

SECRETS

50 WORDS OF WISDOM

MY FATHER

FROM JANUARY TO DECEMBER

TOLD ME

MARIE ANTONIO BONIFACIO

CROSSOVER

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SECRETS MY FATHER TOLD ME

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to three fathers:

To the father who raised me,
my papa Felix Q. Antonio,
who inspired me to keep on writing;

To the father of my three sons,
my hubby, Joey Bonifacio,
who encouraged me with his faith and love;

And most of all, to my Father in heaven,
who taught me all these secrets,
that you are about to read.

Thank you with all my heart! 😊

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In the Beginning

Have you ever heard a secret so powerful that it helped shape your destiny? I have one, shared to me by my father when I was 13.

As he was putting on his coat to get ready for a wedding, he handed me a card and said, “Marie, write a greeting for the bride and groom, then I’ll sign it.”

“Me? Why me?” I asked.

My father was a lawyer, and a wise judge at that. Years down the road, he would even become an associate justice of the Supreme Court. On the other hand, I was the youngest of eight children. What would a gawky, awkward, glasses-wearing, nerdy-looking 13-year-old know about love and marriage? Besides, he was the principal sponsor at the wedding. So why trust a 13-year-old?

Then my father looked me in the eye and said, *“You’re a good writer, Marie. One day, you’ll even write better than me.”*

That little light-hearted comment became a shout that shaped my heart and destiny. “My father thinks I’m a good writer!” I thought to myself. Oh, how his words directed my life!

Writing became my joy and skill. Broadcast Communication became my university degree—all because of my father’s words. It was a secret shared between the two of us.

When I was in my 30s, my father passed away. I was then a young wife to Joey, and attempting to be a super mom to three boys. I needed wisdom and encouragement more than ever. But the secrets had died with my father—or so I thought.

But twenty years, a husband, and three kids later from the time my father shared his secret with me, I discovered another source of secrets.

One day, while praying, I blurted out to God all my frustrations as a wife and mother: “God, I’m lonely!” “God, I’m overwhelmed!” “Jesus, how can You even give parenting advice when You never had kids?” “God, am I doing the right thing?”

I didn’t expect a direct answer from Him. My prayers consisted of me pouring out a litany of concerns, not caring enough to listen for a specific answer. At that time, I saw Bible reading more as a duty that needed to be done, not necessarily enjoyed.

That all changed one day, as I read Isaiah 45:3 (NET):

“I will give you hidden treasures, riches stashed away in secret places, so you may recognize that I am the LORD, the one who calls you by name, the God of Israel.”

The version found in the New Living Translation says: *“And I will give you treasures hidden in the darkness—secret riches. I will do this so you may know that I am the LORD, the God of Israel, the one who calls you by name.”*

It gradually dawned on me that God had secrets, too—secrets that He wanted to share. Secret riches, hidden treasures in His Word, *“riches stashed away in secret places”*—and they were there for His children to discover.

This revelation made waking up in the morning and having my date with my Heavenly Father a treat for me. I knew a treasure awaited me every day. He always had a secret for me, His daughter: a nugget of wisdom here, a word of advice there, even an art idea to try. There have even been occasions when God would give me a whole message to share when I needed to speak in public.

I'm inspired by the story of George Washington Carver, who grew up in the late 1800s—a child of slaves, deprived of early education, yet rich in faith.

George prayed to God, wanting to know the secrets of the universe. Instead, through his quiet time and research, God showed him the secrets of the peanut and other products. And what amazing secrets he uncovered!

George ended up discovering 300 uses of the lowly peanut, and 100 products from sweet potatoes. Many of Carver's inventions are still with us today. His discoveries included agricultural innovations, paint products, cosmetic ingredients, as well as the dyes used in the manufacture of Crayola crayons.

George Carver revealed that God had given him these secrets. He would share this to others, saying, "The Lord has guided me" and "Without my Savior, I am nothing."

Now I don't have 300+ inventions to my name, but what I do have are a few secrets my Heavenly Father told me.

I share with you now in book form those secrets previously shared in my blogs. I hope they inspire you, too! 😊

JANUARY

It takes a Master
to make you
into a masterpiece.

*For we are God's masterpiece.
He has created us anew in Christ Jesus,
so we can do the good things
he planned for us long ago.
Ephesians 2:10 NLT*

How to Be a Masterpiece This New Year

I can't imagine why Chen Forng-Shean does what he does. This Taiwanese artist chooses the tiniest thing on which to create his awesome artworks.

He gets a grain of rice—yes, one grain!—and on that miniature piece, he carves and paints people's faces! Each rice grain is a one-of-a-kind masterpiece; each one a unique creation.

“Chen Forng-Shean has gained international recognition for his amazing talent of making incredible works of art out of the simplest and tiniest things. The self-taught artist spends up to several months in front of a magnifying glass, working on a single piece.”¹

Imagine the labor and the dedication of that guy! If that were me, I would be so impatient that I would just gobble down the rice! But Chen Forng-Shean sees potential in his creations—something I don't see.

At the start of the year, this verse kept replaying in my mind:

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Ephesians 2:10 NLT

¹“The Amazing Rice Grain Artworks of Chen Forng-Shean,” <http://www.odditycentral.com/pics/the-amazing-rice-grain-artworks-of-chen-forng-shean.html>

Here are some secrets I'm learning:

1 Only a Master can take something ordinary and create from it something extraordinary.

I don't want an ordinary life. I want a meaningful one. No one starts a new year thinking: "I want this year to be just an ordinary year. Just so-so. Same as last year." No! We all are excited to have a fresh start, a new beginning. That's the reason why many of us make New Year's resolutions.

But left to our own devices, we have limited capacities to make it happen. In many ways, our power is similar to those grains of rice. Rice is so common. There are millions, if not billions, of rice grains in the world. What will set your life apart from the rest of the crowd? The hands of a Master make all the difference!

Chen's works of art don't get ignored or thrown into the trash! Why? Because a master came and changed its identity forever, from common to extraordinary.

A key to having an extraordinary new beginning is knowing and deciding who is going to be the Master of your life.

2 God is changing my Mess-terpiece into His Master-piece.
The Master Artist is carving something in me that I have yet to see.

Maybe you made a mess of the past year. That's exactly why Jesus came. He is the Master Restorer. He makes the impossible possible. That's why Ephesians 2:10 (NLT) says ". . . *He has created us anew in Christ Jesus. . .*"

A rice grain by itself can't boast. When the Master starts carving His design, many times we have no idea where God is leading us. But if we have faith, enduring faith, God is making you and me into "Masterpieces"—pieces created by the Master. I'd rather have my family and my destinies created by Jesus than insist on my own finite resources, strengths, or talents.

3 God has already prepared good works for you to do in the new year.

This revelation fills me with such relief and excitement. I don't have to wonder and think, "What am I supposed to be doing with my life?" "Am I just wasting my life?" "Is this all there is?" No! Whether you are a career person, parent, student, male, or female, God has already prepared the way. He has the Master Plan!

I can begin my week by consulting my Master Architect-Builder and say, "Lord, have Your way and will in my life. Guide me as I begin a new week. Lead me to the right contacts. Guide me to make the right decisions. Thank You that You are equipping me and supplying me with all I need according to Your riches and glory in Christ Jesus."

I can begin my day by declaring, "Father, I will walk and fulfill the good works You have prepared in advance for me

to do. Lord, I declare that each of my family members will be obedient and do the good works that You have prepared for them to do. My sons and daughters will live meaningful lives. They will not wander through life aimlessly, but will steward and enjoy all that You have planned for us. Give us listening ears and teachable hearts. Give us the courage and obedience to stick by Your word. Amen!"

So dear reader, happy new beginnings!

May you and I be His Masterpieces.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

*The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.*

Psalm 138:8

Personal Application:

1. Have you decided who will be the Master of your life this new year?

2. How will you put that decision into action?

3. Read the following verses slowly.

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Ephesians 2:8-10 NLT

What are you learning from these verses?

God bless you! Have a good day!

Remember the Name

Have you ever been afraid?

Some people are afraid of heights. Some fear creepy-crawly insects! When I was younger, I was super afraid of the dark. That is, until I heard a secret my Father told me.

Imagine a sleepy, little girl going down the second floor staircase, headed towards the kitchen. Now imagine her older, teenage brother, crouched in the dark, and silently hiding behind the stairs.

I was thirsty, and making my way down the shadowy steps to get a glass of water when all of a sudden, a white, clammy hand grabbed my ankle from behind. I let out a blood-curdling scream, only to realize I've been pranked again by my crazy brother. Yes, my one and only dear brother who knew that I was scared of monsters and dark places.

I thought I would naturally outgrow my fear of the dark. But fear knows no rhyme or reason. How else could grown-up me try to explain to my perplexed, new husband, Joey, that, "Yes, I like to sleep with the light on, please!" Even as a new mom, whenever I heard my baby boy moving in his crib, I would get up from bed, swing my legs to the floor, and still think, "Hurry, before a hand grabs your foot from under the bed!"

Do you have fears, too?

Fear paralyzes people, even great men. The Bible gives several examples:

Fear immobilized a whole army of men facing one Goliath.

Fear made Moses want to turn down his Egypt assignment.

It made Elijah run away from Jezebel.

It almost made Peter drown on one occasion, and it caused him later on to disown Jesus and leave Him.

No wonder the constantly repeated message of the Bible seems to be, “Do not be afraid!”

Even today, fear can strike a person with one word. Words, such as “terrorists,” “cancer,” “cockroaches,” “failure,” “bills,” “blood,” “tsunami,” “earthquake,” “hopelessness.” Does your fear have a name?

Then let me share with you the first secret. This helped me with my fear of the dark.

Secret: Remember the name “Immanuel.”

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, “GOD WITH US”.

Matthew 1:22-23 NASB

God is fully present even when your fears seem very real.

Other people may not realize the depth of your fear, but God can see it. God also didn’t disappear when my fear appeared; He is still “Immanuel”—God with me. So the more I became conscious of God being fully present with me 24/7, the less

conscious I became of my fears. When Jesus comes into your life, He is with you in your fear, and He will see you through it.

The darkness of your situation is no match for the Light of the World.

*If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"
Even the darkness is not dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike to You.*

Psalm 139:11-12 NASB

Psalm 139 became my favorite psalm for a long time. When I would wake up in the middle of the night and fear would try to creep in, I would remember Jesus as fully present. My Immanuel. I would pray, "God, thank You that You are with me as I sleep. This dark room is not dark to You. You see everything, like it is daytime, and I know You will remove every unclean spirit from this room." Then I would close my eyes and sleep like a baby.

Do you have fears you keep wrestling with? Problems that seem to have no solution in sight? It's time to remember that Jesus came to be your Immanuel, God with you—not a distant, uninvolved God in the clouds, but a Savior fully present, willing and mighty to save you.

Personal Application:

1. Is there a fear in your life that's affecting you right now? Can you identify what is making you afraid?

2. Based on the following verses, how can Jesus be "Immanuel" over your situation?

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.

Psalm 56:3

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.

Isaiah 26:3

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:6-7

"... Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Joshua 1:9 NKJV

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers assail to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall. Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

Psalm 27:1-3

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

Happy Used Year!

We returned to our little apartment in January after the holidays, and I discovered in our freezer an expired pack of frozen spinach lasagna. It said, “*Consume before December 2016.*”

R.I.P. Here in my freezer lies my poor pasta, frozen and forgotten, never to live up to its full potential as lasagna.

Maybe it’s because I’m writing this during our annual start-of-the-year fast, but I can’t get that pasta dish out of my mind. Was it delicious and cheesy? Was it creamy? Were the noodles going to be oozing with flavor once heated? I will never know.

Aside from lasagna, there are the candles—the ones I collect. I have a friend (you know who you are) who has beautiful, boulder-sized candles with multiple wicks. But she refuses to light these fabulous candles! These candles are “for display only”—unlit, unused.

Do you do that, too? Keep things unused because you want to “preserve” them?

Speaking of “unused,” I discovered I had muscles I never knew existed.

Joey and I went kayaking last Saturday. We’ve done that, years ago. No big deal, right? Well apparently, in this Singapore kayak center, you don’t just plop your behind in the kayak and paddle away. Kayaking here is D-I-Y: do-it-yourself.

There is a very organized system to it. First, you select your vests and your paddles, and then you haul the kayak of your choice out of storage. You carry your own boat out of the storage area until you reach the dock down at the lower level.

I didn't realize how heavy a kayak was! I was sweating, my muscles were protesting, and we hadn't even begun. Then you push your kayak into the water, making sure you don't make a fool of yourself by toppling into the river as you step into the boat.

After kayaking for 40 minutes in the heat, my hubby, with his frozen shoulder, and I headed back to the landing area. I literally crawled onto the dock like a wet dog, and we dragged our kayak back to land.

But wait, there's *MORE!* After you're done using the kayak, you have to rinse and hose down your own boat, as well as dunk and swish your vests *and* paddles into a soapy solution, prior to your returning all items back into the storage area on the upper level.

After we walked home, Joey and I lay flat and incommunicado for 90 minutes! We had discovered, burned, and used muscles we never knew we had.

And that, folks, was how my January started.

My prayer for all of us is that when December of this new year hits, we can declare, "Happy Used Year!"—not "Happy *Unused* Year," or "An Unhappy What-Happened-to-My Year."

Like our kayaking experience, I want to discover and use new muscles, and have a maximized new year.

That's a great word for this year: **maximize**, which means "to use our lives in a way that will get the best result."

Want to get the best results this year?

1 Realize that your days are numbered by the Lord.

That's not a morbid thought. Here's how the Bible describes it in Psalm 90:12 (NLT): "*Teach us to realize the brevity of life, so that we may grow in wisdom.*"

It is scary if you are living your life away from God, but if you know that your days are numbered *by the Lord*, you become wiser on how you use your time and talents and resources. You appreciate the people around you more, knowing you won't have them forever. You also become more conscious that He exists. You are secure that your 24 hours, seven days a week are under the Lord's guidance and protection.

With the Lord, you are fully covered. But if you live your life independent of or indifferent to God, you are living a vulnerable, worry-filled, unprotected life.

2 Live your life as an act of worship to God.

Whatever this year may bring you, start each day by offering it to Jesus, and end each day with thanks.

Worship doesn't have to be done on our knees. Your work can be your worship to God. Taking care of your family can be an expression of worship to Him, if done with the right attitude.

Make a decision to live each day in a way that will give the best results and the most pleasure to God. As God's Word says, *"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men"* (Col. 3:23 NIV).

So, dear reader, this new year, may we live each day with maximized, unfrozen lives, not immobilized by fear or worry, but with gratitude, expectant of the good things God has prepared for those who love Him.

Personal Application:

1. What was the past year like for you?

2. Can you share three lessons from the past year that can help you have a wiser new year?

3. Based on this chapter, what are two ways that you can live a maximized life this year?

This week's Bible verse:

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart,
as working for the Lord, not for men.*

Colossians 3:23 NIV

Discomfort Zone

(When “Ouch” Is Okay)

My hubby, Joey, and I have opposing personalities. He is bold and full of faith, ready to take on big challenges. I, on the other hand, sometimes suffer from “analysis paralysis.” I take a long time to make a decision. I am afraid of failure; hence, I over-think things to death. For a long time, my favorite quotes were from the book of Hesitation, until I realized there was no such book in the Bible!

Several years ago, Kristie (who was then my son Joshua’s girlfriend), told me about a Zumba class. I’ve never been to one, and it sounded interesting. I didn’t like gym machines, but I enjoyed dancing, so dancing as a form of exercise sounded like a great idea. Plus, I thought—and this is a tip for you mothers out there—this would be a perfect “getting-to-know-you-more” opportunity for me and my son’s girlfriend! (By the way, she is now my dear daughter-in-law, so I guess we are really “bonded” for life! ☺)

So wanting to break out of my usual hesitant, knee-jerk reaction, I readily said, “YES!” and signed up. Little did I know that I had actually signed up for an instructor training class for two whole days, with a two-hour event afterwards. Saturday came, and I found myself in the midst of buffed, bicep-ed, tricep-ed, exercise buffs dressed in the latest trainer’s dri-fit gear and spandex.

We all had to introduce ourselves, and their list of expertise in the fitness world grew longer. What in the world was I

doing here? This is what I get for stepping out of my comfort zone?! My turn came, and as every toned head and muscle group swiveled to my direction, I took a deep breath, put on a big smile, and said, “Hi! My name is Marie, and I’m in my 50s! I’m a homemaker, a mom of three sons, and I’m here to prove that it’s never too late to be fit and healthy!”

Then we all had to group ourselves. (I was so glad that a bunch of merciful hearts took me in!) I survived the three-hour morning class, then came our lunch break. On the pretext of having other things to attend to, I skipped joining the group for lunch, and went inside my car. With all my remaining strength, I took out my shoes, lifted my weary legs horizontally, and said a prayer for my ten toes which felt like they had just died.

I dragged myself back for the three-hour afternoon sessions (which thankfully had lectures in between), and hid my quivering muscles beneath my big smile. That evening, as Joey saw my red, sweaty face enter our front door, I warned him, “Do not even think about cracking a joke!”

Waking up the next day, I thought, “God, why is it so hard to step out of my comfort zone? Why did I even agree to do this?” Despite my feelings, I drove my weary body back for another day of training.

I Stepping out of your comfort zone isn’t easy, but it will be worth it.

Although I felt way out of my league, something inside me told me to persevere and not give up. I finished the whole course and got my certificate! In my 50s, I became part of

the first batch of Zumba instructor trainings ever done in the Philippines!

Stepping out of our comfort zones isn't easy. Fear of failure, worries of what people might think, anxiety over what the future could hold—these are “weights” that hold us back from exploring new horizons and new adventures. But ever since that experience, I have become fitter. (I had never stepped into a gym until I was in my 40s, so exercise was definitely not a habit I grew up with.)

I don't teach a class anymore, but I consistently attended one. I have been enriched not just health-wise, but also in relationships, with new and precious friends whom I wouldn't have met otherwise. God opened a door for me (a very strange door) but I'm glad I walked through it.

2 “Heavenly Father, I agree.”

This has been my daily morning prayer: “Heavenly Father, I agree.” Instead of deciding what to do based on what looks safe, convenient, or comfortable for me, I have chosen to say, “Lord, I agree with Your plans for my life. Let them be done today, according to Your will.” Yes, I still have my comfort zones, but I'm also realizing (with great delight) that every zone is safe with God.

I am His child. My Father has plans for me. He has plans for you, too. ☺

For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

Isaiah 41:13 NIV

Personal Application:

Comfort zone: a situation in which you feel comfortable and in which your ability and determination are not being tested¹

1. In what situations do you find it hard to get out of your comfort zone? Can you identify what keeps you from venturing out?

2. Are there areas in which you feel God is telling you to step out of your comfort zone?

3. How can these verses help you?

¹ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/comfort-zone>

This week's Bible verses:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7 NIV

For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.

2 Timothy 1:7 NLT

FEBRUARY

Dear God,
Remove my wrong notion of You.
Open my heart to experience
the real love You have for me.

*This is real love—not that we loved God,
but that he loved us
and sent his Son as a sacrifice
to take away our sins.
1 John 4:10 NLT*

Finding Love

It's the month of February, a season when shops leave singles and couples feeling "loveless" or pressured. You were perfectly fine, then come all these ads talking of romance that make you feel inadequate.

Don't give in to these marketing ploys. Your value as a human being doesn't depend on romance, flowers, or chocolates. It doesn't depend on having a Valentine's date or the lack of it. The month of March will come, and the shops will find something else to sell to you.

In a consumerist society, we are taught to "consume" love—as if love were a fragrance to be worn, an outfit to buy, a date to have. We go out on February 14 with 10 million other couples, clogging streets and restaurants, eating overpriced food, and thinking this is romance.

But real love is not a formula or a mantra. Experiencing genuine love begins with this revelation:

Secret:

Someone already loves you!
You already are "in a relationship."

Do you know the benefit that Christians have? Christians are never loveless, because Someone already loves them!

If God had a *Facebook* page, His status would be “in a relationship.” *With you.*

Remember how excited your friend was when she changed her *Facebook* status to “in a relationship”? Well, guess what? You are in a relationship, too!

Jesus gave you:

- **An unbelievable, “unleavable” love.** God finds you lovable, even at your worst. Try being nasty or unkind to your family or friends, and they will disconnect from you.

Romantic love is often conditional. It says, “I will love you *if you do this for me.*” God’s love is unconditional. It’s the kind that says, “I love you *in spite of* all you’ve done to Me.”

The unusual thing about God’s love is that it’s a love that never gives up on you. It’s a love that has stayed even to the point of death.

The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.

Deuteronomy 31:8 NIV

- **The “saving love” of a Savior.** Some people marry a partner thinking they can change them after marriage. Some people think they can even change themselves. I tell them, “Good luck!” Only the love of a Savior can transform a person from the inside out.
- **The unconditional love of the Father.** Often people look for romantic love, but what their hearts are really hungering for is the love and approval of the Father—someone to give us our real identity, security, and a sense of belonging.

We are grown-up children looking for the approval we never fully received because of our broken world.

God's love will make you whole and healthy. It's different from "alphabet love"—sexual encounters that leave you with STD or HIV, or leave you muttering about that . . . jerk.

It's the love displayed by the father when the prodigal son returned. It's the love the Father gave when He sent Jesus to rescue us.

The Real Question

I guess the real question this February is not, "Does anyone love me?" The real question is, "How am I responding to God's love?" Am I even aware of it? Or have I taken it for granted?

This February, I pray your eyes will be opened to see what true love is, so you won't fall for anything less than that. May God also give you real, satisfying relationships that mutually enrich your life, and make you stronger in your walk with the Lord.

Personal Application:

1. Does the month of February and the focus on Valentine's Day have an effect on you or your friends? If so, is it a positive or negative effect?

2. Based on the article, how is God's love different from "alphabet love"?

3. Romans 8:32 (NIV) says, "*He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*"

Read this verse slowly. How does it describe God's love towards you? How can you respond today?

This week's Bible verse:

*For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD gives grace and glory;
No good thing does He withhold from those
who walk uprightly.*

Psalm 84:11 NASB

When God Googles People

Recently, while having lunch with a group of friends, one of them mentioned that a certain male friend (let's call him Mr. A) was coming to town.

Now, Mr. A is still a single guy. Immediately, a light bulb turned on in our heads. *Hmmm . . . Wouldn't Mr. A be a good match for our single female friend, Ms. A?* All of a sudden, the table was abuzz with possibilities. What if . . . ? What if . . . ?

We started googling to check how Mr. A looked now. Would they look good together? We continued googling to find out if Mr. A and Ms. A shared the same interests, the same sports, etc. In short, we were “virtual matchmakers” caught up in the excitement of possibilities.

It's embarrassing to say this, but although I've been a Christian for many, many years, my automatic response is not always spiritual—especially when it comes to the romance department.

God has to remind me (sometimes through my hubby) that I'm not the official matchmaker; He is. All I see is the external; God sees what's really inside a person.

So what would it be like if God were the one “googling” a person? What would He be searching for?

Criterion 1: Heart check, not body check.

