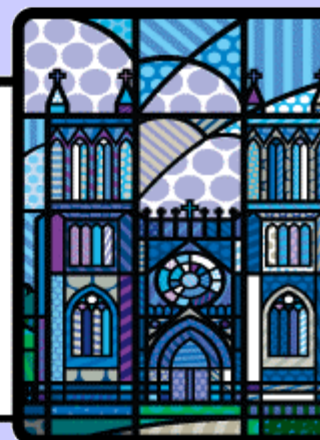


Sanctified Together

Email and Online Publication



Issue 1: Belt of Truth

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A Word from the Editor

Beloved!

"Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist . . ." (Ephesians 6:14a NIV).



In Ephesians, Paul tells us to stand firm in our battle with the spiritual forces of evil. He then empowers us with a list of spiritual battle gear that enable us to stand firm. The Belt of Truth is the first Armor of God that Paul describes. Why is this belt or

girdle so important? It doesn't seem as spectacular as the other battle gear -- breastplate, shield or helmet.

The belt is essential to the fit of the entire Armor of God. The belt strengthens and holds together all of the wearers personal clothing, so that each piece of the armor fits the body perfectly.

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In this life, we have two outfits: We have our personal clothing (our sinful flesh) and we have God's armor (God's redemptive covering through Jesus Christ). Our personal clothing has a lot of threadbare parts due to our weaknesses and a lot of flaps and folds due to our extravagant sinfulness. We need the Belt of Truth to be wrapped around us to protect our weakness and contain our sinfulness; otherwise, the Armor of God can not be as effective and powerful as it was designed to be.

How do we put on the Belt of Truth? We must let go of trying to look perfect and trying to act like we have no weakness or sin. We must let go of our pretenses and (like the photo above) let it all hang out! We will never be perfect, and there is no need to act like we have it all together.

The articles in this issue are about being transparent to God and honest with ourselves and others. They are about setting aside masks and being truthful about who we are in Christ. Our God has a great plan for us, and He loves us just as we are -- failures and all! So let the world know that you are not perfect, and put on the Belt of Truth! You'll need it. There is a battle raging, and God has armor for you that is just your size!

blessings to ya!

Alisa Hope Wagner

Chief Editor

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Design & Marketing

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Issue Quote

"If there is anything you see good in me, it is Christ Jesus" - Debbie Eklund (Senior Pastor's wife at [First Baptist McAllen](#)).

I will be speaking at [A Woman Inspired Online Conference](#) on March 14th - 18th. I would love for you to join me!



Surviving Breast Cancer with Him



Journal Entry: October 17, 2008

"Lord, there is a sense that you're moving me in a new direction. There is some shaking up around me and I feel like things are changing. We both know what that feeling is, so can I just say that I want it if that's what you want. I want to follow you on this most amazing journey. It scares me but only because it's, once again, unfamiliar territory. But I know that with you, it turns out to be the most amazing journey! I want that. I want you."

I am a huge fan of Oswald Chamber's *My Utmost for His Highest*. I try to read it every year, and I usually mark my journey along the way.

October 19, 2008, I read the following:

"You have no idea of where or how God is going to engineer your future circumstances, and no knowledge of what stress and strain is going to be placed on you either at home or abroad. And if you waste your time in overactivity, instead of being immersed in the great fundamental truths of God's redemption, then you will snap when the stress and strain do come. But if this time of soaking before God is being spent in getting rooted and grounded in Him, which may appear to be impractical, then you will remain true to Him whatever happens."

Whatever happens... Eight days later, I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Just days before I was diagnosed the Lord had been speaking to me about a change in the "weather," but I had never considered the possibility of an illness. I knew that, greater than the importance of my medical choices, my spiritual choices would be the catalyst for healing. I needed to plant myself in His House, in His Presence and in His Word.

His House would prove to be the most comforting place to face my battle. Because I served on our worship team, I had the privilege of sharing my journey very openly with the church family I was absolutely crazy about. So many were faithful to lift me up in prayer, encourage me, minister to my family

and just love on us.

I am a very private person and the initial realization that I would be living out this craziness in such a public way made me a little nervous, especially on the weekend that I began to lose my hair. I couldn't imagine stepping down from serving on the worship team, but I was facing such uncertainty about the way this all would go. I agonized over what the best decision would be. I didn't want to be a distraction if my body failed me or if I looked as sick as I felt.

With the exciting, passionate worship that we had come to know and love, I didn't want to be the one to bring the momentum down because my tired legs wouldn't carry me. But I wanted to be steadfast in my faith, testifying that in my weakness, He is definitely strong. It was such a struggle to make those decisions but as I stayed firmly planted in those things that God had called me to, I began to realize blessing after blessing, and now it just seems natural that I would have lived out my illness worshipping the Lord and serving my church. Continuing to do ministry turned out to be a major motivation on days that I felt my worst. What a gift to serve God's people and be so incredibly blessed in return!

His Presence remained my refuge in the midst of the storm. It was those times that I couldn't hold my head up, read one more verse of scripture or remember simple words that chemo had robbed me of, that His Presence would surround me. What peace to know the promise of my Healer, that He would never leave me nor forsake me. I was determined not to be in my bed any longer than I had to, but on my worst chemo days, I never felt alone. Prayer was my saving grace and His Spirit was my constant companion.

His Word brought such comfort. I began to search for truth regarding my specific situation as if I was scavenging for buried treasure. Scriptures that I had known most of my days came to life with a fresh new meaning. I was holding to every word. I set them to memory, sang them in worship, pasted them on every surface, and listened to them with every technological vehicle I could get my hands on. This would sustain me and I knew it. His Word would bring life to my bones, literally, in the days to come.

I had scripture cards that I would write on, putting to memory those promises that most encouraged me in the battle. I would place them on my nightstand, in my bathroom, on the dashboard of my car, on my desk at work...anywhere that I could regularly see them so I could keep reminding myself that if God is for me, who can be against me? One of my favorites was Psalm 118:17 (NLT), which says, "I will not die; instead, I will live to tell what the Lord has done." On days that I didn't feel so good, I would be quick to remind the Lord of that one!

His Word became more precious than ever as I remained steady in my search for comfort, guidance and wisdom. I had never navigated the murky waters of breast cancer and with so many decisions that needed to be made immediately, I needed supernatural assistance and I needed it quick!

My desire was to face cancer the same way I would face any other obstacle in my life: right by His side, clinging tightly to the One who created me. He knew full well what condition my body was in and I knew full well that He could heal me. But my prayer was not solely for health and healing. I wanted to know

Him more.

Philippians 3:10 (AMP) says, "For my determined purpose is that I may know Him," That's what I wanted...to walk with Him, to abide in the shelter of the Most High, to become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him so that my life would be a reflection of who He is to me and in me. A lot of external physical changes occur throughout the course of chemo and radiation and I knew that I was facing some difficult challenges. But my heart's cry was that I would be forever changed on the inside as I used this time to follow hard after my Savior. I never could have imagined the sweet blessings that would come my way because of that.

Life is funny. Just when you think you have things figured out, it's back to the drawing board. I can't say I have it nailed down, but I know without a shadow of a doubt that going through this most dreaded disease has afforded me opportunities to know my Lord in ways that I would not have experienced otherwise. God's Word says that in this world, we will have tribulation. How I know that to be true! But He also goes on to say that we don't need to worry because He has overcome the world. So the best way that I know to face my most challenging circumstances with faith and courage, is to fill my life, every crack and crevice, with truth. His truth. And His truth says that if I abide in Him, if I would be found in Him, there's nothing He and I can't face together.

