the trays beside each other to pick what jewels I want to wear each day. And I can buy more trays to add on, as I get more jewelry! The price is right, too. – Carole

[https://www.bedbathandbeyond.com/store/product/ampersand-reg-large-stackable-jewelry-trays-set-of-3/1016838012?skuld=16838012&enginename=google&mcid=PS\\_googlepla\\_brand\\_brand\\_loca&product\\_id=16838012&adtype=pla&product\\_channel=local&adpos=&creative=233266395762&device=c&matchtype=&network=g&gclid=Cj0KCQjwub-HBhCyARIsAPctr7yXG4R3uNOhUbBV\\_4NKkJea3FQT-EsVbtdxzgIRESSVFIZXXpkow8oaAnVsEALw\\_wcB&gclid=aw.ds](https://www.bedbathandbeyond.com/store/product/ampersand-reg-large-stackable-jewelry-trays-set-of-3/1016838012?skuld=16838012&enginename=google&mcid=PS_googlepla_brand_brand_loca&product_id=16838012&adtype=pla&product_channel=local&adpos=&creative=233266395762&device=c&matchtype=&network=g&gclid=Cj0KCQjwub-HBhCyARIsAPctr7yXG4R3uNOhUbBV_4NKkJea3FQT-EsVbtdxzgIRESSVFIZXXpkow8oaAnVsEALw_wcB&gclid=aw.ds)

I like to stay organized when I bring off season clothes to my main closet. When I first hang my clothes up in my main closet for the new season, I hang them with the hangers *backwards*, the opening facing out (see the first photo.) The hangers on the left are facing out which means I have not worn those items, yet. You can see the two hangers on the right are *facing the right way*, which means I have already worn those two items. As the season progresses, I will pull items from the rod, take the clothing off, and hang my empty hangers in one section of the closet. Having one section of the closet for empty hangers makes it easy when I do laundry and need to hang something up, since all of my hangers are in one place. When it is time to move summer clothes out for my winter clothes, I can easily see what items I did not wear all season long because the hangers are still backwards on items I did not even touch or consider wearing! I then evaluate the usefulness of that item and usually put it in the donate pile. If I did not wear it all season long when there was an opportunity to do so, I do not need it in my closet anymore. This keeps my closet from being crowded. – Anita

A spice drawer rack is also my favorite. And everything in mine is alphabetized. Each spice is easy to get to, and it's easy to know what to grab for any meal that I'm creating. – Edith  
[https://www.amazon.com/Lynk-Professional-4304142PK-Adjustable-Expandable/dp/B07V59FGV4/ref=sr\\_1\\_5?dchild=1&keywords=spice+drawer+rack&qid=1626350772&sr=8-5](https://www.amazon.com/Lynk-Professional-4304142PK-Adjustable-Expandable/dp/B07V59FGV4/ref=sr_1_5?dchild=1&keywords=spice+drawer+rack&qid=1626350772&sr=8-5)



## **Three Moms – The Serious Stuff – by the Cousins**

### Mom of Two

The way that we talk about larger issues I think will change as our kids enter into different stages of life. When they were infants, we felt free to be able to talk about all issues, knowing that their little ears could not comprehend. We did watch our tone, as we could tell that even at an infant age they could feel our anger or hurt.

Our girls are currently ages two and four. They are at an age where they soak up everything. They listen to every little word, they repeat us, they want to be just like us, and their knowledge is growing at a rapid speed. We try to save our deeper conversations for a time when it's just us two. Not only to protect their ears, but also it is harder to get through deeper conversations with our girls vying for our attention. This usually occurs on date nights, when we put the girls down for bed, or sometimes when we are in the car and the girls are napping.

However, we are human. We can have arguments in front of our kids, we will make mistakes, and topics will be brought up that our kids will question. I think the most important part of that is how we respond. Showing our kids that Mommy and Daddy can disagree but showing them even more how we love each other through it, how we have to apologize as well, and how wonderful forgiveness and God's grace is!

As our kids grow, I feel it will be important to include our kids in some of the deeper conversations and larger topics. They need guidance on how to navigate through this fallen world and the importance of love and grace!

### Mom of Three

When the kids were little and slept in the car, we discussed the serious matters. Those were the easy days. But now, if it's something frustrating or serious that needs a "now" discussion we either text or have a phone call. At night, after the kids go to bed we've tried to discuss, but we're tired. Emotions and tiredness make for "mountains out of mole hills" and result in talking again the next day. So that doesn't work.

Currently, our kids can occupy themselves and my husband and I can go to another room and talk and even sometimes say, "Dad and I need a moment," and that is helpful. In the school year; since we both work at home, we can talk while the kids are away.

The other night the kids wanted to do something and my husband said okay, and I didn't want that.. Since we didn't agree, he told the kids to go in the other room so we could discuss. That was a little thing, but had to discuss and then answer. It's always important to have these conversations away from their ears because kids pick up on everything (especially our daughter.) And if they do hear something, we tell them we need to discuss things for a moment...

It is important to converse with my spouse, especially on matters where we differ, so that resentment doesn't form. That makes for "blow ups" later.

“Little” matters, such as where to go out for dinner, that’s one thing. But if I’m frustrated with him or we need a “big” conversation, that’s another. And personally, I don’t think date night is the place for these discussions. In the past, we had put off a frustration and so when we were by ourselves the topic arose and ruined our time together. Date night is to enjoy each other, not for deep conversations. It is hard to find date night time, so it might be tempting to use it for serious matters, but it’s not a good idea.

So texting, a phone call, or asking the kids to go play a few minutes seems to work. But late at night, or date night with him, is never a good idea.

### Mom of Four

It’s so important to us to talk through everything. And there are definitely “private” issues. We then tell the kids that mom/dad need to talk and send the kids to their rooms. Or we can talk in the car or after the kids go to bed. However, our kids are very curious and like to be involved in family issues.

If we are in a family disagreement, like kids’ activities or where to go out to eat, etc. we talk. We try to let them know that we listen to each other and we love each other, and we try to work through our emotions – for sure. We encourage and try to model talking about things. We do apologize, we encourage our kids (when they want to hide) to take space or a breather, but to come back and talk through it all.

I’m so thankful for my husband because he is a great communicator, and he pursues conversation and emotion with each of us when life is hard. We aren’t perfect, but we do talk a lot openly as a family, and acknowledge that conflict is normal and expected. Individuals might not agree, but we can compromise as family at the end of the day.

Really serious things like extended family (illnesses or struggles) or church conflict, or heated issues with us as a couple – we ask for privacy to chit chat. And my husband and I talk a lot!

Regarding world issues that affect our family, like Covid, gender issues, etc., we want to be the filter for our kids and talk with them openly. We want them to feel comfortable to come to us with their questions. The hope is that in the teenage years, we will have established a healthy communication and not ignored the hard.

Finally, we often talk about highs and lows of the week, hard things, things that made us smile, and we pray together. One of the hard topics we’ve started is a healthy view of sex, since the kids are exposed to so much through media, and were recommended *God’s Design for Sex*. It’s a great resource with age appropriate information for families.

## **In the Kitchen – Take a Dip** – by Marcy Lytle

Dips are great for the end of summer fare, because they're cool, they can be eaten with something crunchy, and they're easy to pack and take on a trip or over to a friend's house for a visit! When asked to bring a side or an addition to a picnic, any of these would be great. Or even for just a snack for friends that stop by for a while...

**Corn Cheese Dip** (this recipe makes a ton – so I halved it – and it was still a lot!) – We made this ahead of time, as it's a great dip to chill and then take. Great for a picnic.

### Ingredients

- 3 (11oz cans) MexiCorn
- 1 (7oz can) chopped green chiles
- 1 (6oz can) chopped jalapeno peppers (drained and liquid added to taste)
- ½ cup green onion chopped
- 1 c mayonnaise
- 1 c sour cream
- 1 t pepper
- ½ t garlic powder
- 1 (16oz) package sharp shredded cheddar cheese
- Fritos scoops

In a large bowl, mix all ingredients, except chips. Chill two hours to overnight. Serve with the scoops.

**Mango Guacamole** – We made this on the 4<sup>th</sup> and took it with us to watch fireworks in a park. We even shared it with a couple of strangers! It's so cool, tasty and refreshing.

### Ingredients

- 3 medium ripe avocados
- 1 large mango peeled and chopped
- 1 large tomato chopped
- 1 small red onion chopped
- ¼ c chopped fresh cilantro
- 3 T lime juice
- 1 t salt
- Veggies and/or tortilla chips

In a large bowl, combine the first five ingredients. Stir in the lime juice and salt. Serve.

**Tray of Dipping Cups** – You can use whatever dips you want on this tray, but the key is to serve the meal deconstructed on a tray. Our choice this night was turkey sandwiches.

#### Ingredients

- Slice turkey
- Cheese
- Mustard
- Salsa
- Pickles
- Avocado
- Cucumbers
- Tomatoes
- Nuts
- Chips

Just take out your favorite tray and arrange all of the ingredients for a sandwich on the tray, with some in cups (the dips). That's it. You can include whatever dips you like from Ranch, to mustard, to salsa to Onion Dip – to suit your taste!

**Skewers for Dipping** – Caramel sauce is the dip of choice here. It can be drizzled or provided in a small cup for dipping...your choice.

#### Ingredients

- Wooden skewers
- Strawberries
- Bite size Snickers
- Caramel sauce

Wash the strawberries and halve the snicker bars. Thread them on the skewers. Take the sauce and drizzle, or squeeze into a tiny cup for dipping. Enjoy.