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7

Wow, even Samuel, the highly respected prophet of those times, had to be reminded! Saul, his candidate no. 1, was tall, dark, and handsome—a popular choice! On the other hand, God’s candidate, David, at that time was sweaty, stinky, unappealing! (Remember, he had just spent the whole day outdoors, taking care of herds of sheep!)

In short, Saul was “Instagrammable”; David’s selfie was not. But God preferred David, because of the quality of his heart.

*Many a man proclaims his own loyalty,
but who can find a trustworthy (faithful) man?*

Proverbs 20:6 NASB

Criterion 2: What does his or her private life say about his or her relationship with God?

Underneath his impressive good looks, crowd appeal, and statuesque appearance, Saul was an insecure, unteachable coward who sulked in self-pity and envy. When he would

Speak, it looked like he was obeying God, but it was really on his terms, not the Lord's.

On the other hand, David's private life, spent hours alone in the open fields, showed him worshipping the Lord. He found God even in his loneliness and unpopularity.

Criterion 3: How does he or she respond under pressure or correction?

Saul crumbled and gave in to public pressure. He compromised and disobeyed the Lord and made excuses for his behavior. Pressure made him run away from God's will.

David faced extreme pressure from three sides: from enemies, from within his camp, and from Nathan's exposure of his sin. This was his steady response: running towards the Lord. Even when he grossly sinned, David responded in humility. He took his punishment like a man, obedient to his Lord. When his own men thought of stoning him, still he encouraged himself in the Lord:

And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God.

1 Samuel 30:6

In short, I believe God was googling for faithfulness, and found it in David.

*The LORD is watching everywhere,
keeping his eye on both the evil and the good.*

Proverbs 15:3 NLT

Dear Lord,

Bless my friends; bless them with the virtue of faithfulness to You. May You find me faithful as well. Make us people who are faithful to You both in our private and public lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Personal Application:

1. What insights did you get from reading this chapter?

2. What insights can you get from these verses about the rewards of faithfulness?

This week's Bible verses:

His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord."

Matthew 25:21 NKJV

A faithful man will abound with blessings.

Proverbs 28:20a NKJV

He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.

Luke 16:10 NKJV

". . . Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Revelation 2:10c NKJV

Getting Rid of Heart Junk

The “BoniMarie Method”

There is a best-selling book that has been blogged about a lot. Written by a Japanese author, it talks of the KonMari method as a way of keeping your home clean, organized, and junk-free. If you're wondering whether to dispose of or keep an item, the author suggests a simple technique: hold the object in your hands and ask yourself one question: Does this spark joy in me? If your answer is no, immediately discard/donate it. If your answer is yes, keep it. This way, you will only have in your home the things that bring you joy.

Well, I tried this in my house and arrived at mixed results. Apparently, super worn, old t-shirts may be things wives want to get rid of, but they still give hubbies and sons a lot of great joy.

Now there is another kind of clutter that Christians need to deal with, and that's heart clutter. This refers to the junk in our hearts that keep us weighed down, feeling heavy, or oppressed. Let's call the clean-up process for heart clutter the “**BoniMarie**” method. Ha ha! (With apologies to the KonMari method!)

Secret:
The question that helps me clean up my
heart is this: Does this attitude of mine
spark joy in God?

Here is heart clutter that doesn't bring God joy: holding on to offenses. Being a Christian doesn't make us immune to offenses. People hurt our feelings, and sometimes (knowingly or not), we end up offending others. It happens among friends. It happens between spouses. So what should we do when our feelings get hurt? Should we hold on to our right to be mad? If yes, for how long?

I remember a time when Joey and I had a fight, and I went to bed angry. I couldn't sleep that night, and I knew it was because I was holding on to my hurts.

Me: God, I don't want to talk to You because I already know what You want me to do!

(internal wrestling)

But I don't want to forgive!

(more internal wrestling)

God, just to let You know, I also have a hard time with that "wives, submit to husbands" thing!

(more internal wrestling)

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in
humility count others more significant than yourselves.*

Philippians 2:3

Sheesh, I hate it when verses enter my head when I'm mad! So I decided to get up that night, and read the rest of Philippians 2:

*Do all things without grumbling or disputing,
that you may be blameless and innocent,
children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked
and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights
in the world.*

Philippians 2:14-15

It slowly began to hit me that God wasn't trying to make me miserable or lead a lousy life. God wanted me to shine! Grudges are like a black hole of bitterness that, sooner or later, is going to suck the life out of me and others.

If I didn't forgive, what would make me different from the people who don't follow Jesus? I had a choice to either be a black hole or to shine like a star! What made Jesus such a shining example was His extraordinary forgiveness. I was a recipient of that mercy, many times over. Was I going to be a hoarder and collector of grudges, or choose a cleaner, peaceful heart?

To get rid of heart junk, I needed to ask myself: Which attitude of mine will spark joy in my Savior?

Asking that simple question made it easier. Should I insist on my right in being right, or should I release forgiveness just as Christ forgave me?

Dear reader, how about you? Do you have heart clutter, too?

Personal Application:

1. What are the things that often clutter your home?

2. What are the attitudes that often clutter your heart? Do you have any “heart junk” that God is reminding you of?

3. Which attitude of yours is going to spark joy in Jesus?

This week’s Bible verses:

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.

1 Peter 5:6-7 NASB

“Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.”

Matthew 11:28 CEB

Letting Go of Regret

Have you ever tried riding a Grab or an Uber car? I sometimes do, and get to meet interesting people. One driver shared to me about his French great-grandfather.

“Do you know that my ancestor was one of those who killed Andres Bonifacio, the hero?” he said. *Whaaaat?* And here I am, a Bonifacio, riding his car!

His ancestor was one of the soldiers under Emilio Aguinaldo’s government who carried out the orders to execute Andres Bonifacio and his men. The interesting part of his story was this:

“After the war, he retired, and became a teacher. He also kept a painting in his living room of Andres Bonifacio.”

“But why would your great-grandfather keep a painting of a person he helped execute?” I asked.

He answered, “I think . . . regret.”

Regret (n): a feeling of sadness, repentance, or disappointment over something that has happened

Regret is a strange emotion. It can hang over you indefinitely, like that painting in his ancestor’s house. Can you imagine waking up every day, coming out of your room to eat breakfast, and there, staring at you, is that painting, reminding you of your greatest regret?

The devil is an expert at that. His favorite pastime is a memory game that always reminds us of past blunders, sins, and failures. Regret. Guilt. Condemnation. These are often the darts he hurls at us. He knows that the longer we linger, the weaker we get.

King David knew firsthand the pain of sin and condemnation. Because of King David's lust, he became a home wrecker:

He destroyed a happy marriage.

He became an adulterer, seducing someone else's wife.

He orchestrated the murder of her husband.

He caused the death of his own newborn son.

He became a stumbling block to his own countrymen.

How does a person rise up from such a catastrophe?

I Regret wants to keep you hiding in the shadows. Freedom is facing the truth in the light of God's Word.

Whatever it is that weighs you down or haunts your thoughts, don't go down the rabbit hole of excuses or emotions. Face the painful truth. Lay your guilt on the table, and see what God's Word has to say about it. If there was sin involved, call it what it is.

After David's sin, the prophet Nathan was ruthless in confronting David with his sin:

Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul.

Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife."

2 Samuel 12:7, 9-10

2 Regret chains you up. Repentance brings liberty.

Despite the shame of his sin, David had the humility to admit it. He could've pulled his rank and said, "Hey! I'm king!" He could've put the blame on someone else. But instead he simply replied, "*I have sinned against the LORD*" (2 Sam. 12:13a).

3 There is freedom in receiving God's forgiveness.

King David describes his experience this way:

When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my

transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

Psalm 32:3-5 NKJV

On the day I called, You answered me; You made me bold with strength in my soul.

Psalm 138:3 NASB

Guilt eats us up on the inside, but God's unfathomable mercy brings strength to our souls! He cleanses our emotions of the stain of sin (be it ours or that of another), and gives us the grace and wisdom to face the future.

Does your soul need strengthening today? Do you know of someone who does?

Listen to the advice of Isaiah the prophet:

Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

Isaiah 55:6-7 NASB

Personal Application:

1. Is there anything that is troubling your thoughts or causing you to experience regret?

2. Does God's Word have anything to say about your situation? How does Isaiah 55:6-7 (NASB) speak to you?

Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

3. Practice these three steps:
 - Face the truth.
 - Repent if needed.
 - Receive God's forgiveness and direction.

This week's Bible verse:

*On the day I called, You answered me;
You made me bold with strength in my soul.*

Psalm 138:3 NASB

MARCH

“The Will of God will not take you,
where the Grace of God cannot
sustain you.”

Billy Graham

*But he gives us even more grace to
stand against such evil desires.
As the Scriptures say, “God opposes the proud
but favors the humble.”*

James 4:6 NLT

It's Okay to Eat Your Leftovers

In my perfect world, I will never make a mistake.

My husband and I will never have a disagreement. My kids will be straight A students all of their academic lives; they'll never have a meltdown. After which, they will all impact the world for God, have problem-free family lives, while mentoring Bill Gates and Warren Buffett on finances, and on the side—Stephen Curry on sports.

My physical body will have no trace of cellulite, my mind will rival Solomon's wisdom, and my spiritual life will be excellent, as God and I will have an exclusive Viber group chat daily: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and me.

But here I am at the month of March, and I can't even remember all my New Year goals. I can't even respond nor read all my Viber or WhatsApp groups, nor the pictures my loved ones send.

Even my Bible Calendar, where I'm supposed to read four chapters every day, hasn't been followed to the letter. Back story: I installed Blue Bible App on my phone, which automatically lists for me the four chapters in the Bible I need to read daily. Sometimes, I get to read all four. Sometimes, I barely finish one or two.

Then I rationalize and think, "I'll just carry over the remaining chapters and read all of them the next day." Yeah, right.

And this is where I'm tempted to give up, "This daily habit is too hard. It's unrealistic." Why even try? After reading the Bible, comes my prayer time. "Lord, I'm sorry for not reading a fresh batch of four chapters completely today. . ."

I God is not after our schedules; He is interested in our hearts.

Our devotion is not to our carefully crafted dream life or program; our devotion is to God and His Word.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

1 Corinthians 15:10

Here's the apostle Paul, a super performer in his lifetime saying, "Yes, I worked harder than any of them," but realizing that "It was not I, but the grace of God in me."

New day, new grace. Don't let your failure or your success be the benchmark of your worth. Just begin again every day, with the new grace God gives you. New grace to love. New grace to forgive and repent. New grace to obey. New grace to read.

Our teachability, more than our ability, is the key to success.

Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

2 Corinthians 3:5 NIV

2 It's okay to eat leftovers at times.

For some reason, I'm so hung up on the Book of Joshua lately (not my son Joshua, but the Book of Joshua in the Bible ☺).

Reading the chapters have been so rich with meaning for me, that I keep going back to chapters 1 to 4. I read them Monday, and kept coming back for them Tuesday and Wednesday. And then I'm thinking, "What about my perfectly planned schedule?" That's when the Lord reminded me, "It's okay."

The Bible is so rich with meaning that sometimes you have to chew on it slowly, like a delicious wagyu steak (with apologies to my vegetarian friends). Or sometimes there's just so much goodness, that you have leftovers you want to keep coming back to, and enjoy all over again.

3 Keep eating the Right Stuff.

Some people are spiritually weak because they don't eat any spiritual food at all. Others are spiritually anemic, because they just swallow whatever new concept others dish up.

There's nothing like opening your own Bible and reading straight from God's words; the words that can direct you, energize you, and fatten your soul. Sometimes, when you don't like what you're reading, just keep at it.

If you do it daily, you will have nourishment to be the person God has created you to be, and the strength to live the life

He wants you to live—whether that involves Stephen Curry or not.

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

Joshua 1:8

Personal Application:

1. Do you have a daily Bible reading plan that you follow?

2. According to Joshua 1:8, what are the benefits of daily reading?

3. Share your insights on any of the three points mentioned in this chapter:

- God is not after our schedules; He is interested in our hearts.
- It's okay to eat leftovers at times.
- Keep eating the right stuff.

The Value of Today

Let me introduce you to my Pinterest life.

In that world, I have an ideal, pretend home where every room is organized and color coordinated. I've collected wonderful DIY ideas just waiting to be started, places I want to see and trips I want to take, tons of painting ideas eager to be expressed, recipes and party plans all waiting to be done in some FUTURE time.

"Someday," I think to myself, "I'm going to do this." Many times, however, these ideas gather virtual dust and don't leave my laptop. They actually should be labeled "Marie's Postponed Projects."

It's one thing to postpone projects, but it's another (and even worse) thing to postpone important relationships.

It's easy to live in a world of good intentions. "Someday, I'll do this." Someday—

- When I am less busy. . .
- When I have more money. . .
- When I'm in the mood. . .
- When he/she changes. . .
- When I have more time. . .

I will:

- spend more time with my spouse.
- participate in my children's lives.
- get closer to my family.
- be a better steward of my life/work/time/health.

- invest more in my relationships.
- get serious about following God.

Many, many years ago, a dear lady realized she had limited time left to live. Her beautiful plan was to express her love, be it in speech or in writing, to her children. Her round eyes were glowing with love and affection as she spoke to me of her son and how proud she was of him.

Unfortunately, she kept postponing her plan. She suffered a stroke, and it was too late. So the good-intentioned ideas never became a reality, her loving words were never said, the love letters remained unwritten.

At her wake, I met the son and shared to him the loving words his mom had wanted to say. This distinguished, tall young man bawled like a baby. Up to this day, I will never forget the heartbreaking sadness behind his reply. “I never knew! My mom never told me . . .”

This experience served as a wake-up call to me as a young mom. I never wanted my sons to wonder if I loved them. I wasn't going to wait for a “someday” to tell them.

So at bedtime, as they were growing up, after prayers, and with the lights turned off, this crazy mother would knock again and say, “Boys, don't forget—” I would not be satisfied until each of them would reply: “Yes, Mom, I know! You love me.”

Secret:
Never underestimate the value of Today.

Today is like the currency you can use to invest in a life.
You have 24 hours to spend it.

Today is a chance to develop yourself, to start a better habit—
or a worse one.

Today is an opportunity to build courage in someone.

Today is a window to say, “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you,”
“I thank God for you,” or “You are important to me.”

Today is the day we can decide to live for God and stop
making excuses.

*Come, let us worship and bow down;
Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.
For He is our God,
And we are the people of His pasture,
and the sheep of His hand.
Today, if you would hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts . . .*

Psalm 95:6-8 NASB

“Someday” is not the eighth day of the week. The only time
“someday” arrives is when you make it part of the seven
days of the week.

Is there a responsibility that God has put in your heart to do?
Is there a relationship that God has put in your heart to mend?
Or to phrase it in another way: **What can you do today that
your future self will thank you for?**

Will you fritter your time away in senseless pursuits? Time
moves on. Opportunities change. Children grow up. Parents
grow old. Receive God’s grace today to live a real, fulfilling
life. Not just a make-believe Pinterest life, full of “somedays”
that never come.

Personal Application:

1. What did you learn from this chapter, and how do you plan to put it into practice?

I will _____

2. What can you do today, that your future self will thank you for?

Someday is not the eighth day of the week.

The only time “someday” comes is when you make it part of the seven days.

MARIE BONIFACIO

This week’s Bible verse:

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118:24

Velcro Words

*There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*

Proverbs 12:18

I saw her from afar, and from the corner of my eye. I knew she saw me, too. And so we began an awkward, polite conversation. I was wary about our accidental encounter and relieved when it was over.

Have you ever bumped into a person that you were uncomfortable with? Maybe you were uncomfortable because of a hurtful, past experience or a childhood trauma you went through.

How could it be possible that so many years had already gone by, yet the sting of careless words spoken rushes back in our memory and affects our present behavior? What is it about hearing someone's comments that make our soul like a dormant volcano?

I guess it is human nature that when someone says nasty things, you don't want to be with them. Sure, the wound may have healed, but no one wants to hang around the "wounder."

We have what I call "Velcro words." These are words that cling to our souls, if we're not careful.

A Swiss engineer named George de Mestral went walking in the woods one day, and came home with his pants covered with cockleburs—the fruits of a nasty, thorny weed that

grew in the wild and was hard to get rid of. This gave him the idea to invent Velcro.

Our mind can get filled with these “cockleburs,” too. It can make us prickly people. Before we know it, we have a bitter library collection of Velcro words: “Hurtful Words People Have Said to Us,” “Disappointments in Life,” “Pain,” and “Regrets.”

Well, one day, God came and spring-cleaned my mind. (He often needs to.)

God: *Get rid of your collection, Marie.*

Me: *What?! But I didn't say anything wrong! She did.*

God: *I know.*

Me: *Well then, I have a right to hold onto her wrong, right?*

God: *Nope.*

Me: *Well, I'm not sure I can.*

God: *You can, because I did.*

And in those five words, I learned another secret. (Still am learning it!)

Secret: We can, because He did.

Check out how one of the apostles, Peter, blew it big-time. He disowns Jesus, lies three times, while his friend was being beaten and mocked!

The servant girl at the door said to Peter, “You also are not one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” Now Simon Peter was standing and warming

himself. So they said to him, "You also are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed.

John 18:17, 25-27

Now see how Jesus responds after His resurrection:

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast."

John 21:9-12

What? The guy practically abandoned You, and You say, "Come and have breakfast"?

In my sanctified imagination, this is how I'm seeing it: Peter realizes what he did. He resigns from his job as an apostle and says, "I failed my Boss . . . I'm just going back to what I used to do before I met Jesus: fishing."

In all His might and power, Jesus doesn't electrocute Peter's fishing boat; but He gives Peter a miracle by supplying him with not 10 or 20, but 153 fish! PLUS He cooks the guy breakfast by the beach and affirms Peter's calling! God's love is unbelievable to comprehend sometimes.

What our human nature couldn't do, Jesus' divine nature was able to do. Now, as God's children, we have access to that power.

"By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. . ."

2 Peter 1:3a NLT

Instead of allowing Velcro words to bother us, let us allow the words of our wise God to heal and release us.

C.S. Lewis expressed it this way: "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

Oops, excuse me, I have some "spring-cleaning" to do.

Personal Application:

1. Do you have your own Velcro word collection?

2. What can you learn and apply from Jesus' example?

3. What kind of "spring-cleaning" can God's power do for you?

What Does “It Is Finished” Mean Anyway?

I chanced upon this article written by Robert Herriman on March 22, 2016: “Holy Week in the Philippines: Health officials tell people who practice self-flagellation and crucifixion to get tetanus shot.”¹

Bishop Joel Baylon of Legazpi, chairman of the Bishops’ Commission on Youth, was quoted as saying:

Some penitents nailed themselves to crosses during the mourning process in an attempt to experience the pain that Christ suffered and to get closer to God. But religious leaders in the Philippines have warned devotees against resorting to extreme forms of expression on Good Friday . . .

. . . sometimes the kind of sacrifice that we impose on ourselves is not what the Lord wants us to do.²

Isn’t it interesting that out of all possible statements that Jesus could have said, His last word was **“Tetelestai!”**?

Tetelestai. One word, packed with so much meaning: It is finished.

¹ <http://outbreaknewstoday.com/holy-week-in-the-philippines-health-officials-tell-people-who-practice-self-flagellation-and-crucifixion-to-get-tetanus-shot>

² <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/philippine-penitents-begin-good-friday-crucifixion-self-451398> (emphasis mine)

What was completed at the cross? And why is it even relevant to my life today?

1. **Tetelestai means “fully paid.”**

This was the last word used by Jesus on the cross: “So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ (‘Tetelestai!’) And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit” (Jn. 19:30 NKJV).

In Jesus’ days, when a bill or debt was completely paid, they would stamp *Tetelestai* on the receipt, which meant that there was no more outstanding debt. Yet we still have people who are sincerely trying to continue or add to the already finished payment of Jesus.

It reminds me of a friend of mine who happily announced that her house was now all paid for. There was no more debt to pay. If, out of love for my friend, I decide to sacrifice and go to the bank to contribute some more money, would the bank even accept my payment? My efforts to pay would be useless and unnecessary, because the debt has already been fully paid.

2. **Repentance is better than penance.** What’s the difference between penance and repentance?

Penance is voluntary self-sacrifice; self-abasement to atone for having done wrong. It is relying on my good works and my sacrifice to cleanse myself so that God will hear my prayers. It is possible to keep doing penance without our daily lives ever changing.

Godly repentance goes beyond guilty feelings, and means a changed heart and mind. It is a humble realization that

I am a sinner in need of a Savior—an admission that I can't save myself from my sins. It is progressively turning away from any known sin, and turning to Christ as my Lord and only Savior.

A repentant person acknowledges that God's good work on the cross is *complete*. Jesus' sacrifice is what gives him forgiveness and access to heaven.

3. Tetelestai means “mission accomplished.”

As Christians, we commemorate two very special holidays: Christmas and Easter. You can't have one without the other.

At Christmas, we celebrate Jesus' birth. At Easter, we celebrate Jesus' resurrection into His glorified body.

At Christmas, the manger was filled:

She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger . . .

Luke 2:7 NLT

At Easter, the promise was fulfilled:

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing . . .

John 20:11-14

At Christmas, the Good News was announced:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son . . .

At Easter, sin's power was denounced!

. . . that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (Jn. 3:16).

Easter is a time for celebration. The weeping is over! The tomb is empty. The cross is empty. The debt is fully paid. Jesus is fully alive.

What used to be a dreaded mystery is now a discovery! Death is not a scary ending, but a wonderful beginning. There is eternal life in heaven after death for those who trust in Jesus.

Easter completes what Christmas promised, the Savior came to save. It is finished. *Tetelestai!*

. . . Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

John 13:1 NIV

Personal Application:

1. Why do you think Jesus' last word was "*Tetelestai*" ("It is finished!") ?

What impact does that have on your life?

2. What's the difference between penance and repentance? Are there areas in your life that you feel aren't covered by the death and resurrection of Jesus?

3. Do you know that Jesus' sacrifice means complete forgiveness for you? What is an appropriate response to that love?

This week's Bible verses:

This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

1 John 4:10 NLT

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

John 11:25-26

APRIL

Choose to live
for the approval of God,
not for the applause of man.

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child,
I thought like a child,
I reasoned like a child.
When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.
1 Corinthians 13:11*

Is It Too Late to Say... "I Am Sorry"?

"Is it too late to say, 'I'm sorry'?" Justin Bieber's voice came wafting through my window. I don't know if it's my neighbor's choice of songs, but I'm writing about apologies today.

"I was wrong. It's my fault. I am sorry." These were and still are, to some extent, hard words for me to say.

I remember one conversation I had with my hubby Joey after a fight. I knew I was wrong but those words got stuck in my throat, and never came out.

Joey: *Aren't you supposed to say something?*

Marie: (silence)

Joey: ???

Marie: (silence)

Joey: *I noticed that you have a hard time apologizing. Why is it that when I'm wrong, I say sorry, but when you are wrong, you take a long time?*

Marie: (blurts out defensively) *Well, YOU have more practice! It's YOU who's wrong MOST of the time when we fight! That's why YOU have more practice saying sorry!*

Oh, what a wicked woman I could be! All I had to say were three little words, yet I used up so much of my energy giving out excuses and defending my arguments!