~ DeeDee Sharon

DeeDee Sharon considers herself an ordinary girl serving an extraordinary God. She is a wife, mother, grandmother and most recently, a breast cancer survivor! She served as the women's minister for [JANES Women's Ministry](#) for over two years and is on the worship team at Bay Area Fellowship. She enjoys writing about the goodness of God in her life. She has been featured at [inspiredmoms.com](#), [threadsmia.com](#), [christianwomenonline.net](#) and is a contributor for the [Granola Bar Devotional](#).



Drinking From an Empty Carton



Have you ever watched a character in a milk commercial drink from a carton? The character lifts the milk to his lips, and the carton appears virtually weightless. After the character takes his drink, you wait for the swallow, but it never comes. The character offers an indulgent smile, yet there is not a drop of milk on his lips. Commercials try to creatively make the carton appear full, yet there is nothing in it. The effort used to put on this charade begs the question, "Why not just drink from a carton that is full?"

The sad truth is that we Christians do the same thing in our walks of faith. We tend to embrace the performance of our faith rather than embrace the Maker of our faith. We are diligent about managing our ministries, serving others and gaining biblical knowledge, yet we slack on knowing our God more intimately. We don't do it on purpose. Our intentions are never to take our focus off of God and place it on our performance for God, but we do. We are so busy serving Him that we don't have time to spend with Him. We fall into the performance-based spirituality, and our relationship with God takes a back seat.

Performance-based spirituality is one of the main plugs stopping the flow of the Holy Spirit. We forget that God is infinitely creative and has a plethora of resources at His disposal. We can never assume that we know how our steps of obedience are going to play out: "A man's steps are directed by the LORD. How then can anyone understand his own way?" (Proverbs 20.24 NIV). Yet, without consulting God we get a spiritual performance (ministry, service, tradition, etc.) in our mind, and we work hard to achieve it - even if it costs us our time with God.

In this culture today we are very busy, and we complain to God that there isn't enough time to spend with Him. However, our time is God's number one desire. If we don't give God our time, how are we expected to cultivate a relationship with Him? God would never ask us to serve Him in a way that prevented us from spending time with Him. In the book of Mark, a religious leader asked Jesus which commandment was the most important, and Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (12.30). If loving God is the highest commandment, why would God put us in a circumstance that conflicts with spending time with Him?

Today we have so many choices which force us to daily make hundreds of decisions. What should we watch, read, eat and wear? What ministry should we support? What online social network should we join? What ideology (way of thinking) should we commit to? What social cause should we embrace? What life purpose should we focus on? If we are not carefully walking in the Spirit, we're going to be overwhelmed with choices and begin to second guess ourselves. We will become bogged down in a swamp of choice, and our purpose of reaching our full potential in Christ will be jeopardized.

There are thousands of great ministries, media venues, compassion campaigns and people doing a good work for God's kingdom. However, if our spiritual walks are performance-based, we may find ourselves lost in a market full of good work vendors and no guide to lead us in the right direction. These vendors line our path and call out our names, trying to persuade us that their good work is an absolute must for our walk of faith. There is nothing wrong with these good works, but the Holy Spirit has to daily show us which ones we should carry and which ones we should let go. If we are not allowing the Holy Spirit to direct us, we'll carry the same good works forever and pile on more until our views become blocked and our arms become heavy.

Moreover, if all of our time and energy is spent on spiritual-based performance and not on God, those good works become idols. God specifically says that He hates it when we cling to idols instead of trusting Him (Psalm 31.6 NIV). When we desire a relationship with God and strive to know Him more, our good works will be an outflow of the Holy Spirit working in us. We won't have to worry about doing the wrong good works or doing too many good works because God promises that if we put Him first, He'll take care of everything: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6.33). Our purpose in life is to have an intimate relationship with our Creator; everything else is merely the icing on the cake!

If you are feeling overwhelmed and stretched thin, take a few moments to have an honest discourse with God. Ask Him if there are any areas of your life that you have been "drinking from an empty carton." He will show you. Give those areas over to God and let go of your idea of what your spiritual walk should look like. Choose to put knowing God intimately as your highest priority, and He will free you from performance-based spirituality. Make sure that in everything you do that the carton is filled with God's spirit. In this way, you will ensure that you don't waste your time and energy on an empty performance that leaves you feeling unfilled, tired and malnourished.

~ Alisa Hope Wagner

Alisa has a God-given passion to write, and she loves to write about what the Holy Spirit is currently teaching her. She is the founder of [Granola Bar Devotional Writing Ministry](#), which helps publish and share women's faith-story. Her writing blog, [Faith Imagined](#), hosts [First Friday Fiction](#), an online fiction writing support group. She is also a contributing writer for two wonderful online ministries -- [Exemplify Online & Magazine](#) and [Internet Cafe](#). She and her husband lead a church homegroup and enjoy homeschooling their three children.



Transparency is Good



The day the love of Jesus Christ captured my heart, life for me forever changed. When I accepted Him as Lord of my life, He became my passion.

Experiencing a love that has no limits has revolutionized my life. Believing that Jesus knows all there is to know about me and still loves me, leaves me broken and open before Him. This love I find irresistible. Like the woman in the Book of Matthew with the issue of blood, my faith in the Lord has made me whole (Matthew

9:22). I understand what it means to be free indeed. I am no longer held hostage by the opinions of people.

I am free to become the woman that God has created me to be. My daily goal is to please God. It is my desire that those who come in contact with me will see Christ in me, and I pray that those the Lord leads to me will see Christ through me. The Disciple John shares that Christ was full of grace and truth. His loving kindness and a consistent pure lifestyle led people to know that God was among them, and I want to do the same.

I am far from perfect. Anyone who spends any amount of time with me will soon encounter my many faults and imperfections. Those that have known me for many years are able to testify to the changes that the Lord has made in my life. These changes did not come easy, nor did they come fast; old ways are not easily broken. I went through much, and did lots of wild and crazy things. It was not always pretty; but because I never quit, I outlasted every trial. I have entrusted my entire life to God. My past with all of my countless failures and embarrassments, as well as my present with its frequent frustrations, irritations, and sometimes overwhelming circumstances are all in the hands of God. He now uses my life as He desires.

Many believers live with the misconception that their problems are uniquely theirs, when actually the trials we face are common, so common that they are all addressed in one book, the Bible. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes: "There is nothing new under the sun" (1:9b NIV). There will always be something in our lives that requires that we walk by faith. No one is exempt from tests and trials. They are part of the journey which we all travel and fall under the heading of life.

Frequently, I help others who are going through difficult times, and I am sometimes moved by the Spirit of God to share my past and present challenges. Being transparent creates an atmosphere that helps them see the faithfulness of God and understand the process which will lead them, as He did me, to believe that He is trustworthy. During these times of sharing, healing often takes place. As I recall the goodness of God, I am strengthened and the person that I am sharing with is encouraged to continue in faith.

Men and women we meet in Scripture are real people; they had both strengths and weaknesses in their character—even after meeting the Lord. They still have their personal difficulties and struggles. Though

they did not always get everything right, those that did not give up and continued to follow Christ were always victorious.

