



Sitting with God

Volume 1

A 40 Day Meditation

Alisa Hope Wagner

Proverbs 2.1-8 (NLT)

My Child, listen to what I say,
and treasure my commands.
Tune your ears to wisdom,
and concentrate on understanding.
Cry out for insight,
and ask for understanding.
Search for them as you would for silver;
seek them like hidden treasures.
Then you will understand what it means to fear the Lord,
and you will gain knowledge of God.
For the Lord grants wisdom!
From his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
He grants a treasure of common sense to the honest.
He is a shield to those who walk with integrity.
He guards the paths of the just
and protects those who are faithful to him.

If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior and have asked Him into your heart, God has put His Holy Spirit within you (Acts 5.32). The Holy Spirit desires to give each of you godly insight, understanding and wisdom. God wants to teach you and guide you into a path of righteousness (Psalm 23.3).

But you might ask, “How can I gain this wisdom? How can I become a student of the Holy Spirit?” According to Proverbs 2.3-4 (NLT), all you have to do is *ask* and *seek* for it, and the Lord will grant your request!

Gaining wisdom and understanding can become a daily part of your everyday life. If you are open to the Holy Spirit’s teaching, He will provide “Holy Lessons” for you throughout your normal day. God is not tight-fisted with His insights; rather, He is generous to those who are faithful to Him: “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him” (James 1.5 NASB).

Sitting with God: A 40 Day Meditation is a compilation of Christian devotionals that seek to know God more intimately through a lifestyle of meditation on God’s Word. In this book, you will see the Holy Spirit using average experiences and circumstances to teach godly insights that are biblically rooted.

My prayer for this book is that it provides you with an example of how to “tune your ears to wisdom.” I am merely an imperfect Christian woman who yearns to “cry out for insight” about a perfect God. Please join me on my quest to find “hidden treasures” of God’s truth!

About the Author

Alisa Hope Wagner gave her life to Jesus at the age of 14 in a small Baptist church in South Texas. All she wanted was to be loved, and she found that love through Jesus Christ. Alisa has never felt unloved since that day!

Alisa has her BA degree in English from A & M - Corpus Christi and her MA degree in English - Applied Linguistics from the University of Houston. She has taught English to every age group: elementary, junior high, high school and college. She has a God-given passion to write, and she loves to write about what the Holy Spirit is currently teaching her.

Alisa has published devotionals, articles and poetry; and she is continuously trying to reach people for Christ with her writing. She has also written her first novel and is currently seeking an agent.

Alisa is the chief editor of the *Granola Bar Devotional Writing Ministry* and is always looking for new ways to help people share their faith story. She is also a contributing writer for the *Internet Café*, *Exemplify Online and Magazine* and *Take Root and Write*.

Alisa loves her church, *Bay Area Fellowship*, and is a member of the *JANES Women's Ministry* core team. She is honored to be the One on One with God Discipleship Coordinator of her women's ministry, which involves the coordinating and teaching of a discipleship program called *One on One with God* and producing the women's ministry magazine for their Glo Conference. One of her greatest joys is to watch God change the lives of His people.

Alisa married her high school sweetheart and has been married for over ten years. They are hometeam leaders at their church and dedicate themselves to creating community within their church. Her husband is the greatest supporter of her writing ministry. Alisa and her twin-sister, Christina, co-founded *Sanctified Together: A Compassion and Discipleship Ministry*. Alisa's two sons and daughter offer her constant joy and continuous lessons on the Fruits of the Spirit. Alisa's true hope with her writing is that through it people are brought closer to God!

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Strength in Weakness

I have nodules (calluses) on my vocal cords. Singers get these due to the stress of singing. These nodules cause your voice to sound breathy and hoarse. I grew up going to speech therapy, and my distinct voice sparked my immense fear of public speaking.

To my chagrin, God called me to public speaking. The week before my first speaking assignment, I was so consumed by anxiety and worry that I literally could not sleep. It got so bad that I imaged taking shots of tequila (I don't drink) or slamming my head against the kitchen counter (I'm not a masochist).

Little did I know that my perceived weakness would force me to be innovative. I grabbed at anything that would divert my audience's attention away from me. I learned and implemented computer software, utilized original visual aids, created exciting group work and interweaved the Internet into my talks. If I could just keep the minds of my audience continuously busy, then I wouldn't have to worry about them analyzing me and my voice!

Flash forward ten years later. I completed a speaking assignment last night; and as I watched my audience members smile and laugh; discuss problems and answers; encourage one another and talk like old friends, I was amazed. This was our first meeting, yet my audience interacted like we had been meeting for years. Needless to say, none of them got bored or fell asleep! I spoke with confidence, and it felt good to know that I might be making a difference in their lives.

I realize now that I'm a pretty good speaker, and I'm also a very versatile speaker. My mind is constantly looking for ways to engage the audience and get them involved. My testimony about my speaking journey always blows people away. But really it is all to the glory of God because everything is from Him. The only thing that I added to the mix was my **obedience**. My obedience in my weakness caused me to be innovative and propelled God's strength in my life!

Working with a weakness is hard, but I'm reminded of 2 Corinthians 12:9: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." God gives us weaknesses for a reason. They push us out of our comfort zones and force us to look beyond what's already been done.

If you feel God calling you to work inside of a weakness, be excited! He is about to do something amazing in your life. Though the path will not be easy, trust that God knows what He is doing. He will not ask you to do anything unless He has declared your victory. Your weakness can become one of your greatest assets!

Imperfect Vessel

I struggle with a feeling of unworthiness. This feeling is especially crippling when I'm doing things for the Lord. I want to cover up my imperfections, but God won't let me. I wish I could pretend that I were strong, but I can't. How can I -- flawed as I am -- do anything right for the kingdom of God? My mistakes are guaranteed. My stumbling is certain. How can I move forward knowing I am not good enough?

I called my spiritual mentor and asked her if I could come by for a visit. We are both busy, but, somehow, God arranged two precious hours for us to sit together at the foot of Jesus' throne. No time existed during those two hours. We were just two souls in the presence of the Spirit of the Holy One. We drew our open hands up to God, grasped pieces of His goodness and exchanged them with each other.

My friend handed me a mug of coffee, and I didn't notice the mug's appearance. I only noticed its feel, and it felt comfortable and perfect. As we chatted, I sipped from the mug, never once looking down at it. She began telling me where she found the mug. She was at a store looking at all the beautiful handmade mugs. While she looked at the perfectly shaped vessels, she saw one that should have been thrown away.

This mug was made too thin and the body of it had collapsed. The maker stretched the body back up, but the damage was already done. The mug was warped with wrinkles and folds, yet the maker still put the mug into the kiln. He added a handle and glazed it and presented it in his store. How could the maker offer an imperfect mug in his store? Why did he place value on something so flawed?

My friend looked at the mug then looked at me and said, "It's an imperfect vessel and it's beautiful."

I held the mug protectively in my hands. It might be flawed, but it could still be used. For the first time, I looked at the mug, and I could honestly say that I've never seen a more beautiful vessel in my life. In that moment, I placed a great amount of value on the mug. That imperfect vessel reminded me of myself.

God holds me tightly in His hands, and He places an expensive price tag on my life. I've been weak and I've crumbled, but He stretched me back up, glazed me with His spirit and put me through the fires. Yes, I am flawed . . . but I am no longer frail. I may have wrinkles and folds, but God thinks I am beautiful. He has fastened me with His handle, and He is ready to use me.

God show me how to be confident in my imperfections!

"Do you feel like a lowly worm, Jacob? Don't be afraid. Feel like a fragile insect, Israel? I'll help you. I, God, want to reassure you. The God who buys you back, The Holy of Israel. I'm transforming you from worm to harrow [a tool used for soil], from insect to iron. As a sharp-toothed harrow you'll smooth out the mountains, turn those tough old hills into loamy soil. You'll open the rough ground to the weather, to the blasts of sun and wind and rain. But you'll be confident and exuberant, expansive in The Holy of Israel!" (Isaiah 41:14 MSG).

Every fiber in my soul knows that I am nothing in the light of God. If you were to place my soul next to the Spirit of the Lord, I would completely disappear. It would be like placing a tea candle next to the sun. The more I grow in Christ, the more I comprehend my inconsequentialness without Him.