Sometimes it is easier for us to apologize to people at work, but harder to apologize to those closest to us. Sometimes, it's vice versa. Are you guilty of "selective sorry's" as well? We think apologizing diminishes us, makes us smaller, and exalts the other person.

The more I read the Bible, the more I'm learning how humility makes us much better human beings, and vastly improves our relationships with others. Our willingness to apologize shows we have human decency and dignity that ultimately exalt God. On the other hand, our refusal to apologize when we are wrong reveals our immaturity and ignorance, our insecurity and pride.

1 It's better to be humble than be a fool.

Everyone makes mistakes. It's how we respond that reveals our character: Fools give excuses. Humble ones give apologies.

Fools make fun of guilt, but the godly acknowledge it and seek reconciliation.

Proverbs 14:9 NLT

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

1 Corinthians 13:11

2 Swallow your pride. It's good for you and non-fattening.

Many of us are so concerned about our diet—the food we eat, the supplements we take. Well, here's a supplement we all need to swallow: *pride*. Don't display it for all to see; *swallow* it.

When the apostle Paul swallowed his pride and admitted his errors, God used him in many powerful ways to impact people's lives. When the rebellious prodigal son apologized, he was received with open arms by his father. When the criminal on the cross admitted his guilt, Jesus gave him the gift of forgiveness and eternal life!

Humility is more powerful a weapon than we realize!

James 5:16 (NLT) says,

Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and produces wonderful results.

3 Remember the number of times God has forgiven you.
Live for the approval of God, not the response of man.

First John 1:9 says, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

When I realize the humility of Jesus—His willingness to be embarrassed for my sake, to die an inhuman, disgraceful death to take away my sins—I am ashamed of my pride.

Why not apologize, instead? Why not say, "I am sorry," and mean it? We are all sinners. But only the repentant can admit that.

Dear Jesus,

Thank You for Your example of humility. If You, who knew no sin, could be so humble, what is our excuse?

Personal Application:

1. Do you have an easy or difficult time apologizing?

2. What points/verses from this chapter are helpful to you?

Secret 1: It's better to be humble than be a fool.

Secret 2: Swallow your pride. It's good for you and non-fattening.

Secret 3: Remember the number of times God has forgiven you. Live for the approval of God, not the response of man.

How can you put these into practice today?

This week's Bible verses:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

1 Corinthians 13:11

Score: 10-0

(How to Win Even When You Lose)

It's a humbling thing when your youngest son beats you—in ten consecutive sets. It started out innocently enough.

Josh: *Mom, get the phone app Word Crack. It's like Boggle.*

You like word games, right? We can play against each other.

So we began that evening. He wins the first set (three games).

Me: *Wait! Give me a break! I'm just warming up!*

He wins the second set. (That makes six games.)

Me: *It's Philip! He's distracting me!*

He wins the third set. (Nine games.)

Me: *Hmmphh! No more Mr. Nice Guy! I'm going to win this round!*

He wins the fourth, fifth, sixth sets.

Midnight found me still furiously trying to beat him.

He wins the eighth, ninth, tenth sets.

I end up pulverized.

How is it possible that the kid who once learned the ABCs from you ends up winning every word game?

When your kids are little, they think you are the smartest person in the world. They think you have all the answers. I knew my days were numbered when math homework exposed my feet of clay: Mom doesn't know her algebra!

Reminds me of the time our anonymous pastor friend got locked out of his own home's Wi-Fi access because his teenage

daughter, whom he had just grounded, was way more techie than he was. Ha ha!

So what should the older generation do as a new generation arises with new skills and amazing potential? **Stay grounded. Don't get insecure.**

Here are some secrets that I'm learning from Jesus:

1 Keep your focus on doing the will of the Lord, regardless of your age.

Youth is not the most valuable stage in life. Neither is your PhD stage. Every stage is valuable—from fetus to gray hair to no hair.

I find it disconcerting—

- when parents try to dress up like teenagers despite the addition of pounds, cellulite, and wrinkles, or
- when pride sets in, and popularity becomes a contest, or
- when fear creeps in, and parents are so afraid of disciplining their children so they just become “buddies” instead of authority figures.

Whether it's the popular thing or not, we are all commanded to obey God and do His will, just as Jesus did: “*For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me*” (Jn. 6:38).

2 Be teachable, so you can teach what's worth learning.

Sure you're an adult, but does God still see you as His teachable child?

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning.

Proverbs 9:9

This proverb has no age limit. We all have the potential to grow wiser if we stay teachable.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness . . .

2 Timothy 3:16

Some things are worth learning, some things are not. Be a blessing to those you mentor by giving them truths more than trends. Help the younger generation keep a respect and appreciation for the Word of God.

3 Have a generous spirit. Be an encourager.

An encourager is a life-giver. There's no better example than Jesus. Listen to Him in John 14:12:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.”

Let’s try another version (ISV):

“Truly, I tell all of you emphatically, the one who believes in me will also do what I’m doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I’m going to the Father.”

Is Jesus talking about you and me? How could I, in all my imperfections, “do even greater works” than Him? How is that even possible? But they are Jesus’ words, uttered before He left earth.

What an empowering vote of confidence He leaves us with! What a wonderful legacy to pass on, as well, to say to the next generation: “You matter to God!”, “You can do it!”, “You will be better than me!”, “You will be a blessing!”, “You can impact the world for good!” What a privilege to inspire those we mentor, and declare that God’s Spirit will remain with them even when we are gone:

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

John 14:26 NIV

It’s funny how losing ten sets of *Word Crack* brought out these thoughts in me and taught me more secrets to share. Ha ha!

Lord, my son is amazing! But can I win some rounds, please?

Personal Application:

Let's talk about the three secrets mentioned in this chapter:

Secret 1: Keep your focus on doing the will of the Lord, regardless of your age.

What is your current age or season in life? Is this stage a good one for you? Do you have any worries, fears, or regrets?

How wonderful to know that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Nothing in our past is beyond His remedy. Nothing in our future is beyond His power. Why not pause a while to examine your current season, air your concerns, and ask God for His will?

Secret 2: Be teachable, so you can teach what's worth learning.

Do people find you teachable? Do you make the effort to get real wisdom (eternal truths that will benefit you not just in this life but in the next)? What new revelation has God given you and who are you impacting?

Secret 3: Have a generous spirit. Be an encourager.

Who can you encourage today in his or her walk with the Lord?

Ask God to give you three names this week of people you can text or call to give encouragement. Regardless of our season in life, we can all be life-givers.

Carry Your Bull

“I need my Milo® today!” so goes the slogan of the popular chocolate-malt drink sold worldwide. Did you know that it was inspired by a legendary Greek figure?

Milo of Croton was known as the greatest Greek wrestler in ancient times because of his superhuman strength. But to become the greatest wrestler in Greece and win six Olympic laurels, Milo had to train. His method? Borrow a newborn calf and carry it around Croton—day after day, week after week, and month after month. As the calf grew, so did Milo’s strength; until he could carry the now full-grown bull upon his back.¹

According to the story, the secret of Milo’s extraordinary strength was that he was willing to carry around a baby bull until it got bigger and bigger! As the animal grew, Milo grew stronger and stronger!

I Carrying a “growing bull” is good for both kids and adults.

While I was in Japan, I opened my Viber family group chat to find a message and a video for me. The text read, *“Mom! Philip wrote on your chair!”*

¹ Source: <http://miloandthecalf.com/milo-of-croton/>

Apparently, two-year-old Philip had held a crayon and scrawled all over my sofa bench with his chubby fingers! My heart broke, watching the video of a super-sorry Philip, with his big, round, sad eyes, saying, “I’m sorry” to me on camera. I knew that Philip was uncomfortable with admitting and apologizing, but I’m so proud of his mom, Carla, for letting Philip carry “his baby bull.”

It’s not easy for a two-year-old to bear the weight of his mistake and apologize, but because Philip is learning how to do it, he is building good responsibility muscles that will make him a stronger man in the future. The Bible says it this way: *“It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth”* (Lam. 3:27).

Sometimes, parents are afraid of disciplining their kids, thinking that it will harm them. Actually, it is the lack of clear discipline or personal accountability that ruins children’s character. Godly boundaries of right and wrong and learning to respect other people and their property are good weights for everyone to learn from a young age.

Hebrews 12:11 (NLT) promises a reward for weightlifters: *“No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it’s painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.”*

Joey and I once saw a mom rant and rave because the security guard at the mall would not allow her young son to use his scooter inside. As she was making a scene by berating the guard, the boy was watching his mother’s example as she dishonored authority. How unfortunate that instead of teaching him the value of respect, personal sacrifice, and discipline, her son’s desire was deemed as more important.

2 Godly diligence has a reward, so carry godly weight daily.

Successful people become successful because they don't give up, even when the pressure gets heavier. It's not easy to stay moral when society is immoral. It's challenging to keep your integrity when so many others are getting away by compromising themselves. But if you embrace discipline and learn to carry these weights, you will win in the end.

Be willing to carry the weight of the Word of God. Let God's words have a heavier value on your behavior every time you make a decision. Here are two ways how:

- ⊙ **Decide to read God's Word daily and let your children see the value of it.** Start with a chapter of Proverbs a day, or increase your reading by five more minutes. You'll be surprised by the wisdom you are storing up in your heart.
- ⊙ **Practice obeying the Lord in every situation.** Do it one day at a time. Just like Milo, your diligence will reward you.

An area I need to steward better in my personal life is time management. That's a discipline and a weight I need to carry more diligently. How about you?

Do you have any baby bulls that you need to practice carrying today?

Personal Application:

1. According to the story mentioned here, what was the secret of Milo's strength?

2. Why is "carrying a growing calf" beneficial for children and adults?

3. Do you have a weight that God is asking you to carry more diligently?

This week's Bible verses:

No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way."

Hebrews 12:11 NLT

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Colossians 3:23-24

Building B.R.A.V.E. Muscles

Courage is fear that has said its prayers.

DOROTHY BERNARD

It was 10:45 pm on a Wednesday evening. There was a slight drizzle as I made my way to the car. It was going to be my first time to drive alone from SLEX (South Luzon Expressway) to my home in Pasig City.

For many of you, maybe Manila driving is a breeze. But not for me! Yet here I was, driving solo late at night, with my windshield sprinkled with raindrops, praying I end up at the right exits and toll gates.

How about you? What gets your palms sweaty or makes your heart race a little faster? Is it public speaking, with a thousand eyes staring at you? Is it a new school, a job interview, or launching a new career? Is it starting married life? Or a baby on the way? Maybe it's packing your bags and leaving for a place far from the comforts of home.

It was past 11 in the evening, and I couldn't believe my eyes. Every toll booth was at a standstill. Trucks of all shapes and sizes—delivery vans, cement mixers, and fuel tank trucks—outnumbered small cars like mine. It was every man for himself.

This was no time to get intimidated. So little by little, I edged forward my trusty old Ford Escape, bumper to bumper, trying to stay unfazed by these fire-breathing, horn-blaring, motor-rumbling, metal Goliaths towering around me.

Manila driving is a bravery muscle I am still learning to use! Yet in some strange way, I was glad I was learning how to exercise that muscle that night.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Joshua 1:9 NIV

The advice to “Be strong” and “Be brave” is a constant refrain in both the New and Old Testaments of the Bible. It’s an advice constantly repeated, specifically to God’s people and their leaders.

It was said to Joshua:

The LORD gave this command to Joshua son of Nun: “Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the Israelites into the land I promised them on oath, and I myself will be with you.”

Deuteronomy 31:23 NIV

It was said to Solomon:

David also said to Solomon his son, “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished.”

1 Chronicles 28:20 NIV

It was said to the nation:

“Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid nor dismayed before the king of Assyria, nor before all the multitude that is with him; for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the LORD our God, to help us and to fight our battles.” And the

people were strengthened by the words of Hezekiah king of Judah.

2 Chronicles 32:7-9 NKJV

How to Be B.R.A.V.E. (Because bravery pleases the Lord)

Here's a short acronym I made to remind myself to develop my B.R.A.V.E. muscles:

Boldness. Boldness is facing challenges with faith, knowing that God is greater than my fears.

Because I am a child of God, He is my Backer. I am not just bold for the sake of being bold. Some people do daredevil stunts for the adrenaline rush. That's not the same thing. True boldness lives life freely and truthfully for the glory of God.

I am reminded of my friend, C, who is working in Turkey despite the bombings. Despite the risk, she explains her decision to stay: *"I am always assured of two things before I leave: God's call and God's presence."* In her heart, she knows it is God who brought her there.

Resilience. Resilience is hanging on to God before a storm, during a storm, and after a storm. Resilience is still trusting in Jesus, even when your world seems to fall apart.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 (NLT) says,

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!

Authority. Bravery comes from a healthy fear of God, not our circumstances. God has the final say. My God is the Ultimate Authority, and every authority will bow down to Him.

Colossians 1:16 is the verse our friend, C, in Turkey holds on to:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Voice. Listen to the voice of God, even when fears whisper, "Give up!" Not every thought that comes inside your head is a legitimate thought.

Endurance. Allow challenges to build up your faith muscles. You may not get your answer the way you expected, but you can still trust in the faithfulness of God.

James 1:2-4 (ISV) says,

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you are involved in various trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. But you must let

endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.

Today, my nation is undergoing many challenges. The new government is implementing bold policies to fight crime. I am praying for our leaders and our people, that we all will develop the type of bravery that pleases the Lord and respects His Word:

Bold to do His will

Resilient

Acknowledging God's Authority

Valiantly listening to the Voice of the Lord

Enduring trials with courage

So we can confidently say,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not fear;

what can man do to me?"

Hebrews 13:6

Personal Application:

1. Is there something that you know God wants you to do, but haven't done yet?

2. What is keeping you from obeying God's will in your life?

3. How does the acronym B.R.A.V.E. help you?

This week's Bible verse:

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

Joshua 1:9 NIV

MAY

You are not
forgotten.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

Isaiah 49:15

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39 NIV

One Thing

Some people have a very good sense of direction. I don't. It's interesting how life can teach you lessons, even through Waze.

"In 200 meters, turn right!"

"On the roundabout, turn left! Then turn left!"

"On the roundabout, turn left! Then turn left!"

My car had circled that same roundabout for three consecutive times. "Oh, shut up already!" I muttered while intently driving. My patience was wearing thin. I wanted to strangle Colonel Sanders. But how do you strangle him when he is a voice on your Waze phone app?

Because I am "geographically challenged," I was relying heavily on Waze that Sunday afternoon. I needed to get to the airport fast. My hubby was arriving from a ten-day trip. I was rushing to the airport to pick him up since the powerful typhoon "Koppu" (Lando) was currently in the country. Because of this, I could feel my car swaying with the strong winds while waiting at the stoplight.

Aside from weather concerns, a flurry of thoughts kept swirling in my head:

APEC conference this week, delegates flying in . . . Host friends and guests . . . Women's retreat Friday—gotta prepare a message . . . Four writing deadlines due . . . Follow-up your Japan visa . . . Prepare for next week's trip . . . Plan itinerary of sisters. . . Finish painting the blue cabinet . . . etc.

So there I was, kept company by Waze's voice, along with the buzz of the Viber app signaling incoming chats from friends, updates connected to the storm, as well as prayer requests for sick people, and other specific needs.

As my car circled the American cemetery for what seemed to be the 100th time, my phone rang. It was the voice of Joseph, my eldest son. "Hi, Mom!" He cheerfully asked, "Where are you?"

I must confess, the sound of his cheery, calm, seemingly carefree voice in the midst of my frustration and stress made me crankier! Joseph had offered to pick up his dad, but got delayed. And that's what bugged me and got me driving out to the airport by myself. Here's how our conversation went:

J: *Mom, I'm on my way to pick Pop up now. Where are you?*

Me: *Where do you think I am? I'm wandering in the wilderness!*

J: *Mom, relax, why don't you park at the EN building, then I'll pass for you there.*

Me: *No way! I'm late enough already! I'm driving to the airport now!*

J: *But, Mom, I'm headed to the airport to pick up Pop, too.*

Me: *Then, we'll both pick him up!*

We both got to the airport using two different routes to meet a very confused Joey who was wondering why we had picked him up in separate cars. Back home, I felt a little bit guilty about my grouchy behavior towards my son, but I brushed it aside. *Well, he shouldn't have been late! I'm so busy attending to so many things!*

Then a quiet voice came seeping to my head. "*Martha . . . Martha . . .*" it said. Oh dear. Sometimes, God gives secrets

even when I am not in the mood. *You're focusing on the many things, instead of the one thing.*

But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Luke 10:40-42 NASB

Worried. Bothered about many things. "But, Lord," I argued, "I'm bothered about good things!"

"... but only one thing is necessary ..." That verse intrigued me. What is that one necessary thing I needed to focus on anyway?

It hit me like a thunderbolt. Mary wasn't some passive sitter, doing nothing while Martha was working. Mary actively sought the Lord. Mary was more conscious of doing what pleased Jesus, rather than what pleased her natural self.

Secret:

When you start getting bothered by so many things, that's the best time to focus on the "one thing."

The "one thing" I was learning was simply to keep my eyes on Jesus. Do what pleases the Lord, regardless of my situation.

Never worry about anything. Instead, in every situation let your petitions be made known to God through prayers and requests, with thanksgiving.

Philippians 4:6 ISV

Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:5, 7 NASB

Worried about the storm? God has the power to divert it.
Confused over driving directions? Holy Spirit, help me.
Panicking over deadlines? God, give me wisdom.
Overwhelmed? God is stronger and more able than me.
Wondering if I should apologize? Do what honors God.

And so, that night, I reached again for my phone—no longer to ask Waze to direct me, but for God’s voice to Waze my heart to the right place. I texted my son: “Hi, Joe, I’m so sorry for being grouchy today . . . I was wrong, please forgive me . . .”

May your heart be focused on the One thing, even as Jesus gives you the wisdom and grace to succeed in many things.

Personal Application:

1. Do you have a current list of “many things”—those pressing concerns that occupy your thoughts and demand your attention? What are they?

2. How can you cast your cares upon the Lord today, knowing He cares for you?

This week’s Bible verses:

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.

1 Peter 5:6-7 NASB

A Mother's Day Message

Where is my Wonder Woman costume when I need it?

Every mom needs a Wonder Woman outfit for those days when you need to multitask. Moms are jugglers, trying to keep so many balls in the air. We juggle kids' activities, drive them to and fro, feed them, balance the budget, take care of other family expectations, while doing other work or ministry on the side and keeping track of deadlines and bill payments.

So kids everywhere, here's the truth: Your mother is a **juggler**. She balances daily demands and schedules.

She is also an **acrobat**. She can sprint to catch that toddler, who insists on climbing up that kitchen counter or poking his tiny finger inside electric outlets.

She is a **weightlifter**. She balances one baby at her hip, while carrying a heavy baby bag of diapers, medicines, and toys. And groceries. And laundry. And other kids in tow.

She is a **lion tamer**. Whether it's a toddler's temper tantrums or a teenager's angst and emotions, or when there are fights among siblings, she'll find a way to tame those little and big roars.

So kids, if you wonder why your home is a circus, wonder no more. In your home lives a juggler, acrobat, weightlifter, lion tamer — all rolled into one package called **MOM**.

Yes, life can be a circus. You're part of it.
But wait, there's more!

She is also a **nurse, doctor, and hospital** rolled into one. She knows where the bandages are, and who's allergic to what. She kisses away the tears and fears, and consults with specialists for every symptom she sees.

She is a **GPS**. She instinctively knows where each child is, and who is getting into mischief because the room suddenly is too quiet. Even when her growing son or daughter's cell phone is out of reach, that child will never be out of Mom's reach.

She is a **miracle worker**. School supplies for projects magically appear, even past mall hours. Budgets get stretched. People get fed. Outfits for proms, parties, etc. are purchased.

She is a **7-Eleven**, open 24 hours, and familiar with sleep deprivation. Her mother radar is always on, even when she sleeps—ever alert for sleeping babies, or adult kids coming home later than expected. That is where the eye bags come from.

She is a **networker**, discovering contacts for every need: scholarship funds, investment opportunities, relationship builders, and travel bargains.

She is a **soldier**, storming the gates of heaven with her prayers for each and every member of her troop. She is the widow in the Bible, unceasingly banging at the door of the judge. She is the discerner of which friends are good for her kids, and which are from enemy lines.

She is a **pit bull**, who will never let go of God's promises despite the injuries of the past, or the disappointments of the present. Her faith is tightly clenched in the faithfulness of God.

M.O.M.
Master of Magic.
Maker of Miracles.
Molder of Memories.
Maker of Me.

A MOM can take many forms and shapes. She may be your wife, the mother of your children. For many, she may be your birth mother. For others, she may be the person who adopted you and cared for you when your natural mother was absent or unsupportive. She may be a sister, an aunt, a mother-in-law, a grandma. A godly, female friend.

As we celebrate Mother's Day, let's honor these brave women. Let's celebrate that the circus has come to town, and we are privileged to witness these loving, unpredictable characters called Moms. Celebrate the Juggler-Acrobat-Weightlifter-and-Lion Tamers in our lives.

And let's remind them that, above and beyond all these wonderful traits they possess, they will always be **God's daughter**. Yes, MOM, you are His child, and He will never let you go. He is the Ultimate Miracle Worker. Multitasker. Commander-in-Chief of your army. Watcher of your child.

Mom, despite all your wonderful qualities, you're not the Savior of your world. Jesus is. And He has promised never to let you go.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

Isaiah 49:15

He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.

Isaiah 40:11 NLT

Personal Application:

1. Did this chapter remind you of certain influential M.O.M.s in your life? Who would they be?

2. What roles did they play in shaping you?

3. Why not send a prayer their way or an encouraging text?

4. If you are an M.O.M. reading this, how has this article encouraged you?

This week's Bible verses:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

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Isaiah 40:11 NLT

Is There a Christian You Wouldn't Want to See in Heaven?

A certain son of mine likes to put me on the spot by asking challenging questions. He would pick the most horrible, most notorious criminal in the news, and ask: *Mom, which one would you rather see in heaven: Mr. X, a suspected mass murderer, or Mr. Y, a known crooked politician?*

Me: That's impossible! Those are terrible people! They're fake and try to look like they're innocent, but they're not! I am NEVER going to see them in heaven!

Anonymous son: But what if, IF . . . after doing all those terrible things, they realize they sinned, repent, receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior and—

Me: Argh!!! Go, ask your Pop!

Truth is, I am uncomfortable with the idea of seeing certain people in heaven, especially those who I think have sins far more terrible and shameful than mine. Where is the fairness in that, right? If, after living your life to the best of your ability, some ex-gangster ends up going to heaven to be your next door neighbor?