It is recorded in the Book Revelation that "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (12:11 NIV). All of those that believed before us, trusted the Lord and were willing to die for His sake. Moses, Daniel, the three Hebrew boys - Paul, John the Baptist, Stephen - and so many others gave up their lives. They lost all earthly possessions, comfort, reputation, freedom and many were killed. They did not seek to save their lives. Jesus has said, "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it" (Luke 17:33 NIV).

Many are fearful when it comes to being transparent and open with others because in the past someone has revealed a confidence they trusted them to keep. The love of people may not be perfect, but the love of God is perfect. God's perfect love will drive out all fear. We are not required to tell everybody everything that we have ever done or felt, but we required to be obedient. God desires that we listen to Him and obey and trust Him with the results.

We are to speak what He says and when He says. We are to tell the truth in love. If we have truly given Him our lives, He is responsible for what happens. We may be embarrassed, misunderstood, or even betrayed; but He is able to make it all work out for our good. Knowing this, we can rejoice in all things, because He is working in all things. Even when we are being stretched to what seems to be beyond limits, God is being glorified, and His love and power are being revealed.

The Lord is always found in, near, and around His people. It's like a boxer going to his corner during a boxing match. The second the bell rings that signifies the end of the round, there are three men waiting outside the ring to come in. The first has a stool and a bucket of water to refresh the contender; The second applies ointment to protect the contender from blows; and the third speaks directly to the contender with words of direction and encouragement.

I have found that when we as believers go to the Lord's servants during trials, we have in our corner God Himself and those servants of the Lord who are willing to be transparent enough to share how God has brought them through their tests and trials. I have been in the position of going to someone and of someone coming to me. I can say that fearless transparency builds confidence in the faithfulness of God, as well as His faithfulness of His servants.

~ Marva Leavell

Presently, Marva, an anointed Bible teacher, serves as an assistant to her husband, Senior Pastor Donald Leavell, of [Corpus Christi Christian Fellowship](#). Marva's effective and unique way of teaching encourages and challenges many to enter a deeper and more practical way of understanding the Word of God. While humor and wisdom in her illustrations are both interesting and enlightening, they exhort the hearer to love and live for God. She is the leader of the Ladies Fellowship that meets once a quarter for fellowship and Bible instruction with



emphasis on the Lord's expectations of women believers. Marva is a contributing writer for the Christian Metro Times, an area Christian publication.

Sweep Me Clean



Company was coming. I flung wide the doors to welcome some fresh air and sunshine. I sorted and put away stacks of mail. I cleaned out the magazine basket, the one that fills all too quickly with catalogs and papers. I wiped the Daddy-is-home!-nose-prints off the windows and the dust off the sills. "Our house is going to be so clean," five-year-old Maddie declared getting into the spirit of things. "I'm going to sweep the kitchen floor."

Delighted to have her willing help, I smiled at her flouncing skirt as she galloped on her broom-horse into the adjoining room.

I checked her progress on my way to the laundry room to toss in a pile of dirty socks. The kitchen floor shone. Sunlight streaming through the window illuminated a sparkling surface. But something was amiss. Where were the grains of rice, scattered after the math lesson? Where were the bread crumbs, remnants of yesterday's lunch? Where was the sand tracked in from the backyard? There was no pile of gathered debris in sight.

Swish, swish, swish, went the broom, in all directions, as dust and grit was whisked away to congregate in the far-flung corners of the room. Out of sight to the casual observer, but still there nonetheless!

My mind began to whirl. How often these everyday moments draw their parallel to the more eternal aspects of life. How often these simple events pull me out of the temporary and shift my thoughts to a deeper level. How easy it is for me to put on a happy façade when I leave my home.

The children trail behind me in a line, dressed and combed and ironed and perfect. When something goes wrong -- a little boy falls in the grass or a little girl forgets her manners -- I correct in my most patient soft voice, showcasing my never-ending long-suffering. But then we return home and the doors close behind us. Someone speaks too loud or spills a glass of milk or runs in the house -- and I? I scold too quickly, easily perturbed when there is no one to impress.

In this way, I am no different than my shiny kitchen floor. To the casual observer, I am gentle and kind as I lead my squeaky-clean quiet children. But grime hides in my corners. The broom of deception has pushed crumbs of sin under the cabinets. But "He searches the sources of the rivers and brings hidden things to light" (Job 28:11 NIV). Nothing is hidden from my Heavenly Father.

He sees past the glossy surface and shines His light straight into my cluttered heart. Does it really pay for me to put on a false front? What does it benefit for me to give a perfect impression to others while my inner self struggles? "For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open" (Mark 4:22 NIV).

God desperately desires for me to sweep out those hidden corners, to clean out the impatience and discontentment and anger, to admit my weaknesses and to lay them all at His feet. For only He is able to clean out my soul. "Does he not see my ways and count my every step? Let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless" (Job 31:4,6 NIV).

My thoughts return to Maddie and the broom and my floor. "Baby, let's try to gather up all the gunk," I urge. "Let's find all the dirt and sweep it out of here."

"He hath made everything beautiful in his time" (Ecclesiastes 3:11 KJV).

~ Kristin Shockley

Kristin is, above all, a child of the King. She is also wife to her best friend, Brian, and mother of 4, ages seven and under. Kristin is a homeschool mama and avid reader of children's literature. Though she is the teacher, she finds that often the daily happenings of life are teaching her! She shares her gleanings on her personal blog, [Bits and Pieces From My Life](#) and has also written for Internet Cafe and [5 Minutes For Mom](#).



Interview with Roxanne Henke



What was your path to publication?

My path to publication started with reading. Ever since I learned to read I've had a passion for "story." I learned what I liked in a story...and what I didn't. Over the years I wrote in a variety of ways...a diary, letters, a humor column for several newspapers, Christmas dramas for church. In some way or another all of it was "practice."

All that writing taught me what I was going to need to tell a story and get it published. I also studied the "business" of writing. I learned how to write a query, and what publishers were looking for. It took me a year to write my first novel. Another two years to find a publisher. The best investment I made was to attend a writers conference. It was there that I pitched my novel and interested an editor. Within a couple months I was signing a

contract and the rest, as they say, is history.

How do you motivate yourself to write?

Sorry to say, there is no 'magic-motivation-potion.' I always tell people that writing is a "job" just like any other. Some days you wake up raring to go to work. Other days you'd rather turn over and go back to sleep. But, you get out of bed and get to work because that's what you do.

What do you love the most about writing?

Knowing that I'm using the gifts God gave me. Hearing from readers that my stories and characters have impacted their lives, and have made them more aware of God in their every day lives.

What gave you the idea for your current book?

"On a Someday" deals with the subjects of retirement as well as career-building. I'm in that aging-baby-boomer stage of life and many of my friends are starting to talk about retirement. I started to think about what's next??? I've had this sense that, as we get older, at some point each of us needs to step aside and let someone else (someone younger) take their turn at our work. I wanted to explore those ideas...

How do you develop characters?

I get to know my characters as I write. I have a sense of "who" they are at the beginning of a story, but they come to life as I live with them over a period of many months. Sometimes they surprise me!

How do you connect with your readers?

E-mail is wonderful!! Hearing from a reader is my 'reward' for spending long hours at my computer. I have a website: www.roxannehenke.com where I blog weekly. I send out every-now-and-then e-newsletters to my readers. And I do a fair amount of speaking and book signings. Living with fictional characters is fun but meeting real LIVE people is better!