**Chicken Avocado Salad** – This recipe is called a salad, and I suppose it is. But we took it as a dip of sorts, to eat with tortilla chips. And it was so delicious!

#### Ingredients

- 2 T olive oil
- 1 T lime juice
- 2 cups rotisserie chicken, shredded
- ¼ cup cilantro, chopped
- ¾ cup salsa
- 1 avocado

- Salt and pepper

Combine oil, lime juice, salt and pepper in a medium bowl. Add chicken and cilantro, and toss. Gently fold in salsa and avocado. Serve with your favorite tortilla chips.

## **Tried and True – Baskets** – by Marcy Lytle

Baskets were a thing decades ago, when that country style of decorating was popular, way back when. And now...they're back. Only they're styled differently, made differently, and look so cool on shelves, walls, and even as functional organizers in our homes. Have you purchased and used any of the cute baskets out there, right now? I'm careful about the ones I choose, because some still remind me of a general store. But then there are others that are so good for just the right space!

*On a shelf.* I see young moms use these to capture toys or books, and I use one to hold magazines, on a shelf. These baskets are the rope style, woven round and round, and come in cute patterns. This one is from Target.

*As a statement.* We recently lined the top of our bookshelves with all sorts of baskets, and some even have lights. I saw this on the web, and loved the idea.

*To hold cords.* Another one of the same rope baskets is great on the floor next to our desks, to hold the electrical cords and strips, to hide them out of sight, and to serve as a small trash can for paper.

*Up against a wall.* It's fun to have a few of the flattering style baskets that can serve as a double purpose. Leaning against a wall, they look pretty. And used on the table, they look even prettier!

*As a plant pot.* Just place your potted plant inside a basket to give it a whole new look. There are so many pretty options!

*By the sofa.* For a rolled up magazine, a throw, or a catchall until you have the time to tidy up later.

*For gathering.* Do you snip herbs and/or flowers or branches from your yard? Keep a handled basket somewhere in your house to grab to gather the pretties that you cut, as you bring them in to arrange.

*Part of a trio.* Grab a pretty shallow basket and place inside it a vase, a candle, and a book. You've got yourself a table setting! Or books, a mirror and some jewelry!

*In a group.* This idea reminds me of the 80's, but I see they are now arranged in a pretty design which updates the look of baskets on a wall.

*In your creative space.* Smaller baskets can look pretty on a desk holding pens, paper, crafts and more.

Got any more ideas for baskets? Leave a comment below!



HOME

## **Practical Parenting – Your Umbrella – by Marcy Lytle**

I had the pure pleasure of shopping with my daughter and her daughter recently, and when we stepped out of the car at the mall, it was raining just a bit. Not really much at all was falling from the sky, but Ayla (age 8) wanted to carry the umbrella in case we needed it. And, of course, she wanted to open it and walk under it on our way into the mall. I happily gave her my large umbrella popped open; she then raised it and walked, covered and dry into the building.

I was able to snap a picture of her under this umbrella, and in fact, she's always liked umbrellas. What kid doesn't? There's something fascinating about opening this skinny thing on a stick and seeing it fly apart in this huge circle of color. And there's something even more magical about getting underneath it to sit or walk or to twirl it around above our heads.

I was looking at this photo and thought how important it is to offer our kids our umbrellas. The things that have covered us throughout our lives from rainy days are important to share with the kiddos. Just like we hand them a physical umbrella to carry in their own hands, we can offer them other types of coverings as well:

*Offer them the Word.* Think of the words that have covered you in stressful times and write them down in cards, on paper, or wherever – and leave them in their lunch boxes, on their desks, or under their pillow. This covers them with truth and hope.

*Offer them Markers.* The times when God showed up just in time, met a need, or healed an illness, are great stories to share with our kids to cover them with hope when they walk out in their own storms in life.

One such story occurred just while we were shopping! Ayla found a dress she really liked on a clearance rack, only it was missing a tie (it tied in the back) and there was no price tag on the dress. She and her mom went to the bathroom while I talked it over with a clerk and tried to pay for the dress, of course asking for a discount because of the missing tie. About that time, another clerk nearby heard my discussion and went to a “junk” type of drawer under the register and approached me and asked, “Is this the tie?” Apparently, someone had found it and placed it there, and it was the one lone tie for this one lone dress, the one that Ayla wanted! And then the manager emerged and marked the dress down from \$34 to \$7 for all our trouble!

You can bet that I told Ayla the entire story of that miracle that enabled me to give her the cute gingham checked blue sundress she wanted so much. That story will be a “marker” next time she can't find something she desperately wants.

*Offer them Joy.* The kids need to see us skip with them, laugh out loud at absurdities in life, and giggle over funny shows on TV beside them. Joy is an umbrella like no other, the biggest and most colorful one of all.

*Offer them Love.* The umbrella of love is surely the biggest. Our kids need to know that they are loved for who they are, period. We need to bless them for no good reason on days when they least expect it, we need to have our arms wide open to cover them with hugs on days that

make them cry. And we need to offer them His love when hate is what they see in the world around them, so that they too can offer the umbrella of love to their friends.

Umbrellas. They're so much more than skinny sticks that open and twirl. They're protection from the rain.

## **I Don't Do Teens - Teach Them** – by Marcy Lytle

I learned nothing, in the way of housework, when I was a kid. Mom felt like if we were studying and doing homework, that was enough. And I so appreciated that! Maybe your kids will know it all by the time they're grown, but just in case, let me suggest some practical learning that might be handy...once they leave the house. It might even be advantageous to have them learn it while they're still home, to help Mom out, just a bit!

Sewing on a button – Grab the sewing kit (Don't have one? Get one) and show her/him how to thread a needle, tie a knot in the thread, position the button, sew it securely, and tie off the thread. If you don't sew on buttons yourself, learn how – and do this fun task together!

Folding a sheet set – It's a challenge, for sure. And I've seen so many tutorials for this home task, so it must be something people are frustrated with! I find that folding the fitted sheet, with corners tucked in each other, and then placing that folded sheet inside the folded flat sheet (along with the pillowcases) works well. If the fitted sheet is a bit uneven, it's hidden because it's between the folds of the flat!

Washing a load of clothes – I heard someone the other day say that they don't separate whites from colors. Is that true for most people, now? Well, it's a must for me, because I like my whites to stay white! Grab a stain stick and show your teen how to treat spots, before washing, how to use the washer and dryer, and the importance of putting away clothes as soon as the dryer buzzes. (They can set their phone alarm as a reminder).

Planning a menu – Let him/her be responsible for a family dinner as often as time allows. Show them how to pick the menu (it can be themed, there can be a main entrée and two sides, or it can be a variety of small dishes, etc.) and then how to make sure all of the ingredients are available.

Storing food – I knew none of this! Cucumbers and tomatoes sit on the counter. Otherwise, in the fridge they get watery. Milk and dairy products are not stored in the door of the fridge, because they need to stay the coldest – not where the door is being opened and shut. Glass containers are better than plastic and keep food fresh longer. Labels are key for knowing how long leftovers have been sitting. Nuts last longer in the fridge. All the things...so they're ready when they have their own kitchen.

Cleaning the toilet – Check the product ingredients (show them how to make their own cleaners if you do that), use gloves when cleaning and using products, and be sure to wipe under the seat and the base and behind the toilet. Kids can surely clean their own toilets at an early age, right?

Folding the towels – Some like to roll the towels, some fold in halves, and others in thirds, and then there's the place where they go – with the folded edges visible and not the raw. Show them your method, and see if they have one of their own for their bathroom. Towels can be visible (in baskets or on open shelves) or tucked away in cabinets, and that might determine how you roll...or fold.

Learning the lingo – Zest, julienne, chop or dice, pinch, fold or stir – all the terms when cooking and baking that are helpful to know when making a dish. And show them the gadgets you use and what they are – the zester, the lemon squeezer, the pasta spoon, the apple slicer – or whatever ones you love.

Setting the table – Maybe you don't actually use nice dishes or actually "set" a table, but it's nice to know these things for when you do! Show them what a charger is, where to place the flatware, how to fold the napkins, what a runner is, the different between a salad and a dinner fork. It might be fun to look up dinner etiquette as a family and let the kids set the table according to what they've learned!

There are SO MANY household chores that some kids learn and others don't, for all sorts of reasons. Maybe parents don't have the time, kids show no interest, or we've become a society that doesn't even clean or fold or cook or organize. However, it's something to think about...what he or she knows or doesn't know...by the time they become an adult in your house.

## **An Adage a Day - Once in a Blue Moon** – by Carole Gilbert

Once in a blue moon, I get a crazy idea. How about you? Once in a blue moon, I think of something I want to do and start to plan it. How about you? “Once in a blue moon…”

So, what is it about this blue moon that makes me feel ambitious or melancholy or ready to run with some idea? They say people act differently when it is a full moon, so what is it about a blue moon?

I have always enjoyed learning about the stars, sun, and moon. At one point in my childhood, I wanted to be an astronaut. And I really enjoy writing this column. Maybe that is because I can write about all the things that interest me like the moon and the adages of old. Although, I am always praying about what to write next and I let the adage, saying, or quote come to me. I believe this is the Holy Spirit putting a whisper in my ear, “What about this one?” Of course, I never say no to the Holy Spirit. Well, maybe, once in a blue moon I do. At least I hope it is only once in a blue moon.

This idiom, “once in a blue moon,” began in a similar form in 1528 in a pamphlet published by William Roy and Jeremy Barlowe. It has evolved into what we know today as meaning “rarely” or “almost never.” It is like having a dream to reach for the stars. It rarely happens that you can reach for the stars but there is always that one possibility.