Here are some reminders that have helped me see this through a biblical perspective:

1 God knows absolutely more than I'll ever comprehend.

One of the qualities of God is that He is **omniscient, all-knowing**:

Omniscient: having complete or unlimited knowledge, awareness, or understanding; perceiving all things¹

God is not some ancient, bearded dude sleepily lying on a cloud, half-aware of what's happening in the world. I don't have to worry if God sees what's happening in my life. He knows. He knows everyone's past, present, and future. The Bible describes it this way in Hebrews 4:12-13:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

He is 100% aware and 100% discerning. He is no one's fool. Neither can He be bought. No man or woman can fake and fool God. We all will face Him one day and give an account of our lives.

2 I'm more of a sinner than I realize.

¹www.dictionary.com

It is easy to compare myself with a mass murderer, and think that I'm a much better person than he or she is. God reminded me of a piggy birthday party we held at our garden one summer. Our three sons, then aged 9, 11, and 12, had invited their friends for an afternoon of fun and games.

I called it a piggy party because it was bound to be a mess! There were plastic basins overflowing with water balloons, water pistols loaded and ready, and a stash of raw eggs guarded by each team. That afternoon was literally filled with mud-slinging, egg-throwing, dirt-flying galore, as the children chased each other around the backyard.

At the end of it, no one left unscathed. Everybody was a mess—soaking wet, with dirt and mud all over their faces, hair, and bodies (even in their ears!), egg yolk dripping from hair and noses.

There was absolutely no way I was going to allow them in my nice, clean house!

No one could argue and say, "Hey, Mom! Let me in! My hands have less mud than William's! I'm better than him!" or, "Look, Mom! Joseph is the worst! He has egg white and egg yolk and mud and dirt and earthworms and everything all over him!"

Neither could Joey pull his weight and argue, "I'm the father! I don't care if I'm a horrible mess! You have to let me in!"

As far as I was concerned, they were all dirty. Sure, their degrees of muddiness did vary, but even the cleanest of them wasn't qualified to enter my house! It didn't matter how cute they looked, or how much I loved them—not a single one could enter until they got cleaned up!

That's when it hit me: Here I was, proud of that fact that I have, at least, less dirt than someone else, when the truth is that we are all unqualified to enter the spotless presence of God.

Romans 3:23 says so accurately that **we all have sinned and fall short of God's standards.**

Not a single person on earth is always good and never sins.
Ecclesiastes 7:20 NLT

I don't earn heaven by my clean hands in the good works I do, by the prayers I pray, or the number of people who pray for me after I'm dead. No one earns a right to be in heaven. Salvation is a GIFT given by a spotless Savior—a gift by a sovereign God to a repentant, yet undeserving people.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

3 God is sovereign, not me. His ways are higher than mine.

Instead of being prideful ("I'm better than they are!") or resentful ("That's not fair! They don't deserve it!"), I believe God is pleased when we are humble. How does this translate to my life?

1. **Live gratefully.** Just like the thief on the cross who didn't deserve forgiveness, let's always remember we all need Jesus desperately. Holy Week is coming, and Easter Sunday, too. What Jesus did on the cross for our sake is the only reason we are deserving of heaven.
2. **Live with a healthy fear of God.** God is not a pushover whom you can take for granted. One day, our lives will end. His mercies are here, but we won't live forever. While we are alive, with breath in our nostrils and life in our bodies, this is the day we can surrender our lives to the Lord.

Personal Application:

1. Are there people you don't want to see in heaven? Is it because you feel they don't deserve it?

2. Based on the Bible, who are the people who deserve to go to heaven?

3. How is this devotional giving you a biblical perspective of God's sovereignty?

Who Moved Your God?

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. . .
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair . . .”

CHARLES DICKENS, *A Tale of Two Cities*

What an unusual season my country’s previous election has been. People are either happy or sad, depending on whether their candidate won or lost. There is ranting and raving, doomsday predictions contrasting with “a new day is dawning” lines, waxing euphoric.

Good news can take you up high, bad news can plummet you low similar to a roller coaster.

At the same time, my family celebrated the “high” of a son getting married on a Saturday, another son and daughter-in-law having their first baby the next Monday; then came some overlapping sad news of close friends unexpectedly losing a sister, a brother, and a child.

Three deaths, one birth, one wedding, one election—all in a row, just days apart.

I wish I could say that I am an even-tempered person, but unexpected news gives me uncertain feelings as well.

What happens when problems seem to overwhelm you?
What questions are causing you to lose your peace?

“Why did that happen?”
“How will they/we cope?”
“Where do we go from here?”
“What does the future hold?”

What Do We Do Now?

It’s comforting to know that even people in the Bible asked these same questions.

From 2 Kings 6 (NLT), we read:

When the servant of the man of God got up early the next morning and went outside, there were troops, horses, and chariots everywhere. “Oh, sir, what will we do now?” the young man cried to Elisha (v. 15).

Elisha and his servant had just woken up. As they stepped through the door, they found themselves physically surrounded by enemy soldiers. Their situation seemed hopeless, impossible to fix. Here is Elisha’s response to that situation:

“Don’t be afraid!” Elisha told him. “For there are more on our side than on theirs!” (v. 16).

What Are You Gazing at?

Then Elisha prayed, “O LORD, open his eyes and let him see!” The LORD opened the young man’s eyes, and when he looked up, he saw that the hillside around Elisha was filled with horses and chariots of fire (v. 17).

The servant’s eyes were focused on the problems and the negatives on earth. Elisha’s eyes saw the problems, yes, but

he kept his spiritual eyes purposefully lifted and open to the power and might of God.

When we wake up in the morning, what is the first thing we see? The problems on earth, or divine interventions from heaven, ready to help us this day?

Secret:

When question marks start bubbling up,
God reminds us, “Remember the Who.”

Who is in charge of heaven and earth?

Who has heavenly armies at His disposal?

Who holds the past, present, and future in His hands?

Who is sovereign?

Who is in control?

Who gave His life so you could live?

In short, **“Who is your God?”**

Most of us profess a certain degree of faith in God. But if the power of the God we serve can be shaken or moved by election results or unexpected news, it only means that our view of God is too small.

What are the words that come out of our mouth? Disappointment mixed with fear or anger? Or do we view current events filtered by faith from a Sovereign hand?

If our expectations are more important than our God, then our expectations are becoming our god. No wonder our faith is easily dethroned.

Prayer:

Father, give us the steadfast faith of Elisha. Help us to know that despite whatever shakes our world, Your power remains. You are Sovereign. We give You all our unanswered questions, knowing You and You alone, Jesus, are our Way, Truth, and Life. Open our eyes to see You in Your power and might. May signs and wonders accompany the works of Your hands.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Hebrews 13:8 NKJV

Personal Application:

1. What insights did you learn from this chapter?

2. Do you have any unanswered questions about life? How can Elisha's example help you process those questions?

This week's Bible verse:

*"Be still and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."*

Psalm 46:10 NIV

JUNE

“To be a Christian means
to forgive the inexcusable,
because God has forgiven the
inexcusable in you.”

C.S. Lewis

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and
just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us
from all unrighteousness.*

1 John 1:9

The Return of the Giant

Let's have a Bible trivia quiz!

Question: What was the name of the giant that David fought?

Did I hear you say "Goliath"? Yes, we remember that name. But hardly anyone remembers "Ishbi-benob." Sunday school is filled with Bible stories of Adam and Eve, Samson and Delilah, David and Goliath. But David and Ishbi-benob? Check out 2 Samuel 21:15-16.

There was war again between the Philistines and Israel, and David went down together with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines. And David grew weary. And Ishbi-benob, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, and who was armed with a new sword, thought to kill David.

In his youth, David confronted a giant named Goliath. Goliath was threatening the soldiers and armies of Israel. David wasn't his main target; he was just a kid sent on an errand, and happened to hear the news.

Despite his young age and lack of military experience, David was amazingly successful in killing Goliath with minimal methods: a slingshot and five stones.

Simple faith and youthful zeal combined. What a victory!

“And David lived happily ever after . . .” That’s how it should end, right? The good guy wins. The end.

I thought that was the way the Christian life should be. You follow Jesus and you will have a blessed life. Goodbye, giants! Goodbye, challenges! But turn on the news and you’ll find more problems. The same thing happened in David’s time.

In 2 Samuel 21, we find a much older, more battle-seasoned David. He is now king of all Israel. He is no longer the “Boy Most Likely to Succeed,” but the “Man Who Has Succeeded”—the famous spiritual and political leader who shaped his country, won battles, accumulated wealth, made women swoon, and sired a lot of children. A man of outstanding achievements, yet still described as a “man after God’s own heart.”

Now this original Giant-Killer was about to face a sad fate in the hands of another giant. What sobering secrets I’m learning!

I Success doesn’t automatically protect you.

How many times have we heard of preachers who committed adultery after preaching about it from the pulpit? Or Christians who can’t be corrected simply because they know “so much”?

Your achievements are not your protection against the enemy’s schemes. They could even be a distraction, if you are not careful. The young, inexperienced David wasn’t wearing an “armor of success,” yet he knew where his strength and protection came from:

And David said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

1 Samuel 17:37a

2 Never outgrow your dependence on your Savior because Christ is always your defense against giants.

This was how Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced their giants in Daniel 3:17 (NIV):

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand."

This was also how Paul faced his in 2 Timothy 4:18 (NIV):

The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

3 Don't fight your battles alone.

We need a spiritual family that will pray for us, support us, and even correct us at times.

And David grew weary. And Ishbi-benob, one of the descendants of the giants . . . who was armed with a

new sword, thought to kill David. But Abishai the son of Zeruiah came to his aid and attacked the Philistine and killed him.

2 Samuel 21:15b-17a

Thankfully, David's fellow warrior, Abishai, came to his rescue! Alone, David fought one giant and won. With a team, he defeated four giants more:

These four were descended from the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.

2 Samuel 21:22

Personal Application:

1. How can too much success or busyness affect a Christian?

2. Are you facing any “giants” currently? Or do you know anyone facing challenges? Whom can you actively reach out to for prayer and counsel?

Exasperated Children, Clueless Parents

*Fathers, do not exasperate your children;
instead, bring them up in the training and instruction
of the Lord.*

Ephesians 6:4 NIV

*Fathers, do not exasperate your children,
so that they will not lose heart.*

Colossians 3:21 NASB

What in the world is an exasperated child?
Is that a child who threw a tantrum at the mall?
Is that a teenager who just slammed the door *and* rolled his eyes?
Is that a baby crying from colic at 3 am?

Every parent starts out clueless. Once you hold that tiny baby in your hands and experience his wailing in the wee hours of the morning, not even your Harvard-educated brain or CEO skill set or TED Talk coaching ability will be prepared.

It's okay to start out clueless. But parents can't stay clueless, just as babies don't stay babies. We all need to grow.

Clueless parents are clueless that they have the ability to exasperate their children.

The word "exasperate" (*erethizo* from *ertho*, which means to stir to anger) means "to cause someone to react . . . provoke mostly in a bad sense and so to irritate or embitter." Our

English word “exasperate” (from Latin *exasperare* = to make rough, to irritate to anger) means to make resentful, to cause annoyance, to irritate to a high degree, to provoke to anger.

How do parents exasperate their children? I think a more personal question to ask yourself is this: **Am I raising an exasperated child?**

As a parent of three grown and married sons, let me share with you **three key questions** I ask myself every now and then (You might as well benefit from my success, mistakes, and wrinkles!):

1. What do I value?

When your children observe your life and the way you spend your time, what will they say is valuable to you? Your regular behavior reveals your values, and your values form your basic foundation as a family.

In February of 2016, a Taiwanese building collapsed during an earthquake. Further investigation found empty paint cans embedded in the building’s cement posts when it was built in 1994. No wonder it collapsed!

Some families put their family’s value on educational attainment or achievements; some on wealth accumulation; others on career or sports. While these are all important, they are but empty paint cans, and cannot be the foundation of your children’s identity.

Children get exasperated when:

- they are valued, given time and attention based on their performance, popularity, personality, or appearance.
- there is favoritism (whether they are the beneficiary or the neglected one).

- their parents' words dishonor others, or when they talk a lot about spiritual stuff, but don't live it out.
- their parents are overly critical, fearful, absent, or unaffectionate.

Children feel valued and secure when:

- they know they are loved unconditionally because they are made by God and in His image (They are not stocks in the stock market whose market value rises and falls!).
- there are consistent family disciplines and reasonable rules in place for their protection and growth.
- they see their fathers doing honest, diligent labor on a consistent basis.
- the Word of God is the first and final authority of the family's conduct and beliefs.

2. How is my personal integrity?

Do you walk the talk? Do you follow the same spiritual standards you impose on your children? Do you parent in faith or in fear? Are you humble and teachable, or are you the parent who won't admit your mistakes and change?

You are raising exasperated children when:

- you are an unfaithful, unreliable spouse, and impose hurt on their mother or father.
- you are manipulative and use guilt, fear, deception, or anger to get your way.
- you use Scripture as a club to hurt, rather than a light for all the family to follow.

Children will love God and their parents when:

- the Word of God is respected and obeyed by parents first.

- there is repentance and forgiveness modeled in their parents' marriage relationship.
- their parents are interested and actively listening to their children (with their mouths closed, but hearts open).
- their parents are not afraid to discipline and educate their children according to God's Word; or believe Him for breakthroughs and opportunities for them to succeed and fly.

3. How serious and consistent is my commitment to parent my child under God's direction?

Do you have a daily time set aside to read the Bible and pray for your family privately, or do you just do token prayers? Do you seek godly counsel so you can constantly grow as a parent, and not just get help in times of emergencies? Or do you refuse to share any family problems with others because your pride can't take it? Do you make a regular effort to strengthen your ties with your spouse? Do you even make time to be with your children on a regular basis?

Children get exasperated when:

- their parents parent in fear rather than in faith.
- they become the "punching bag" for a parent's unhappiness, and have to shoulder a role God didn't give them to carry.
- they become "mini parents" because their parents are too immature or selfish to take care of their family.
- their parents make empty promises that are never kept.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Forgive us for our sins as parents. Help us not to be clueless parents who exasperate our children. Your Word has clues that will show us the way. Give us the right value system and the right relationships to train up our children in the way they should go. Most of all, we look to You as our Father, to teach us to parent in faith and not in fear. In Jesus' name. Amen.

. . . but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 19:14

Personal Application:

1. Based on the three questions raised in this chapter, were there times when you were an “exasperated” child?

2. What practical steps can you take to avoid raising exasperated children?

3. Here are promises you can claim over your families:

*Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who greatly delights in his commandments!
His offspring will be mighty in the land; the generation of
the upright will be blessed.*

Psalm 112:1-2

*. . . I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their
offspring shall be known among the nations, and their
descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them
shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the
LORD has blessed.*

Isaiah 61:8-9

*They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity,
for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the LORD,
and their descendants with them.*

Isaiah 65:23

*The righteous who walks in his integrity—blessed are his
children after him!*

Proverbs 20:7

*In the fear of the LORD one has strong confidence,
and his children will have a refuge.*

Proverbs 14:26

*We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the
coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his
might, and the wonders that he has done.*

Psalms 78:4

*Listen to your father, who gave you life,
and do not despise your mother when she is old.*

Proverbs 23:22 NIV

*The father of a righteous child has great joy; a man who
fathers a wise son rejoices in him.*

Proverbs 23:24 NIV

Do Not Enter

There is a story of a robber who broke into a house and stole some valuables. He was easily caught because he charged his cellphone in that house, then forgot to unplug it and bring it! Dumb, right? It was easy for the police to trace him using his cellphone!

I realize sometimes how we allow “dumb robbers” into our lives, too. What could these dumb robbers be?

It is easy to trace them. **These robbers are our careless words and thoughts.** They steal our hopes and drain our energy.

Sometimes, we “un-bless” ourselves with our own words.
“I’m never going to make it.”

“I’m hopeless.”

“I’m so dumb.”

“I’m so forgetful! I think I have Alzheimer’s.”

“I always lose things.”

“I’m so awkward.”

“I’m a lousy parent.”

That’s why the Bible says we need a security guard!

*Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth;
keep watch over the door of my lips!*

Psalm 141:3

I have a dear anonymous friend whose favorite expression is “Mamamatay akooo!” (“I’m gonna die!”) when talking about—

- Politics: “Those hearings are driving me crazy! I’m gonna die!”
- Fashion: “I love that dress! I’m gonna die!”
- Traffic: “It’s horrible! I’m gonna die!”

So one day, I asked her, “*So, when are you going to die?*” She looked at me with amazement and asked, “*What are you talking about? I don’t want to die!*” To which I replied, “*So why are you always saying it?*”

She’s not the only one guilty of saying it. Sometimes, I catch myself thinking dumb thoughts, too. Thoughts like:

“They don’t really like me. They’re just pretending.”

“I’m such a failure.”

“Why can’t I be like _____?”

When I was a teenager, I remember myself thinking that my problem was so huge, and I would think, “*Why not just kill yourself and end it all?*”

That’s why God says we need a GUARD. Not just in banks. Not just in offices. We need a guard over our lives, and over our mouths. These unguarded, unarrested thoughts and words are sent to rob you of your destiny. What is the devil stealing, keeping, and destroying in your life? Don’t allow him to steal God’s promises to you as His child. Take action!



Arrest the robber, demolish the lie.

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5 NIV

Demolish: to knock down, tear down; overwhelmingly defeat

Many of us are security-conscious. We guard our bags, our computers, our phones. We lock our cars. We can't sleep until we make the rounds and check all the doors. Yet we easily believe what we read, see, or hear from the Internet or news.

The most important thing we can guard is our soul. Proverbs 21:23 (NASB) says,

*“He who guards his mouth and his tongue, **guards his soul from troubles**”* (emphasis mine).

A psalm of David said, “. . . ‘I will guard my ways that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth as with a muzzle while the wicked are in my presence’” (Psa. 39:1 NASB).

2 Fill your mouth and soul with blessings.

How many times a day do you bless yourself?

Yes, you can read that question again. ☺

How many times a day do YOU bless YOURSELF?

Let my mouth be filled with Your praise and with Your glory all the day.

Psalm 71:8 NKJV

You don't build yourself up by mere positive thinking, or by avoiding conflict. You build yourself up by filling your mind with the unchanging promises of God, who promised to never leave you nor abandon you, no matter what challenges you are facing that day.

3 Verbally and orally recite God's promises daily.

Yes, I do it out loud. The more discouraged I feel, the more verbally I proclaim God's Word. Why?

Psalm 142:3 says, *"When my spirit faints within me, you know my way."*

I would go into my children's rooms, lay hands on their beds, and declare out loud:

"All my sons will be taught by the Lord; and great will be my children's peace."

"Surely, Your goodness and love shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in Your house forever."

"Your plans for me are always for my good, never for my evil."

I read Psalm 119:97 onward and make it a prayer of blessing for me and my household:

"Lord, my family will love Your Word.

Your commands will make us wiser than our enemies.

You are giving us the insight we need this day.

We meditate on Your statutes and obey You willingly.

My children are gaining wisdom and understanding and will hate every wrong path."

Ever since Lukie, my grandson, was born, I have blessed him with a blessing from God. "The Lord bless you, Lucas, and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you and give you peace." Joshua, his dad, looked at me in amazement. Apparently he's been blessing Lukie with that prayer since the day he was born, too.

So it is with two-year-old Philip. So it is with his grandpapa Joey at 59. The blessings of the Lord are available for all of us to claim daily.

How many days has the devil stolen your peace, and replaced it with worry and fear? It's time to put a new padlock, and enjoy the security of God's unchangeable Word.

Personal Application:

1. Are there any careless words or thoughts that have become a habit of yours?

2. What are you planning to do about it?

3. What daily action can you do to demolish lies and protect the truth of God's promises for you and your family?

Was Jesus an Extrovert or an Introvert?

A few years ago, as we were walking along a windy and empty beach, my hubby turned to me and said, *“Man, I love this place! There are hardly any people here! It’s so isolated, I could write a book undisturbed, grow a beard, and never dress up! I could stay in this place forever!”*

While Joey was daydreaming wistfully about his ideal “quiet place” far away from Wi-Fi and city life, I was having nightmarish visions of living like Tom Hanks’s character in the movie *Cast Away*, forever stranded in some deserted island. My only companion would be a bearded husband, dressed like an unwashed hermit, wearing an old, holey t-shirt, held together by vines—and I, a half-crazed, conversation-starved woman with finger nails like claws, talking to a coconut named Vito.

To say that Joey and I have different personalities is an understatement. To realize that we have been married for almost 35 years is a miracle!

This made me think: If Jesus were physically here, who would He be like? Would He be like Joey and enjoy prolonged isolation? Or would He come to a party with me, socialize, and meet my friends?

But then, we are so uniquely created as human beings that none of us fits neatly into a simple category. No one is purely extrovert or purely introvert. There are times when Joey

is the more gregarious, friendly one, conversing for hours, while I just want to go home!

So what would Jesus be, I wonder?

Where Did Jesus Get His Energy?

Extroverts get recharged by being around people. Introverts get recharged by spending time alone.

How did Jesus get recharged? What refreshed Him?

There were times we found Him talking for hours to five thousand people. There were times He spent with his smaller group of twelve, familiar friends. Then we find these revealing verses:

But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.

Luke 5:15-16 NASB

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.

Luke 6:12 NIV

I Fresh wisdom and energy come from spending time with our Father.

Human companionship is great, and time alone can also be wonderful. But regardless of our personalities, as Christians,

we need the habit of spending time with our Father and reading from His Word, the Bible, what He has to say.

True refreshing comes from spending time with your Father in heaven, who completely “gets” you, accepts you, loves you, and has tons of wisdom to give you.

2 Our personality is not the lord over our life.

We can choose to be Christlike regardless of how we’re wired. We have a choice to respond in a Christlike manner, whether we feel like it or not. We can’t make our personalities an excuse to behave badly or unkindly.

See how a tired and hungry Jesus behaves in John 4 (NIV). He encounters a Samaritan woman, a kind of person highly unpopular with the Jews. But Jesus chooses to befriend her.

Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, . . . “Why are you talking with her?” (v. 27).

Meanwhile, his disciples urged him, “Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about” (vv. 31-32).

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (v. 34).

3 Our nourishment comes from doing God's will and receiving His approval.

I'm inspired by how Jesus set aside his own discomfort in order to share to a stranger the Good News. I'm encouraged by how confident He was of His Dad's approval.

So, back to the question: Was Jesus an extrovert or an introvert? Hmm, what do you think?

Let's apply Secret 1, and find out. 😊

Personal Application:

1. Where do you get your energy? From being around people or from being alone?

2. "Our personality is not the lord over our life. We can choose to be Christlike regardless of how we're wired." Can you comment on this point?

3. Based on Jesus' example, what are the two ways we can get energized and nourished?

- a. _____
- b. _____

This week's Bible verse:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

JULY

If God has the final word,
shouldn't you read it?
Satan's greatest weapon is
man's ignorance of God's Word.

*The teaching of your word gives light,
so even the simple can understand.*

Psalm 119:130 NLT

C Is for Clarity

“You have German measles.” What? Why couldn’t I just have French fries?!

Being diagnosed with German measles or rubella was not a joke—not when I was just 24 years old and pregnant with my first child.