The story of the immoral woman washing Jesus' feet always bothered me. Jesus forgave the woman of her many sins and He said, "I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love" (Luke 7: 47 NLT).

What I don't think people realize is that we are all immoral. I don't care how the world categorizes and ranks our sins, but compared to the perfection of the Holy God, we are all liars, prostitutes, thieves and murderers. We all have need for great amounts of forgiveness. The only difference between the immoral woman and us is that she comprehended the truth -- she is nothing without Him.

The world might label us as a sinner or a saint, but it doesn't matter. We are all sinful without the redemption of the cross. We are all that immoral woman at Jesus' feet. The distinction between people who are forgiven much is not their appearance of "many sins"; it is their full understanding and awareness of their "many sins." We all have an outstanding debt of sin that we cannot pay.

All my value and all my self-worth can only come from God. I might be a tea light, but I got the power of the sun around me. I have no significance without my Creator. It's time I let go of finding my own value and start allowing God to place His value on me. I am an imperfect vessel, and God thinks I'm worthy to be used. Are you struggling with feelings of unworthiness? Will you claim ask God to fill you with His divine worth and acceptance?

What Shall I Wear

Early one morning, I stared into my closet and wondered what I should wear? I was about to pull one of my nice shirts off of the hanger, but I thought better of it. I didn't want to waste a nice shirt on a day that was a "just-get-it-over-with" kind of day.

"Today is not special," I thought. "I should just wear jeans and a t-shirt."

I put on the jeans and t-shirt and inspected myself in the mirror. I realized that I pretty much wear

jeans and a t-shirt every day. As I stared at my reflection, God nicely connected my outward attire to my attitude. I had a negative attitude towards this day. I wanted to hurry up and get it out of the way. I had already made up my mind that this day would be unimportant and absolutely no fun. And judging from my hamper overflowing with t-shirts and jeans, I harbored that attitude a lot.

Although there is nothing wrong with wearing jeans and a t-shirt, God revealed an expectation and attitude I had about my days that needed to be readjusted. Every morning, I roll up my sleeves and plow through my day like a tractor on autopilot. I trudge along and miss most of the enjoyment because my expectations are low and my attitude is wrong.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever thought to yourself, "If only I could get through this day, life would be better"?

God is teaching me that I need to change my attitude and expect great things every day. God is the master weaver of our days, and He does not waste a single one. None of our days drop under His radar; He has a divine appointment for us each and every day!

I'm not saying that every day is going to be filled with rainbows and lollipops, but each day does serve a purpose. I think if we put our trust in God, we can find joy even in the hard times. God doesn't waste a single heartache, conflict or tragedy. He cares about us and our days, and He wants us to be blessed.

If you are a Christian, you have the ultimate portal to joy -- Jesus Christ! People are looking at us, and they are wondering why we are here on this earth. They want to see if Jesus makes a difference in our lives. They need to see our joy, especially during the mundane and hard times.

If we start tapping into the joy that is within us, we would have joy every day, even when the circumstances are bleak! God wants us to rejoice every day: "This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24 NIV). Once we get good at opening that joy, we can start sharing it with those around us. We can pass out God's joy like it's going out of style, and people will praise God because of it!

I am learning to put on a new attitude every morning, even if I still put on my jeans and t-shirt! What about you? How can you give your attitude a new wardrobe?

Spiritual Flu Shot

I bought a book from the religious section at Barnes and Noble a few years back. It looked like an interesting, encouraging read and the author on the cover looked smart and friendly. I went home and started reading it. As I read it, I felt very empowered. The book discussed deep, spiritual ideas, and I believed that I had found a hoard of valuable insight.

I read one quote from the author that I thought was brilliant, so I typed the quote word for word and massed emailed it to almost everyone on my address list. I wanted everyone to know what wonderful things I was reading. I wanted everyone to be encouraged by this author as I was.

After I sent out the email, I continued reading the book. I began to get a sinking feeling deep in my spirit. I noticed that I was already on the second chapter of the book, but the author had yet to write anything about Jesus. How could that be? Jesus is the highlight; He is the main attraction.

I quickly started thumbing through the book desperately looking for the name "Jesus," but I couldn't find His name. Then, I flipped to the back cover of the book to see which Christian leaders had supported her book, but I didn't recognize any of the names. Finally, I got on line and looked up the author's name and the truth became evident: I had an encounter with a false prophet: "How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds?" (Jeremiah 23.26 NIV).

Her words sounded beautiful, spiritual and right-on. I felt comforted and encouraged by her ideas about spirituality. Many things she touched on were based on biblical truth. I could probably back much of what she said with scripture. Yet, even with a ton of supporting evidence, she still purposefully skipped over Jesus and His sacrifice for us on the cross.

When I realized that I had been unknowingly tricked by a false prophet, I was so ashamed. Why didn't I research the author before I bought the book? Why did I mass email my friends with this author's spiritual emptiness? I knew what I had to do. I had to eat a big o' slice of humble pie and mass email all my friends back and tell them that I had made a mistake.

It was very embarrassing, but I did it. I explained what happened and apologized for not getting more information before spreading the false teaching. I was so disheartened about this entire event for several years until God recently taught me something. God gave me the image of a spiritual flu shot. Sometimes God exposes us to a small dose of failure to prepare us for a greater victory.

I can say honestly say that now before I consume information and pass on information, I always try to verify the creditability of the author. My false-prophet radar is constantly in high-gear, and I am now able to quickly recognize false teaching that glosses over the importance of Jesus Christ and the cross.

The amazing thing is that my email address list has multiplied greatly since my mass email several years ago. I am now a leader in several ministries, including writing ministries which emphasize the passing on of information. God was so good to me that He allowed me to stumble when the stakes weren't that high. If I were to stumble now, I wouldn't even want to think about the damage that could be done.

Has God ever allowed you to stumble? Can you look back and see how God might have been giving you a spiritual flu shot? Can you see a difference in your life today because of that spiritual flu shot?

Women in Ministry

Women do not need a title to be in ministry – there is ministry all around us. We don't have to be pastor's wives, women's ministers, church staff or Bible teachers in order to live sold-out lives to Christ. We can go outside our front door, click onto the Internet or head to the grocery store and find fields ripe for the harvest (John 4.35). We live in a lost world, and people no longer know how to reach up to God. God put a desire in each of His children to know Him, but so many people have lost their way. They need someone to show them path to God through Christ! And that someone is God's chosen – you and me!

We as Christian women have Jesus residing in our hearts, and that Jesus longs to gather up His lost children. That Jesus in us desires to serve the needs of the brokenhearted. That Jesus in us craves an intimate relationship with His children! If we truly want to live spirit-led lives, we won't be satisfied with simply giving God a small portion of our week. When our lives are God-controlled instead of flesh-controlled, our every moment will crave God's anointing. Our sole desire will be to please Him!

Our female gender does not exclude us from being fishers of men! Whether through evangelism or discipleship, our lives can make a beautiful mark on God's kingdom. We can be God's instruments to bring His children closer to Him! We are daughters of the King, and we work diligently to shine His light into a dark world (Matthew 5.16). God will daily orchestrate divine assignments for us; and if we are attentive to the Holy Spirit, our work will bear beautiful fruits for the world to see and give God glory.

However, our ministry in Christ cannot happen unless we are daily seeking to know God more intimately. Our ministry and good works should be a manifestation of our love for our Father; otherwise, we are just going through religious motions. As we cultivate our relationship with our Creator, the fire of His spirit will burn inside of us (Jeremiah 20.9). Our passion for God and His people will overcome any shame, insecurity, embarrassment or fear we have while proclaiming the Gospel. When we fall in love with our Maker, we can't help but share His majesty with others!

How can you focus on your ministry today? Who in your life needs to see the love of Jesus in your? What non-eternal things can you cut out of your life so that you can focus more on your relationship with God?

Soccer Humility

My sister-in-law has been inviting me to play city-league soccer with her for several years. This season I finally felt ready, so I went out and bought my cleats, shin guards, and soccer ball. I am thirty-two years old, and I have never played a lick of soccer (save elementary gym class) in my entire life.