One weekend, when my son was in elementary school, he spent the night with a friend. He came home the next day telling me of how they had stayed up all night outside and watched falling stars that were everywhere in the sky. I told him he must have fallen asleep and dreamed he saw so many falling stars. He disagreed, but life went on and we did not think any more of that weekend.

After my kids were grown, I heard the weatherman talk of the meteor shower that would be going on later that week. He encouraged everyone to get up in the night and go outside to watch it. I thought, “What? Could that have been what my son and his friend saw that night all those years ago?” When the night came, I set my alarm and got up, went to my lounge chair on my back patio and laid down to watch for this meteor shower, or “the falling stars,” as my son had called it. I saw about five before I fell asleep there on my back porch, but that was four more than I had ever seen in one night. And it was worth getting up in the middle of the night to see. I can only imagine what my son saw. Maybe I should not have questioned what he told me but we moms don’t always get everything right.

This month we have a “Blue Moon” scheduled on the 22nd. These only happen about every 2.7 years. And we also have the Perseid Meteor Shower on August 12-13. This is the one I started to see when I fell asleep. I hope you will look at these wonders from God.

Psalm 8:3-5 says, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor."

I love this verse!

It tells me how special the moon is, blue or any other color. It tells me how special the stars are, even those falling in the sky. And it tells me how special we are, and that God cares for us even more than the other wonders He made. I will remember this when I look up to see the Blue Moon or the Perseid Meteor Shower. And I will thank God for all He placed in the sky.

Picture courtesy of Pam Chapman.

## **Tiny Living - Back to 2019** – by Leyanne Enterline

Pre-pandemic life begins...

I feel like I blinked and now it is 2019 again...a second chance. I don't really know what that means. But for Brian and me, 2020 was a bizarre year. There were so many emotions, like one would experience when riding a roller coaster, with all the ups and downs of life in a pandemic – in a tiny home. Even that word – pandemic - was new to all of us.

And then one day it was just over, and we are back to where we started. Not many changes, just back to 2019. It's like 2020 was just a dream/nightmare. I could use so many words to describe that year.

*So now what?*

*Do we go on like nothing happened?*

I feel like we really need to take some time to reflect and think about how we will do things differently this year. Or what things were great about the pandemic “era” and what we should continue to do. I think we thought coming through 2020 *something* would have changed. We were looking for something different to happen. But it didn't. And we're back to pre-pandemic life.

So from here, we will move forward and see what the rest of 2021 has to offer.

We are back on the road more than ever. Brian's line of work has found him busier than ever and we'll try and go with him as much as we can. In the past month, we have been through seven states. It's been a blast, and we look forward to many more adventures. We will embrace this opportunity God has provided for our family to travel and enjoy time together.

So for the second half of 2021, I pray we continue to grow and learn together. Maybe we will learn more about each other's personalities, learn more facts about each state we visit, or smile at whatever God places in front of us, whether we want it or expect it, or not. We can embrace the journey and look forward to what's to come!

I suppose that's what can change for all of us, post-pandemic. We can note how life changed in an instant for the bad, and it can also change in an instant for the good.

Here's to the good...

## **A Night to Remember – Whadda Ya Know? – by Marcy Lytle**

There's a big fast food restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia where the workers yell out, "What'll ya have?" as customers enter the door. They then proceed to take orders and deliver good burgers! I was thinking about that phrase and changed it to "What do ya know?" in regards to family. What do we really know about each other and what do we really know about God? It might be a great thing to actually find out...

Preparation: Set out a large array of snacks (maybe six) like pretzels, cookies, fruit, granola, or whatever you have in your pantry or fridge. Then cover it with a cloth. Have a stack of small plates nearby for serving, later.

Start out by asking the kids to answer the following dozen questions and see how many they get right.

1. What was Dad's first job, ever?
2. Where was Mommy born?
3. What is your brother's favorite color?
4. What is your sister's favorite candy?
5. Where did Mom go to college?
6. How does Dad like his coffee prepared?
7. Who is your brother's best friend?
8. What size is your sister's shoe?
9. What sport did Mom/Dad play as a kid?
10. What kind of car does the family drive?
11. How much are groceries each month?
12. What's Dad's middle name?

Now ask them these few questions about God and see if they know the answer, using the phrase in the title of the devo.

What do ya know about God's forgiveness? How many times does God forgive us for the same mess-ups over and over again?

I John 1:9 says *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

What do ya know about God's faithfulness? Is there ever a time when God is not with us?

Hebrews 13:5 says he will NEVER leave us. That's an awesome God!

What do ya know about God's commandments? What is the greatest commandment and the second one, in the New Testament?

Matthew 22:36 says, *Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*” Jesus replied: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.*

What do ya know about how God views others? How should we treat our friends?

Read the second half of that greatest commandment again – love others as we love ourselves.

John 14:27 says, **Peace** *I leave with you; my **peace** I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

What do ya know about God’s peace? Can we have it, even when we are afraid?

Sometimes, we live with people for years and don’t really KNOW them, their likes and dislikes, their history and their jobs, or even their full names! Isn’t that crazy? And sometimes, we can follow God and not really know his character unless we stay in his Word, read it and believe it.

Uncover the snacks and yell “What’ll ya have?” as you serve each person in the family their plate of goodies.

## **Chipped China - When I Embrace Her Wonder – by Jennifer Lytle**

Last summer, a pipe burst in our front yard. My little girl raced to play in the stream after getting her swimsuit on. She danced while I stood on the sidewalk fretting about the possible water bill. When I spoke with the firefighters and assessed the mess made by their digging out the sidewalk, she screamed with elation and laughed.

Being a parent has offered me a spectacular view of the beauty of embracing the gift of the present. My little girl is such an illustration of finding joy in all times and all places. She is one of the most lovely souls I have encountered. There is much she has already taught me about experiencing a fulfilled life.

Several years ago, after she underwent three surgeries, we spent the night in the hospital together. I tried to create the perfect sleep environment with mood lighting and quiet sounds. She wanted to explore the area and stay up until morning. Instead of me checking on her breathing through the night and startling awake in my chair bed every few hours, we rode around the wing in a wagon. There was chocolate pudding and popsicles and funny hospital equipment to discover.

When schools closed down last spring, my daughter gladly embraced the opportunity to sleep in late during the week. While I was concerned about the added household responsibilities, she wondered which friends would be willing to play in our backyard. She found that she could pretend her computer was glitching during virtual lessons and made us all laugh with her robotic moves and stutters.

While I tabulated the number of hours of sleep she was getting and compared it to pediatrician recommendations, she would spend evening hours with a flashlight, string, and miscellaneous crafting materials. During those hours, she configured three pulley devices. Each device delivered her a cup of water, nighttime reading materials, and stuffed animals.

There isn't a thing my daughter cannot design or do. I have the joy and privilege to sit back and observe her metamorphosis. Here are a handful of lessons I have learned from my daughter.

It is a perfect time to dance.  
Go-bags should include a swimsuit.  
Sleep is for the weary.  
Joy is NOW.  
Making toys is better than buying them.  
The best boot is a used, muddy boot.  
A messy room may indicate a bright mind.

My prayer is that we will notice and celebrate our gifts at this moment, being thankful for them ALL: even the burst water pipes or a new pair of muddy boots.



YOU

## **Strengthening Your Core – No Tears – by Marcy Lytle**

I woke up early today with fears pounding in my chest about all things uncertain. Do you ever do that? Just yesterday I was concerned about my husband's doctor's appointment to check on his knee pain, and it was a great report, but now it was a new morning and other uncertainties raced through my mind. After all, life is full of uncertainties of the worrying kind, and if I'm not careful these things will plague me and destroy my peace of mind. Can you relate?

I sat up and got up, decided to not try and sleep some more, and I entered the front room of the house in the early morning dark hours, fully prepared to unload my angst on Him in prayer. That's a good thing to do, right? I do this often, because he says to cast our cares on him, to come to him when we are weary, and to pour out our hearts in prayer. So that's what I decided to do...cry my eyes out and hopefully feel better.

However, this particular morning I was exceptionally weary and didn't feel like praying, and was just SO distraught over no particular thing, but rather over every single things from kids, to church, to the future, to health, etc. You name it. It was on my mind. Seriously, what we all want is to be assured that all things will work out okay and be good. Isn't that right?

I entered the kitchen and thought maybe I should read a scripture, an encouraging book (I have several on a shelf by my desk) or...and then I stopped. I felt him tap me on the shoulder (no, not literally, but I sensed his presence) and say, "I am your shepherd...you shall not want."

I felt like this day, this Tuesday morning, I was not to pray or cry or list out my woes or linger and wail, but I was to settle my own soul by trusting in that one word, that one Person – Shepherd.

I've never met an actual shepherd of sheep on a farm. But Psalm 23 gives me a great picture of what it's like to be led by The Shepherd, and it's a pretty cool one.

Not wanting is to not be lacking, and if he says he's my shepherd and I shall not want, then it must be true. I could stop on that first verse alone and not even read the rest of the chapter. And that's what I did that Tuesday morning.

There's a time to pray and weep and release and give it all to Him, and I do that frequently. But there are days when I just need to be still and trust in who He is and who I am, and trust in the fact that that combo is the best one, the blessed one, and the only combo I need today.

I was frustrated and burdened and ready to spend time crying, but instead I spent a few seconds choosing...to trust in that pressure on my shoulder...that gentle reminder of who it is that's leading me and how there's peace in just following...because he knows where the still waters and green grass are.