If *Google* had existed back then, my initial response would have been to rush to the Internet and consult Dr. *Google*. This would have been his reply:

Rubella is most dangerous to your baby if you catch it during the first 20 weeks of pregnancy. It can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, or birth defects in unborn babies . . . There is no known treatment for congenital rubella . . .

Miscarriage. Stillbirth. Birth defects. No known treatment. Oh, the fear and worry that can grip you when you are facing the unknown!

The more information I read, the more people I consulted, the more my worries grew. *What would happen to my baby? How would he or she turn out?*

It was too soon to know the gender of my baby, and now I had to wrestle with these other thoughts.

With my thin arms, I hugged my little belly protectively, brushed away a few tears from my cheeks, and tried to smile bravely. I said a silent prayer for my unborn child. To think

that only a few months back, Joey and I were newlyweds, our little family was just about to start, and already the world seemed dark and uncertain.

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
Now the earth was formless and empty,
Darkness was over the surface of the deep...*

It's comforting to know that, once upon a time, the world appeared formless and empty and dark. Just like how many of us feel from time to time.

*. . . and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.
And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.*
Genesis 1:1-3 NIV

I like that portion of the verse in Genesis 1: ". . . and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." In a formless, dark and empty situation, God's Spirit was "hovering." He was not absent in the darkness. He was fully present and fully aware.

And by His power, God commanded, "*Let there be light.*" Before anything else, God created light. And that's how I begin my day. Let there be light. Lord, give me CLARITY today.

God knew how important LIGHT is for you and me. Are you facing a challenging situation—clueless, just as I was, on what would happen to my child? Light makes things clear. It gives you a better perspective of every situation.

Light was God's first command in Genesis in creating the world. It was also God's intent to give us LIGHT, not just for our physical lives, but also for our inner life.

*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will
shine.*

Isaiah 9:2 NLT

Matthew quotes the same passage:

*“. . . the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.
And for those who lived in the land where death casts its
shadow, a light has shined” (Mt. 4:16 NLT).*

Upon entering a dark room, what’s the first thing you look for? The light switch. We all yearn for *clarity*. Clarity illuminates, while darkness keeps us stumbling around, stubbing our toes, and groping for answers. It answers questions like, “What in the world is happening?”, “What should I do?”, “Where should I go?”, “How should I decide?”

Bookstores are filled with self-help books instructing you on how to navigate your world. The Bible does more than that. It doesn’t toss you a few rules and tells you, “You’re on your own!” The Word of God gives you principles, but most importantly, it gives you a Person. It reminds you, **“You are not alone in what you are facing. God is with you.”** It is this Person who will bring clarity to your world.

So in my simple **C.O.R.E. Prayer** method, the first thing I pray for is **clarity**.

If you are a Christian, praying for clarity is remembering the following secrets:

1 You are not alone. Jesus is your light. He will lead you from darkness to light.

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

John 8:12

2 You don't have to be afraid.

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Psalms 27:1

3 He will give you clarity, power, and perspective for a situation.

But the path of the righteous is like the bright morning light, growing brighter and brighter until full day.

Proverbs 4:18 NET

"And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them."

Isaiah 42:16

Do you need clarity today? Are there decisions you need to make? Are you feeling clueless and in the dark? Here is a simple prayer for clarity:

Jesus, while my day seems formless and empty, thank You for the reminder that clarity comes from a Person. You, Lord, are my source of light. No one is smarter, wiser, or brighter than You. You know the best way I should go.

Create my life/my day/my family the way You desire it to be. Help me make decisions today that are guided by Your Word; not simply by my feelings or outside pressures.

Thank You for the reminder that I am not alone, and that the same powerful God that illuminates the sun and brings light to this physical world is also the same God that can bring light, strength, and power to any situation I am facing.

*Thank You for Your promise in Isaiah 42:16—
“And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.”*

So be it!

Personal Application:

1. Do you need clarity for a situation?

2. How do the three secrets shared in this chapter help you in your decision-making?

This week's Bible verses:

In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:4-5

O Is for Order

I'm beginning to notice how organized God is. Look how He created the world in Genesis: He did it step-by-step. He was systematic and strategic. This will happen on Day 1. Next, this will happen on Day 2. Then Day 3, etc.

Systematic. Strategic. Orderly.

Jesus didn't seem frazzled either. He had a heavy workload, met with tons of people, yet He never seemed worried or burned out.

There were times He did miracles, and times He didn't. He knew what to say "yes" to and what to say "no" to. Although He was sent to earth on a heavenly mission, He didn't accept every need or S.O.S. as something He needed to personally fix. There were lots of crippled, sick, blind people within His radius, yet He zeroed in on *specific* people to minister to.

How did Jesus know which invitations to accept, which challenges to take on, and what needed to be ignored? How did He know that He needed to eat at Zacchaeus's house after seeing him sitting on a tree, even though he was practically a stranger? How did He know that He needed to talk to the Samaritan woman by the well even if He was already hungry, and it wasn't part of His daily schedule? How did He keep His cool and not react in panic after hearing of His cousin's (John the Baptist) imprisonment and beheading and the death of His friend Lazarus?

Having said all these, this is why I've decided that I need God to order my day before the demands of the world come in. *Because the same God who so efficiently and effectively created the world in Genesis is the same God I call on to create my day.* I call on Him early in the morning while my day is formless and empty. I call on Him any time of the day when I feel pressures tugging at me from different directions. I pray my C.O.R.E. prayer for God to create my day *His way.*

The C.O.R.E. prayer starts with an admission: **I need God in my life.** It's not a prayer because I need things, or I need answers, or I need healing. **My C.O.R.E. prayer is an acknowledgment and an admission that I need the God who created the universe to create my day. I need the Savior of my soul today.** It starts with:

C is for CLARITY. "Lord, give us CLARITY in this situation." There is nothing like reading God's Word to give you clear directions in life.

O is for ORDER. "Lord, help us know what steps to take."

Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.

Ecclesiastes 8:5-6

Where does real order come from?

I Order comes from respecting God's timing.

How many of us have been burned by so-called “investment opportunities” with high-yielding returns, but “you have to grab it now before it’s too late”? Or have we ever had relationships that messed us up? Which opportunities should we take? Which ones should we release and say “No, thank you” without feeling insecure that we are missing out on something?

I realize that my timetable is not the same as Jesus’. It’s not “I want answers NOW!” nor “We need to do it now!”

2 Order comes from obeying God’s priorities, not my emotions.

Contrary to what the soft drink commercial tagline says, I realize that making decisions by “obeying your thirst” can lead you and me into a lot of trouble! Can you imagine if we all just simply “obeyed our thirst” and followed our emotions or mood at the moment? We’d have more road rage, adulterous affairs, lying, cheating, and murder!

But God surrounds us with His boundary lines for our protection and proper growth as decent human beings and children of God. If we allow God to order our day, we can expect godly results. So hold on to His promise in Psalm 16:6:

The (boundary) lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus,

We need godly order in our lives. Show us how You did it. How did You live a fruitful life but not burn out? Give us wisdom to know what to prioritize and what to delete from our schedules. Give us an obedient heart to obey not our thirst, but to respect our Heavenly Father's priorities. Remind us that as we obey and trust God's way, there will be peace and order in our souls. In Your name. So be it!

Personal Application:

1. Is there disorder in your life? Can you identify the source of this disorder?

2. How does God's Word address this particular situation?

3. Based on this chapter, how can you instill order in your life?

This week's Bible verses:

*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace,
as in all the meetings of God's holy people.*

1 Corinthians 14:33 NLT

*For everything there is an appointed time,
and an appropriate time for every activity on earth . . .*

Ecclesiastes 3:1 NET

R Is for Results

“I don’t care! I’m taking that job!”

I was frustrated and tired of balancing a tight budget of a one-income household. I was missing my more glamorous career as the head of my own product design agency, which I had let go of, as a mom of three very young boys below the age of five. I chafed at the lack of adult interaction, the endless diapers, the 24-hour mom patrolling, refereeing fights, cleaning up messes, and the lack of private moments (“Mama, knock, knock, what you doing in the bathroom?”). I was uncertain of how good or effective I was as a mother, with my lack of experience and mentors. And so, I impetuously decided to go back to a full-time career and leave this hands-on mommy role behind.

My hubby, Joey, calmly replied, *“Sweetie, just pray and ask God what you should do. If you know this is what He has called you to do in this season, then go for it.”* I hate advice like that! But I need it because it forces me to make decisions from a spiritual perspective instead of merely from an emotional reaction or need.

So I went to a quiet room and prayed, *“Father, this is what I feel . . . This is what we need. But not my will, but Your will be done.”*

It was in the early years of my marriage and parenting that the seeds of praying the C.O.R.E. way were planted.

As I acknowledge my need for God to create my day, I continue to pray the C.O.R.E. way:

C is for CLARITY. “Lord, just as You created the world and the first thing You commanded was ‘Let there be light,’ give me clarity in this situation. Give me clear eyes to see and make decisions from Your point of view.”

O is for ORDER. “Just as You knew in Genesis what to do from day to day, Lord, order my steps today. Give me godly priorities. Help me discern what needs my attention today, distinguishing matters that are truly important from what are just seemingly urgent but not important and can wait another day.”

R is for RESULTS. But not just any results. I want godly results. I love how God created the world, day-by-day, step-by-step. I particularly am touched by how God took the time at the end of each day to assess the results of His handiwork and say, “*It was good.*”

I studied these verses in Genesis 1:

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good . . .

And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good . . .

The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God

saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day . . .

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day (vv. 3-4a, 9-10, 12-13, 31).

Then it hit me like a thunderbolt: whatever God makes is good!

His plans for me are good. His timing is good.

The relationships He gives me are good.

His lessons are for my good. His intentions are all good!

If I allow God to create my day, my life, if my decision-making is based on obeying His word and His values, I can live a meaningful and purposeful life with no regrets.

I Decide that you want godly results.
Base your decision-making on what pleases the Lord.

What is God saying you should do in this season of your life? It varies from person to person. For one friend of mine, it meant going to Kenya. For another, it meant juggling two careers. For me, His directions were “Stay. I will teach you how to parent your three sons.” It was a decision I never regretted. Did I feel unable? Yes, but God is able.

2 God has you covered.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10

Ephesians 2:10 says you don't have to wander through life wondering if you are doing the right thing. God has good works for you to do. Why not ask Him today? The results you experience may not be what you expect. These may be unpopular with the world's expectations. But oh, the peace and the strength that comes, and the blessing you become to others when you put your life in the center of His perfect will.

Personal Application:

1. Think of a decision you need to make.

2. Which steps do you think will produce godly results?

3. Can you find Scripture to guide you?

4. Do you have a wise mentor you can consult to help you make a godly decision?

This week's Bible verse:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10

E Is for Energy

Energy: the strength and vitality required for sustained physical or mental activity

The steps of a man are established by the LORD, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong, because the LORD is the One who holds his hand.

Psalm 37:23-24 NASB

It seemed like a very bad dream sitting in that court room. How could this even be happening to us?

There we were, about to face a stranger; a man who had accused my husband of stealing his car in 2011. Incredulously, we read his accusations: His vehicle disappeared from his parking lot in 2011. He found the car in some province a few years after, displayed in a used car shop! When he confronted the shop owner, the shop owner said some men had sold the car to him and those men used my husband's identity and faked papers.

In short, Joey became a victim of identity fraud. Upon examining the papers and photocopied "IDs," it became very obvious to us and even to the judge that the papers were fraudulent.

Carnapping is a serious crime. Being accused of that is no joke.

Despite his innocence, Joey had to post a bail bond of P200,000 just so he would not be imprisoned but remain free.

Imagine having to preach, and having this carnapping case hanging over your head.

To add insult to injury, this man who accused my husband refused to accept the truth that Joey had nothing to do with his car and had no idea what he was talking about. He re-filed the case after the first was dismissed for lack of merit.

So here we were, on our second visit in court.

I was so mad at this man; I took a video of him as he spoke, and memorized his face in my brain. How could he even believe the lies? Why was he pressing charges against Joey again, instead of running after the guy caught selling his car at the second-hand shop? Even the judge knew this was not a valid case.

As the hearing ended, Joey turned to him and took his hand. Unbelievable. I would not have touched that man's hand. I would have bitten it.

It is in times like this that I know my hubby is a real Christian. He even *prayed* for that guy after the court hearing! Unbelievable.

I, on the other hand, was feeling un-Christlike. The verse I was tempted to claim was 2 Kings 2:24 (NLT): *"Elisha turned around and looked at them, and he cursed them in the name of the LORD. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of them!"*

I am so grateful that the Lord promises to give us His strength even when we are mad, discouraged, upset, or un-Christlike.

The last part of this C.O.R.E. prayer series is "E," which stands for *energy*.

Yes, I want *clarity* (C).

Yes, I want God to *order my steps* (O).

Yes, I want godly, supernatural *results* (R).

But lastly, I pray for **energy**.

“Lord, give me the human energy to do Your will, even when my flesh doesn’t want to obey You. Give me the energy to obey You. Give my family the energy to say no to sin and yes to You.”

1 Energy is a blessing from God to be fruitful and successful.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Genesis 1:28

2 Staying in God’s presence brings renewed energy.

It takes energy to wait and energy to act. May God give us discernment and the willingness to do both.

3 Godly energy gives us endurance to wait on God's results.

The court case didn't disappear overnight, and went on for several months. I am so grateful that ordeal is over! But I thank God for the energy He gave us to hang on, the lessons He gave us along the way, and the wonderful people He sent who brought encouragement and strength in our time of trouble.

May God give you divine energy, dear reader, to face what needs to be faced, to be fruitful, and to succeed in life, because He has promised to never leave you nor abandon you.

Personal Application:

1. Are you currently facing a challenge or tough time?

Why not offer it to the Lord today?

2. How is this chapter helping you?

This week's Bible verse:

But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:31 NLT

AUGUST

“If God is the Creator of the entire universe, then it must follow that He is the Lord of the whole universe.

No part of the world is outside of His lordship. That means that no part of my life must be outside of His lordship.”

R.C. Sproul

*“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’
and not do what I tell you?”*

Luke 6:46

How to Impact People with C.O.R.E. Prayer

“Should I migrate to Canada or not?”

“How can I make this business grow?”

“Is this the man my daughter should marry?”

“The doctor says my father needs this medical procedure.”

“My child is having problems at school.”

Every day, people face questions that need answers. I’ve found the C.O.R.E. prayer very useful in connecting people to God. Whether it’s a friend, family member, or someone I’m meeting for the first time, C.O.R.E. gives a guideline on how I can pray for them, and how they can pray for themselves.

As we have learned, **C.O.R.E.** stands for clarity, order, (godly) results, and energy.

My C.O.R.E. prayer is inspired by the Book of Genesis’ account of how God created the world. While the world was formless and empty, God’s word brought:

Clarity. *“Let there be light.”* God’s word brought light to a dark world.

Order. God’s word created order: first light, then sky, then land, vegetation, sun, moon and stars, sea creatures, land creatures, man. In the same way, He gives order to man’s priorities.

Results. God saw that everything He had made was good.

Energy for man. God commanded man to *“Be fruitful; fill the earth and subdue it,”* and gives him the energy to sustain him as he obeys.

God, our Creator, took something formless and created a supernatural world. Then He made man and woman take dominion, and live a fruitful life on this earth.

When a person has a problem or is facing a challenge, his or her situation is in a way formless and empty and dark. He or she doesn't know what to do, or what steps to take. My C.O.R.E. way of praying acknowledges God's existence and our dependence on Him. We invite God, our Creator, to create the solution, and ask Him to give us the willingness to obey His words and take dominion over that situation.

Here's an example of C.O.R.E. prayer applied to a situation:

"My son wants to change his college course, but he has already invested so many years taking up medicine! Now he just wants to go into business. What should I do? Should I force him to stay and not give up? Or leave him alone to decide?"

Marie's answer:

I wouldn't know, but God does. So let's pray:

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your promise that if anyone lacks wisdom, we can come to You freely and ask what Your perfect will is regarding this situation.

God, give them **CLARITY**.

Make it clear to them which way is most pleasing to You. May Your Word and Your commands light their path. As they spend time reading Your Word and seeking You, clarify what decisions are most pleasing to You. As a parent, give her clarity on how You want her to connect to her son. Create in her and her son a clean heart and a clear mind to follow Your commands.

Lord, give their lives **ORDER**.

You are not a God of confusion but of peace. Just as You created the world step-by-step and day-by-day, give them the right strategies and methods to accomplish Your will. Let them not just follow man-made strategies and ideas, but give them the discipline to follow Your plan of action. Remove any source of confusion, fear, or pride that is clouding their minds in seeking Your will for their lives.

Father, give them godly **RESULTS**.

Just as You looked at each day's work and commended it as good, may the fruit of their decisions be good and God-anointed. May they make decisions that please You more than just giving financial results or personal satisfaction.

May You give them supernatural insight and creativity that will astound even themselves. May You provide for them supernaturally in areas where they experience lack. Help this young man make decisions that lead to godly results.

Lord, give them **ENERGY**.

Give them the energy and willingness to obey You. Give them energy to discipline their mind, will, and emotions. Grant them hearts willing to follow You and not their flesh alone. In areas where they feel weak or inadequate, empower them through Your Holy Spirit. Send them godly advisers who can help them make the right decisions.

Most of all, may Jesus be the Lord of their lives. Because only when He is Lord will they have the strength to do all things, because Christ strengthens them.

In Jesus' name. Amen!

Hope you find the C.O.R.E. prayer useful. Why not give it a try?

Personal Application:

1. Can you think of a situation where you need God's wisdom?

2. Try applying the C.O.R.E. prayer to that situation. Pray for:

C: Clarity (God's Word to give clear directions)

O: Order (God's strategies and methods)

R: Results (godly resources and results)

E: Energy (willingness and obedience to obey God's will and submit to His lordship)

This week's Bible verses:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Ephesians 3:14-17a NIV

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20-21 NIV

How to Change Your Stars

Young William Thatcher: *“Can it be done, Father? Can a man change his stars?”*

John Thatcher: *“Yes, William. If he believes enough, a man can do anything.”*

A Knight’s Tale, 2001

Last week, I was sitting at a funeral service for a man who changed his stars. The chapel echoed with music, such as *“It is Well with My Soul,” “The Power of Your Love,” “Amazing Grace,”* as one achingly beautiful, sad voice sang one song after another, lovingly from the heart. It was the man’s son and grandchildren who took turns singing his favorite songs.

His wife V shared how God had turned their family around. They married young. He looked like James Bond (of the Sean Connery kind) in his prime. She was feisty, brainy, and bold. Sparks flew and they eloped.

Sparks soon turned into fireworks, and the first 20 years of their marriage was, at many times, a war of wills—their five children witnesses to it all.

After 20 years, they separated. They lived independent lives for nine long years—he in Manila, and she, at times, living in the U.S.

But that was not the end of their story because at the darkest point of their lives, they met the Star-Changer, who brought *clarity* to their lives.

What exactly does praying for clarity do for us? Here is the power of clarity:

1 Praying for CLARITY opens my eyes to my true condition.

It is easy to think that life is good and that we are living meaningful lives. But God exposes the true condition of our hearts so we can see our desperate need for Him.

In the memorial service, V described how God opened her eyes to see how her pride and willfulness had contributed to the breakup. Strong, capable, and highly intelligent, she lived life her way, and the sin of pride affected her choices. She repented of her sins and made Jesus the Lord and Savior of her life. Unknown to V, God was working behind the scenes to change their stars.

We, too, can pray for people like her. Pray that God will open their eyes to see the truth about their situation and their need for Jesus.

“... open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.”

Acts 26:18 NASB

2 Praying for clarity makes people come to their senses and make wiser decisions.

Although they were already living independent lives, God was also working in her former husband's heart. His children kept praying for him. And just like the prodigal son, he came to his senses. *"What was I doing, taking care of others when my very own children needed me?"*

After nine years of separation, husband and wife were reunited. But he was not the same man, and neither was she the same woman. God had brought them to their senses.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17

It was amazing to hear how God miraculously redeemed their marriage. Not only did their love for each other grow stronger, their home and family became a haven for many—a godly testimony of how God can change even the most complicated of situations.

He became a tireless evangelist, ready to share not just his warm bear hug or humor, but the God who saved him. Many lives were changed for the better.

I know that as a fact. As a young family, Joey and I spent many mealtimes in their home. We witnessed how the power of obedience to God transformed this family from darkness to light.

I was traveling abroad when he unexpectedly passed away. But we willingly changed my travel plans, so I could fly back and give honor to the man who had allowed the Lord to change his stars, and pay tribute to his wife—his strong, faith-filled, loving companion. There were others who flew in, too.

The chapel was filled with people young and old. I still remember V's words:

“ . . . After 20 years of living for ourselves, and nine years of living apart, God gave us 29 memorable years of living life together again as husband and wife. Our children have whole marriages, and we are blessed with 18 grandchildren, all of whom are close to their grandparents.”

Isn't God so amazing? He can redeem even the most hopeless and complicated situation and give you the best in the end.

Do you want God to change your stars? Do you need clarity? It starts by putting your trust in the Bright Morning Star. His name is Jesus.

Personal Application:

1. Do you want clarity?

2. What are the advantages of having clarity in our lives?

3. Where does clarity come from?

This week's Bible verses:

So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, my great army which I sent among you.

Joel 2:25 NKJV

... Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9-11

How Boundaries Can Set Us Free

“If Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are divorcing, what hope is there for the rest of us?”

I was checking the news on social media, and that was the general sentiment of that day. Trending was: “Angelina Jolie files for divorce from husband of two years, Brad Pitt.” One magazine responded with a caption “The death of love in 2016” under a picture of the good-looking Hollywood couple. The premise was, if people as gorgeous as these two can’t even stay married, then who can?

How ironic it is that what many people look for in a lifetime partner are often based on these external qualities: good looks and financial status, and yet more and more marriages with these two ingredients are still breaking down. It leads us to conclude that:

1. Good looks don’t guarantee a happy, long-lasting marriage.
2. Wealth is not enough to keep a marriage.

Maybe that’s what has kept Joey’s and my marriage alive these past 34 years. We are not “celebrity gorgeous” and definitely don’t have their money!

So what keeps a marriage going strong? Two words: **internal boundaries**. Boundaries are necessary for us to honor each other as individuals.

I had to learn that lesson the hard way.

I was a mom driving her young boys to basketball class. Running late, I was desperately trying to find an easier route. So I decided to turn to a side road, ignoring the “DO NOT ENTER” sign. After all, I thought, there are no other cars, and I was so late!

Well, lo and behold, a policeman appeared at the end of that road waiting for my car! In panic, I immediately turned left to avoid getting caught, only to end up in a dead end road. In short, I had a lot of explaining to do—not just to the policeman, but to my three young sons who had just witnessed their mama pass a “Do Not Enter” sign!

It is important to pray for order, that we may be willing to accept godly boundaries that are good for us (myself included).

I Personal boundaries are for our good.

The boundary lines have fallen in pleasant places for me; truly, I have a beautiful heritage.