How do you weave God's Word into your writing?

I start each book with a theme in mind. Before I do any writing I look up Bible verses that pertain to that central theme. I study the verses and find one or two that sum up what I'm hoping to write about. My characters are 'real' to me. They make mistakes. They certainly are not perfect. I do my best to let them live their lives in ways that show my readers how God is present even when life isn't going so great. One of the best compliments I can get is when a reader writes to tell me they find themselves praying throughout the day and they learned to do that from my characters.

What is your hope for your writing?

To tell a great story. To entertain my readers and make them think. To help my readers see God at work in their daily lives.

Thanks, Alisa, for this chance to chat with you and your readers!

Here is the description of "On a Someday."

On a Someday: Jim Westin is tired. Over most-of-a-lifetime he's built his grocery business, hoping someday to hand it over to one of his kids. The only trouble is none of his kids want the business. Jim's wife, Claire, thought she was ready to retire along with her husband, but an unexpected career

development has exciting new opportunities coming her way. Their son, Drew, is climbing-the-ladder in New York. No way would he consider moving back to North Dakota to help his dad. . .or would he? What happens when plans conflict? When "someday" is different than you planned? What happens when someday is now?

Take care...and risks!
Roxy Henke



Roxy is the author of the popular *Coming Home to Brewster* series...*After Anne*, *Finding Ruth*, *Becoming Olivia*, *Always Jan*, and, *With Love*, Libby. Also available...*The Secret of Us*, *Learning to Fly*, and her newest release: *On a Someday!*

Check out Roxy and watch a preview of her book, *On a Someday*, at her website: <http://roxannehenke.com/>.

God Approved



It takes a lot of work to make a first grade classroom into a dainty tea room, but my son's first grade teacher did a beautiful job at making it look elegant. As the children and mothers sat around a table, the teacher asked the children to take turns reading their poems. The poems started out with the writing prompt, "My mom is good at . . ." The kids then had to write what they thought their mothers were really good at doing.

As the children read their poems out loud, they said things like, "My mom is good at baking cookies" or "My mom is good at teaching me to tie my shoes." The classroom was full of "Oh! How sweet!" and "Ooohs" and "Aaahs."

My sweet angel face, second born son said, "My mom is good at taking naps." I wanted to die! I wanted to hide and run out of that room. My face turned bright red, and I felt the urge to go over to my son and squeeze his chubby, little face. Although there is nothing wrong with taking naps, I would have preferred my son highlighting one of my other "good at" skills.

As we drove home that day, I was trying to stay calm; but I couldn't help becoming upset. I went off on him in the car: "What was that all about? What about all the times that I take care of you when you're sick or how I taught you to read in kindergarten or how I take you on fun trips, like to the museum and to the theater? And we make all these ornate desserts for special holidays. And we have a ton of special family traditions. How about them? All you could say was that I'm good at taking naps?!"

He said, "Well, Mom, it's just the easiest word to spell."

My son's poem bothered me so much because I worry way too much about what people think of me. I really believe that a lot of stress in our lives is caused by an internal addiction to people's approval. Galatians 1:10 is a wonderful verse to memorize if you struggle with wanting the approval of others: "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ (NIV).

We must strive to not let society's unhealthy expectations of us make us into unhealthy Christians. I also love Jeremiah 6:16, which reads, "This is what the LORD says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.' But you said, 'We will not walk in it'" (NIV).

No wonder we're so stressed out! God says that if we follow in His path, we will find rest for our souls. However, many times we're like children stomping our feet with our hands on our hips saying, "No. I don't want to walk on Your path. I want to walk on my path. I want to walk on the path of people's approval."

We soon find out, though, that a path built on society's approval isn't very restful. God's path of approval is about helping others feel valued. Whereas, society's path of approval is about us wanting to feel valued. God's path of approval is free. Society's path of approval is expensive - we pay a high price to impress people we don't even know.

Our obsession with what people think of us is the quickest way to forget about what God thinks about us. God says that we are wonderfully made: "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:14 NIV). God created us and He loves us, so it really doesn't matter what others think. Let us remember how God sees us and rest in His approval.

~ Jessica Cornelius

Jessica Cornelius is the senior pastor's wife at [Bay Area Fellowship Church](#) in Corpus Christi. She and her husband, Bil Cornelius, have three children. She is heavily involved in the [JANES Women's Ministry](#) and has a heart to serve women. Pastor Bil and Jessica are excited about their newest ministry, [BilCorneliusTV](#), which is designed to reach people for Christ across the globe.



Spiritual Tug-of-War



The truth is that I struggle with negative self-talk. I struggle with my left sided weakness (a handicap from having a stroke). I struggle with looking upon my current circumstance and only seeing unemployment. I feel defeated, detached, and unworthy to share my experience. After all, I have no victory report to share.

My feeling of self-worth is attached to having financial and material success. However, God reminded me (He must do that from time to time) that as long as I maintain a relationship with Him and have gratitude for my gift of life, I will always be successful. God never forsakes His righteous: "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Psalm 37:25 KJV).

God is walking me through my relationship with Him, and He is showing me that He has everything under His control. First, He gives me God-winks. I receive dozens of emails each day of comfort. Second, He speaks to me. During my prayer time, I meditate on hearing from God and I ask God questions. Most recently, I asked Him why - even though I am a Christian - was I afflicted with a stroke? He answered me with a verse:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4 KJV).

My life application of this verse:

"Even though I had a stroke and could have died as a result, the gift of life was extended to me for a reason. God was with me through it all. The Father directs me because I don't know where I am going. He loves me."

Third, God gives me fellowship with other believers. I blog, and it is one way to keep me connected with Christians. Once I have experienced these three things, I feel renewed, positive, and empowered. However, the tests of life continue. For example, the phone will ring, the bill-collectors will call, and my family will have drama. True to human form, I roll back into my negative self-talk: I gossip, murmur and complain. I liken it to going in and out of consciousness. It is a tug-of-war between my flesh and my spirit!

There are certain stages of maturity in Christ Jesus that I have reached, yet there is much that I need to learn. These stages don't have to take very long for me to work through, but it does take obedience on my part. In order to keep my mind positive, I must keep myself surrounded by Godly resources, such as worship music and other Believers. I recognize that opposable spirits exist and that I am under attack. Whenever God is about to reposition a Christian's life, the devil will begin to attack!

Satan is cunning in that he's always searching for ways to keep my mind off of who I am in Christ. So the

strategy to win the tug-of-war is to practice my conversation with God. I must leave no opportunity for Satan to get into my mind. I must remember who I am, and I must reprogram my thoughts.

There will be a change in me when I switch from sentences beginning with "I struggle, I worry, and I complain" to sentences beginning with "I am strong, I am blessed, and I am highly favored." God's Words are alive and active and so are ours! If God states that all things are possible, then they are possible. If I struggle with my faith, I can rest assured that the struggle will end victoriously. I will not complain - I will praise! I will not forget God's truth - I will remember!

~ "Jesus replied, 'What is impossible with men is possible with God'" (Luke 18:27 NIV).

~ "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6 KJV).

~ "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Mathew 6:25 NASB).

~ "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 NASB).

~ "Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you" (1 Peter 5:7 NLT).

Only when I keep these words on my mind, will they be on my tongue. I need to be diligent about forming the habits of repetition and memorization. Soon, I will find that my conversation has changed. I will no longer be negative; rather, I will be filled with God's truth! I'm putting the game of Tug-of-War away and exchanging it for a better game, Simon Says. But I changed it to God Says.