I don't like how we find these places of rest and then the very next day we need directions again. But I guess that's why we're called sheep. We need a guide, and a good one. We need his staff and his rod, and they're both gentle yet firm. And we need repeated assurance that in

the darkest of valleys, goodness and mercy are pursuing us at all times. In fact, my cup that I see half empty is actually full and running over. I need to think about that for a while...

The tears dried up quickly that Tuesday morning, because He knew that instead of crying I needed to be reminded...

*The Lord is my Shepherd*

*I shall not want*

## **Life in a Nutshell – Traveling Lighter – by Jill Montz**

I have never been accused of being a packrat. Very few things hold sentimental value to me and I take great joy in purging closets, drawers, garages, and storage sheds...my own and others...just ask my mother. On second thought, don't ask her. I think she is still a little miffed that I donated all her Rocky Mountain jeans and threw away all those TV Guides from back in the 90s!

While I love to part ways with things in my home, I tend to try to pack everything in my house when I travel. I was never a scout of any kind, but I pack for trips like I am hoping to be awarded a merit badge (or five) when I return. I want to be prepared for anything that might come my way.

For example, when Dotty and I pack for a two-day softball tournament I give her the following checklist for packing:

- All her softball gear (better check it twice)
- Both softball uniforms (along with extra socks, pants, belt and sliding shorts)
- Two water jugs (in case one cracks or gets lost)
- Bug spray, cooling towels, and sunscreen (spray and lotion)
- Rain poncho and umbrella
- Gloves, beanie, jacket, hoodie, and blanket
- 2 Swimsuits (in case one has a strap that breaks)
- 2 sets of pajamas
- 3 everyday outfits
- 4 extra pairs of socks
- 5 extra sets of undergarments
- Tennis shoes, flip flops, crocs, and Ugg boots (unless we are past mid-May)
- A book (just in case she loses her phone privileges)

Some of you might think this is crazy. Some of you have not been in north Texas or Oklahoma in the spring. We have played in tournaments where I was wrapped up in several layers of clothes and blankets on Saturday morning and by Sunday afternoon I was getting a good base tan going on, while sweating profusely.

As the mom, I pack all of Dotty's list and more:

- Two lawn chairs and a stadium seat (never know where I will want to sit)
- Two extra blankets and extra sets of gloves and hats (in case things get wet or dirty)
- More sunscreen, more bug spray, more cooling towels (someone might have forgotten theirs)
- One ice chest full of assorted sports drinks and another full of fruit and snacks
- Paper towels, trash bags, wipes, hand sanitizer, and even a couple rolls of toilet paper (those ballpark bathrooms can get pretty scary!)
- Travel first aid kit with extra Band-Aids, Tylenol, and Ibuprofen
- Extra hair rubber bands, head bands, brushes, and combs
- Extra phone chargers, battery packs, cords, and even a paper map (just in case all technology fails)

For two people going to a weekend tournament, my car looks like we are fleeing the country with no hopes of returning someday. Even my cat, the first few times we left, kept trying to get in the car for fear she was being left behind. Now she knows the drill and barely looks at us disdainfully as we pull out of the garage.

I pack like this for vacations, too. Even when we fly. Most trips, Dot and I each have a large suitcase, a carry-on bag and a backpack. I will divide our clothes and necessities into each suitcase just in case one gets lost in transit, so that we each have some clothes. My grandmother also taught me years ago to pack my carry-on with a change of clothes, pajamas, a bathing suit, extra shoes and all my must haves. That way if all the checked luggage is lost, I still have some items to start my vacation. I never carry a purse. It goes in my backpack so I can pack more items which are usually more books or charging devices. And last, but not least, I always wear a hoodie or jacket to the airport (even in the summer in Texas) so I don't have to pack a bulky item (and I can always tie it around my waist if I get hot.)

As each trip progresses, I slowly start putting items we have worn in one suitcase and items that are still clean and unworn in another. More than once, Dotty has causally mentioned we usually have an entire suitcase full of unworn outfits on our flight home. More than once she has gotten the "mom look" from me.

This last June, we took a trip to Florida. We were meeting friends at Disney World and then had plans to visit Universal Studios. Travel before Covid could get a little stressful, but I had been hearing horror stories all year about flights and lost luggage and all kinds of issues involving flying.

So with a deep breath and a quick prayer, I told Dotty we would each only be taking a carry-on bag and backpack this trip. After Dotty finally got over the shock of my new traveling light mindset, she easily packed her two items for the trip. We carefully planned each outfit and toiletry item. Considered what we had to have and what we could purchase when we landed. Then it all went in the bag. Thanks to those handy dandy packing cubes, (if you have not used them they are a game changer!) Dotty still had a little more room in her carry-on, so of course I did what any good mother would do. I threw in more underwear and socks...just in case.

Even though I was still a little uneasy about our sparse packing lists (only a poncho and no umbrella, only one extra set of clothes, no crocs, no gloves or beanies, and only one battery pack...not even an extra cord) it was so nice to sail through the airport without having to check luggage or go to baggage claim. We had more than enough and still had a few unworn items. We even managed to squeeze in some (very small) gifts for a couple of people back in Texas. It was a fabulous trip!

On the flight home, Dotty and I were separated and no one was willing to switch seats. While I was sad I wouldn't have my sweet girl using me as a pillow/couch as she tried to get comfortable enough to sleep on the plane, I did manage to enjoy the flight and some time to think as I stared out the airplane window.

I was so proud we had made it an entire six days with less than half of what I would have normally packed. I felt less burdened and stressed knowing that all of our luggage was tucked safely in the overhead bins just above each of us. It was a lovely feeling. And like I do so often, I started to compare all this to pecan trees and life itself.

In the summer months, the pecans on our trees grow and fill out as they get closer and closer to harvest time in the fall. Some years, the trees might put on a very large crop of pecans (also known as a bumper crop). Those years can be very stressful on the trees as they use so much of their resources to making pecans. This can cause them to make inferior pecans when the resources are simply spread too thin over so many clusters of pecans or it can cause the tree to not produce any pecans the next year, due to being drained by the bumper crop.

When this happens, sometimes trees will naturally start dropping pecans in the summer as a way to lighten their load, especially if they don't have enough water to sustain themselves during the hot, dry summer months in Texas. Other times we will thin them mechanically with our pecan shakers to keep the trees from becoming overly stressed and thus hurting the current crop as well as the next one.

Pecan trees and pecan farmers both know that being burdened with a heavy load is not good. If we want to have well filled out and tasty pecans this year, as well as a crop next year, we sometimes have to lighten the load of each tree. And if we want to have a more enjoyable and less stress filled life, now and in the future, we too must sometimes lighten our metaphorical loads.

The whole flight home I wondered what I could unpack and leave behind in my own life and a few things came to mind:

Regrets, missed opportunities, and mistakes  
Self-loathing and hatred  
Unforgiveness for myself and others  
Past hurts and old wounds that I often pick at to see if they still bleed  
Words I never spoke and words I wish I could take back  
Anger, vengefulness, and callousness that I wear around like heavy armor  
Judgement and self-righteousness I use to cover my own sins  
Anxiety and stress about what I can control and what I can't

There are more, I am sure, but these are the big ones that weigh me down on a daily basis. They fill up my life not with joy or gladness but with pain and sadness. They make going through life bulky and hard to maneuver. They are constantly weighing on my mind and my heart and forcing me to pay extra to bring them along on the journey.

So perhaps with a little better planning and a little more evaluating, I can take another deep breath and say a few more prayers and be able to unpack some of these items that have been weighing me down for so long. I have a feeling God will be okay with me handing them over to Him. He seems to have a big enough suitcase to carry all my burdens (and yours, too.) And I highly doubt He worries much about the lost luggage.

1 Peter 5:7 is one of my all-time favorite verses.  
*Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.*

And I love it when Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30,  
*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.  
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

Rest for my soul. Now that sounds like a heavenly vacation indeed.

## Healthy Habits – Those Hot Words – by Marcy Lytle

Most of us wouldn't think about sleeping on dirty sheets. We learn to change them often, wash them, shake them out and place them fresh and crisp on our beds. Just the thought of soiled sheets underneath our clean bodies makes us shudder, so we make sure they're cleaned often and changed. And yet, we let the same old soiled words come out of our mouths, ones that damage and hurt others, and never think to change those. But changing our words can be a healthy start to changing relationships with those around us.

How so?

With the kids. Yelling demeaning words to our kids when they disobey wounds their hearts, and this doesn't make for a healthy relationship. It seems impossible NOT to yell when we have kids that are underfoot, making messes, making noise, and creating chaos. It seems the only way to jolt them and get their attention is to yell, and to yell meanly. However, most of the time we're way past our limit in tiredness and tolerance, and that's why those words spill out.

We can take care of ourselves and ask for rest, create disciplined rest times for all, and ask for forgiveness when the words hurt.

With him. It's easy to fall into critical dialogue with our spouses. We sit by him and he's doing some annoying habit, so we tell him he's gross. He didn't do that thing on our list we asked him to do, so we sigh and make him feel two inches high with our words of disdain and approval. He emerges wearing that shirt that's way too small so we tell him words we'd never want him to say to us, "You look fat in that!"

We can stop and think about the words that spill out to create an unhealthy relationship with him, and pause before we speak. We can ask for a visit with him to talk over some concerns, in a manner that's conversational instead of critical. OR...we can let him be in some areas and learn to quit saying everything we think. It's hard, I know! But we can do it!