Psalm 16:6 ISV

A doctor asked me an interesting question: **“What is a baby’s first nursery?”** He continued, “Normally when we have our first baby we are so concerned about hygiene, cleanliness, and keeping the baby’s room clean and germ-free. We scrub the room, wash the crib and beddings. We are so careful on who will touch our precious newborn infant. Every parent wants the best environment for his or her baby to grow up in.”

“But a baby’s first nursery is NOT the room you just painted pink or blue. *A baby’s first nursery is his or her mother’s womb.*”

Then he paused and shook his head. “That is why I always tell young women and men, ‘Why are you allowing random sexual partners into your body? Don’t you realize that the diseases and germs from sexual promiscuity could affect your future baby’s first nursery?’ There is no Lysol or alcohol for that!”

2 Our emotions must have boundaries, too.

In this age of social media, it is so easy to burp out whatever you are thinking or feeling. But not every thought needs to be tweeted. Not every fight needs to be made public. Not every emotion needs to be made into an emoticon.

First Corinthians 14:40 says: *“But all things should be done decently and in order.”*

Learn to express your emotions at the right time and in the proper venue, not just because you feel like it.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 NIV

When couples blurt out their fights or marital disputes in public, rather than in private counseling with qualified marriage counselors, they are doing more harm to their relationship. Why? Because the Internet never forgets. It will keep reminding you of your wrongs.

God, on the other hand, is a God of grace. I have seen God do miracles in marriages that have been falling apart because couples have been willing to exercise self-control, shut up in public, but do the necessary repair work in private with the right counselors. Always leave room for God’s grace to

come and intervene. He has a proper time and way to do that. But we are often impatient.

Then Jesus said to them, “My time has not yet come, but your time is always ready.”

John 7:6 NKJV

3 Boundaries bring God’s blessings.

As we respect God’s boundaries and His order in our lives, we can claim these promises:

Internal peace and security:

*I praise you, LORD!
You are my mighty rock,
and you teach me
how to fight my battles.
You are my friend, my fortress
where I am safe.
You are my shield . . .*

Psalm 144:1-2 CEV

Godly protection and provision:

*Praise the LORD, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!
For he strengthens the bars of your gates;
he blesses your children within you.
He makes peace in your borders;
he fills you with the finest of the wheat.*

Psalm 147:12-14

So, happy boundaries, everyone! Here’s to practicing self-control and obeying “Do Not Enter” signs!

Personal Application:

1. What are your insights from Secrets 1 and 2?

2. Do you think all kinds of public expression on social media are beneficial or harmful? Why or why not?

This week's Bible verse:

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace . . .

1 Corinthians 14:33 NIV

Shaken But Not Stirred

(How to Weather the Storm)

Philosophers can debate the meaning of life, but you need a Lord who can declare the meaning of life.

MAX LUCADO

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

John 17:3

It has been a challenging week.

Joey’s parents have been living with us for two-and-a-half years now. Late Monday evening, we called for an ambulance for Joey’s dad. He suffered two strokes and an aneurysm, and, as of this writing, is confined at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). (I am writing this from the hospital.) Because of this, we cancelled our trip to the Every Nation World Conference in South Africa.

My father-in-law’s room at the ICU is exactly the same room my son, Joseph, was placed in when he had to undergo brain surgery for multiple skull fractures years back. Out of so many hospital choices, and so many possible rooms, we found ourselves in the same room that had carried my son and traumatized us many years ago.

“Is this a bad joke, Lord?” I thought to myself.

Our eldest son, Joseph, carries on his skull the permanent scars of 23 staples that formed part of his surgery. His badge of courage. And God's grace.

Those of you who have seen him personally know that.

Once upon a time, Joseph was the "sick" one.

Once upon a time, he lay in that same room, hooked to machines, battling between life and death.

Once upon a time, he was a young student, single, with a future abruptly interrupted by his accident and brain injury.

What kind of future awaited our son? No words could accurately describe our emotions then.

But today, Joseph walked into the same room he had been carried into, unconscious, 11 years ago.

He walked.

He came in confidently, and spoke to his grandfather. He blessed him and prayed for him, now no longer a victim of unfortunate circumstance, but a victor. And there I realized that God was not being cruel by giving us crises and pain, but that God is a God of redemption. That He can turn the saddest moments of your life into a victorious experience years down the road. That tears of grief can be turned into tears of joy and peace.

I When we are drowning in tears,
remember that Jesus can still walk on
water.

But when he (Peter) saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Matthew 14:30-33 NIV

God holds your future, even if your present is covered in storms. There is still more good to come to your life, and blessings to come your way.

Who would have known that Joseph would one day meet his beautiful wife, Carla, and have a precious boy named Philip? Who would have known that they would be traveling the world over, encouraging young people to live meaningful lives for Jesus? Who would have known that he would be traveling to Capetown, South Africa tomorrow because he has a message inspired by his grandfather?

Who knows what your future has for you? Only God.

Your future will yield godly results if you have made a serious decision to stop living your life on your own terms, and make Jesus 100% the Lord and Savior of your life. Never mind if the people around you are not doing it. Never mind if you don't have all the answers now. Jesus will take care of YOU. He will take care of your present and your future, because He has already washed you clean of your sinful past.

2 When you are in an “ICU” situation, remember that God sees you!

As of this writing, we do not know what the outcome of Papa’s health will be. But we are praying for godly results. We have brought him home since to care for him. Let God’s good, pleasing, and perfect will be done. Whether he lives on this earth, he will be blessed. Whether he lives in heaven, he will be blessed! May God give us the wisdom and energy to go through life’s storms and challenges in a godly manner.

If your life is in a similar “ICU” kind of situation, with one crisis after another, remember: *God sees you.*

We have a Great Physician. He heals damaged bodies, souls, and spirits. He fixes broken hearts, homes, and lives. You are safe in His hands.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

John 10:27-29

Personal Application:

1. Are you in an "ICU" situation in your life? Have you made a decision on who will be the Lord of your life? Will it be you, or God?

2. Reflect on the verses below and see how they apply to your situation.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Acts 4:12

But what does it say? "The word is near you, it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

Romans 10:8-10 NIV

SEPTEMBER

“I have never known anyone to
accept Christ’s redemption
and later regret it.”

Billy Graham

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one
and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall
not perish but have eternal life.”*

John 3:16 NIV

No Toilet Paper. Again.

How many of you have experienced the following?

1. You are seated on your bathroom “throne” only to realize that someone has used up all the toilet paper and left the empty cardboard roll dangling.
2. Some people have left their clothes on the floor, while the clothes hamper is just inches away.
3. Someone used the car and left the gas gauge nearly on empty, and here you are about to drive off.
4. Some people left their food on the table, and didn’t clean up.
5. Someone borrowed your phone charger and forgot to return it.

Yes, there are major world events that capture our attention: the ISIS situation, the U.S. elections, President Duterte’s latest pronouncements, etc. But sometimes it is the minor things that drive us crazy or drain our energy, like messy toothpaste smears left on your bathroom sink, or hair clogging the drain, or empty gas tanks, or last-minute emergencies that need to be acted on. Something inside you protests and you find yourself wondering, “Why me? Why do I have to be the one to do this? Unfair!”

What happens when “minor” activities like these get in the way of your “major,” more important plans for your life? I know many moms of babies and young children whose days seem filled with “minor” activities: Feed, burp, repeat. Cook, clean, repeat.

Or this may be yours: Wake up, work, sleep, repeat.

That's when the Holy Spirit reminded me of Jesus' last night on earth.

Check out this passage from John 13:1-6 (MSG):

Just before the Passover Feast, Jesus knew that the time had come to leave this world to go to the Father. Having loved his dear companions, he continued to love them right to the end . . . Jesus knew that the Father had put him in complete charge of everything, that he came from God and was on his way back to God. So he got up from the supper table, set aside his robe, and put on an apron. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with his apron. When he got to Simon Peter, Peter said, "Master, you wash my feet?"

Okay, let's press the "pause" button for a sec.

This is Jesus' last night on earth. His last day to be alive.

What would you do if you just had one day to live?

Precious seconds of His life are ticking by . . . it is almost night.

Judas is about to betray Him.

He is about to be arrested.

He will be abandoned.

He is about to die in the cruelest, most agonizing way possible.

Yet on His last day on earth, Jesus chose:

To clean feet.

Twelve pairs of feet, 24 in all—even Judas's feet.

Feet of the men who, hours later, would abandon Him.

What a thankless task.

I wonder how long it took to wash 24 dusty, grimy male feet? What emotions rose in Him as He humbly knelt in front and washed the feet of Judas, His betrayer?

Jesus' actions puzzled even His followers. The act of "foot washing" was usually done by the lowliest servant in a household. Streets in those days were rough and stony. Men in sandaled feet accumulated a lot of dust and dirt along the way. So upon entering a home, they needed to wash the grime off. And here was Jesus—Hope of the World, Savior of Mankind, God in the flesh—spending His last precious hours, kneeling down, towel wrapped around His waist, doing a selfless act of service for others.

1 Acts of service are important to God.

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

John 13:12-14

2 To be Christlike is to have an attitude of humility.

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to

become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.

Matthew 20:25-28 NKJV

3 Blessings come to those who serve.

“For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

John 13:15-17

I want to have a life blessed by the Lord. And now I'm realizing, sometimes blessings come disguised as minor things and God is watching my attitude.

They're sometimes wrapped in nursing babies, going to work, caring for family, and, yes, even replacing empty toilet paper rolls.

Personal Application:

1. How do I react when I am placed in a position of serving? When I am unnoticed or unappreciated? Do I grumble and complain? Do I make people aware of my displeasure?

2. Do I actively go out of my way to serve others, or do I instead expect others to serve me? Do I go the extra mile to lighten someone's load, or expect them always to cater to me: my wants, my schedule, etc.?

3. What would my helpers or service people say about me?

This week's Bible verses:

"For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

John 13:15-17

Secret Ambition

Fill in the blanks. If I were to ask you, “What is your goal in life?”, what would your answer be?

“I want to _____.”

Some possible answers could be:

“I want to make a difference in the world.”

“I want to be an excellent doctor.”

“I want to be a godly lawyer.”

“I want to be an inspiring teacher.”

“I want to be a successful entrepreneur.”

“I want to find a cure for cancer.”

“I want to have a lot of followers on my website.”

“I want to make a lot of money.”

“I want to feed the poor.”

We all have great ambitions in life. That’s why this verse in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 (NASB) puzzled me: “. . . *Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you . . .*” It says that even before you think of attending to your work or your business, your first ambition is to aspire for a quiet life. I’ve never heard a parent say to his or her little children, “Guys, when you grow up, your goal is to lead a quiet life.” I mean, is that even considered an ambition?

Somehow the words “ambition” and “quiet” don’t seem compatible to me. You can’t be a success and live quietly, right? To make a difference in the world, you have to make waves!

Take action! Be popular! You have to “go against the flow”! “Swim upstream!” “Think out of the box!” “Strike while the iron is hot!” All these phrases that success gurus promote.

Now here comes the Bible saying that the worthwhile goal to aspire for is a quiet life.

I’ll never forget the day one of our teenage sons came to us, distraught and in tears. His batch had just graduated, and college was the next step. The top student of his class, this bright, eloquent, young girl, had just given her valedictory speech. Two weeks later, this very girl, so full of potential and intelligence, had decided to end her life. It broke our hearts.

Here was a girl with the world at her feet, yet the world could not give her the peace that her heart longed for. This tragedy became a wake-up call for us as parents to remember that, yes, we want our children to succeed, not by the world’s definition of success, but by God’s.

Jesus came to the world with a huge calling. He was full of wisdom and stature. He was drawing crowds. He was making miracles. This was His public life. But He didn’t allow His public life to pressure Him.

The Bible points out the secret of His enduring strength and wisdom: He had developed a quiet life, one unseen, that was hidden with God. He was getting His love, acceptance, and reassurance from His Heavenly Father.

God was revealing a secret we all need:

Secret: Develop your private life with God.

A quiet life is needed in a noisy world. The noisier and more demanding your world is, the more “quiet” you’ll need.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

Mark 1:35 NIV

After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone . . .

Matthew 14:23 NIV

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.

Luke 6:12 NIV

The world needs God, and so do His children. And more than the public life that demands our presence, we need to follow Jesus’ example and have more and more of God’s presence in our daily lives.

Dear Father, may we teach our children to live, not for the approval of men, but for the quiet approval of the One who loves them the most. May we develop a quiet life with You.

Personal Application:

1. With 10 being the highest, how busy would you rate your life right now? Encircle your answer.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. What occupies most of your time?

3. How often do you pray to God about your daily concerns? Encircle your answer.

Never Once or twice Sometimes
When I remember to Often

4. What is one practice you can do to remind yourself to speak with God daily?

This week's Bible verse:

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.

Isaiah 26:3

If at First You Don't Bounce . . .

Today, I tried my first Bounce class.

While Joey was busy at work, in his new role in Singapore, I explored and tried to find my bearings. I'm quite geographically challenged, which in a way, leads me to many unexpected discoveries—like this “BounceFit” class. I stumbled into this tiny workout place and thought of giving it a try.

What is “BounceFit” anyway? Here's what the brochure said: *“This one-hour cardio workout on a trampoline involves a combination of fast and slow jumps, as well as high energy aerobic moves.”*

Clearly, I did not read this brochure completely when I signed up for a trial class! There were around 15 trampolines clustered around like a honeycomb, and we all faced our instructor. I wanted to meet the locals and get to know them in their element. That was my second goal. (See what a spiritual woman I am! ☺)

However, all thoughts of trying to strike up a conversation flew out the window as I was busy gasping for air, *while* flying in the air, and trying to catch up with the jumping jacks, “kick like scissors,” and leg lunges, all the while making sure I didn't bounce off my trampoline!

One lady, whom I chatted with initially, was so kind to give me sidelong glances and smiles, just to make sure I was still alive. Such was my first attempt to meet strangers.

You may be wondering, why do I do such things as “bounce”?

Let me tell you one thing on my bucket list:

I want to try flying on a flying trapeze.

Yes, I know I am old. And yes, I will be careful. One well-meaning person warned me about “Bounce” and said that one daughter had hurt herself badly, and was left with a swollen face. Oops! And here comes this Nana in her 50s going to give it a try!

I did. And I succeeded.

One thing I pray for is a **“CAN-DO”** spirit.

There are so many things that people say we **can't do**.

“You're a woman, you can't do that.”

“You're just _____.” (Fill in the blanks: a Pinoy/ undergrad/ poor/ unpopular/ too old/ too young/ too late, etc.)

“What makes you think you will succeed?”

You lack _____.” (Fill in the blanks: education/ money/ experience/ contacts/ time/ skills).

“It's too hard and too late for you to _____.” (Fill in the blanks: succeed/ learn a new skill/ change your ways/ invest for the future/ mend that relationship/ get married.)

I

Christ is the Giver of a “can-do” spirit.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13 NKJV

Having a “can-do” spirit gives us the ability to live a maximized life despite our many challenges. Even when our circumstances are not the best, a can-do spirit always enhances your life.

Here’s how Paul describes a “can-do” spirit: a spirit that is contented and at peace regardless of his situation, yet also full of hope!

. . . for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:11-13 NKJV

Wow! I love those verses! “I know how to be abased (live humbly) AND I know how to abound.” Christ my Savior will give me grace for every situation.

I know my hubby has a “can-do” spirit and it is actually his example that inspires me. He never seems to say “no” to any ministry challenge given to him. He is always full of faith and raring to take on the task.

But I will tell you his secret. Every morning, he wakes up and he prays.

I hear him from our bedroom. I see him write on his paper. He pours out his heart to God, and God mentors him and gives him all kinds of ideas.

2 Something that looks impossible could actually be God's signal that it is possible!

God signaled Moses through a burning bush. Think of how old Moses was when God interrupted his life, and his assignment was just beginning:

Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as the LORD commanded them. Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh.

Exodus 7:6-7

God used an unskilled, retired shepherd to lead His people in the most dramatic “parting of the Red Sea” style that Hollywood has tried to recreate many times over. Moses bounced high, and he bounced back into the perfect will of God for his life.

Dear reader, how old are you? Which voice is telling you it's too late?

Why not try what my hubby does every day? There's a God who is willing and totally capable of mentoring, educating, and leading us beyond any human ability we possess.

*In the day when I cried out, You answered me,
And made me bold with strength in my soul.*

Psalm 138:3 NKJV

Personal Application:

1. Do you have a “can-do” spirit? Why or why not?

2. Based on the verses below, is a person born with a “can-do” spirit, or is it something a Christian learns?

... for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:11-13 NKJV

3. How has Moses’s example inspired you? Why not write a prayer below for God to give you that “can-do” spirit for a particular challenge you are facing?

Are You a Tortoise or a Rabbit?

There's an old Aesop's fable about a race between a tortoise and a hare. Do you remember hearing that story when you were a child?

The story went this way: The hare (which looks so much like a bunny rabbit, but with longer legs and ears) was making fun of the tortoise's ungainly appearance and slowness. Proud Mr. Hare challenged him to a race, which Mr. Tortoise readily accepted.

As soon as the signal was given, ZOOM! The hare hopped away! He dashed off, leaving the poor tortoise in a cloud of dust.

Halfway through the race, the hare, seeing how slow his opponent was, decided to take it easy, enjoy his surroundings, and take a nap. He wakes up, only to realize that he had overslept, and that the tortoise had reached the finish line and won!

Well, in 2016, an animal event in Thailand decided to do *a real live race* between a tortoise and a big bunny rabbit! Would Aesop's fable prove true in real life? Could a slow turtle really beat a rabbit to the finish line?

As a crowd of onlookers cheered, the confident rabbit hopped off, effortlessly reaching the middle part of the race track. Then, he stopped, looked around.

In the meantime, the awkward tortoise just lumbered s-l-o-w-l-y along. He never changed his pace or his focus. He just looked straight ahead as he progressed inch by inch.

The bunny, on the other hand, was easily distracted by the crowd. His cute, furry head turned to the left and to the right. Not even the gestures of the bunny's master could get his attention.

Well, believe it or not, the tortoise won the race—in real life—and the bunny lost! There's even a YouTube video that shows the actual event.

That got me thinking.

In terms of appearance, who was cuter? Bunny.

In terms of strength and agility, who had the advantage? Bunny.

In terms of skill and talent, who was the natural athlete? Bunny.

Who was born with more advantages in winning the race? Bunny.

But who won the race? Tortoise.

Not the best-looking.

Not the most talented.

Maybe not even the smartest.

But the *most focused*.

What was the secret of Mr. Tortoise? **Diligence.**

Mr. Rabbit had natural abilities, but he was poor in disciplining himself.

He was easily distracted and chose temporary stopovers, which made him lose sight of his main goal.

Sometimes, I see Mr. Rabbit in me when I try to pray in the morning:

“Good morning, Lord! How are You today? Oh wait, let me just check if any text messages came in the night . . . Dear Father, please bless my day today, I have a meeting with . . . hmm, wait let me check my e-mail . . .” and off I go into many rabbit holes, forgetting my main goal.

Sometimes, we see Mr. Rabbit in obviously talented and smart young men and women who get derailed from their true calling by wasting their days on video games, the pleasures of the world, bad relationships, or drugs—or even in marriages that could have gone the distance until one mate hopped off and found another playboy bunny instead.

One thing I am praying for is that enduring quality that Mr. Tortoise had: **diligence**, which means “careful and persistent work or effort.”

It’s even biblical! Take a look at these verses:

*Whatever you do, **work heartily**, as for the Lord and not for men.*

Colossians 3:23 (emphasis mine)

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Colossians 3:2

*Whatever your hand finds to do, **do it with your might**.*

Ecclesiastes 9:10a (emphasis mine)

1 Diligence is faith in action.

Live each day focusing on what's really important, rather than on what seems pleasurable and easy.

2 Between diligence and talent, it is diligence that brings success.

The following verses in Proverbs highlight the importance of diligence:

*In all toil there is profit, **but mere talk tends only to poverty.***

Proverbs 14:23 (emphasis mine)

*Whoever is slothful will not roast his game, **but the diligent man will get precious wealth.***

Proverbs. 12:27 (emphasis mine)

Whoever works his land will have plenty of bread, but he who follows worthless pursuits lacks sense.

Proverbs 12:11

3 Even Jesus practiced diligence.

Jesus practiced diligence in prayer:

And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.

Mark 1:35 KJV

He also practiced diligence in His purpose for living:

*. . . fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. **For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame,** and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Hebrews 12:2 NIV (emphasis mine)

Now, dear reader, who do you appear to be?
Blessed with natural talent and skills, like Mr. Rabbit?
Or seemingly struggling with limited advantages, like Mr. Tortoise?

Which would you rather be like at the finish line, Mr. Tortoise or Mr. Hare?

Let these words guide you:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

1 Corinthians 9:24-25 NIV

Personal Application:

1. Do you see qualities in you that are like Mr. Hare and Mr. Tortoise?

2. Describe these qualities. Which are good and which are undesirable? Why?

3. Think of a person you admire. What qualities do you admire most about him or her?

4. Is diligence a trait you desire? Why not ask Jesus to give you this trait that brings success?

This week's Bible verse:

*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial,
for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of
life, which God has promised to those who love him.*

James 1:12

OCTOBER

Christ is the Giver
of a
“can-do” spirit.

*I can do all things through Christ
who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13 NKJV*

God's Backseat Driver

Sometimes, I am God's backseat driver. I like to tell Him what to do, and where to go, and how to drive this journey I call my Life. For many years, I have given Him the keys, *"God, You're in control."* In essence, He drives the car of my life. He is my Lord, Savior, and Boss. But many times, I realize, I still have the tendency to boss The Boss. *"God, please do this . . . God, please do that . . ."*

The Highway of Marie's Life stretches ahead, smooth driving all the way. Aahh, life is good! So I relax in my comfy seat. *"God, You are so good. My life is safe in Your hands. Your perfect will be done."*

But sometimes, He allows unexpected twists and turns: major potholes of conflict, unexpected detours, super-long delays. It gets bumpy, painful even—sometimes, terribly lonely and dark. *"God, what in the world is happening? You call this a good plan?!"*

Your life seems headed for disaster. Not just stuck in mud, but hurtling down a ravine. And here you are, pained and disoriented. Complete darkness. *"God, how could You do this to us?"*

It is easy to believe in God and His goodness when everything is fine in our world. But when major blows come, we are tempted to snatch that steering wheel back and say, *"God, give me back my life. You blew it. I'm not going to trust You anymore."*

It's at times like these when I realize I am still God's backseat driver. I want my life smooth, predictable, worry-free—and fully air-conditioned. I still want to choose the direction of my life.

But if God is really my Lord, then He doesn't just *hold* my road map—He *creates* it. Yes, I can list down my goals, strategize, work excellently, pray, and give Him my carefully made Plan A, but if He changes them to Plan B or C, it's *His* prerogative. Sometimes I forget that, and I get mad at the Driver. I get mad at Him for going off the Road of My Carefully Planned Life.

I realize that Jesus didn't promise me a road, He promised me a way. So even if there is neither road nor light ahead, He promised to be the way and to be my light. My plans are not the Way. My life is not the Way. *He* is the Way.