God says that I am wise. God says I am healed. God says I am blessed.

Father, thank You for Your healing Word. Thank You for providing a relief from the ties that bind our minds to negativity. We love and praise You for our lives. We praise Your name, for in You the struggle is over. Because of our salvation, You handle our tribulations so that we don't have to be defeated. The battle is won! Victory is ours!

~ Dale Ottley

Dale Ottley, a native New Yorker, has been walking with God as a born again Christian from the age of 12, has worked in the entertainment industry for 20 years, has lived in California for 15 years, and has worked as a production accounting professional for the past 5 years. After having a crippling stroke in 2006, she began blogging in April of 2009 and shortly after started contributing devotionals to the [Granola Bar Devotional](#), as well as being asked to contribute to other Christian Internet publications that have not yet been featured. Dale is happily single with no children. Please visit her personal blog, [Stroke of Living](#).



Let Your Secrets Go



"There's no such thing as perfect people." We've all said it a million times. Today, we can even sing it along with Natalie Grant on the radio. We easily see the truth in the saying, as we know there is no way we can ever measure up to Jesus. He's the only One without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

However, is the life you are living different from that truth? Do you have secret struggles you keep hidden because you want the world to think you have it all together? Do you wear masks to cover up the "real" you to make others think you are perfect? Or do you have skeletons hanging in your closet that you would die if anyone found out about?

Growing up, I always tried to maintain my "good girl, good Christian, good citizen" image. In doing so, there were all kinds of skeletons and masks hanging in my closet. Years ago, when a scam artist took my husband and me for everything, the FBI came knocking on our door. Because I was so used to wearing a mask, I certainly didn't want my friends to know what we were going through. Wouldn't they think we were guilty if the FBI was involved?

Along with the secrets, there was so much anger, bitterness, and resentment crammed in my closet that the door would no longer shut. As I tried to shove the door closed one day, I broke down. I called a friend for help, and she told me, "Alene, if you let the secrets go, they will have no power over you. You won't need to hide them any longer."

Basically, what that friend was telling me was it was alright to let my friends know I wasn't perfect. Why is that such a struggle for so many of us? My husband and I were innocent, but innocent and perfect are two different things. 1 John 1:8 NIV tells us, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." By the same token, we deceive others when we try to make them think we are perfect and have every aspect of our lives neatly put together. Believe it or not, I think there were times I was actually trying to deceive Jesus, as well Crazy, I know!

My friend was right. Letting those secrets go brought about renewal. It is freeing and healing to admit you are real and that you struggle. As I tried to break free from the secrets, Jesus began whispering to the heart of my soul, "The world is waiting on you to get over yourself so you can help others." As I took baby step after baby step with a double dose of courage, I was able to begin speaking of my struggles. By being brave in Christ and sharing my real day-to-day life, I have been amazed at how the truth has freed other women. They began to share their burdens not only with me, but also with others.

Halleluiah! There is no such thing as perfect people. As soon as that soaks through every nerve of your

being and you believe it, freedom will quickly come for you.

If you need help with the process of becoming "real" to experience freedom and healing, recite my friend's advice over and over as needed:

"If you let your secrets go, they will have no power over you. If you let your secrets go, they will have no power over you."

~ Alene Snodgrass

Alene Snodgrass speaks all over the country and is the author of two Bible studies, *Dirty Laundry Secrets ~ a Journey to Meet the Launderer* and *I'm a Fixer-Upper ~ A Day-by-Day Remodeling Guide*. Each study has created drastic changes in many women's lives. Alene, her husband, and three children reside in Corpus Christi, Texas. For more information, visit www.alenesnodgrass.com. For a peek into her personal life, check out [Positively Alene](#).



Living Life in Truth



He was a simple shepherd boy. Standing before a nine-foot man, he must have seemed as small as an ant. As he stood in the face of the giant, many had to be amazed at his audacious bravery. For every time Goliath would come out, the Israelites would shrink back in fear. Yet, this mere boy very courageously put one foot in front of the other and marched toward the enemy. He wore no physical armor - just his staff, a few stones in a bag, and a sling. He didn't need the king's armor. His was better - an unseen armor from a God

who is mighty to save.

David had full assurance that God would protect him as he went up against this giant. In that faith and confidence, He grabbed a few pebbles and employed his sling. There were jeers and laughter. Who did he think he was trying to pelt a giant with small stones? What a joke! But small stones in the hand of a willing boy became the ammunition of a mighty God to topple a giant.

Like David, many of us face giants. There's a war going on - not one that can be seen with eyes and fought with physical weaponry. It's an unseen war, yet it is very, very real. And it's filled with giants of all kinds. Things like fear, doubt, addictions, and bitterness are all towering giants trying to intimidate their targets and force them into retreat.

There was a vast difference in the reactions of the Israelites and David in the face of the enemy. When

confronted with a gigantic problem, the Israelites shrunk back in fear. On the other hand, David faced the problem head on. What made the difference for David? What makes the difference for us? Truth.

Knowing the truth.

Believing the truth.

Acting on the truth.

The Israelites simply knew the truth that God was their Deliverer. He had delivered His people many times. The problem is that they didn't believe the truth enough to act on it. What stood before them was an army with a taunting giant who spouted threats. Goliath was trying to make them shrink back in fear. And it was working. The Israelites melted in fear of what they saw instead of standing firm in the unseen truth of their mighty God's deliverance.

On the other hand, David not only knew the truth but he also believed and acted on it. He grabbed the stones and kept them closely by his side. He then hurled one pebble and God toppled the enemy. The truths David learned about God's strength compelled him to act in faith. David believed God's promises, and he acted on the truth he believed. He knew when he hurled the stone that God would act and bring the victory.

John 8:32 tells us, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (NIV). How can we know the truth? By hearing, reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word. Yet, we can't just stop there. Knowing the truth requires that we meditate on it. The book of Psalms is filled with many verses that talk about meditating on God's law, such as Psalm 119: 97 which reads, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long"(NIV). You see, the more we think on the truth, the more that truth becomes a part of who we are. No longer is it just head knowledge. It has reached our heart. And that's when true believing begins.

When we know and believe the truth, we don't have to be afraid to act:

- act ON the truth,
- act IN the truth, and
- act OUT the truth you know.

The truth is crucial in battle where we have to be able to fight against lies and deceptions. Every time the enemy shoots his darts our way, we have to act. We must fire back with the truth. If we don't act, the darts will continue to pelt us, pushing us back and threatening to destroy us. God has given us a myriad of truths we can use in our warfare. We just need to pull them out of the bag and hurl them at the enemy in full faith and assurance that God will respond.

Knowing. Believing. Acting. All three are necessary for victorious living. Do you know and believe the truth? Will you act on the truth you know? What you decide will make all the difference.

~ Karen Lowe

Karen is a stay-at-home wife and homeschooling mom who has a passion for writing in-depth Bible studies and teaching women God's Word. She



has taught and led a number of women's Bible studies in churches both in the small group setting as well as in Sunday schools. Karen feels it is a privilege to be able to share what God has done in her life so that others may be encouraged and strengthened on the journey that we all share - the journey of this life on the way to our true eternal home. All of her life experiences, good and bad, have molded her into the person she is today. Because she has known the prison of bondage and the liberation of Christ, she has an intense desire to see others live in the freedom Christ came to give them. She began [Truth and Grace Ministries](#) in order to encourage women to grow in God's truth and grace. You can find Karen writing on her blog, [Living Life](#), where she shares God's Word, devotionals, and various other posts about life as she strives to live in God's truth and grace. She also writes for [Take Root and Write](#), an online Christian women's site designed to encourage women through writing.