When I met the other team members, it became painfully obvious that I was soccer ignorant. I needed help putting on my shin guards, my sister-in-law had to give me a quick lesson on how to kick the ball (on the side of your shoe laces), I had to be told over and over again the name of each position, and my team mates had to continually tell me where to stand on the field.

My ignorance became evident to the other team, as well. During the game, the ball went over the goal, and I asked a player that I was guarding if it was good or not. She looked at me with surprise and said, “It has to go into the goal to be good.” As the girl laughed and walked off, I struggled with my utter stupidity. I finally decided to swallow my pride (it kept catching in my throat), and I worked harder to do better.

I turned my focus to the ball. I might not have all the fancy footwork that every woman around me seemed born with, but I had determination and a learning spirit. I blocked the ball, kicked it (maybe not quite in the direction of my teammate), hit the ball with my head (well, it was actually the side of my face), and pestered any woman on the opposite team that had the ball. Even though I was clueless, I became a crazy force to be reckoned with.

I played the entire game. I could feel my heart thumping against my chest, and I could have taken my pulse just by feeling the pulsating in my gums. My entire body was throbbing. I never realized how enormous the soccer field was and how few players there are on the field. The other team was so good at passing the ball that it felt like I was always chasing it. The other team won, but I knew that I didn’t make it easy for them.

I motivated myself by saying, “Glory to God! Glory to God!”

I knew that many of the women were not Christians, so I wanted to be a good example of persistence and dedication. I wasn’t going to let the fact that I knew nothing of soccer stop me from playing it. I know that God loves me and thinks I’m special, so if the entire world of soccer laughs at me, I would be okay. My desire is to base my self-worth on being a daughter of God, not on what the world thinks of me. And if I do that, I can do anything.

If we as God’s daughters base our entire self-worth on the awesome fact that we are His, we can do anything! So many Christian women fear doing something new. We don’t want to join a Bible study, volunteer at our church, go to a new play-date, or share our faith with others because we are scared what people will think of us. But we can’t let fear stop us from stepping out because God is always doing something new: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland” (Isaiah 43.19 NIV).

In our Christian walk, God will always have us reach outside of our comfort zone. Whenever we start to feel comfortable, we must prepare ourselves -- God is going to do something new. The best way for us to perceive what He is doing and to be ready for it is by swallowing our pride and humbling ourselves. We can’t always be know-it-alls. We can’t always be the best. We can’t always have it all together.

Many times we will be ignorant and on the bottom of life’s totem poles. But, that’s okay! Our self-worth is based on the fact that we are children of God: “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we

may also share in his glory” (Romans 8.17 NIV). This promise should be enough to encourage our complete obedience and dependence to God.

Jesus came to this earth as a lowly carpenter. He served people every day by healing the sick, feeding the hungry and teaching the ignorant. He washed His disciples’ feet and sacrificed His body for the world. He could have come to this earth as a prince, demanding angels and humans to do His bidding and expecting us to pay for our own sins. But He didn’t! He humbled Himself for us and did something new, and we are called to follow His example!

What are you doing that is new? Are you basing your self-worth on the world or on being a daughter of God? Are you able to swallow your pride and try something that you know nothing about? What can you do today that would enable God to show His power through your weakness (2 Corinthians 12).

Will you join me on a journey of knowing Christ more intimately? I want my life to burn for Christ and brokenness is the first step. Make a choice to humble yourself before God and others, and you will find your God-designed life: “Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life” (Proverbs 22.4 NIV).

Never a Writer

When I was fourteen years old, my family moved from Fairbanks, Alaska, to Corpus Christi, Texas. I was really excited. I would be starting high school in a beach town and I couldn’t wait to get involved in the sports program! Playing sports was everything to me. I disciplined myself in sports, I enjoyed playing sports and much of my identity was wrapped up in sports. All I wanted was to move to Corpus Christi and start high school on the right foot – playing sports!

The sports I loved most were track, gymnastics, volleyball and softball. I played these sports from a young age, and I was confident that I would exceed in my new high school. When we moved to Corpus Christi, however, I discovered devastating news: the local high schools didn’t have gymnastics, volleyball or softball – all they had was track! I couldn’t believe it!

During my freshmen year in high school, I felt hopeless and detached. I had lost my identity, my method of meeting friends (on the playing field) and my sense of achievement. Is it any wonder I accepted Jesus during this time? I struggled with feeling disconnected – I was in a new state, new culture, new climate, and I had nothing to cling to for acceptance. I started studying a little bit more, and I was shocked when someone called me “the smart girl.” Actually, I was thrilled! At least I had some kind of title!

My junior year in high school, I started tentatively writing. My grammar was pathetic, but I wrote with a lot of emotion. My junior English teacher had us write an essay about Thomas Paine’s famous line, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” We were supposed to research current social issues and discuss them in our essay. I, of course, didn’t know how to research, so I wrote a satirical essay that made fun of the boys in our high school. I didn’t realize that I was writing a satire, but I whipped up the essay (grammar mistakes and all) in about ten minutes. The next

week as I walked into class, my teacher had a big smile on her face and she told me how much she enjoyed my writing. She said that I should write for a magazine. She even read that essay to all of her classes.

I was ecstatic, and my waning self-esteem had a dramatic boost! I finally found something that I did well, and it had nothing to do with sports. My senior year, I took a creative writing class and I excelled. My grammar still wasn't great, but my teacher got excited about what I wrote. I started to get some confidence in my writing, and I began to integrate writing into my identity.

I went to college without any idea what degree plan I would take. I did, however, take a lot of English classes. I finally took a grammar class, and the hazy world of grammar started to become clearer. At the beginning of my junior year in college, my guidance counselor said that I would have to choose a degree plan. I chose English because I had no idea what I wanted to be, and I couldn't think of anything else.

During my senior year, God told me that I was going to be a writer. I was twenty-one. I remember shrugging my shoulders and thinking to myself, "Well, I better start reading then." Once I knew that God wanted me to write, my writing improved dramatically. One English professor, whom I had taken for two semesters, even commented about the remarkable change in my writing. I finally had a God-given purpose, and I had a clear goal at which to aim.

I write all this because for years I never understood why God brought me clear across the country to a school that didn't have the sports that I loved. I always questioned God and wondered why my first two years of high school had to be so hard. It wasn't until a friend showed me her "life timeline" that I gained understanding.

My friend made a timeline of her life and wrote down the big events (bad and good) that happened to her. Then, she looked at each event and asked the question, "Where was God's hand in this?" I discussed her timeline with her, and we were able to help her gain many beautiful insights of God's guidance in her walk of faith.

When I thought about my life, the first thing that came to my mind was my freshmen year in high school. It was very much a low point for me. However, I realized that if I had not gone through that struggle, I might not have become a Christian, and I definitely wouldn't be a writer. God in His awesome way allowed hardships in my life, so I could become who I am today. I can say with all honesty that I am glad I went through what I did. Of course, there is more to the story; but I'm glad God gave me clarity concerning this particular struggle. I look forward to the day that God gives me complete clarity about my life. I know I will be mighty glad that I trusted Him and stayed obedient to His will.

What about you? Do you want clarity about some of the events that happened in your life? Part of knowing God more intimately is knowing who you are in Christ. God says that you are a pleasing aroma to Him (2 Corinthians 2.15). You need to know the ingredients to that "aroma" so you can make that fragrance even more distinct for God. The world needs to see who you are as a believer.

I challenge you to make a timeline of your life. You can bring it before the Lord and ask Him to show you His hand in all the hard times and good times. I would also suggest you enlist a close friend to talk you through it, as well. Strive to gain understanding about your walk of faith, and God will bless your efforts: “Blessed is the man [woman] who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold” (Proverbs 3.13-14 NIV). God loves you, and He will match your heartache with His grace. Trust Him with your life.

A Prophet's Fear

Christians today are blessed with a ton of resources. We have several translations of the Bible, many godly leaders that can guide us, our own Christian genre of music and fiction, and numerous web sites that encourage spiritual growth. All of these resources are awesome and can be used by God to build our character; however, if they are not divinely used, they can also distract us from God's purpose.

The story of the man of God (a prophet) who told King Jeroboam (an evil king of Israel) to tear down all the idol shrines always reminds me of the importance of listening to God first. This prophet confronted a very powerful king with God's message. He even performed several miracles in front of the king and the Israelites. King Jeroboam asked if the prophet would join him for dinner because the king wanted to give him a gift. But the prophet said, “Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water here. For I was commanded by the word of the LORD: 'You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came'" (1 Kings 13:8b-9 NIV).