My life and my personality have been generally sunny, but very, very few know of my pitch-black situations where it took superhuman effort just to live another day. My lifeline in those times would be this verse ringing through my head: "*Because of the LORD's great love, we are not consumed, . . . great is your faithfulness.*"

My natural mind would silently scream, "What love?! If God truly loved me, this would not be happening!" But Lamentations 3:22-23 (NIV) would be the verse that would get me up in the morning and help me live another day. "*Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, . . . great is your faithfulness.*"

Secret:
Just because the way is dark, it doesn't
mean God is blind.

My friend, sometimes the way looks dark and you can't see what's ahead. Maybe you can't even see the face of your Driver. But God is not absent in the dark. He is present even when He seems silent. You can hang on to His words. In fact, you *must*. He is the Way. He is the Truth. He is your Life. Every dark path is temporary. Some of you need to hear and repeat that.

He is with you in the journey. He creates ways when roads seem closed. He provides light when all seems dark. He has supernatural outcomes for the person who keeps his faith in Jesus, his Savior. So dry your tears; your journey is not over. You may be wonderfully surprised.

Personal Application:

1. In what areas of my life am I a “backseat driver” to God?

2. Read Proverbs 4:18: “*But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.*” How can I apply this to my present situation?

This week’s Bible verse:

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.*

Proverbs 3:5-6 NASB

“ . . . if I can stay in the turmoil, calm and unperplexed, that is the end of the purpose of God . . . God’s end is to enable me to see that He can walk on the chaos of my life now. . . that I see Him walking on the waves, no shore in sight, no success, no goal, just the absolute certainty that is all right because I see Him walking on the sea.”

OSWALD CHAMBERS, *My Utmost for His Highest*

When “Good” Is Enough

Have you ever heard of the Diderot phenomenon?

A French philosopher in the 18th century, Denis Diderot, wrote an essay entitled “Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown.” In his writings, this French man described how he was given a beautiful, elegant coat (in those days called a “dressing gown”) to replace his old one.

In the beginning, the new coat gave him a lot of satisfaction. Yet having it started him on a downward spiral of discontent in his life. As he began wearing his brand new coat, Diderot began feeling more and more unhappy with his life. Suddenly, everything else he owned felt unsatisfactory, and “not good enough.” The clothes that he once thought so comfortable were now not stylish enough: his old pants were no match for the new coat. The old, familiar chair he used to sit on was now too shabby for such nice attire. Even the table where he worked at now looked inelegant! Nothing looked good enough anymore; not even his wife.

Upgrading his lifestyle became an obsession. He spent a lot of time and energy in acquiring new possessions and new contacts, to the detriment of his family relationships.

It’s so easy to go “Diderot-ing” nowadays. Social media offers us an overload of opportunities to compare ourselves with others and push us further to meet the world’s standards:

- You think you’re a good parent until you see the blog of that supermom whose children’s lunchboxes look like a

work of art: hardboiled eggs shaped like rabbits, vegetables molded like Rubik's cubes. Now why can't I be like that?

- You watch a video of someone's three-year-old already knowing how to read and write! Now why can't my kid do that?
- A guy finds his *Facebook* friend driving a brand new car. Now his own vehicle doesn't feel like a blessing anymore.
- You view pictures of a sibling traveling abroad, then you feel upset with your local "staycation."
- Even the term "tiger mom" was coined to describe hyper-strict Asian mothers who are never satisfied with a child's academic performance unless the child is perfect.

We pack our days with things to do, commit to urgent demands on our schedules, and pressure our families to achieve what others define as success. We end each day, wondering, "Did we succeed enough, study enough, or parent enough...?" We never seem to be rich enough, smart enough, or successful enough to feel fulfilled. When will "good" ever be enough in our increasingly discontented lives?

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, describes the undertaking of a tremendously huge project: the creation of the world. Talk about an intimidatingly long list of things to do! Here's how God handled the creation of "nothing" into "something":

God created His world in stages.

For everything there is an appointed time, and an appropriate time for every activity on earth.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 NET

Even though He could, God did not create the world in one instant. In Creation, He didn't cram all that needed to be done in one day. There was a designated priority from day one

through six. God wasn't bothered with unfinished projects spread out over a period of time. Could He be sending man an example of how to live his life, raise a child, build a career?

1 Progress comes in stages. Life is lived in seasons.

We see it in nature, as seeds are sown and stewarded until they bear fruit. We see it in the growth of a human being—from conception to birth to infancy to childhood, to his teenage years and beyond—we don't give birth to instant adults!

Instead of frustrating ourselves, wanting results NOW with our kids, our marriages, ourselves, fussing over progress that seems so slow in coming—don't give up because the work is still unfinished. Growth comes through stewardship and consistent faithfulness, not shortcuts. Every day, just be a faithful, responsible steward of your area of responsibility. Keep applying godly principles, and let Him be the one to promote you.

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

1 Corinthians 4:2

2 Follow God's perspective: **"...and God saw that it was good."**

We do know that when a word is often repeated, it is a weighty word. In Genesis 1, the phrase "and God saw that it was good"

was repeated at least five times, each time connected to the accomplishments done that day.

God saw His work as GOOD and ended each day with that perspective. Sure, the job of creating the world was still incomplete, but I loved how God summarized His days with “I did good today.”

So, I gave it a try. At the end of the day, I’d think:
“Marie, you did good meeting with _____ today.”
“Marie, you were a blessing today.”
“Marie, you did good by not screaming at the driver who stole your parking space.”

I also tried it on my hubby and kids:
“Joey, that was a good decision you made today.”
“Josh, thank you for accompanying me. You did a good thing today.”

God reviewed each day, and called His labor “good.” Satisfactory. Enough for the day.

Imagine the effect we’ll have on others if we had the habit of highlighting the good done that day instead of constantly complaining about the undone. Wouldn’t they be more motivated to do more good?

Just knowing that God actually sees the good you do on a daily basis, even when no one else does, is so encouraging to me!

Personal Application:

1. In the Book of Genesis, why do you think God chose to create the world in six days instead of just one?

2. Are there areas in your life that you feel are never “good enough”? Is this evaluation coming from people’s expectations or from godly conviction?

3. “*And God saw that it was good.*” Make a mental list of “good things” you did in the past two days that pleased the Lord. Nothing is too little!

How to Be a Tree

I've never seen a noisy tree in labor. I'm sure neither have you. But lots of trees give birth.

One Saturday, a friend of ours shared his harvest of fruit. He had bought a large farm, not realizing that the land contained rambutan trees. The seasons came and a few years later, these old trees suddenly started popping out juicy, sweet fruit!

Here are some lessons I've learned about fruit-bearing—from trees.

I Trees stay put as they grow.

I've never seen a restless tree, running from one garden to the next. Nor have I heard a noisy tree calling attention to itself: "KABOOM! Hey, look at me! I gave birth to that apple!" Or, "KABOOM! Wow, I'm the best coconut maker on the planet!"

Commitment comes first. Fruitfulness both in nature and in people is a process that requires the hand of God. And in God's proper time, the fruit will show.

Sometimes, the seemingly quiet people are being prepared to bear major fruit. Remain faithful. Remain humble, and let God be the one to put you on display.

2 Roots come before fruits.

And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.

Genesis 21:2

Can you imagine what huge roots God was doing inside Abraham and Sarah? To wait 90+ years to see results is no joke; but they waited.

One practical way to raise children, or even disciples, is to focus on building their roots of faith more than wanting fruit to show up right away. Don't always focus your attention on what's on the outside, the external behavior, appearance, etc. (Ex. "He still smokes." "She's so vain.") Focus on making people connect to God in a more personal way.

This works also in marriage problems. If you're frustrated with what you see on the outside, ask God how you can change your heart on the inside. We are all responsible for our internal responses.

3 Fruitful trees make use of p_ _ p.

Oops, I'm not sure I'm allowed to write that here! Haha! But it's true! Sometimes, life gives you p—p. But you can use the unsavory hurts, the failures, the heartaches, and trials as *fertilizer*.

Now tell me, where do most fertilizer come from? Yep. Manure. Use the “manure” in your life to make you mature.

Wisdom sometimes comes through facing challenges. Remember what Joseph said after all the abuse he experienced from his own family members? Listen to his words in Genesis 50:20 (NLT): *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.”*

So dear reader, you may be young or old. You may have new dreams to dream or old ones waiting to be fulfilled. You may have unfair life struggles. But as long as you remain steadfast, trusting in Jesus your Savior, God will make your life fruitful. Not just ordinary, superficial fruit. But the kind of legacy that is a blessing to you, to your nation, and to God. His timing, His power is greater than every limitation you and I have.

God bless you and give you a fruitful week!

Personal Application:

1. Based on the verses below, what is the first requirement of being fruitful?

But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.

Psalm 1:2-3 NLT

2. What benefits will you receive?

This week's Bible verses:

But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.

Psalm 1:2-3 NLT

Waiting with Lions

Five minutes away.

One advantage in using the “Grab” mobile application to get a cab or a car is that it tells you how long you have to wait before your vehicle arrives. It makes the waiting bearable, when you know there’s an end to it.

Three minutes away. Ten minutes to go.

Are you a good “wait-er”? Not the kind that serves you at a restaurant, but the attitude of someone who waits.

I realize, sometimes, that I am not. Even at the immigration line at the airport, Joey and I have a “contest” to see who got on the shortest line.

Sometimes, I also get spiritually impatient.

“God, why is it taking so long?”

“Why isn’t this problem over yet?”

“Why don’t You answer our prayers?”

“How many times do we have to go through this trial?”

I wish God had a Grab app Himself.

For example, you could type in: “God, please send money for tuition.”

Then God could answer: “Guaranteed three-day delivery.”

Then it’s easy to be spiritual, and wait for three days.

Or He could even have that “Grab Express” function for emergency situations: “God! Help! My child is sick again! Send help now!”

Then God could answer: “Two minutes away from healing.”

It's easy to be at peace when you know that answers to your prayers are coming. The hard part is the w-a-i-t-i-n-g—and waiting with no end in sight.

That's why Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego will always be on my personal list of Bible heroes. Not only did they have to wait, but they also had to wait with lions and fire. Daniel 3:19-20, 22-23 (NIV) says:

*Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, **and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace** (emphasis mine).*

How does a follower of God end up in flames?

So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"

A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed.

Daniel 6:16-17 NIV

How does a follower of God end up surrounded by lions overnight?

If you find yourself in a challenging situation, ask yourself: Is there any sin on my end? If so, admit it, repent of it, and receive God's grace.

But sometimes, we could be facing a trial with no sin in our hearts, nor wrongdoing on our hands.

1 Sometimes challenges come because you did what was right, not what was wrong.

As I was writing this, I felt that some of you readers needed to hear that. Just like Daniel and the three other guys, you may have found yourself in trouble, not because you did something wrong, but because you made a stand for God and chose to do what was pleasing to Him, regardless of the personal consequences. But remember this:

2 You are not alone. God is with you as you experience the fire and the presence of lions.

A sleepover with lions sounds like a death sentence. A bonfire—with you as firewood—sounds unbearable. There was no assurance of God saving them. There was no escaping the trial. In fact, God allowed the trial, unfair as it sounds. But remember, you are not alone. Someone powerful is with you in your greatest fire, and as you face your greatest threat.

Listen to the king's words to Daniel: **"Your God whom you continually serve will rescue you!"**

Listen to the king's words about the three friends:

*Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." He said, **"Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods."***

Daniel 3:24-25 NIV (emphasis mine)

3 Wait for the Lord to act. Let your deliverance show the greatness of your God.

We all want to do great things for God. Many times, the greatest thing we can do is to wait in faith—not struggle in desperation, not wrestle with fear or worry, not fight back and blame other people. Sometimes, the greatest act of faith we can do is WAIT.

But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.

Micah 7:7

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.

Isaiah 30:18

I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Psalms 27:13-14

Daniel received full vindication, and was rewarded for his faith. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were rewarded for their enduring faith as well.

Dear reader, I pray God will give you and me that same enduring faith, and that God will not allow any of us to be harmed by our trials, but instead turn our challenges into a celebration of His goodness.

Personal Application:

1. Are you facing your own “trial by fire” or “threat by lions”?

2. How do the three “secrets” mentioned in this chapter apply to your situation?

3. Which verse is speaking to you right now? Why not use it as your prayer before God?

This week’s Bible verses:

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are Mine!
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched,
nor will the flame burn you.
For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel,
your Savior.”*

Isaiah 43:1b-3a NASB

NOVEMBER

Don't say God
has been silent
if your Bible
has been closed.

*For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and
understanding.
Proverbs 2:6*

When Crisis Hits

When we hear of terrorism, corruption, and other crimes, we feel a sense of injustice and outrage. We're frustrated that wicked men seem to get away with evil. What are we to do when we are in a state of anger or grief? Does God's Word have anything to say about it?

This is what's been helping me, so I thought I'd share it here:

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart.

Ecclesiastes 7:2

What an unusual verse! Let's try it again:

It's better to attend a funeral than to attend a banquet, for everyone dies eventually, and the living will take this to heart.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 ISV

Such puzzling words. Grief is not a happy thought. We are uncomfortable with sad situations. Sadness is only as cute as that blue girl in the *Inside Out* animated movie; but not in real life.

How in the world could it be better "to attend a funeral than to attend a banquet"?

The verses continue:

*Sorrow is better than laughter,
because the heart is made better through trouble.
For the wise person thinks carefully when in mourning,
but fools focus their thoughts on pleasure.*

Ecclesiastes 7:3-4 ISV

1 Crisis can give us a wiser perspective on life.

How can sorrow be better than laughter? It forces us to stop and assess our lives. We begin thinking: What is the meaning of all this? Do I need to make changes? What happens if I die? Am I living for what really matters?

Crisis awakens our heart to the reality that this life, with all our plans, is temporary. Fools, on the other hand, only focus on “good times,” deceived that they can get away with anything and are answerable to no one. Pleasures temporarily distract us to focus mainly on this world, while the permanence of death opens our eyes to the reality of the next.

2 Crisis reveals where true protection comes from. Spend time with the Lord when you are overwhelmed.

*Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me;
all day long an attacker oppresses me;
my enemies trample on me all day long,
for many attack me proudly.*

Psalm 56:1-2

These words, written by King David in Psalm 56, could have been written today. They were written by a world leader who was beset by one crisis after another.

*All day long they injure my cause;
all their thoughts are against me for evil.
They stir up strife, they lurk;
they watch my steps, as they have waited for my life.
For their crime will they escape?*

Psalm 56:5-7

It's refreshing how David had such an honest relationship with God. Yes, he was a leader with serious responsibilities, but he was also God's child. He had a Father he could always run to and air his concerns, especially in times of trouble.

*When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can flesh do to me?*

Psalm 56:3-4

Despite David's courage, military might, and talent, he knew his real strength came from his relationship with the Lord.

*. . . Lead me to the rock
that is higher than I,
for you have been my refuge,
a strong tower against the enemy.*

Psalm 61:2b-3

3 Remember who wins. Live in the fear
of the Lord, not in the fear of man.

Here's my acronym for CRISIS:

Christ's **R**esurrection **I**S **I**nfininitely **S**tronger!

Jesus came in the midst of a hate-filled world and suffered a cruel death caused by sin. Yet all the sin in the world could not stop Him from rising from the dead, and overcoming the enemy. When you receive Jesus in your life as your Lord and Savior, that same resurrecting power of Jesus lives inside of you.

Jesus already won the victory for you. His Holy Spirit will enable you to live life with faith and supernatural results, regardless of your situation.

God's justice will prevail. He is the defender of His people. Death doesn't provide wicked people an easy escape; there will be payback even after death.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

2 Corinthians 5:10

So live wisely. Find your strength in God and the truth of His Word. Let crisis make you firmer in your resolve to live a meaningful life that blesses people and honors Jesus, our Savior.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might . . . Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

Ephesians 6:10-13

Personal Application:

1. How do you react to bad news?

2. How can God's Word strengthen you in times of crisis?
Which passages from the psalms of David mentioned in the chapter are helpful to you now?

3. C.R.I.S.I.S: Christ's Resurrection Is Infinitely Stronger
How can Christ's death and resurrection change your perspective on life?

This week's Bible verse:

*"These things I have spoken to you,
so that in Me you may have peace.
In the world you have tribulation, but take courage;
I have overcome the world."*

John 16:33 NASB

How Narrow Are You?

I did not vote for our country's current president. So upon his installation, I thought, I could respond in either of two ways: narrow or supportive. I could go on social media and be a critic of the government's every move, or I could celebrate the good I see and pray for God to give them strength, insight, and boldness to correct what's wrong and do what's right.

I can trust in the sovereignty of God and humbly decide, "Lord, You are infinitely wiser than me. My perspective is limited; Yours is infinite. Lord, not MY will, not their will, but Your plan for this country be accomplished."

Many times, we have become a nation of critics:

"I've given up on this country," I told my kids. "Migrate if you can."

"This president is _____ (insert negative adjectives)."

"My kids are _____ (insert latest complaint about child)."

"My spouse is _____ (insert latest criticism about spouse)."

"My job _____ (insert "sucks" and its synonyms)."

"People are so _____ (insert latest insult about society)."

Yes, we are intelligent and educated. Yes, we may have all the answers (or think we do). Yes, some of us may be intellectually superior, or eloquent in speech. But the bottom line is that we have become professional complainers. So we eloquently and intelligently complain while thinking we have contributed to the good of society. We post our rants on *Facebook*, craft our latest complaint tweets, thinking the universe will change by our latest comment on society's stupidity or someone's ineptitude.

Ever wondered why more young people entertain suicide or thoughts of leaving this world? Why should they stay when all they hear is criticism, doom, and gloom? Don't believe me? How are your dinner table conversations?

In contrast, here are Jesus' words:

“. . . Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33 NLT).

From his mouth come words that build up, not tear down, people. “But **take heart**,” he says, “I have overcome [the problems of] the world.”

If there is anyone who has a right to complain, it would be God. He could easily look down on us and tell us, “See what kind of a mess you've made of the life / marriage / career opportunities / resources I have given you.”

Did you ever hear God tell you that? Instead, in Scripture, He writes, “*Take heart.*” Be encouraged.

Secret:
Unless you are God, remember, you do not
know everything.

So instead of criticizing, decide to agree with God's plans. “Lord, not my will but Yours be done.”

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation,

among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life . . .

Philippians 2:14-16

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was asking His Dad if there was another way. Could He do a painless Plan B, instead of the cross and suffering found in Plan A? But Jesus chose to agree with His Father's plans despite His discomfort.

Not complaining means that you have decided to become a part of the solution, not a contributor to the problem.

How do you become a part of the solution?

Be an active influencer for God, instead of a passive social media critic.

Actively and wisely use your talents and skills to be a blessing to this nation, in harmony with the Word of God. If you are a teacher, doctor, student, entrepreneur, etcetera, you can be an active godly influence in the world God gave you to occupy.

If you're a parent, commit to raise your children with integrity, human decency, and moral values. Give them the skills to face adversity with courage and resiliency.

If you have the passion and knowledge to run the government, then get involved, and be a God-fearing civil servant. The key word is "servant," not know-it-all.

If you are a Christian, influence your environment. Pray for your leaders.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Ephesians 4:29

Instead of complaining with your words, live your life with excellence! God's advice in 1 Peter 2 (NLT) says,

Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God . . . (v. 12).

For the Lord's sake, submit to all human authority—whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right (vv. 13-14).

Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Fear God, and respect the king (v. 17).

Why be narrow in your perspective when you have a sovereign God? This is the perspective I want my children to have in this nation that God has given us:

*The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.*

*The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.*

*I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
in the night also my heart instructs me.*

*I have set the LORD always before me;
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.*

Psalm 16:5-8

Personal Application:

1. In the course of a day, are you more of a complainer, or a person who builds people up with your words? Is this a habit you wish to keep?

2. Is it your habit to bless or curse your nation or its leaders?

3. How are you a positive influence to the people around you?

This week's Bible verses:

Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God . . . For the Lord's sake, submit to all human authority—whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish those who do wrong and to honor those who do right Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Fear God, and respect the king.

1 Peter 2:12-14, 17 NLT

An Everyday Holiday

It's great that America has its Thanksgiving holiday. How wonderful it is to have a special day that isn't focused on getting gifts, but rather on giving thanks for what we already have.

For many years, we enjoyed this American tradition via dinners with the Murrells when they lived in Manila. I sure loved the roasted turkey, cornbread stuffing, pecan and pumpkin pies! They preferred white meat while we liked dark, so everyone was happy! Expressing thanks to God for each one was always the best part.

One Thanksgiving, I dressed my whole family in Native American attire, complete with headgear made of feathers, fringing outfits, and face paint (after all, we were the "natives" of our country). So when the Murrells opened their front door, they were completely surprised! I would have even DIY-ed and brought a teepee if I had the time. One of their guests, a blonde American student, was also invited. So before we entered, I lightly tied up the arms of the "pale face" as a gift for the Murrell family. ☺

This gave me an idea. Since the Philippines has its own history, I wanted to have a uniquely Filipino holiday of thanksgiving. I thought, Our family name is Bonifacio; why not have a special holiday on November 30? "Let November 30 be our family's special 'thanksgiving day'!" I declared. After all, it already is an official nationwide holiday dedicated to Andres Bonifacio, one of our country's heroes.

My family is somewhat used to my wacky ideas, so this time my dress code was "dress like a Katipunero" for our

new thanksgiving day. (Philippine trivia: Andres Bonifacio was the head of the *Katipunan*, the secret revolutionary movement which sought the country's independence from Spanish colonial rule. He was known to be a fearless leader; outspoken, but rough on the edges.) So guests came in *camisa de chinos* (plain white tees), loose red pants, bare feet, cloth bands around their heads, while wielding menacing *bolo* knives and *itaks* made of tinfoil and cardboard, complete with "bloody smears." Some of the girls came in long skirts. I had a huge painted *Katipunan* flag and cooked up native Pinoy food like chicken *tinola*, beef *bulalo*, and *daing na bangus*—food fit for brave *Katipuneros*.

After the feast, I gathered everyone, and hauled out this heavy coffee table book. For dramatic effect, I darkened the room, lit candles, and started reading manuscripts about the *Katipunan*. There we were, huddled in the dark, reading by candlelight, dressed in our vintage outfits. I was trying so hard to give this activity a "holy, happy, thanksgiving-y" kind of atmosphere, but was failing miserably.

"Mom, this is so weird," one of my sons blurted out.
"Yeah, Mom!" another son added from the shadows. "It's like you're forming a cult!"
"What is it you're trying to achieve anyway?" asked my perplexed hubby.
"Well, I just wanted us to have our own version of thanksgiving!" I replied, equally frustrated.
"Honey, you don't need to have a special holiday to be grateful," spoke the wise hubby. "You can be grateful anytime."
And yep, he was right.

So we blew out the candles, turned on the lights, became normal again, and did just that. We simply took turns that November 30, saying "I'm grateful for you _____ because of _____."

I'm glad that God can teach me secrets through my family, despite my wacky ideas.

Secret:

You don't need a special holiday to be grateful.
It's not the day that matters, but the spirit
of thankfulness.

According to the Bible, when is the best time to be grateful?