The Mother of the Prodigal



Masks are for hiding, deceiving, concealing, and protecting. They hide shame, hurt and wrongs - the wrongs we have done and the wrongs done to us.

We never hear her voice or her story; but if we could, I bet the mother in the story of the prodigal son could tell us a lot about masks - and about throwing them down (Luke 15:11-32).

Married to a man, a Godly man, a respected man, a man who provided abundantly, there was no need for a mask. Imagine the marriage blessings. A man searching to be close to God found himself a wife desiring to please the Father. Then God blessed them with their first child - a son. Such blessing!

The ability to bear sons established her position in the community. She was then blessed with a second son - double the blessing - double the rejoicing. Her confidence grew. She stood firmly on the promises of God that were sung before her sons were born. Each son was designed for heaven, equipped for the challenges they each would face (Psalm 139:13-16).

I bet she cried when the second son was born - cried tears of joy. Her first son, always pleasing the father, a parenting-made-easy child, was probably very practical, lacking compassion maybe, but so easy to shepherd into manhood. He probably always won at Alquerque or Chatrang (checkers or chess) because he understood cause and effect.

Within her women's prayer group, the mother was respected for raising such a noble son. He probably brought great joy to her heart - and laughter unfettered by frustration. Maybe sometimes she judged other mother's whose sons were not so obedient, who did not always do their father's bidding or speak respectfully to their mothers. Maybe they were lax.

Fearless defined the second son. He was poor competition at Alquerque or Chatrang because he was not programmed for cause and effect methodology - he thought in the "Now." Passionate about his pursuits and compassionate towards others, he probably shared his allowance with his peers who "needed" or the blind man sitting at the well. He was filled with talent - a risk-taker. However, his

passion lacked cause and effect self-control. His mother started feeling uncomfortable.

His father encouraged him to save his money, but he just felt criticized, beaten down. His happy-go-lucky face turned sullen. He sassed his mother. She picked up the mask, uncomfortable with it, but peer fear of judgment was even more uncomfortable.

The first born, working hard to make the right choices, resented his brother's behavior, and that resentment turned to anger. The joy within the household that thrived just a few short years earlier evaporated. Tension hung like high humidity.

Rules were not for this second son, or so he thought. Studying was a waste of time. Seeking God - yeah, sure he believed, but he treated God like he treated his father and mother. The older he got, sullenness grew into contempt - he felt restricted and confined. He was blinded to blessings, to love, to wisdom.

Do not blame his parents, citing carelessness or lack of discipline. His father punished him all sorts of ways to get through to him. He talked to him gently, calmly, reasoning with him about the choices available to him. Sometimes it is hard to make the smartest "man" in the room admit someone else knows better.

Long ago, his mother dropped to her knees, praying and seeking God's guidance and God's mercy. She longed for laborers to be sent across her son's path to draw him back - to restore the blessing in her son's life and in his actions. Sometimes she prayed to God, begging Him to show her how to love her second born. God would warm her heart, restore her strength, and give her hope.

These struggles were kept behind the family doors, until one day it spilled outside those doors - cracking the façade - the mask behind which hope struggled.

The women's prayer group heard him back-talk his mother one day in that sullen tone. She pasted a smile on her face, turning back to the group of women. The mask cracked. How would these women react if they knew her struggles, her perceived failures? A mother's motto is always, "I can fix it." However, she was realizing that she could not fix it - only God could fix it.

It was lonely behind that mask. Self-judgment and fear were her constant companions. She feared that if the mask crumbled even the modicum of community support with the women might fall away too. How she needed the support of women and mothers to lift her up when she fell down. But they did not know she was falling down, that she needed help. The mask blinds the community and the individual.

Then one day, still a teenager, her son boldly told his father he wanted to leave: "Give me my inheritance." He was tired of the rules, tired of the expectations his family put on him, tired of controlling himself. He was a man after all - according to Jewish tradition. He was responsible for his soul; and if he was responsible for his soul, then surely he could be responsible for his inheritance. But he was neglecting his soul.

His father gave it to him, and the world welcomed him. His laughter had once brought such joy and his passion for life had brought such amazement to his family. But later everything turned into concern, and

he left. "I'm never coming back," he said. "I don't care what you say."

Broken-hearted, his parents watched him leave. The entire town knew about it. The mask crumbled.

If you were part of this mother's community, what would you have done? What did she need? Throughout all the years she struggled, she needed women who would lift her up in prayer. How would you have responded? Do you wear a mask because you fear judgment from other mothers, other peers, other family members?

Dysfunction is so prevalent within the Bible that you must conclude that God does not expect every family to be without challenges. However, challenges can provoke masks and isolation from true help and true mercy. You cannot recognize the women God has placed in your path to help you unless you remove the mask.

Removing the mask, surprisingly, makes it easier to love, easier to face the challenges, and easier to rejoice when that prodigal turns his life around. Remove the mask and trust that God will surround you with other women who will speak hope, faith, encouragement not only in you but the in the son gone astray.

No mother wants to hear her son condemned by her peers. She wants to hear him lifted up in the hope of prayer. Are you willing to not only take off the mask, but to lift other struggling mothers up? Encourage mothers whose children might have to learn cause and effect the hard way - pray until her son returns home, willing to be the man God created him to be.

After all, Jesus knew the story of the prodigal son. He knew his struggles, his challenges, his failures - and He knew that the path home was paved with faith.

If you have faith that God will take care of your children, have faith enough to take off the mask. Taking off the mask is a step of faith.

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" - (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 NIV)

~ Maryleigh Bucher

A wife of 27 years, a mom of 5 sons, a child of divorce become whole as a daughter of The King. With a BS degree in Journalism and MA in English from Eastern Kentucky University, I taught college composition and home school groups. Author of [Blue Cotton Memory](#), guest contributor to [The Home School Post](#), journalist, poet and creator of Standing at the Cross Roads, a program designed to break/prevent cycles of dysfunction.



Why Do I Throw out the Good?



Sometimes we need to have an honest look at ourselves and allow God to penetrate our hearts with His truth. God is exposing in me the tendency to throw out all the good and jump feet first into negativity when bad stuff happens.

My daughter is three years old, and at times she can be very challenging. I love her to pieces and she has really helped me grow, but I've really had to grow. We might be having a good day. My daughter will be obeying and cooperating without any whining, but then she throws a tantrum and out goes all the good she has done that day.

I immediately start thinking, "She will never change. Why does she have to be so difficult?" It is like the whole good part of the day didn't even happen. Even if she gets her act together, I'm still stuck in Crabbyville; and if nothing bad happens over the next hour, maybe I will be fine and start to breathe again (you can hold your breath for a really long time when you have toddlers).

I do this in my marriage too. You know how the argument goes, "You always do that!" I suddenly forget the whole week beforehand and all the times he didn't do that, and all I can think is "this is how he always is; he is never going to change!"

And, honestly, guess where else I do this? I do this in my relationship with God. Things are good, and I'm praising Him and trusting Him; but then something bad happens, and suddenly I find myself saying, "Where are you God? You must not care about me!" Panic begins to set in.