The prophet left the king, but on the way back home, he was encountered by “an old prophet.” The old prophet told the younger one that an angel had told him that the young prophet was suppose to come home and eat with him. The young prophet allowed this other prophet's words to usurp God's command, and he ate with the older prophet. While they ate, the older prophet cried out, “You have defied the word of the Lord and have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you. You came back and ate bread and drank water in the place where he told you not to eat or drink. Therefore your body will not be buried in the tomb of your fathers” (1 Kings 13:21b-22 NIV).

I do not think the old prophet was trying to be mean or deceitful; I think he just made a mistake. Since the young prophet listened to the older man and not God, a lion killed him. The older prophet gathered the young man's body and buried it in his own tomb. The old prophet cried out in mourning, “Oh, my brother!” (1 Kings 13:30 NIV). The older man was clearly upset that the young man of God had died. He even told his sons that he wanted his body to be buried by the young prophet's body.

I'm sure the old prophet was thinking, “I wish the young man had listened to God instead of me!” This is the heart of any Christian who is in spiritual leadership. We obediently write, say and do what God asks us to do; but our readers, listeners and observers must always listen to the Holy

Spirit first. Whenever I give advice (which I'm very cautious about giving), I make an effort to say, "Do not write my words in gold on your heart! Always, always, always pray about it first!"

John Piper writes in his book, *Life as a Vapor*, "I am vigilant, as far as it depends on me, to be less than Christ to others." We are spiritual leaders for Christ, yet we are also spiritual disciples (learners) of Christ. We must be vigilant to make our words and our actions subservient to God's Words and His Will. He is the authority. We are merely God's tool to accomplish His divine purpose.

Therefore, the point of the story about the young and old prophet is twofold: First, Christian resources are merely additions to the movement of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can and does use others to accomplish His will; however, we need to be consistent about seeking His guidance first. A well-meaning bit of advice can be the exact opposite of what God wants to accomplish. Second, spiritual leaders have to make exerted efforts to become less than Christ. Most Christians would be devastated to find out that their advice led someone astray. That is why whenever someone seeks my advice, I always ask, "What does God have to say?"

The Spirit of God resides in each of us. It is an amazing gift! He wants to guide us, teach us and love us. He will hand pick outside resources to shed some light on issues, but He enjoys teaching us directly. My desire is that I do not put people's words on a pedestal, and people do not put my words on a pedestal. In the scheme of things, we know nothing of the multi-faceted mysteries of God. I believe that if all Christians were desperately clinging to God, we wouldn't have all the hurt feelings and disappointments we have today. Christians are human, and God can use our imperfections to achieve His divine plan; however, we need to always put Him first.

John the Baptist said it best when his disciples were worried when Jesus started gaining more acclaim. John said about Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30 NIV). That should be the heart's desire for all Christians. Can you remember a time that a well-meaning friend got in the way of God's will? How can you make sure that you become less and Jesus more in your life?

The Acts Get Up

Peter and Paul both healed a crippled man in Acts. I heard Peter's performance of healing while driving in the car. I just happened to flip to my audio Bible in my 5 CD changer and listened as Peter pulled a crippled man to his feet.

That same night when I was reading my one year Bible before bed, I read about Paul's performance of healing. Paul yelled across a crowd of people for the crippled man to stand up, and he did. Read both accounts quickly and see if you can notice the difference.

First

"When he saw Peter and John about to enter the Temple, he [the crippled man] asked for a handout. Peter, with John at his side, looked him straight in the eye and said, 'Look here.' He

looked up, expecting to get something from them. Peter said, 'I don't have a nickel to my name, but what I do have, I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!' He grabbed him by the right hand and pulled him up. In an instant his feet and ankles became firm. He jumped to his feet and walked. (Acts 3.5-8 The Message).

Second

"There was a man in Lystra who couldn't walk. He sat there, crippled since the day of his birth. He heard Paul talking, and Paul, looking him in the eye, saw that he was ripe for God's work, ready to believe. So he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Up on your feet!" The man was up in a flash—jumped up and walked around as if he'd been walking all his life" (Acts 14.8-10 The Message).

The day that I happened to read these two healings, I was struggling. I was smack in the middle of a "crippling" season, and I wanted to claim defeat. Several so-called negative things happened in my life, and I wanted to crawl in a hole and disappear. I didn't want to get up. I wanted to get out!

After I read the second healing, God asked me a simple question: "Which one are you?"

During the tough times, was I going to be the man who was looking for a hand-out and had to be yanked up out of his crippledness? Or was I going to be the man "ripe for God's work" and by faithful determination jumped out of his crippledness? God accomplishes His will either way. He can either pull us up when we've been knocked down or we can jump up claiming God's promised victory (Psalm 118.15).

I have made a vow to God. I want to be the second man. When I mess up or when bad things happen, I want to jump up and keep running the race. I trust that God uses all things (good and bad) to accomplish His perfect plan (Romans 8.28). Are you in a crippling season right now? Will you claim God's victory with me and get up?

His Strength is Your Joy

Recently, a friend asked me if I understood the verse “. . . for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8.10b NIV). Her question sparked my interest because I had made a vow at the beginning of the year that I would dedicate this year to understanding and gaining joy. However, this particular verse always appeared backward. It seemed to me that it should read “The strength of the LORD is your joy.” How could God’s joy be our strength? Where can we find God’s joy?

To answer this question, I had to look at this verse in the context of the Bible. This verse was stated by Nehemiah (445 B.C.), an Old Testament prophet. He was sent by God to help the Israelites rebuild their lives. The Israelites had just experienced great amounts of devastation at the hands of other nations. They suffered through starvation, displacement and slaughter. In fact, when Nehemiah came on the scene, only a few survivors were left.

The remaining remnant made their way back to the promise land, but they were disgraced and harassed by other nations. Their homeland was in ruins, and the city wall that protected them was consumed by fire. The lives of the people were in shambles, and all that was left to do was rebuild from the mess. Needless to say, there was very little joy during this bleak time.

Against all odds, the nation began to rebuild itself. There wasn't enough man-power or money, enthusiasm was low, bordering cities tried to sabotage the reconstruction and there were many disputes among the people themselves; but, somehow, the wall was built in record time and the towns within the walls were restored.

Before the people went back to their villages to start their new lives, Nehemiah told them, "Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." But where do we find God's joy? It is hard to gain strength from something that we do not see.

The amazing truth is that God's joy was actually recorded approximately 250 years before the nation rebuilt itself. The prophet Isaiah (700 B.C.) foretells the fall and restoration of the Israelite nation. Isaiah records God's attitude toward the nation rebuilding itself. And what is God's attitude? It's joyful: "Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones (Isaiah 49.13 NIV).

God is shouting for joy. God is telling both the heavens and the earth to rejoice. God is eager to offer compassion and comfort to the afflicted remnant, and He is rooting for His people to succeed at rebuilding their lives.

What does this mean for you and me? It means that God is our cheering section. Life is hard and bad things happen – houses are foreclosed, families are broken, health is compromised and lives are lost; but we gain strength to move on because God finds joy in our lives. He wants us to rebuild from the ashes and start again. With God on our side, we can accomplish anything.

Are you nervous about going back to school? Are you apprehensive about dating again? Are you scared to start that new business? Are you concerned about a health issue? Are you struggling with an addiction? Are you consumed by self-doubt and worry? Don't be! God is cheering for you to succeed. He wants you to make those tough decisions that push you outside of your comfort zone. It will be hard at first, but you will find strength in God's joy for you. He wants you to rebuild and thrive!

Proud to be a Slug

***Question:**

"Comparing different slug groups arises quickly the question, how those shell-less snails could survive, without the protection of a shell."

***Answer:**

"The external protection of a slug mainly happens by its mucus or slime."

I've been telling God lately that being obedient to Him is making me feel like a snail without a shell. A shell-less snail is called a slug, so I guess I feel like a slug. I've been on my slug-journey for about four years now. My self-esteem used to be connected to a lot of things (beauty, education, accomplishments, money, family, etc.), but God has slowly cut everything until all I have left is Him.