1. **Always.** So gratitude becomes a daily habit, instead of a yearly one.

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers . . .

Philippians 1:4

2. **In all circumstances.** So gratitude becomes a decision, and not just an emotion.

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 NIV

3. **For everything.** So we can see God behind the scene in all situations.

. . . giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .

Ephesians 5:20

So Happy Thanksgiving (Every) Day, everyone!

Whether it's the third Thursday of November that you celebrate, or November 30's Bonifacio Day, or whichever day you hold special, may your whole year be a thanksgiving offering, pleasing to the Lord.

Personal Application:

1. What's the first thing that you think of before you get up in the morning?
 - a. Things to do
 - b. Problems and concerns
 - c. The news
 - d. God's power and love for me
 - e. Something I'm grateful for

2. How often do you verbally express your gratitude to God, to your family, or to the people around you?
 - a. It's a daily habit for me to be grateful and say it.
 - b. On Christmas, birthdays, and holidays.
 - c. Only when I feel like it.
 - d. I didn't grow up that way, so it's uncomfortable.

3. According to the Bible, when is the best time to be grateful? Why?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____

Unmasked

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.

Hebrews 4:13 NLT

Have you ever been conned by a con man?

When I saw this poor old man, I felt so sorry for him. This frail, seemingly helpless, emaciated guy was clutching his side, and slowly making his way up Julia Vargas Avenue.

Acting on impulse, I got out of my car and let him ride with me so I could take him nearer to his destination. (Fortunately, I had a driver with me.)

He then unraveled a tale of how he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and how he was about to meet a friend who promised him some money. The amount was not for him, but for his kids. He desperately needed to buy bus tickets for his children and take them to the province, so his sister could take care of them when he died.

Unfortunately, his friend never showed up. He showed me lab results, and pictures of his three kids which he had in his bag.

I was so moved by his sad story that I thought, "This man needs to know Jesus! I have to help him!" We parked on the side, and Manny (who was driving) prayed with him. This man closed his eyes, and repeated the prayer that Manny prayed for him.

I gave him some of my personal money to help him buy bus tickets for his family, and went my way, sad but happy.

Weeks later, we received a text message from his sister, informing us that he had died, and grateful for the help I extended to her brother.

Almost a year after, our family friend Benjo excitedly told us an interesting story of how he had been a good Samaritan. . .

He was driving down Makati Avenue, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw this poor, old, seemingly helpless, emaciated man, clutching the side and walking along the road. . .

Believe it or not, we were conned by the same guy!

He looked the part, said the right words, and acted so convincingly that we fell for it. To think the man even had the audacity to text us via his sister that he had already died!

And now its election season in my nation. There are too many candidates, and too many promises. There are accusations and counter-accusations. There are debates, smoke screens, intimidations, and cover-ups.

Who is telling the truth? Who is telling lies? Who is leading a double life? Who is so used to telling a lie so convincingly that he even fools himself?

This is a time I am grateful that there is a Sovereign God who cannot be fooled. There is no getaway for con men, because in the end, God will get them. He cannot be silenced, nor bought by charitable donations or good works.

1 God is not blind.

The Bible is filled with reminders:

Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?" declares the LORD. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 23:24 NIV

My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes.

Jeremiah 16:17 NIV

The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.

Proverbs 15:3 NIV

Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

Psalms 139:4 NIV

For your ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all your paths.

Proverbs 5:21 NIV

2 Devoted things are not to be touched.

In the Book of Joshua, God gave specific instructions to the people not to steal or keep for personal gain what wasn't theirs to keep.

But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.

Joshua 6:18 NIV

But Achan, one of the guys, disobeyed God's orders and chose to keep what wasn't his. Here's a Bible verse about hidden wealth:

Among the plunder I saw a beautiful robe from Babylon, 200 silver coins, and a bar of gold weighing more than a pound. I wanted them so much that I took them. They are hidden in the ground beneath my tent, with the silver buried deeper than the rest.

Joshua 7:21 NLT

Who is touching the things he shouldn't touch?
Who is having relationships that he shouldn't be having?

3 God can track a family tree.

Not only is the guilty punished, but his sin affects his family line as well as the nation.

But Israel violated the instructions about the things set apart for the LORD. A man named Achan had stolen some of these dedicated things, so the LORD was very angry with the Israelites. Achan was the son of Carmi, a descendant of Zimri son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah.

Joshua 7:1 NLT

This true account is sad and scary at the same time. No sin goes unpunished. What we do, no matter how hidden, will have consequences that affect the people we love, as well as the nation we live in.

Not only did God expose Achan, his family members were destroyed, too. Instead of enjoying their lives, Achan's family ended up badly, young and old. Check out what happened by reading Joshua chapter 7.

Standing before God, we are all unmasked. We are all exposed. I am exposed for the sinner that I am. So are you. So are all our candidates.

May this fearful revelation make us stop in our tracks from doing evil, and choose to live right before God, not just in words, but in truth and in action.

Personal Application:

What insights can you get from the following?

1. God is not blind.

“Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” declares the LORD. “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 23:24 NIV

My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from me, nor is their sin concealed from my eyes.

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The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.

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For your ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all your paths.

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2. Devoted things are not to be touched.

But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it.

Joshua 6:18 NIV

How can you apply this in your own life?

3. Not only is the guilty punished, but his sin affects his family line, as well as the nation.

What can you learn from Achan's story in Joshua 7?

Please pray:

Teach me your ways, O LORD, that I may live according to your truth! Grant me purity of heart, so that I may honor you.

Psalm 86:11 NLT

This week's Bible verses:

*For a man's ways are before the eyes of the LORD,
and he ponders all his paths.*

*The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him,
and he is held fast in the cords of his sin.*

*He dies for lack of discipline,
and because of his great folly he is led astray.*

Proverbs 5:21-23

DECEMBER

CHRISTMAS
is celebrating CHRIST,
Messiah and Savior.

*“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end.”*

Isaiah 9:6-7

When It Doesn't Feel Like Christmas

Fill in the blank: "Only ___ more days till Christmas!"

What? It's December already? It's enough to make the OC in me panic. Gifts to buy! Things to do! Plans to make! Family reunions! Food to order! People to host! Places to go! Bills to pay! *Ay, caramba!*

For the first time in forever, I am UNPREPARED. No gift yet bought. No Christmas decor except one tiny wooden tree that's sitting on my bare dining table. And it is already December 1 as I write.

The past days of 2016 have been a roller-coaster of activities and emotions. Joey's dad in the ICU, his unpredictable health situation, combined with our relocation to another country, the duties and adjustments there, the packing and unpacking, mixed with leaving comforts and joys of being with family and friends, have left me little time to think about Christmas.

I am, by habit, very OC about Christmas. I love the holidays, the gatherings, advent nights, and all the preparations that go with it.

So does Joey. My dear hubby loves trimming the Christmas tree. No, make that, *He looooooves decorating our Christmas tree.*

This has been Joey's ritual for the past one million years: he will play Christmas carols, turn on the a/c full blast

(winter effect in our tropical country), light our Christmas scented candles (cinnamon or peppermint effect), unwrap the ornaments one by one, and get teary-eyed as certain ornaments remind him of memories of our growing family through the years.

He *plans* which ornament goes on the tree, and which ones go on the garlands. Then he will take *each* little item and hang them carefully in his chosen spot. Yes, Virginia, underneath the strong, leader surface, my hubby is a sentimental Christmas bear on the inside.

Tree-trimming night for the Bonis is really watching Papa Joey trim the tree and get teary-eyed until midnight, as the rest of us gather around him, read our huge collection of Christmas books, twist tinsel around each other, and basically just goof around as a family.

But today, our Manila tree is still bare, the Christmas books still stored. We don't return to Manila until December 18th. And God is showing me a different side of Christmas in another part of the world.

One quiet night in our new rented unit, Joey and I had a very un-Christmassy dinner of scrambled eggs and hotdogs, beside our tiny, wooden tree. A simple meal for two. Then he washed the plates, while I played Christmas carols on Spotify. We still had no TV or cable connection, so we sat on our sofa in silence, and watched the city lights from our window.

We were experiencing a December so different from the festivities we were so used to . . .

Silent Night. Holy Night.

Sometimes, we feel it's not Christmas unless:

- we've bought our Christmas outfits (preferably red),
- our home is all decorated,
- all gifts have been bought and wrapped,
- we received gifts, too,
- the family picture has been taken,
- all loved ones are gathered and complete,
- the turkey/ham/family secret recipe has been served,
- Santa Claus comes to town.

But the first Christmas had none of that. Joseph and Mary had:

- no family or relatives with them,
- no fancy decor,
- no food,
- no special place,
- no room at the inn,
- no Santa.

But there was Jesus.

I Christmas is complete when Jesus is present, and a meaningless event when Jesus is absent.

The good news is *not* that you've completed your Christmas shopping. The good news is, you have a SAVIOR.

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:9-11 NASB

2 Christmas is an invitation to “Come as you are” to God’s presence.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.” So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.

Luke 2:15-16 NASB

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”

Matthew 2:2 NASB

3 Christmas is you receiving Jesus as the ultimate gift of all.

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

James 1:17 NASB

Interesting how Joseph and Mary had no camera, no GoPro or *Instagram* to record their special event, yet the whole world could still picture that scene to this day: Joseph and Mary leaning over the baby Jesus, angels singing, shepherds and Magi kneeling.

Joy to the world! The Lord has come!

So dear reader, I don't know what kind of Christmas you're having this year. Maybe it's filled with a flurry of activities, maybe it's quiet like ours so far, but remember to CELEBRATE. Celebrate, because you have Jesus. Celebrate, because He gives you hope instead of fear. Celebrate, because He invites you to come to Him, just as you are. Most of all, He came to give you the best Christmas present of all.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 NASB

Personal Application:

1. Describe your current Christmas preparations.

2. How does it compare to the first Christmas?

3. What made that first Christmas special? How can you preserve that in your Christmas this year?

"BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means "GOD WITH US."

Matthew 1:23 NASB

Have You Opened Your Gift Yet?

When you're an adult, Christmas seems more of a mad frenzy of giving out gifts rather than receiving. But when you are a child of God, you are never too old to receive gifts! He'll never say, "Get out of here! I don't have time for you!" Instead, He always says, "Come here, child. I'm so glad you're here." So this Christmas eve, let's take off our "grown-up hats" for a minute and be kids again!

I'm so happy that we're forever children when God is our Father. He's got gifts for you and me! Let's open one.

God's Christmas Gift No. 1: Complete Forgiveness

What a way to start Christmas day: completely clean and forgiven—a fresh start for the year ahead.

Think of something in your life that you regret doing. I can think of a lot of things I wish I did and didn't do, bad decisions, or words I wish I never said. Whatever your guilt or regret is, it can keep you tossing at night, or mentally kicking yourself in the butt. We'd rather drink to keep from thinking, laugh to keep from crying, blame others for our misery, and find a way to distract or amuse ourselves to avoid facing the truth that we blew it—not just once, but several times.

Maybe it's a lousy decision made years before, but the memory stays fresh. Maybe it's a relationship gone bad. Temper blown. A horrible exchange of words. Maybe it's worries for the future.

Regret: some avoid it, ignore it, and live in denial. Some keep it, relive it, and live in guilt.

I Jesus came to give you a gift you could never afford to give yourself.

This Christmas, God's got a gift for you! The tag has your name on it. Yes, yours. :) Reach in and hold your gift. It's wrapped in a manger. What is it? Total forgiveness, wrapped in hope.

Breathe that in. Embrace it.

Yes, despite every bad decision. Despite that wrong relationship. Despite your most horrible mistake or secret or blatant sin—100% forgiven. For everything. A clean slate.

It's yours to claim not just on Christmas, but in your lifetime. What a gift! It's almost impossible to comprehend.

Only a sinless Being has the right to grant such an audacious gift. He came to earth that first Christmas to deliver it in person.

2 Jesus paid FULL price for you to receive that gift.

We pay our purchases in cash or credit card, even on installment. That's not the way God hands out His presents. Jesus paid our gifts *in full* with His own blood, sweat, and tears. Paid in full. Remember His last words on the cross? *Tetelestai*. "It is finished." It's done. His life was the price; His suffering, the cost.

Jesus paid with His life what the richest gazillionaire could never ever afford to buy: complete forgiveness. A fresh start. Mercy. Hope.

Humility is the key that opens this gift while pride is the lock that keeps you from receiving it.

You see, we've got Christmas all mixed up. God is the one who gives gifts. That's the Good News. Our Savior has come. We can be forgiven. It's not too late.

A Prayer:

Dear Father,

Thank You for giving me my first Christmas Gift: the gift of Complete Forgiveness.

I come to You just as I am—strengths and weaknesses, blunders, bloopers, sins, and all. I admit and repent of all my sins, specifically the following:

I'm sorry for the way I have lived my life and put You aside. I was wrong. Frankly, I have no power to save myself. The good stuff I try to do will never be enough to pay for all the bad in my life. I am really just a sinner saved by Your amazing grace.

Thank You, Jesus, for coming that first Christmas. Thank You for paying the price that I could never pay, so I can receive a gift I don't deserve. Thank You for the gift of complete forgiveness. I receive it humbly and gratefully. Thank You for the gift of a clean, fresh start. Thank You for being my Savior for life.

Let this Christmas be a more meaningful one for me and my family. Help me share this gift of forgiveness with others. Let healing begin in my heart, that I may share it to others. By Your grace, I choose to live a life that honors You.

Thank you for reading! Have a blessed Christmas from my family to yours! ☺

Personal Application:

Merry Christmas to you!

1. Would you like to receive God's gift of forgiveness?

Why not make the prayer on the previous page your prayer today?

2. Are there people you need to forgive and release into God's hands?

An Interrupted Life: The Secret of Mary

Mary's life amazes me. Frankly, if I were in Mary's shoes—I mean, her sandals—I'd probably be very offended with God. Imagine being Mary for a minute:

Here you are—a young, obedient, teenage girl, living a godly life, properly engaged to a good guy, minding your own business. Then God comes along and completely changes your entire future! He sends an angel, who gives the strangest announcement, and now you are suddenly pregnant in the weirdest way!

How do you break such scandalous news to your parents or relatives? Your husband-to-be? Now people are talking, whispering behind your back, and saying nasty things about you. Even your fiancé is thinking of divorcing you.

Imagine yourself, after facing the ridicule of people around you, standing firm in your declaration that God is behind all this, confident that He will take care of you—only to experience further embarrassment.

Now nine months pregnant with your first child, you have to travel by donkey with your swollen tummy, jostling up and down dirt roads, suddenly feeling labor pains, and find yourself having to give birth far away from the comforts of home, away from the love of family—with your only companion being your husband, who is not even the father of your baby!

How easy it is to be offended, especially when you consider yourself a Christian who is already obeying God. You follow God diligently, so in a way, you expect life to follow a certain formula: “I do this, therefore God should do this for me.” And when it doesn’t happen, we get mad.

It’s tempting to look at other people’s lives, and think, “*God, You’re unfair. God, do You really love me? Why did my life have to turn out this way? Is this what I get for following You? Why are their lives easier?*”

While the weary, young Mary and her nine-month swollen womb were tumbling up and down the road to Bethlehem, her fellow teenagers were single and carefree.

Besides, God had all the power to wake up the shepherds and light up the skies with His heavenly angels. So why couldn’t He wake up just one innkeeper, and tell him in a booming voice, “Prepare a room!” Then poor Mary wouldn’t have to endure the pain and humiliation of giving birth to her first-born child in a cold, damp, stinky cow barn.

Surely He knew when Mary was due. Surely He knew the destiny of this child she carried. So why did He have to let them go through so much pain and trouble?

If I were God, I would have told Mary: “You, my dear, are excused from suffering. No more donkey ride for you. And because you’ve been so obedient, I’m going to give you a problem-free life. Oh, by the way, remember all your neighbors who spoke all those nasty things about you? I’ll just zap them with lightning right now.” (KABOOM!)

Nope, God didn’t do any of that. He allowed Mary and Joseph to experience their unique life struggles. Yes, even death

threats. All the more does Mary's response become even more amazing to me: ". . . *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior . . .*" (Lk. 1:46-47).

Secret:
Regardless of your situation,
focus on the greatness of the Lord,
not the size of your problem.

Don't allow your emotions to focus on your challenges. Let the magnifying glass reveal that God's will is greater than your will.

Mary's soul, which could have easily been offended and burdened by God-given cares, chose instead to magnify the Lord and not her problems. ". . . *May it be done to me, according to your word . . .*" (Lk. 1:38 NASB).

Mary, despite her suffering, allowed God to be God.

Life is a journey we live, and God promises to travel the road with us. The challenges we face become part of our testimony. He is always in control, despite the Herods of this world and the hurts we endure.

When others see us respond in faith in the midst of our personal troubles, the opportunity for Christ to be born in their hearts becomes very real.

God interrupted Mary's life, and she responded in faith. As far as she was concerned, her Savior had come. It was well with her soul.

“And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a fulfilment of the things which have been spoken to her from the Lord.”

Luke 1:45 ASV

Prayer:

*Dear Lord, I choose to believe.
Let it be done unto me and my family,
according to Your Word.*

Personal Application:

1. Based on Mary's response to the angel in Luke 1:47, would you say that she saw herself as needing a Savior just like us?

2. How was Mary able to live her life as the mother of Jesus while on earth? Is that same power available to give you an overcoming life today?

And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."

Luke 1:35

3. Has there ever been a time when you wondered about God's ways? How does this verse help?

This week's Bible verses:

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.”

Isaiah 55:8-9 NLT

Dear Philip and Lucas

A few months ago, I sang to my grandson Philip: *"Who made all the trees that grow? God in heaven above!"* Testing his memory, I sang it again: *"Who made all the trees that grow?"* Philip replied happily: *"Bob and Kevin (characters from the Minions movie!) above!"*

So I thought of writing this Christmas letter to two-year-old Philip and his seven-month old cousin Lucas:

Dear Philip and Lucas,

Merry Christmas!

Everything looks different now, doesn't it? There are bright lights all over the city, and everyone is busy! There are boxes wrapped in red and green, and Christmas carols playing. I'm sure the two of you will receive a mound of gifts from family, and I can't wait to see your happy faces light up when you open your wonderful presents.

Right now, Batman excites you, Philip. And you think that the Minions, Bob and Kevin, made the trees grow! But one day, you will meet a very special Person, and that will be a very special Christmas for you.

I found a train set for you, Philip, and a basketball toy for you, Lukie. I also wrapped a cute superhero stuffed toy, some chubby board books, and more stuff! Truth is, this Nana would have bought you the whole Toys R Us, if I could!

But there is **One Gift** I have been wanting you to receive, ever since you were born. But I can't buy it. It's that expensive. Not even the richest man in the world could pay for it. The price is too high for anyone.

But God bought this gift for you, and He came on Christmas to give it. I hope one day, you will receive His gift, and say, "Thank You."

His name is Jesus Christ. He is bigger than Batman, faster than Superman, and more satisfying than Lego.

On Christmas Day, we will have a birthday cake for Him! This way, you will always remember that Christmas is not about you, but about Jesus.

Then you will get the honor of *giving* out your gifts to other people *first*. This way, you will learn the joy of giving and thinking of others before yourself.

We will also read to you the Christmas story so you will know who I'm talking about, and why we celebrate Christmas.

"Christmas" without **Christ** is just **"mas"**:

- **Money**
- **Activities**
- **Shopping**

That's how many big people celebrate the holidays: money, activities, shopping! Even Nana forgets sometimes.

So let Nana share with you a **SECRET**:

If all December is to you is money, activities, and shopping, that will be a very poor, unfortunate Christmas indeed. But

if you ever experience a December with no money, activities, or shopping, and the only one you have is Christ, you will still have the BEST Christmas of all.

Dear Jesus,

*I am praying for the day to come that Philip and Lucas, and all who read this, will have a meaningful, wonderful Christmas. That's the day they will receive **CHRIST: Messiah and Savior.***

Personal Application:

Merry Christmas!

1. How has your Christmas been? Is it more about money, activities, and shopping? Why or why not?

2. Can you think of three ways to have a more meaningful Christmas?

3. Who is a person you are reaching out to this season?

This week's Bible verses:

"She will bear a Son; and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Matthew 1:21

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Romans 10:9

End the Year F.A.T.

Would you like to know what I'm going to do as the year ends? I am going to assess my F.A.T.! No, not the amount of food I've eaten during the holidays. Although, even now, I'm still dreaming of this delectable Paper Moon cake that has, like, 1,000 layers of thin crepes and cream filling, as well as the juicy roast beef my sister Reg brought on Christmas day. (Dear Reggie, if you are reading this, just bring the same thing always!)

Okay, back to topic . . .

I had an interesting chat with a friend of mine who shared what they do as a family at the end of the year. They take a "gadget-free" family retreat! They don't use their cellphones or Wi-Fi except on specific agreed hours. They spend the time either reconnecting with each other as husband and wife, or going on long walks, or playing games as a family, etc. Everyone buys a fresh journal each, and individually, they take time off to write the things they are grateful for the past year and their goals for the new year.

When life gets too busy, it is good for adults and children to purposefully take time off for some peace and quiet reflection.

Let me share some secrets with you about how I end my year, and end it F.A.T.:

F: Forgive others and forgive myself.

Begin the new year light by letting go of the weights of the past year. Yes, things could have been better. Yes, there were headaches and heartaches. But, by the grace of God, you are alive and reading this! God has seen you through the ups and downs of the past year.

I will end the year by asking God: “Lord, who do I need to forgive? Which record of wrongs need to be wiped clean?” Why start the new year holding on to the grudges of the past? It’s time to erase! Letting go of old hurts leaves room for God to do new things in your life.

Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:18-19

It’s also a good time to *ask God to forgive you and for you to forgive yourself* for your failures in the past year and beyond. If there is something that’s been nagging at your conscience, listen, take it to the Lord, and tell Him about it. Confession to God is good for the soul. Start the new year free from heavy condemnation and regret, secure in the unconditional love of a Savior.

First John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

. . . For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor

any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39 NIV

2 **A: Accountability**

Sometimes, priorities get out of whack in the busyness of life. The end of the year is a good time to ask God:

“Lord, what should my priorities be for the new year? What needs adjustment?”

“What am I accountable for?”

“What relationships should I be spending time on?”

“How can I be a better steward of my time, talent, resources?”

Maturity comes when we stop blaming others for our lot in life, and start taking *active* responsibility for our lives.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23-24

3 **T: Teachability**

“Lord, am I still teachable?”

“Do I still listen to what You have to say to me, or do I have a habit of ignoring You?”

“Do I make daily decisions based on what is pleasing to You, or on what is pleasing to me?”

Wisdom comes, not from knowing everything, but from having a daily relationship with the One Who Knows Everything. Lord, help me be more teachable and more obedient to You, the older I get!

Why live a life of regret when you can be guided by the wisdom of God every day?

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV

So, dear reader, here's wishing you and me a blessed and F.A.T. New Year! 😊

This week's Bible verses:

May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed.

Psalm 20:4 NIV

You crown the year with Your goodness, and Your paths drip with abundance.

Psalm 65:11 NKJV