With others. Usually, we're guarded when we're with other people, because we wouldn't dare say exactly what we think to their faces. However, when we return home, we often spill out judgments and nasty opinions about the way they acted, what they said, or more. It makes for an unhealthy outlook on friendships in general, and often plants seeds of bitterness in both of our hearts. Maybe that friend could have been more attentive, actually showed up on time, or a number of other expectations.

We have all been hurt in the presence of those we thought were friends. We can pray and ask Him to give us an allowance of grace for others, when we truly don't know the why of their actions or inactions. We can think of the good in those friends, and only talk about that, and let go of even the hurts friends inflict. It does not feel healthy or good at all to hold on to anger at them.

The best thing we can do with all of the above is to *pray*. We can ask God to stop us when those words spill out, to realize what we've just said and ask Him to change us. We can *practice affirmation*. We place those entrusted to us in this life in His hands to deal with them,

when they act in hurtful ways. And we can *give thanks* for the good, good, blessings we've been given.

I find that I personally spill out ugly words solely due to being tired. Changing that one thing has been a focus lately, to realize my tiredness and rest, before engaging in activity or conversation or any interaction. Rest is hard for many, especially if life is way too busy. So we may have to start with scheduling rest in our daily routines, including the kids resting with us, asking our husbands for it (and offering it to him, as well) and stepping away from relationships for a bit...in order to be refreshed.

It's only then that gracious words can spill out like a gentle waterfall, instead of explosions of hot lava that burns...

And we'll all be healthier for it.

## Life Right Now – Summer Peaches – by Hannah Bouck

Let's talk about dropping the ball.

Before 2015 I would have considered myself an EXPERT juggler. Watch your kids, turn homework in on time, help plan a church event, work two jobs, and add your load of laundry to mine? I'm your girl!

But it was around that same year something changed and I lost balance.

Cue a 7-year journey with crippling depression, anxiety, loss, familial addictions, eight moves, medications, failed health, amongst other "fun" things and you have a wonderful recipe for an expert ball-dropper.

All of a sudden, I couldn't/can't keep up.

Everywhere I look, I see healing and hope in the lives of those around me, but then I turn to my circumstances and all seems lost. Each time a step toward progress happens a bowling ball hits my face. (Shout out to the student loan lawsuit I'm currently navigating.) But the impact of the hit is silent. I lay in waiting; bruised and tired, wondering why I'm still unseen in my grief. Thoughts creep in that tell me how somehow it's all my fault and I deserve every last bit of this. That I need to believe harder. They tell me the things the mean girls said in high school were right, that I don't matter and the world (including those around me) would be better off without my pain clouding their vision.

*\*record screech\**

*(And praise the Lord for people around you that speak life into your veins.)*

As soon as those thoughts come in, I have people I can call and immediately *dirty* cry to. Even though the ball that smacked my face moments before is heavy still, I have people that can balm the bruising. And I have a Jesus that takes my tears and uses them to water what I don't yet see.

I used to think I was an expert juggler....but now I know I'm an expert ball dropper. I've dropped it so many times that most days I can't even pick it up. And if there's one thing I've BEGUN to learn on this journey, it's that I'm not meant to pick it up on my own. I'm meant to tell my bestie that I can't pick it up, I'm meant to let my husband help me clean off the dirt covering it, and I'm meant to ask those who care for me better ways to handle it on my own.

(I know, Enough with the analogies. You get the point!)

All of this to say; life is really hard sometimes. Seasons we think will be quick last for 7+ years. And it sucks.

I don't know what will ever come from my story and season. Fruit, I hope? Preferably some juicy peaches your girl can make a pie with. Or maybe empathy; the ability to walk with people in the mud of their tilling and tears and just be.

Either way, fruit is the end result and highlight we see; the cultivation is what happens in the mud.

Find your people to be with you in it all.

You're not alone.  
You may feel unseen, but...  
You are not unknown.

## **Under Pressure – Stay Motivated** – by Debbie Haynes

When I was working full time, every year when spring arrived and flowers bloomed and trees leaved, I felt trapped. A boredom set in with life and I experienced a hunger to get out and do something different, but my job was too demanding. It was a global job, so I had early morning and late night meetings, and I could feel the mundaneness of the patterns in my life of working, cooking, eating and sleeping. I read the Word and attended church, but I still yearned for the “different” in order to jump out of the rut for something exciting.

*I wanted an escape from the unchanging familiarity; from the harder parts of life.*

I didn't dislike my job. I loved its challenges, the diversity of it, and I was rewarded for my work. I loved my family and enjoyed everything I did to serve them. And I even enjoyed hobbies and music and visiting with others, but I STILL wanted something different. Maybe we'd take a quick trip or I'd embark on a new project, but then I continued on...

I did recently reseal my granite countertops all by myself, and could barely move the next day. I also now have a new tankless water heater, two beautiful security gates on each side of the house, so I'm thankful for all of these things! I even was gifted a sourdough starter from which I baked pizza dough, biscuits, muffins and more (all delicious!)

So what's the point to this story?

Some “new” things have also begun in my heart. I've written three songs and started to hear God's voice in new ways. I've let go of some judgments I've had about others, and surrendered windows of my heart I had never opened to Him. And I've seen His faithfulness to me in ALL of these things.

In Galatians 6, Paul says we should restore anyone who has fallen and bear one another's burdens – thus fulfilling the law of Christ. In other words, there is a place in Christ where we stand alone with Him, where we cannot depend on an escape valve, on other people for a rescue, or look to “deserve” something better than what we have. In verse 5, we are reminded to not be deceived because we will sow what we reap. And in verse 9, we read to not grow weary in well-doing because in due season we will reap, if we don't faint. And we are encouraged to “do good” to all...

The Message Bible says it this way:

*So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up or quit. Right now, therefore, every time we get the chance, let us work for the benefit of all, starting with the people closest to us in the community of faith.*

We are called to keep working, keep moving forward, and keep doing good.

In Ephesians 4:20-24 we are told that anything connected with our “old way of life” has to go. We are to get rid of it. And we are encouraged to take on a “new way of life” – a renewed one where we conduct ourselves in a manner that depicts God's character being reproduced in us.

That's how we maintain, and stay motivated, even in the dog days of summer...when we're tired of the same old thing, we don't see evidence of fruit, and everything feels routine. We willingly cooperate with Him and we reap a great reward where others see His fruit in our lives.

I remember a time when I was a teenager, trying to learn to play the piano and making gross mistakes. But then there were other times when I was called to play the piano at the end of a church service and I prayed, "Lord, what shall I play?" and he answered me!

So here I am again, trusting the Lord to enable me to not become weary in well-doing, or give up when things seem terrible. I'm realizing that He – God himself – is my reward. Deeper walking with him, experiencing his goodness, and understanding his Word, are all making me more like Him.

Be encouraged to keep on, stay motivated, and do good works – even if every fiber in you is screaming for change! You may need to play those awful, bad notes a while longer, to stay faithful...to allow his character to emerge as you stand.

## **Simple Truths – Never Left Empty** – by Marcy Lytle

Recently, I read something that said God will not leave us empty. He's always in the business of filling us up. This encouraged me, and I'm hoping it will brighten your day, as well. Feeling empty happens for any number of reasons, and while it's good to empty the watering can...it's not good to leave it empty for long. Why? Because then all the plants that the can watered will die. Here's more...

We become empty when we pour out with no refill.

We become empty when the heat is on, and we're dry and exhausted.

We become empty when our kids leave, or a spouse travels, or a friend moves.

We become empty when a season is over and our flower beds are bare.

We become empty when we've spent all we had in store, and we don't see anything more...

Feeling empty just occurs from time to time, because we give, we pour out, we nurture, we plant, we spend, and we end up at the end of the day with a backache, a headache, a heartache and dry as a bone.

Back in February, the freeze completely stunted so many plants, and many of our bushes or blooms were lost for good. They froze to the root. And we have this one small flower bed in the middle of our front yard that housed a beautiful Indian Hawthorn for the entire time we've lived in our house (25 years.) It was rooted deeply, required little care, and bloomed on point each time it was supposed to. I really liked it.

After the freeze, the leaves turned brown and we trimmed it back and we waited.... March, April, and June we watched it. And most of the limbs barely had any new shoots, so the decision was made to empty that flower bed. And now it sits, with nothing planted, just an odd-shaped bed full of dirt and a few scraggly roots that still need to be ousted. It's an ugly empty spot now, where there used to be lovely stately hedge full of bloom and color.

However, as we've begun to think of the new plants, it's been sort of fun to envision a newness in this empty bed. And I'm quite sure we'd never have planted anything new had the old plants not died. That same bush would have sat there forever, and that would have been fine with us. But the freeze came, the hard freeze of the century, and emptiness has now resulted. I'm sure you can relate...

You've always had children in your house, and now suddenly the hallways are quiet. You were always with that group of "best friends forever" and you're not quite sure what happened, but they're gone. You served and you gave to this and to those, and life has changed overnight and those opportunities are gone. And here you sit looking out your window at an empty bed full of dirt, wondering what happened and how it happened so quickly.

A few weeks ago, we finally made the decision to replant this bed and we started shopping and dreaming up our new "look" and driving around neighborhoods for inspiration. The empty bed is

now going to be filled with something new, take on a whole different look, and provide us with something fresh that will fill the void.

I'm always learning from the everyday things about how life works in the spiritual setting as well. Sometimes it just takes a hard freeze to knock out the old, empty out the pot, and provide an empty bed for replanting. It's not pleasant, it probably never would occur without outside forces, but the emptying is not always a bad thing.