This doesn't mean He has actually taken everything from me, but He has taken my dependency on everything. I can survive if I lose everything, but I cannot survive if I lose God. Without God there is absolute nothingness - no beauty, no education, no accomplishments, no money, no family, no anything! Without God I wouldn't be typing these words, and you wouldn't be reading them. We wouldn't exist.

If we live the slug-life by putting God first, we gain everything in the process (Matthew 6:33). But, putting God first is not easy. Putting God first means allowing God to take our snail shells (our sinful flesh and imperfect humanity) off. Without our snail shells we are vulnerable and exposed to the world, which is exactly what God wants. It is only when our snail shells are off that Jesus' light that He planted in each of us can shine in this dark world (John 8:12 NIV).

But what does the slug life look like? You can see it when you examine Jesus' life.

If you read Isaiah's foreshadowing of Jesus, you get an image of a very ordinary man (Isaiah 53:2-5). Jesus was God in the flesh, yet the scriptures describe Him in very humble terms: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering" (2b-3). This was Jesus' humanity. Not so very pretty (I hate saying that, but it is a biblical fact). However, if you read Daniel's description of Jesus, you get an entirely different image (Daniel 10:4-610).

This description of Jesus boasts a super-natural and awe-inspiring image: "His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude" (6). This is an image of the Son of God, the King of the Jews! When Daniel saw this Jesus, he said, "I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless" (8).

Jesus took off His snail shell and humbled Himself to the world. He allowed us to mock Him, persecute Him and kill Him. At any moment He could put on His snail shell (His sinless flesh and perfect humanity), but He didn't. Why Did Jesus allow Himself to be despised and not worshiped? God had a plan: "Through what he experienced, my righteous one, my servant, will make many 'righteous ones,' as he himself carries the burden of their sins" (Isaiah 53:11). Jesus humbled Himself so that we may gain righteousness (right-standing with God) through His sacrifice for our sins.

Okay, so what does that mean for you and me? It means this: If Jesus took off His snail shell

which was perfect, why do we have such a hard time taking ours off which is flawed by sin? Instead of humbling ourselves to this world, we pump-up our snail shells. We decorate our shells with degrees, clothes, cars, houses, achievements, beauty and pride. We lug around our bulging shells and knock over anyone in our way. How can we serve and love others if we are too busy bowling them over with our pride?

I'm not saying there is anything wrong with these things. But when we base our self-esteem on things of this world, we will be severely disappointed in the end. We can only find our self-esteem in the fact that we are created by the Most High, and He loves us and has great plans for us. Once we fully understand that privilege, it won't be so difficult to take off our snail shells and humble ourselves.

However, how do we willingly humble ourselves to a world that we know will hurt us? If we take off our snail shells and become slugs, we'll be surrounded by a bunch of tough snails. Mostly everyone else is wearing their shells, and we're going to get bumped on and rolled over. How do we protect ourselves?

The answer is in the slime! The Holy Spirit is often symbolized as oil. King David was anointed with oil to represent that the Holy Spirit would be flowing through him. If we take our snail shells off and humbled ourselves, we will be protected by an oily slime -- the Holy Spirit! Just imagine that when you are allowing the Holy Spirit to have complete control of your life, you're allowing your slug to be smothered with glistening slime. This slime will help whenever the other snail shells hit you. They'll try to take you out, but their efforts will just slide right off (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

On the other hand, when you come into contact with other slugs, you'll have a holy slime swap! Their Holy Spirit will mix with your Holy Spirit, and your understanding of how wonderful God is will deepen. Our points of view are so limited, and that is why it is so important we surround ourselves with other Spirit-led people. If we can see God through the eyes of many righteous, how awesome would our image of God be? But you got to take off your shell!

Tell the world that you are proud to be a slug, and God will shine through you. Take off your snail shells, and the Holy Spirit will protect you.

* Reference: (<http://www.weichtiere.at/english/gastropoda/terrestrial/slugs.html>).

Disobedient Driver

I was driving in the car with my oldest son who is five years old. He and I were going grocery shopping together. As I drove, he was telling me all about what he learned at Sunday school. I stopped at a stop sign then continued driving down the street, and my son said from the back seat, "Mommy, you are so obedient."

This made me smile. My husband and I have been trying to teach our son about obedience. We tell him that we're teaching him to obey us so that one day he'll know how to obey God. God

will be able to bless his life only when he is obedient to God's direction.

"All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God"(Deuteronomy 28.2 NIV).

I wondered what obedience my son saw in me. Did he notice how I try to always keep the house clean so my family can have a peaceful home? Did he see me volunteer for our church and understand the sacrifice I made? Or did he watch me take time out of my busy schedule to read the Bible and talk with God?

What my son said took me by surprise. He said, "You are obedient when you drive. You don't break the rules so that the police officers don't pull you over."

After he said that, I had to take my foot off of the gas. I was driving faster than the speed limit and, thereby, breaking the law.

My son's perceptions of my obedience even in the smallest of circumstances made me realize how important it is to obey the laws -- God's laws and man's laws. My son notices every little thing I do, and he can sniff out a **double standard** anywhere.

How can I teach my son the importance of obedience when I'm disregarding laws that I don't really care for? I'm sure my son doesn't care for a dozen of rules that I enforce (brushing his teeth, washing his hands, picking up his toys), but he still has to do them for his own good.

I want to model to my son how to obey the rules out of love. I don't want him to see me obeying the laws because of some guilt-trip or out of legalistic duty. I want to obey the laws out of respect and love for my God. I want my son to see my obedience in every facet of my life – not because I **have** to obey but because I **want** to obey. As long as the laws correspond with the Bible and are for "my own good," I should strive for obedience.

If I want my son to obey and brush his teeth when I ask him to, I better take my foot off the gas and slow down!

"The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb" (Psalm 19.9-10 NIV).

Are there any small laws, like the speed limit, that you have not been taking seriously? How can you strive to obey the laws with an attitude that would be pleasing to God? Will you try meditating on those laws, imagining them to be "sweeter than honey"? Ask God to give you a compliant heart and change you from the inside out!

What's Your Glory Color

I've been thinking a lot about how God designed me... well, actually, I've been complaining. I

trust that God has designed me in a specific way, so I can fulfill a specific purpose in life. I love to write, and I know that writing is a big part of my design and plan. However, as I look over all of my writings, I can't help but think, "Dan it, Alisa! You are always so serious!"

I remember one time I got so sick of my melancholy writing that I wrote a brilliantly funny article (at least in my mind). I always enjoy women who write with humor, and I so appreciate their gift-offering of a smile and a laugh. So, in my funny article I wrote about boobs and my boys peeing off the deck. I couldn't wait to see what my friends thought.

That night when I tried to sleep, I felt the Holy Spirit tell me to delete that article. I tried ignoring the Holy Spirit and later rationalizing His words. Finally, though, I flung the covers off me, stumbled to the computer room and deleted my wonderfully witty article. And God sat me down and told me, "You write for me alone."

"Yes, God," I whispered and crawled back into bed.

Later, as I was thinking over these things, my identical twin sister called me with a spiritual breakthrough God had given her. My sister and I look a lot alike, but the core of who we are, how we view life and how we interact with God are completely different. Our perspectives are so unique that we have to discuss everything to pieces just to ensure that there are no misunderstandings that would translate into hurt feelings.

She admitted that reading my and other Christian writers' articles made her feel that she was spiritually lagging -- that maybe her relationship with Christ wasn't as strong. But what she realized is that her purpose is very different than mine and the writers she has been reading, so her interactions with God and her understanding of spirituality will also be different. She decided that there is nothing wrong with not always being so serious, and I wanted to yell out, "Thank God! I can barely handle my own seriousness."

My sister is positive and funny. She makes people laugh and feel comfortable. She goes out of her way to ensure harmony, and she does it all to the glory of God!

I truly think that when God created people, He fitted each of us with a tiny and unique slice of His glory. I imagine God's glory as a giant ball of a million-billions colors -- colors that we can't even comprehend on this earth. And He placed an individual hue of His multi-colored beauty into each of His children. Yes, some of the hues may look very similar from a distance; but on closer inspection, they are each very distinct.