But God has shown me I'm not alone in my negative tendency. The Israelites also acted this way. I used to read Exodus and ask, "How can you be grumbling like that? God did amazing miracle after miracle and now you are getting a little thirsty and you are ready to throw God out the door and return to Egypt?" I used to think I was above this, but now I'm realizing I'm in the same boat.

Now that this problem has popped up on my radar screen, I am trying to handle these situations differently. When a negative situation arises, I am trying to pause and ask God to help me not make negative agreements about what is taking place. I want stop turning just a bump in the road into a pothole!

The Lord has shown me the remedy to my negative attitude: I need to start handling these situations with love. Love pushes through the bad times, and it hopes, believes and perseveres until the good times.

"Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." - 1 Corinthians 13:6-7 (NIV)

~ Jaime Farkas

Jaime Farkas has been happily married for the last 8 years to her high school sweetheart. She has two beautiful children: a 5 1/2 year old boy and a 4 year old daughter. She is able to stay home with her children full-time and is currently homeschooling them. She leads women's Bible studies through her church. She had the blessing of growing up in a Christian home and is still a Christian! She loves the Lord and He is continually drawing her into deeper relationship with Him. Please visit her at her blog, [For His Glory Alone!](#)



God Reveals as We Attempt to Conceal



Facades, masks, disguises - these words describe those things that conceal who someone truly is.

Many of us can play religion so well. We act as though we are seeking God, when many times we are seeking the approval of others. We have become "seeker friendly" versus seeking the heart of God. We must be the sons and daughters after God's own heart, not the world's heart.

Our lives will not be victorious if we seek how we can please others. It may look like it is working for a while, but the end result is only "great ideas" created by people. Yet, these ideas are nothing compared to "God ideas" created by the Holy Spirit. When we settle for the world's opinions instead of God's opinions, disappointments occur in ways we cannot imagine.

We must empty the closet of the masks and disguises that make us look like we are seeking His face. We need to truly begin to seek His face. We must throw away the masks that are mounting and replace the masks with God's Truth.

Truth is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ came to set us free. How amazing is it that out of the mouth of Jesus Christ Himself He said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32 NIV). The Truth He spoke of was not any truth or the truth that can be found in the world. This Truth is the understanding of who He is! Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 NIV). Notice that Jesus is the Way, not a way. He is the Truth, not a truth. He is the Life, not a life.

I rejoice as I realize if I attempt to please people they will not take pleasure in what I do. However, when I choose to please God - whether others take pleasure in it or not-God will take pleasure in what I do. Our focus can no longer be on pleasing people. Our focus needs to be on the Truth, which reveals the outlining of the mask that conceals.

As His Truth reveals, the mask can no longer conceal.

"For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with salvation."
- Psalm 149:4 (ESV)

~ Teresa Stevens Criswell

Encouraging. Passionate. Dramatic. Crazy. Funny -- these words describe Teresa Criswell. She is a wife, mom, writer and has a love of speaking forth God's Word with great encouragement. In her love for the Lord, Teresa shares encouragement through the Word of God and with personal experiences. She inspires others and offers hope in the midst of hopeless situations, utilizing the greatest weapons from God: His Powerful Word and our praises to God. Her love for people reveals a glimpse of the heart of God as she longs to see Truth and Freedom of God transform lives. Teresa enjoys living in Texas along with her amazing husband and two beautiful children. You can visit her at [Triumphant Victorious Reminders](#).



The Me Inside



There are certain people that the Lord has called that are truly amazing. Their gifts and talents seem to be greater than ours and it's awesome to see how God uses them for building His kingdom. But do they really have special gifts that we don't have? Or do they just use the gifts they have in a greater way?

The truth is that we all have gifts and talents that the Lord gave us to build His kingdom. But there is just one thing that stands in the way of our using these gifts to the full capacity.

Many of us never reach our full potential because we are blocked by something. Sometimes we think, "Gee, the truth is I could sing as well as she can" or "I know I can write as well as this author." And how many of us hear a certain speaker teaching and think, "I could preach this message myself." Could those thoughts actually be from the Lord?

But why is she up there speaking and not us? What stops Me from stepping up to the plate with my gifts and talents, and actually using them? It's Me! I'm in the way. It's all about what I think of me and what I

think of my gifts and talents.

Deep inside we think, "What if other people think my gifts and talents aren't good enough? Then My feelings could get hurt....maybe very hurt. What if I feel rejected when I expose my gifts to others?" There is a great risk involved when we use our talents, and many of us can't bear the thought of being embarrassed and rejected.

The gifted speakers, singers and writers that we admire all had to take a risk. There's no way around it. But how did they ever do it?

The Bible teaches that we should be empty vessels for His Holy Spirit. The problem is that there's a big Me in my vessel. God designed my personal gifts and talents right inside my vessel. But in order to access and utilize these gifts, I have to step out of the way.

The famous phrase from the book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, is "It's not about you." We have to shift our thinking from us, to Him. The huge challenge is in stepping aside and putting less value on Me and more on Him.

But what about the risk of looking foolish or our gifts not being accepted? When children are in their first school play, they typically don't perform very well. We as parents adore the play and praise them for their wonderful performance. We know that a child's mistake is a lot cuter than an adult's mistake. But to Jesus we are just as adorable and precious.

Every great person went through that awkward stage of mistakes and failures in the beginning. Every one of them can describe their early struggles. But in order to achieve greatness, they had to put aside their own Me and allow Him to be greater inside them.

Apostle Paul described how God's strength was shown in his own weakness. "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10 NIV). Can we accept that at first our gifts - coming through our bumpy, scratchy vessel - may seem a little awkward?

What will the results be? If you sing a special song in front of others and make a few mistakes, will you keel over and die? What will really happen? Will they all cringe and wish you had never sang that song? Is God able to reach and touch even one person with the words to the song? If so, you would have taken part in that movement of God. You would have been the vehicle - the vessel - that God used to minister healing to that one person who didn't think your song sounded bad at all. How many of us have been touched by God through the anointed words of a song?

How many of us have been touched by God through the words of a speaker - just a person who was willing to be a vessel? The Holy Spirit only needs a willing vessel to do His work. What if the speaker stumbles as she speaks and looks foolish? Is God not able to use that speaker to reach just one person in a big way? Who are we to determine the results of our efforts if the driving force is the Jesus Himself? God doesn't need a great person; He just needs a willing person.

But what if we're not really sure if Jesus is behind that desire to step out with our gift or talent? We need to ask ourselves who we are stepping out for? Who profits? Is the gift we want to share for our own benefit or for others? Will we receive something that will build our ego or build the faith of others?

Another key is to start small. If you have a song, share it with a friend. If you have a piece of writing, share it with the people closest to you. If you have a testimony, share it with dear friends. If the movement is from the Lord, it will progress to a larger setting, like a church homegroup, a ministry luncheon or retreat. Before you know it, God may have you in settings you never dreamed possible.

Proverbs 18:16 says, "A man's gift makes room for him, and brings him before great men."

If each and every one of us put ourselves aside and allowed the Holy Spirit to have full access to use the gifts and talents He Himself placed in us, the world would be a different place. Life as we know it would be altered and all it takes is just stepping aside.