In fact, like I said back up at the top, God doesn't leave us empty. In Ephesians 3 we are told that He fills us with the fullness of Him. Romans 15 offers us the hope of being filled with joy and peace. And Psalm 126 speaks of mouths filled with laughter (I'll take that one!)

Here's a prayer I read from Rachel Wojo for all of us who are staring at an empty flower bed, wondering what's next, and sighing over what was...

### **A Prayer for When I Feel Empty**

Dear Father,  
I humbly come before you  
With hollow heart and barren soul.  
Wondering how life can be so full  
And I can feel so empty.  
I poured out all I had today...  
and left no reserves of my own.  
But I'm exactly where You want me to be-  
Empty of self.  
And now I'm asking you to make me  
Full of you.  
I need you to flood the dry places  
and fill the vacant spaces  
So that I can overflow with your love  
And give again.  
Amen



MARRIAGE

## **In This Together – I Pick Us** – by Bekah Holland

By the time you're reading this, I will have just celebrated my 15<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. 15 years? Really? It seems like just yesterday and also like 3.7 billion years ago. We have lived what feels like many lifetimes in our years together. In some ways we have.

These days, I find myself remembering back to that 25-year old girl who walked down the aisle toward the rest of her life. She was so bright and shiny. She'd had her share of pain, heartbreaks, yes, but still, she walked straight to that handsome man waiting for her, and saw only his perfect smile that gave her butterflies and eyes that looked at her like she was the most beautiful person in the universe (for the record, he still does both of those things). The future was theirs for the taking. Full of promise, adventure and dreams.

That girl was an idiot. I had seriously read at least two dozen, too many novels about happily-ever-afters. I didn't know what it would feel like to get pregnant three months after our wedding when we planned to wait a few years. I didn't know what it would feel like to live through miscarriages, addiction, depression and anxiety, job losses, picking and choosing which bills we could skip for a bit so we could eat and have electricity. I didn't know it would hurt so bad to be unable to fix things that were out of my control. I made a lot of mistakes at the beginning (and middle, and probably future) of my marriage. We both did. We said things that never should have been said and couldn't be taken back. We pulled away when we should have walked toward each other. We dealt with things on our own, just trying to fight our way through to a little bit of sunshine. Add a couple of kids and a mountain of bills, we lost our way from time to time. Unmet expectations, pain from the past and an unsure future left us existing in two different worlds. And I'll be honest, there were times I did not think there was any way we were going to make it. But somehow, every time we hit another tough place, we'd eventually start crawling our way back into the light, and toward each other.

Could we have done things differently? Most definitely.

Did we learn from any of our (many) mistakes? I hope so.

Where are we today? Somewhere easier to navigate.

We ask for what we need. "I need space. I need a hug. I need you to stop chewing so loudly so I don't have to find a place to bury a body." We listen to each other talk about the same stories, or topics and still laugh in the right spots. We sometimes watch the same shows on repeat because the characters make us feel connected (or old recorded games because LSU football is life for half of us). We finally realize we are not dress-up and go-out-to-a-fancy dinner kind of people. We are order-food-from-a-local restaurant and eat-it in-our-sweatpants on the couch kind of people.

We cut each other and ourselves some slack when life gets messy. We grab takeout after a crappy day and tell each other that queso is, in fact, a healthy choice, given there are vegetables in it, and that cupcakes count as a breakfast food because there are eggs in them. We try to remember what fills the other's cup and find ways to do that more. We quit with the expectations of what this life we've created is supposed to look like. In fact, if you would have asked me years ago what we would be doing on a milestone anniversary like number 15, I would have told you we'd be on a trip, a long overdue honeymoon, or giving lavish gifts. What

are we actually doing? Well, my husband is getting vaccinated and I'm taking our 10 year old on an overnight trip with his Cub Scout pack. *Romantic, right?*

Romance is great and all, and I still swoon over a good love story, but I'll take a partner who works endlessly to become the best version of himself over bouquets of flowers and expensive dinners any day of the week. I love walking hand in hand with him on a romantic stroll through Costco, and I love it when he presses pause on whatever is going on just to drive me to the store so I don't have to walk from my car in the rain. He makes a killer margarita when I've had a bad day (they are also delicious on good days, in case you are wondering) and sends me up to take a bath when I get snippy.

We are far from perfect. We still have to work through things. We sometimes still say the wrong thing at the wrong time and have to remove our foot from our mouth. But in our work-in-progress life, the one that we'll be working on for the next however many years we get together, he's the one I want to work along side of, find missing socks with and sneak snacks upstairs with, even though we've forbidden food outside of the kitchen. He's the one I want to argue over the best vacuum cleaner with and sit in separate rooms and send snarky texts with when UT and LSU play once a year.

And it's because our mess, our family, our life, is ours. And I'll pick us every time.

"Marriage is not just spiritual communion. It is also remembering to take out the trash."

Joyce Brothers

## **Date Night Fun – Find a Game – by Marcy Lytle**

It's August. It's probably hot. Patio dining might not be ideal. Neither is a game of mini golf, because of humidity and mosquitos. And even picnics are not inviting, because the weather just isn't that kind of weather for picnicking. Finding a game to play/enjoy might be just the thing for date night fun this month. And these can be played at home, at a coffee shop, by yourselves, with another couple, or whatever fits your lifestyle and desires! Make sure you give and take with this option, and discuss what kinds of games you like to play...before you choose.

Simple Trivia – We were gifted a box of trivia cards called Bless Your Heart. We recently took them on a weekend trip and enjoyed reading the cards and playing. We just picked 20 cards each, read the question, and if we got it right, we went again. First person to finish the 20 questions wins. This is an easy game to play while sipping on lemonade and shortbread cookies. Any trivia set of cards will do. Choose options for each month!

<https://www.amazon.com/Bless-Your-Heart-Questions-Southern/dp/1984826085>

Battleship - Remember this game as a kid? Why not play it as adults, as couples? It's a fun, no-stress, type of competition, and it can be just as fun as a couple, as it was when you were 10. Set up the game, place your ships, and start guessing. It might be fun to watch a war movie after the game is over. Be sure to include a tub of popcorn for the game and the movie night!

[https://www.amazon.com/Hasbro-A3264-Battleship-Game/dp/B00C0ULS3G/ref=sr\\_1\\_6?dchild=1&keywords=games+for+two&qid=1625733800&sr=8-6](https://www.amazon.com/Hasbro-A3264-Battleship-Game/dp/B00C0ULS3G/ref=sr_1_6?dchild=1&keywords=games+for+two&qid=1625733800&sr=8-6)

Video Games – If you don't want to stay home, visit a local arcade at an off-time when the teens won't be there, and enjoy. It might be a Sunday afternoon. Decide before you go how much you'll spend, and then enjoy every minute. I love Skee-ball. He loves tossing the basketball. We both love the old game PacMan. It's not cheap, but it's a fun way to spend the bucks on something different than dinner and a movie. And spend the tickets you earn together to buy yourselves a treat in the store – even if it's just a bag of candy.

A Puzzle – “How is a jigsaw puzzle a game?” you might ask. Make it a game of sorts by using a few strategies as you begin. We recently took a 300 piece puzzle on a trip and were able to put it together in one evening. We turned all pieces over and grabbed the edge ones (I suppose most people do this.) But then we somewhat sorted scenes. And then we divided the picture into his half and mine. Once we had the frame of the puzzle, we then worked on specific scenes. And part of the time we talked, and another part of the time we listened to tunes. Check out this nostalgic puzzle for an option and figure out your own strategy for putting it together. You could even time yourselves! Enjoy a tray of snacks while you puzzle!

[https://www.amazon.com/Bits-Pieces-Friendly-Service-Americana/dp/B01LX47WJL/ref=sr\\_1\\_28?dchild=1&keywords=riverboat+puzzle+350+piece&qid=1625734570&sr=8-28](https://www.amazon.com/Bits-Pieces-Friendly-Service-Americana/dp/B01LX47WJL/ref=sr_1_28?dchild=1&keywords=riverboat+puzzle+350+piece&qid=1625734570&sr=8-28)

Four Game Fun – Pick four games you have (maybe a card game, a board game, a video game, and a game with dice like Yahtzee). Set up a card table and prepare four different snacks (popcorn, dark chocolate covered nuts, sliced peaches, and carrot sticks/dip – one snack for each game.) Figure the time you have for the date, say two hours. Then you'll play each game for 30 minutes and see who's winning at the end of each game – then start the next. Fun!

What's your favorite game to play as a couple? When's the last time you played it? Maybe it's time to play it again...

## **After 40 Years – Breakfast Outside** – by Marcy Lytle

We rarely eat breakfast together. I'm an early riser and a hungry person at 6am, and he's a sleeper and not in a hurry to eat at all. So most days, we eat breakfast separately. However, when we travel on vacation or even just a weekend away, we eat breakfast together. But here's the deal...

I am not a breakfast lover. I don't like eggs, and most menus include eggs on breakfast entrees. And when I then choose pancakes, I feel too full. So I'm not one to choose to eat breakfast while we're traveling. I'm happy with a small muffin and a piece of fruit, or granola. He, on the other hand, loves all of the entrees from which to choose, enjoys his coffee (I despise this drink), and breakfast out is one of his favorite meals of the day!

On a recent getaway, we had two mornings where we had breakfast together outside on the back deck of the cabin where we were staying. I had brought a blueberry loaf which we sliced and had with watermelon the first morning. And the second morning, we cubed that loaf and made parfaits with granola, blackberries, apples, and Cool Whip.