Our mission is to shine that tiny color of God's glory and fight the urge to blend it with the other colors around us. My twin sister's glory-color may be a golden-pink and my glory-color may be a silvery-blue, and our lens of life will be tinted by our colors. That is why it is so important for us not to judge and compare. God gave us each a unique design and purpose. We will all express love differently, reveal God's glory differently, relate to spiritual truths differently and interact with Jesus differently. But if we are seeking to know God more, there is no wrong answer - just wonderful variety.

I can imagine God in His million-billion color grandeur gathering up His children in His arms; and once we are resting against the pulsating of His being, we each simultaneously shoot out our own glory-color, creating a miniature replica of His majesty. We are each created in the image of God, and we daily become more Christ-like and beautiful by letting go of sin. Maybe we should stop trying to change people and stop trying to change ourselves and start allowing God's glory to shine through the design He intended us to be: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12.4 NIV).

Gathering Empty Pitchers

Women are constantly serving the needs of others. Almost every night we fall into our beds depleted of energy and devoid of passion. We are completely empty, and we wonder how we'll find the strength to make it through another day.

I've had many nights like this. Out of obedience, I pour into the lives of family and friends, and I fulfill the many obligations that come with life. Hands continuously grope at the fleeting seconds of my day, and I desperately search for the scraps. When there are no leftovers to be found, I hold my empty hands up to God and cry out, "Lord, there is nothing left for me!"

As I contemplated more ways to hoard my little scraps, God taught me a beautiful lesson that has forever changed my life. He taught me how to Gather Empty Pitchers!

I read the story about Elisha and the widow found in 2 Kings: 4.1-7: A prophet died and left his wife and sons with a considerable debt. The debtor was going to come and take the widow's sons away to pay for the debt. The widow came to Elisha and asked for his help. Elisha asked the woman if she had anything of value, and at first the woman said no; but then she admitted to having a little oil. Elisha told the woman to gather all the pitchers she could find and take the oil and fill each of them. The oil poured out until there were no more empty pitchers. The woman was able to sell the oil and keep her sons.

When I read this story, I imagined the woman carefully pouring her oil into each pitcher. As she held one of the pitchers and poured oil to its rim, she cried out, "Another pitcher, please." But there were no more. I could see the desperation on the woman's face as she realized how very few pitchers she had filled.

I felt the woman's anguish over not having more pitchers. I wished that she would have been more prepared. If she would have taken Elisha's words more seriously, she would have spent weeks or even months gathering empty pitchers. That's when I felt God say to me, "You are gathering empty pitchers."

I didn't quite understand what God meant, but I knew He was about to give me hope in my obedient emptiness.

I meditated on the story for several days, discussing it with God and friends. Finally, I felt the last puzzle piece fall into place and an amazing image of empty pitchers appeared in my mind. I

figured out how I could gather empty pitchers! At long last, I understood how I could find my “true self” by sacrificing myself!

Jesus said, “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat—I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you?” (Luke 9.23 The Message).

How could “Self-sacrifice” be beneficial to finding my “true self”?

If God is my Creator and the Creator of all things, wouldn't it stand to reason that He knows me better than I know myself? And if He designed me for a specific purpose, wouldn't it be to my benefit that I surrender to His will completely?

But why does it seem that God would have us continuously pour ourselves into those around us? So many times we want to be like the widow. She didn't want to let Elisha know that she had a small jar of oil at home. We do the same thing. We don't want to let go of the little time, resources and energy we have because we're scared there will be nothing left for us.

But this is not the case. Every time we pour our lives out for God's glory, we leave an empty pitcher for God to fill. Every time we serve the needs of our children, we leave an empty pitcher. Every time we sacrifice our bodies for our husbands, we leave an empty pitcher. Every time we pour into the lives of our friends, we leave an empty pitcher. Every time we give resources to the poor and disadvantaged, we leave an empty pitcher. And every time we surrender our desires to the Holy Spirit, we leave an empty pitcher.

Sometimes God fills those empty pitchers immediately, and we are instantly blessed for our sacrifice. However, most of the time, the empty pitchers gather. God allows them to gather because He knows that He is about to open the heavens and pour down the blessings. He wants you to be ready with a bunch of empty pitchers, so you do not cry out, “Another pitcher, please!”

This revelation has helped me because now I look forward to leaving empty pitchers. Every time I serve those around me, I open myself to be blessed by God. And the most awesome part about pouring myself out to others is that God loves my emptiness! He can complete His divine work only in my emptiness! The “real me” shows up when I have nothing left to hoard!

Be constantly mindful, though, that you do not try to get others to fill your pitchers. Wait on God's hand! If we expect others to give us something in return, God will not bless our actions. He only fills empty pitchers (Matthew 6.1).

Sometimes we forget that God is the everlasting Creator. He specializes in creating something out of nothing. In the Old Testament God created life out of emptiness: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1.2 NIV). And in the New Testament God created new life from an Empty Tomb (John 20).

If we are constantly pouring ourselves into the lives of others, God is able to create something beautiful within our emptiness. So many times we think we could do a better job than God can at molding us. We pray to God to make us more like Him; then, we scold Him for not doing things our way (Isaiah 29.16). God created life! How could we possibly top that? Whenever we try to take control, we just create chaos and heartache.

God in His infinite wisdom knows that we want to meddle with His creation, so He ensures our humbleness by keeping us continually poured out to others. Our brokenness allows the Holy Spirit to easily pour through us, and it makes us more malleable so that God can complete the good work He started in us (Philippians 1.6).

God is so awesome because He made our self-sacrifice doubly good. God blesses us when we sacrifice for others because we are able to leave empty pitchers for Him to fill and He blesses us when we sacrifice for others because He is able to create us into His image. It's the best two-for-one-deal in the entire universe! This is why Jesus said that the only way to find your "true self" is to sacrifice yourself. Only God knows our "true self" and only He can complete His design.

So the next time you feel exhausted and you lift your empty hands up to God, cry out to Him, "God, create life in me!" And if you feel like you've messed up the life He has already given you, lift up your hands to Him and cry out, "God, create new life in me!"

If you can stay broken by continually pouring yourself into the lives of others, God will be able to bless you and create your emptiness into a thing of beauty. Don't hold anything back! Trust God with all you have and start gathering empty pitchers!

God Given Fantasies

God loves you, and He wants to fulfill the innermost fantasies of your heart. He doesn't want you to simply be content with "just good enough"; He wants to knock your socks off with a purpose that you would never dare dream.

Don't believe me? I will show you. God many times weaves His promises into the stories of His Word. Listen to this following story and find that hidden promise. Let the truth sink into your heart and know that there is a God who is in love with you, and He wants to bless you beyond what you could ever imagine! Don't miss this promise - claim it! In 2 Kings 4:8-37, there is a story about Shunammite woman who blesses the prophet Elisha by building him a room in her home. This room is a place that he can come and rest and rejuvenate himself.

Elisha is very grateful for the woman's hospitality, so he decides to do something for her. When Elisha asks her how God could bless her, she says, "Nothing. I'm secure and satisfied in my family." She has been serving God by taking care of God's prophet, Elisha, and God wanted to fulfill the dreams of her heart. But her view of her life is so small, and she never dares to believe that there is more for her.

But there is a dream in her heart; and when Elisha told her it would come true, she shirks back and cries, "O my master, O Holy Man, don't play games with me, teasing me with such fantasies!"

Before I go on with the story, I want you to expose that dream in your heart. If someone were to tell you it would come true, would it make you cry out, "Don't play games with me!" If yes, then that is the dream! That is how God wants to bless you!!! But there is a beautiful process that accompanies that dream. God always has a process because He is more concerned with us than our dreams.

The process seems cruel in today's world because we're so used to having everything right now. But, the process will strengthen you so you can hold the dream; otherwise, it would crush you! Most people don't achieve their dreams because they resist the process. Don't resist! Humble yourself to God's teaching, and you will surely be blessed (Proverbs 29:23).

Elisha told the woman that she would have a son. She couldn't believe it; but the following year, her fantasy was born! Has your fantasy been born? Or is it still in the womb tucked deep within your soul? Many times our fantasy is so large that when it is born, we don't recognize it. The fantasy is still in infancy form and it takes A LOT of care and work. But keep working at it. Your fantasy will grow and mature and, hopefully, become an integral part of the Kingdom of God!