~ Susan Wood

Susan Wood is a founding member of Catskill Mountain Christian Center and has served in compassionate ministry to the homeless of New York City and the victims of the Chernobyl disaster in Belarus. She worked for CitiHope International where she also served as outreach programming director for Christian radio, coordinating a variety of New York City ministries. Susan and her husband, Jonathan, founded the [Raptor Project Inc.](#), a rehabilitation and educational effort with birds of prey. Susan, Jonathan and daughter Rachel travel the U.S. on tour each year producing bird shows and exhibits in 28 states. She has been featured on Cornerstone television and CBN. In between road tours, her family divides their time between their New York home and a home on North Padre Island, Texas, where they are members of Bay Area Fellowship.



Sin Gains a Hearing



It was the summer between my son's pre-school and kindergarten year. We requested the school to evaluate him for speech and language issues. When I asked for the evaluation, the vice principal tried to talk me out of evaluations. He said, "I can assure you that if you ask for these, we'll find your son no other qualifies for an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP)."

New to the whole process of special education and the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) and Asperger's

Syndrome, I was confident my son would continue to be eligible for individualized instruction. However, it turns out that the vice principal was correct. Jonathan did not re-qualify for an IEP. I understood this meant that Jonathan would be changing schools and moving into a full day kindergarten without the supports I believed necessary to ensure his success.

That summer, I contacted local advocates who agreed with the school system's interpretation of the federal laws. By now, I was a mama bear in full protection mode. I hired an attorney. He in turn hired a neuro-psychologist, a speech and language pathologist and an educational consultant. We took Jonathan through a series of private evaluations, which mirrored school's evaluations. Each side's conclusions diverged over whether Jonathan's disability impacted his ability to "access his free and appropriate education" (An important phrase in the federal law).

We met with the school board attorney, the vice superintendent and all the school professionals for an informal "will you please reconsider" meeting. They did not agree to reconsider. We met again at the school level bringing in all our professionals for a stand-off. Both sides spent six months and lots of time, money, and energy to continue standing at the same impasse.

Then my husband, an ordained elder in our church, started preaching sermons when our pastor left to plant a new church. One sermon was on Micah 6:8: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (NIV).

I don't recall what my husband said; however, the next day I made an appointment with the school principal. I started off the conversation telling her my husband's sermon caused me to request a meeting. Then I said, "My husband and I were hopping mad before we ever even walked into this school based upon what happened at the other school. We hired an attorney before we even gave you a chance to address our concerns. We started off adversarial and I'm sorry. I'd like to start again."

We had a long talk. I shared from my heart about where I was coming from and how I'd gotten there. She listened and then told me where she was coming from. In the end, we agreed to disagree. Before I left she said, "Mrs. Howe, you don't know me and have no reason to trust me; however, I'm going to ask you to trust my decision for Jonathan."

I told her that I had to trust her because God sent me there to seek reconciliation. And I believe He knew better than I what was best for my son.

Her decision was absolutely the best thing for Jonathan. Not only that, but she's handpicked his teacher every year. Often I'm confused about her choice, in the end; the teacher was the right teacher for the time.

Four years later I had to make another appointment to go in and humble myself again for a sinfully inappropriate response I had to something that occurred at the school. She graciously listened to my apology and we talked through the issue. As I left, once again she said, "Mrs. Howe, never apologize for advocating for your son. We teachers like to think we know better and get intimidated by parents who actually do. You will have to fight for Jonathan the rest of his school career. Don't feel sorry for doing so."

I accepted her attempt to reassure me, but she seemed to have missed the point that while I was not wrong about what I was doing, I was wrong in how I originally tried to do it.

She is not a believer in Christ, but I know a lot of her family and friends are believers. She always listens intently about how my faith is central in everything I say and do. I know the Lord is working in her life. I know I was a small part of it by being humble and letting Him use me in my sinfulness.

~ Corrie Howe

Full-time SAHM, part-time freelance writer, wife to life-long disciple-maker, mom to three ranging from seven to seventeen. I've recently discovered how to use my passion for writing to help minister to others. My writing ministry is like my daily ministry, becoming "an insider" into different worlds. As people begin to know me, they begin to like me and then trust me. At that point, I know I've earned the right to share the source of my Hope. My blog is about my middle son and the "joy in the daily challenges of Asperger's Syndrome." While he and his issues can be difficult, he's funny and imaginative. Yesterday, he was talking to his imaginary pickle! Drop by to see what he's doing today at [Just Because My Pickle Talks Doesn't Make Me An Idiot](#).



Because of Grace



I need to be lost in Your presence, Lord
Just move me into Your love
As Your peace comes to surround me here
Lord, it's by Your grace that I've been touched

Yes, Your grace is enough to know
Even when things are hidden deep inside
That I may feel your spirit draw close

Lord, it's in Your truth that I long to abide

Father, hear my heart as I cry out to You
Hear me as I lift Your name in praise
When the world seems to leave me weary
It's to You my prayers I can always raise

Yes, Your grace is enough for me
It's because of grace I can look above
And through tears of deep gratitude
By grace I know your ever present love

Yes, I am overcome by Your love, my Lord
I'm surrounded by Your mercy and grace
Just being in the presence of Your Holiness
I find comfort in Your sweet embrace

Yes, Your grace is enough for me
It brings me humbly before You, face to face
When hope is found with peace attached
New life comes from Your touch of Grace

~ Karen Hopkins

Karen was born into military family in the late 1950s, and Europe became her family's playground. She traveled to many countries, both for the military and for fun and adventure. She moved back to Northern California, where she finished her teen years. She now lives in the mountains of eastern Oregon, where she has learned to appreciate God's beauty. During the snowy and cold of winter, she stays inside and quilts to her heart's content. She donates each little handmade quilt, as an offering of her own healing from her not so pretty past. These quilts are an effort to give a healing touch to other women who have adopted out their own children. You can visit her on her blog at [Karen's Threads of Hope](#).



Issue Photographer

Amanda Patterson is a woman of many, many hats. Each day she puts on one or more of these hats. Sometimes multiple hats at a time. She is a lover of Christ, devoted wife, doting mommy, patriotic army wife, loyal best-friend, leader of youth, life-long Texan, proud Aggie, and an aspiring photographer. She loves capturing the miracles of creation, life, and family on camera. Her goal in photography is capture you in your element to help preserve your precious memories. She is proud to have made it in this business over the last year to help support her family. Please visit her website to preview her work at [Touch of Grace Photography](#).



ST Publication Prayer - Honesty



Dear God,

I love You. You are everything to me. I want to be more like You; but I'm going to be honest, some days it's hard. On the outside I seem fine. I smile. I witness. I share You just as You told us to do, but deep inside sometimes I struggle. I'm not as strong on the inside as I appear to be on the outside, and I'm afraid to let anyone know. Help me and those like me who at times feel spiritually dry, tired, forgotten to share our struggle also. Help us to allow those who are hurting to know that we hurt also and that we struggle also, but the difference is that we have a Heavenly Father who has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. Give us the strength and courage to show the world a true picture of the changes Your presence has made and continues to make in our lives.

Amen

Bernadine is a thirty something single lady who loves life, loves to laugh and loves her Lord. She has a passion for ministry to young ladies and seeks to point them to Jesus Christ, the one who captured her heart as a teenager. Bernadine can often be found curled up reading a book or writing in one. You can find her at personal blog, [Keeping it Real Girl Talk](#), and she's a monthly contributor at [Laced With Grace](#).