Yes, I got up early as per my usual habit, but I drank a large glass of water, read a few magazines and tamed my routine-driven self to wait another hour or so for him to wake up, so that we could eat together. He didn't mind not having any eggs, but was happy to help prepare what I'd brought, and help me set up our breakfast "date" out back each morning.

Here's the beauty of our having breakfast together. It was out of the norm, and it was a refreshing change from our work week routine that we follow all the time. We sat outside before it got too hot, and we just listened to the birds, observed nature, and took our time with each bite. We talked and chatted and even played a game for a bit, as we lingered over this first meal of the day.

Our pause, our change of routine, our both compensating for the other's likes/dislikes made for a favorite memory for me, from that weekend. Sure, the excursions, the sightseeing, the couple of meals out, and the shopping were all fun. But those two mornings on the back deck alone with him were priceless. They were what one might call Kodak moments.

Maybe you have breakfast with him often. But perhaps there's another activity you two rarely do together because of your differences. Maybe he enjoys strumming the guitar, but you have a hard time sitting still to listen. Or you really like watching a romance movie and he'd rather see action. We all have differences. But laying them aside, coming together with a give and take, makes for a really pleasant connection once in a while.

We are back home now, and I'm back to rising early for my daily granola/cereal before the sun comes up, and he's back to rising a bit later and making his coffee, and his simple fare of yogurt and a banana and pomegranate juice at his own pace.

But we always have another weekend coming up or a getaway, and we will for sure connect again over breakfast at the table...or outside among the breezes...and create more memories for sure. And I can't wait until we do.

## For Better or Worse - Love like Jesus – by Kaelin Scott

LOVE.

What comes to mind when you hear that word? A warm, fuzzy feeling? Flowers and romance? Hearts and fancy dates?

Love can be all those things. But it's also so much more.

We all know that Jesus died on the cross because He **loved** us so much. But do we really stop and think about what that means? Because it wasn't a warm and fuzzy feeling that held Him there. It wasn't a romantic gesture. It was a deep, passionate desire for you and me to be free. It was a willingness to put us before Himself, because He couldn't imagine a future without us. It was a giving over of Himself, because He didn't consider His life more important than ours.

Wow. What a picture of love.

What would happen, I wonder, if we loved our husbands like that? What if we gave all we had for them, each and every day? If we poured ourselves into cherishing their hearts? What a difference a love like that could make.

And aren't we supposed to use Jesus as a guiding example in marriage? Of course, we are. Yet how often do we fall drastically short of the mark? Nobody will ever be perfect. Not you or me or our husbands. But we can choose to radically love each other. We can choose to put our spouses before ourselves. Not because it's easy or convenient. Not because it feels good. But because that's what Jesus did for us. And that's the kind of love He wants us to have.

It's not enough to *doodle* hearts around our names or plan a special date. That's wonderful, and marriage definitely needs those kinds of things. But we have to love deeper than that. We have to *choose it*. We have to *be it*.

Love is a verb. It's not just a word we say before going to sleep every night. It's an action.

A way to live.  
An incomparable gift.

When we choose to love like Jesus, we bring heaven to earth.

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” John 15:12



ENCOURAGEMENT

## Firmly Planted - Close Encounters – by Dina Cavazos

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Do you remember the 70's movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? UFOs appear and people all over the earth experience it. Several people, including the main character, played by Richard Dreyfuss, have a vision of a mountain but don't understand why. He's driven to replicate this implanted vision, including with his mashed potatoes during dinner. Hilarious scene! I can relate to that...

I've been creating a prayer garden in my back yard since 2011. The idea started before that, but (ironically) the first "concrete" step was when the concrete was poured. I used all my savings on the slab and pergola, a kind of "all in" statement to God. Over time, my barren back yard has become a haven of shade trees, fountains, plants, art, and messages for little creatures (if they can read!), and people who spend time here. But how, when, and even *if* the *real* purpose—God's purpose—will manifest isn't clear yet. It's a work of faith.

Faith is defined in the Bible as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen". The prayer garden started as a thought, and then blossomed into a vision, but I had to act on it. With prayerful consideration, I believed that God was speaking to me. I decided I would rather stand before him and say "I heard and acted in faith" than say "I heard but didn't have the faith to act." I still have to choose to hold on to that: to believe and act. As I've done so, I see evidence all around me of things that were once not seen except in my God-given imagination.

Through the years, I've had doubts. I've wondered if it was just my own idea after all. I've wondered if the garden is just a place for me and God to interact personally and nothing more. My enthusiasm has fluctuated, and my creative energy has stopped flowing for periods of time; but then something sparks, and the conviction that I "must do this" blazes again. I find treasures for the garden that call my name, and my love of words and plants combined seem to merge together into a harmony of garden praise. It's a story coming together, but the ending is unknown to me.

My heart's desire is for the prayer garden to be a place of close encounters, with God. A place where the boundary between heaven and earth is thin; where beauty and peace allow the reality of God to penetrate the shell we've become accustomed to in our everyday lives; where the Savior of the world touches the need of the world one person at a time. How, when, and if this happens is in God's hands.

In the meantime....I'll keep doing what I do. I just made a frame-like holder to hang a poem in the garden. The materials shown are things I had on hand. Now I get to stroll around looking for the perfect spot to hang it!

## **Moving Forward - The Zoe Life** – by Pam Charro

Life is hard and we all get tired. It can be challenging to feel hopeful and excited about the future. But did you know that God has made it possible for every one of us to be more alive than we've ever been?

Think of it this way:

Jesus' sacrifice made him victorious over everything that steals life from us. Everything that makes us tired or discouraged or faint-hearted or depressed or less than enthusiastic. He conquered all of that, so all that's left is freedom to live in excited, childlike wonder. Now the Zoe Life is ours!

But what is the Zoe Life? It is much more than being biologically alive. It is rich, abundant life that is full of hope and promise. It is deeply fulfilling and free of fear because we know we are here on purpose and we have a right to be here. The curse of negativity has been broken off, and our good, good God has a meaningful and exciting life for us.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/zoe.html>

Jesus puts it this way:

"But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 4:14

Bubbling over with joy. Brimming with promise. Goodness that just keeps getting better, not just now, but forever. This life has been given to us, a constant hope that whatever lies ahead is going to be amazing. God walks with us into this fulfillment as we continually learn to embrace this truth. Nothing can take away our access into the Zoe Life. It's the highest kind of life God can give. Vibrant. Rich. So, so good.

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people (that's us, his saints!), and his incomparably great power for us who believe. - Ephesians 1:18

## **Rooted in Love - Celebrate Your Tribe – by Kaelin Scott**

You know those life-changing experiences? The ones you know you'll never forget?

I had one recently. I got to attend a writing conference hosted by my favorite author.

It was an amazing trip. I learned so much about writing, but that wasn't even the best part. The biggest blessing of all was the sheer amount of love I experienced.

There were authors from all over the country at this gathering, and some from farther away. And each one was so kind and encouraging. It was so humbling and inspiring to be in the same room as so many wonderful people. Not only was I in the company of people who love to write, but I was surrounded by people who love Jesus. Behind each of their stories, each of their dreams, He was the driving force.

None of these beautiful people thought they were better or more important than anybody else. We all shared a common passion, and we supported each other's dreams. It was an awesome reminder that everybody's life is different. We can't compare ourselves to each other or compete with each other. There's plenty of success to go around. It's so much more rewarding when we celebrate our tribe. Cheer for each other's victories, knowing that our turn will come.

So many lifelong friendships were cultivated during this trip.

Friendships that have less to do with hanging out and having fun,  
and more to do with cherishing each other's souls.

These are my brothers and sisters in Christ, and knowing them means more to me than any bestseller list ever will. I may never see my new friends in person again, but I know without a doubt that I can count on them to be there for me. And that is the most beautiful thing.

While the week was filled with tips and advice geared toward writing, I walked away with something more valuable. I walked away with a heart full of love. At the end of my life, looking back, those are the things that will mean the most to me. Whether I sell 25 books or 25 million, my friends will support me. They will root for me. They will pray for me. They will love me.

Everyone should have friends like that. If you don't have that tribe, I pray you'll find it soon.

“A sweet friendship refreshes the soul.” Proverbs 27:9

## **Unearthly Thing - Permanent Goodness** – by Angela Dolbear

“God is good.”

A phrase I repeat regularly. In emails, social media posts, and requests for prayer.

And I mean it. It's not meant as a flippant feel-good phrase for me.

I truly believe to the depths of my soul that God is good. And He is good all the time.

There isn't a single day that goes by where I don't catch a glimpse of God's goodness. Most days, His goodness overwhelms me, in such a wonderful way.

It's good to know that even when things go wrong, God is still good. Circumstances have no bearing on His goodness. His goodness is part of who He is, it stems from His tremendous love for us. God is love (please see [1 John 4:8](#)).

I am not merely spouting off sweet words here. I can testify to His constant goodness. Here are just a few examples:

- There was a time when our finances were so tight that I had to use the money in our change jar to buy a carton of eggs and laundry soap to get us through the week. But God provided, because He is good.
- I have lived with chronic illness in the form of a not-yet-cured auto-immune disease for the past 25 years. Every morning I ask Jesus for the physical and spiritual strength to get out of bed and have a productive day; hence, I have learned the extremely valuable lesson of dependence on Him. He is good.
- Because of this illness (Systemic sclerosis, or Scleroderma), I have survived a heart attack and a stroke. I have new physical struggles, almost like enemies to me, as a result of these incidents. But they too, are more lessons in dependence on God, pushing me closer to Him, stripping away the lie of self-reliance. He is good.
- I lost my singing voice as a result of the stroke. I have been singing my whole life, and then in an instant, a couple of blood clots in my brain took that away. But only with God's guidance to good vocal teachers and much prayer and persistence did I develop a new voice, which is stronger, more resilient, and with a harder edge to it, which is handy when singing songs my husband and I have written about our experiences. So again, God is good.