But, something happened to the Shunammite woman's dream. It died! Do you feel like your dream has died? Are you mad at God that He would give you this dream only so you could witness its death! Are you telling God that you never even asked for the dream in the first place?! Do you believe God can resurrect it? Of course, God is the God of redemption, new life and second chances!

What does the woman do after her dream dies? She goes straight to Elisha, the man of God. She ignores everyone else's help. She knows only God can help her. She runs to the man of God and "threw herself at his feet and held tightly to him." That's what we need to do: throw ourselves at God's feet and cling tightly to Him. We must let Him know that we love Him more than our dreams, and that He is our one and only true love and everything else means nothing compared to Him. When our heart belongs to Him, He will bless us without limits (Matthew 6:33).

How does God resurrect the Shunammite woman's dream? He sends Elisha to get "into bed with the boy [dream] and covered him with his body, mouth on mouth, eyes on eyes, hands on hands. As he was stretched out over him like that, the boy's body became warm."

Align your dream with God. Lay one on the other until they become one thing. Once you completely attach your dream to God, your life will be like a holy rocket. You will shoot across this world, burning everything in your wake with the fire of Christ. God will set you a part and bless you if you put Him first (Deuteronomy 28:1).

Don't settle for "good enough"! Grab hold of God, claim this promise in His Word and get ready

for one amazing ride! You are the daughter of the Most High. Do not take that lightly. He died for you! Don't make a mockery of His sacrifice by being mediocre. He wants you to be His holy baroness to this dark world. He wants you to be special! He wants people to notice you! He knows that you will shine His glory and give all glory back up to Him. So shine, ladies! Claim your dream!

Abiding

I take all three of my kids to the gym with me. My baby girl is 5 months, so I cart her around in her stroller. My two boys stay close to me as we walk through the parking lot to the sidewalk that leads to the gym's Kids' Club. My boys know to stay close to me in the parking lot because the cars scare them and they sense the danger. Once we get to the sidewalk, however, it's a free-for-all, and they run ahead of me.

When we first began this walk, I would urge them to stay close. My heart raced because drivers are constantly cruising down the street looking for parking, and one of my boys could easily take a few steps off of the sidewalk and get hit. Also, the boys would get to the Kids' Club so fast that they would have to wait for me to catch up. They couldn't enter in without me, so they just stood there anxiously crying for me to hurry.

One particularly nerve-wracking morning, they ran ahead of me again. I kept yelling for them to wait, but my voice was getting blown away with the wind. I remember thinking that if they would only walk with me, I could protect them and enjoy their presence. I could chat with them, ask them questions and tell them how awesome they each are. Also, if they stayed with me, they wouldn't be anxiously waiting for me at the entrance. There would be absolutely no lag time, and they would arrive at the entrance and immediately walk in.

As I tried to push the stroller faster toward the Kids' Club where my boys were waiting, God gave me an image of me constantly moving ahead of Him. In that moment, I understood what God had been telling me for years. I realized that whenever I get a glimpse of where God is leading me, I take off running. I run from His protection and from His presence.

I did this exact thing with my writing ministry. God directed me towards doing this ministry, and, zip, I took off. I was so busy editing, marketing and writing that I didn't have much time to spend with Him. I was so consumed with trying to make this ministry successful, that I didn't enjoy the process of starting a ministry. It was a lot of work, and I made a lot of mistakes. I had to change a lot of things and do a lot of things over.

I look back and recognize that I wasted a lot of time and energy and endured needless heartache and frustration. If I would have clung to God during the entire process, I would not have made so many mistakes, I would have enjoyed myself more and I would have established this ministry in His perfect timing. Instead of making a straight shot, I made a bunch of zigzags, u-turns and complete stops and start overs. I wasted my time running and then crying out to God to hurry up! I could have skipped all the chaos if I would have just abided (to stay) in Him.

Abiding is so important. Abiding is why we were created. Abiding is our joy. Abiding is our protection. Abiding is everything. Ministry is just a side note and nothing more. When we make a ministry more important than God, we have seriously failed. Our purpose is to love God and to allow Him to love us. Anything else in this life is simply a manifestation of His divine love. So now when God shows me the "sidewalk," I don't run off; instead, I stay close to Him. Life is so short, and God has a specific design and plan for me. I don't want to miss it or mess it up. I wasted a lot of time not abiding in Him, and I do not want to make the same reckless mistake. If I would simply abide in Him, I would fulfill my God-given purpose and enjoy life in the process:

"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me" (*John 15.4 NASB*).

Rejected but Loved

My friend and I took our two oldest boys (both 5 years old) to an outdoor concert. They were both excited to go to an "adult concert," and my friend and I were excited to hang out and listen to music. There were a lot of kids at the concert (every kid got in free with an adult ticket), and most of the kids were playing in the grass by the stage.

There were kids of all ages, but our two boys were probably one of the youngest playing. I loved watching my boy play. He is in gymnastics, so he was doing lots of cartwheels, jumps and somersaults. Many times Isaac would run up to one of the other kids and ask him to watch him do a cartwheel, and the boy would either ignore him, watch and laugh at him or just laugh and walk away.

I had to analyze my feelings about Isaac's rejections. Of course, the mother in me wanted to give a lecture to all the boys, letting them know just how special my boy is. However, I realized that life is full of rejection. The world will always reject us, especially when we let our Jesus shine through us.

I watched Isaac to see if he was getting upset, but he never did. Whenever a boy would ignore him or laugh at him, he would just walk up to me and give me a hug or a kiss. He would allow me to love on him a little bit, and then he was ready to go try his hand at playing with the big boys again.

As I watched Isaac smiling and enjoying himself even after being laughed at and ignored, God gave me a little of His beautiful insight. God showed me that if I am continuously seeking Him and finding security in Him, I would never care what the world thought of me. If I daily allowed God to fill my heart to overflowing with His mercy and love, I would never feel depressed, insecure, unloved, vulnerable, deserted, ugly, ashamed or stupid. I wouldn't have those negative feelings because my feeling-capacity would be completely occupied with feeling loved!

The reason God wants us to put Him first in every aspect of our life is because He is the ONLY one who will NEVER reject us. Everyone -- EVERYONE -- will reject us sooner or later. God asks us to put Him first not for His benefit, but for our benefit. When we learn to put God first,

we have the ability to be Invincible in His love. And the only way we can love Him more than anything is by continuously seeking Him, talking to Him, listening to Him, reading about Him, etc.

Like any relationship, it takes time to forge intimacy. But God is such a gentleman. He waits on us. He never pushes us. And He always seeks us out even though we constantly reject Him. And if we are still completely lost on how to love Him; all we have to do is pray and ask God to help us, and He most definitely will! God only asks for our obedience; He will do the rest.

Therefore, whenever those negative feelings start creeping back, it is my cue to draw closer to God. I can find strength in Him, so I will be ready to play with the "big boys" again! "The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song" (Psalm 28.7 NIV).

Get Out of the Way

I took my eldest son to Vacation Bible School, and he was so excited. However, his younger brother was not happy at all. As I drove off, my second born son kept yelling, "Turn around, Mamma! Turn around!" He did not want to be without his older brother.

I decided that this small separation (3 hours) would be good for both kids, so I went on with my day like usual. I never realized how crazy those few hours would be without my oldest child!

Levi did not know how to behave without his brother. He was like a little ship without a map. Even though Levi has a lot of energy, I've never had too many discipline problems with him. He always seems to toe the line pretty well. I never realized that the reason for this was that he has an older brother to direct him. Without his brother, Levi was lost!

I took Levi to the store, and the boy would not listen to me. He was running around like a spastic chicken! One of the store attendants even had to tell him to climb down from the shelving. I was trying to look at curtains, and the little stinker was up on a shelf in 10 seconds flat. Half the time spent at the store was looking for Levi and the other half was spent running after him. It was exhausting, especially with a 5 month old baby girl strapped into a Bjorn on my chest.

When I finally got both kids into the car, I sat in the driver's seat for a moment to cool down. "What the heck was that all about, God?" I thought.

I felt God urging me to see something, so I tried to focus on the experience. Then I remembered a friend talking about how she wished her husband was the spiritual leader of the home instead of her. I remember thinking during that conversation that my friend was so aggressive about her beliefs that it would be hard for anyone to lead her.