Since moving to Tennessee a couple of years ago, I have been unsure about my purpose in the Church. Big “C” church, meaning the body of Christ. The Kingdom of God. This is hard for me to deal with, and feeds my depression like an insatiable dark monster.

I woke up with a heavy heart over the matter a few days ago. As I was taking the kitchen trash out to the big trash container that morning, a beautiful large dragonfly fluttered near me.

I love dragonflies. When I was a little kid, my grandfather used to take my brothers and me fishing at the Lake Oroville Dam, in Northern California. There were always bright red and blue dragonflies flying around. Since they didn't bite, I was okay with them. I became quite fond of them. Like sweet, winged companions.

When I lived in Austin, TX, an unusually large dragonfly with iridescent magenta wings would fly around me whenever I was outside watering my flower boxes, and praying. Usually, by the time I had finished giving the flowers a good soaking to survive the Texas heat, I had received answers to my prayers, or much needed comfort, or both. And then the dragonfly would fly away.

I believe the dragonflies are God's unique marker to remind me of His never-ending presence.

It was the first time I had seen a dragonfly in Tennessee when I saw that one the other day. It had clear shiny wings that were tipped in black. I knew this little creature was a cue to push aside the depression and listen.

I heard God say in my spirit, "Let not your heart be troubled...trust in Me (please see [John 14:1](#)). This is a verse I speak to myself often.

My worry was lifted, and my heart became lighter.

I am grateful to God for His Word. I hope I never fail to hear Him speak it to me.

And I am grateful for His uniquely intimate signal to remind me that He is near, like the dragonfly. I pray God gives you a reminder of His goodness and nearness, something that is special between you and Him.

He never ever leaves you, or me. He is good.

God is always good. Yes and amen.



FRESH THYME

## **FRESH THYME - I Thought** (by Marcy Lytle)

*I thought they would have called us to do something, since we initiated last time.*

*I thought she would have responded by now, I guess she doesn't care.*

*I thought he would realize what he said was unkind, what a jerk.*

*I thought she would never stop talking, she's such a nuisance.*

*I thought he'd call me and let me know, but he never did. That hurt me.*

How many times a day do we have thoughts similar to the above? I'd say way too many! And the thoughts don't stop with our fellow humans. We have the same sort of process in our thinking about God.

*I thought God would bless me with that. After all, I've been so faithful.*

*I thought He would have answered me by now, He must not care.*

*I thought He would speak instead of being silent. Why's God like that?*

*I thought He was mad at me for my mistake, I feel like a loser.*

*I thought God would never let that happen to me. I'm so bitter.*

Thinking and reasoning and analyzing are all great things we can do with our minds. And of course, thinking about the why and the how and the what-for are normal processes of these minds we've been given. However, as we all know, the mind is also like a runaway train and can be off in a dark forest to never return if we're not careful. Untamed thoughts, thoughts that are embedded in lies or half-truths about others or God, or even true thoughts that leaves us angry, can cause all sorts of woes. Namely, the woe that we can then be lost in that dark forest forever, alone, lost, and unable to turn around.

I've done it. I've gone there. I've often judged someone and found out later my judgment was unfounded and based on partial knowledge about the situation (always a dangerous road!). I've spent a full 24 hours thinking about God and how he "must be" and completely discarded the truth about who he really is!

I suppose that thinking and reasoning is what sets us apart from the animals. But thinking and reasoning is addressed so many places in the Word. And in Philippians is the most common passage I've heard that invites us to think on good things, true things, honorable and noble things, praiseworthy and excellent things. If he tells us to think these things, then it must be possible to do so. But these thoughts will be obscured and hidden behind the dark trees of the forest to which we've run, if we're not careful.

So what's the solution to the runaway thoughts we have on a daily basis?

Just don't think so much. Observe, raise your eyebrows if you must, but stop the train before it leaves the depot. And fill your boxcars with all the good thoughts they can hold before pulling out for your day's destination.

I promise you, the track of thinking will then lead you to the light, and the view out the windows will be glorious.

## **FRESH THYME - Out of the Way – by Marcy Lytle**

Maybe you've already seen the series *The Crown*, as it seems I'm way late in watching it. I'm really enjoying the story, and it's one of the few shows that keeps me so intrigued with every single episode. And the episode today was maybe one of my favorite episodes in a series of all time, as it was so moving and beautiful.

The young Duke of Edinburgh has been sent on a world tour for five months away from his wife, the young Queen, and he did not want to go. He didn't want to leave his children, and he thinks quite a few things that are "required" in his position are just preposterous – especially this tour. However, The Crown thought it best that he go, and his wife encouraged him to go as well.

Fast forward a few months and he's tired of the travel, the speeches, he's even been drawn into things he shouldn't be, and the Duke is feeling quite empty inside. The Queen, too, is regretting that he's gone for so long, and she too seems forlorn and sad. And then there's the scene, the part of the story that took my breath away, and the visual that is still with me as I'm writing this piece.

The Duke is on board the large ship, bound to complete the tour on schedule, being run by the Flagship Officer. It is discovered that a tiny boat nearby with a small crew has lost its members, except for the captain, who is in dire need of a rescue. The Duke perks up and states that they must rescue this man, and they do. That alone is heroic, but then the Duke states that they must transport this man back to his homeland. This would take the large ship off course for a few days, and delay the last leg of the tour.

The Flagship Officer states that it would be too much "out of the way" to do this, and they'd done enough already by rescuing the captain of the small boat. That was surely enough, and they could just deposit him somewhere and he could find his own way back home. But the Duke stood firm and made sure that the man got safely home.

Watching the people greet this man when he arrived was beautiful. And seeing the face of the Duke as his empty soul was somehow being refilled as he gave of himself to help another, by going "out of the way" to do so, was so good.

This made me think of the people in my life that have gone out of their way to bless me at different times, take care of my needs, minister to my wounds, and love on me when I wasn't lovable. And I stopped to think about how it's hard to get folks to go out of their way to do much, these days. I feel like it's for one big reason:

We've come to only give when we think we will be rewarded for our giving, noted and thanked for our generosity, and only if the time involved is convenient. I'm among those in this category myself, so often. Giving a little, an hour or so, or a few dollars, isn't bad and doesn't put us out. But going out of our way to disrupt our schedules, help someone "beneath" us, and then go the extra mile to do more than what's expected...well that's a rare thing indeed.

We are told often by Jesus to go the extra mile, out of the way, give our all, and do more than what's expected...actually expecting nothing in return for our labor of love...except the pleasure of knowing we obeyed the Father.

It's something to think about. Life can feel empty and mundane at times, or chaotic and scary. And we often become insular and brooding, like the Duke was. But then, an opportunity arises right near us, one that involves a little muscle and a lot of caring, and we have a choice to help, to reach out, and to do more.

That's all. I'm just still chewing on this scene. I want to watch it again. The actor that plays the Duke (Matt Smith) is really amazing at his facial expressions, and it was evident that something took place that day. A shift, of sorts, and a good shift it was.

All because he stood firm to insist that the larger boat go out of its way to help the smaller boat, and take care to complete the mission of caring for another fellow-traveler in need.

## **FRESH THYME - Sounds...of Summer**

I go for a walk often, down several streets in my neighborhood. And sometimes (more often than I'd like to admit) I talk on the phone, think about a million things, or hurry to get the exercise done so I can get back to work or whatever... until recently. I was walking and felt like I should listen to the "sounds of summer." Here's what I heard:

*Birds chirping* – they chirp all the time, don't they? It can be so annoying, or it can be a reminder of the One who cares for all living things and gives them daily songs to sing.

*Dogs barking* – In the distance, behind that fence, over on the other street, someone has a pet that's alerting the owner that they are hungry, someone's near, or they see one of those aforementioned birds.

*Squirrels scampering* – They rustle hurriedly through the branches of the trees when I walk by, to escape my nearness. That's okay. I don't want to be near them, either. Those pesky things dig in my plants and destroy my backyard cushions.

*Wind blowing* – I love watching the effects of the wind when it blows through the trees and knocks the dead leaves loose. That sound of leaves rustling from the wind is reassuring that the air is not stagnant, and a new season is near.

*Neighbors chatting* – Two guys were in a driveway talking car stuff, and one of them waved as I passed by. The voices of people outside their homes, having conversations, means people are connecting, and that's nice.

*Lizards scurrying* – A pretty big lizard skirted under a bush when I walked by one particular house. I don't like lizards and I'm happy that the noise of my feet made him run the other way. Most creatures are more afraid of us than we are of them. I must remember that.

*Rooster crowing* – There's a farm just a few blocks from our house, and the path I walk leads me right by it, where a rooster might crow. It's a familiar sound and one that somehow brings comfort that country animals are awakening to the new day and alerting the neighborhood.

*Cicadas* - Oh, those summer bugs that buzz around in the trees. I guess that's what they are, and one can hear them any afternoon. They remind me of those old movies with kids walking down dusty lanes toward town to get an ice cream cone.

What have you heard recently? I could have listed cars honking, trucks passing, and other city noise, but I chose to focus on the sounds of the summer from nature and people. When I walked and listened, instead of talked and wondered, I came back from my walk smiling instead of weary.