Then I felt God say, "Sometimes you must get out of the way!"

Many times we want our husbands, kids, siblings, parents, friends, etc. to be spiritual leaders, but they don't because they are so used to us directing them. Why should they hone their spiritual

leadership skills when they know we'll just do everything for them? Sometimes the best thing we can do for the ones we love is Get Out the Way!

And, yes, they may flounder a bit, just like my son, Levi, did at the store; but eventually they'll get it. Many times we are not patient with the ones we love. We don't allow them to make mistakes, and we eventually pull the reigns back from them. But we can't do that! We must allow them to find their stride, just like we had to find ours!

So who do you need to get out of the way for in your life? Pray for God to help you, especially if you are a perfectionist, type-A personality. God will help you empower those around you to be the spiritual leaders they were designed to be. Don't hinder them by doing it all for them. Be hopeful that God is a better leader and teacher than you! "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5.5 NIV).

Just a Slight Turn

I've been very confused lately. God asked me to take a step of faith over a year ago, and I've mapped out my entire life in the direction of this step. Lately, however, I haven't had any clarity. The time is up for me to take the next several steps in the journey that I planned out, but God is not directing me in that path. I feel lost in a train station full of tracks that lead in different directions.

Finally, I begged God to help me. I told God that He had put me on a journey but has stopped leading me. And God told me, "I never told you to go on this journey. I simply asked you to take a step in that direction. I have another journey for you that is far better than what you could ever plan, so why don't you just give up planning your life altogether."

I was so excited because -- truth be told -- I was never very thrilled about the journey I had planned for myself. In fact, I hated the journey, but I just kept telling myself, "If God wants me there, then my happiness will be there too." But, no matter how much faith I had, I just couldn't find joy in the situation. God hadn't chosen that direction for me, so, of course, I couldn't find joy!

Now I am so pumped about the future. I have realized that there is absolutely NO WAY I could ever plan my life as well as the Master Planner. He has so many wonderful things in store for me and my family, and nothing I could imagine could ever come close. I am going to try very hard not to plan. I've learned that just because God has me take a step in one direction, it doesn't mean I know the rest of the journey. I know nothing compared to God. How could my extremely limited viewpoint ever plan further than one day?

I am so relieved that I don't have to plan. God has something so cool prepared for me, and I don't want to mess it all up! I just want to rest in the Lord and trust that He will guide each day's steps, which will eventually unfold into an AWESOME God-designed journey! Thank You, Lord, for teaching me to abide in You. Free me from the plans that weigh down my life and muck up my

brain! "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (Proverbs 16.9 NIV).

Over my Head

I was in the car listening to Air1 Radio when I heard the song, "Over My Head," by the Fray. It thrilled me to hear it. The lyrics go, "Everyone knows I'm in over my head," and that's exactly how I've been feeling lately: Over my head in every way, doing things that out of my league, out of my comfort zone and out of my mind!

God has been leading me in many steps of obedience. If I were to make a list of each step and its inevitable outcome, I would become overwhelmed. In fact, I do become overwhelmed when I don't look through the lens of faith.

I've been overwhelmed before. I was tired, frustrated and angry at God. There didn't seem like enough time in the day to do everything, and there was absolutely no room for me to enjoy life. I accused God of giving me a yoke I couldn't bear, until He said, "I never asked you to bear it."

I was out of line with God's plan in my life, doing "good things" that He never asked me to do. But, this time is different! I'm overwhelmed, but I feel at peace. There's a lot to do, but each day seems doable.

God's been asking so much of me, but the cool thing is He doesn't expect me to do it alone! There is something very exciting about being right in the middle of God's plan and knowing that there is no possible way that you can accomplish it by yourself. I know that God's hand will come through for me, and I'm looking forward to seeing Him in action.

So what about you? Are you in over your head? Is God asking you to do something that you could never accomplish alone? God wants to do something amazing in your life. He wants to enlarge your territory! Don't be afraid! He will strengthen your capacity to handle it. Align yourself in God's plan and nothing will be impossible for you! "Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me" (Psalm 54.4 NIV).

Do not Claim Ownership

The Enemy hands out temptations every chance he gets. He and his cohorts have stacks and stacks of them. They stand on street corners and force them into the hands of anyone who walks by. Sometime the temptations are carefully planned, but many times they're just thrown out in droves in hopes that they'll eventually be picked up.

The sad thing is that many Christians feel obliged to take them. They see the temptation staring them in the face and have no clue what to do with it, so they quickly grab it and tuck it away in their hearts before anyone sees. They feel ashamed that such a temptation was ever offered them, like it's their fault the Enemy wants to see them fall. I've done this so many times. I'm embarrassed by a temptation that's being handed me, so I quickly take it and hide it inside. I feel

that if I were somehow a better person or if I were closer to God that the Enemy wouldn't have access. Though I usually never do anything with the temptation, I still feel guilty. That guilt trips me up and distracts me from the beautiful things God is doing in my life.

I'm sure the Enemy hopes that the temptation will linger and grow roots, but he's satisfied with our guilty feelings. If we're constantly feeling guilty, we're not going to be very confident Christians. And if we're not confident Christians, it will be hard to be a Christ-like example to this world.

I finally read something that was so simple and obvious, but I just never applied it to my life: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (Matt 4.1 NIV). The perfect son of God was tempted, and I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that Satan attacked Jesus with EVERYTHING in his arsenal. So whatever small or outrageous temptation we are given, Jesus was probably given it too. And please note that the "Spirit" led Jesus into the desert to be tempted. That's an entirely different topic, but Bible does say that God tests the hearts of His children: "The refining pot is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the hearts" (Proverbs 17.3 NKJV).

I bet Jesus was tempted a lot -- much more than what is documented in the Bible. Satan pumps up his attacks against anyone who is serving the Kingdom of God, and Jesus is the supreme servant. But, Jesus never took ownership of those temptations. He rebuked them, and He never felt guilt over them. How could He? He is the perfect son of God. Jesus has no reason to feel guilt.

Now when I walk down the street and those temptations are being thrust at me left and right, I'm going to give them to God. They have no power over me. In fact, God promises to never let us face temptation that we are unable to claim victory over. I will also search my heart for temptations that I've surrounded with guilt and tucked away. I'm going to expose them to God too, so they will no longer have any control over my life. God gives me a choice of what I claim ownership. Forget the temptations and guilt! I'll take more blessings and peace, please!

The Wii Circle

I make compilation Christian CDs and play them while I drive. I love all Christian music, and I like to expose my kids to the wide selection we are blessed with today. My oldest son reads the track number of each song and memorizes what song goes with what number.

While I was driving yesterday, I really wanted to listen to track 2 ("Awakening" by Switchfoot), but my son kept insisting that we listen to his favorite. I asked him what his favorite was. He thought for a moment and said, "Number 12." I didn't believe him. I told him that he was making up a number just because he didn't want to listen to what I wanted to listen to.

He kept yelling from the backseat to play track 12. I asked him to tell me what the song was about. He couldn't explain it, and again I thought he was just making it up. (Sometimes I forget that my son is only five).

Once we got home, I skipped the CD to track 12 because I wanted to make a point to my son. I just knew it was one of the songs he didn't prefer. When the song came on, I realized that he had picked my current favorite song, "One Trick Pony" by Mercy Me.

"You see, Mom! I wanted you to play your favorite song!" he said from the backseat.

I felt horrible. All along my son wanted me to play my favorite song. He knew that this song always cheered me up. I was totally missing the point. I was so consumed with what I wanted that I couldn't see my own son trying to bless me. I gave him a big hug and apologized, and I thanked him for being so sweet to me. As I walked into the house, I asked God, "Why can't I get it right?"

God has been teaching me a lot lately about His children. What I've realized is that my kids are not mine at all. I know people say it all the time, "They're not really my kids. God just loaned them to me." However, I never really understood the depth of that statement until recently.

God gave me an image of my son's soul next to mine in Heaven. I was no longer his mother. We were both simply souls in a vast horizon made up of God's children. The important thing is not that I'm his earthly mother. The important thing is that God chose my son's soul to be under my care for a season. God has allowed me to have a huge influence on another soul of His creation.

God has made it abundantly clear that I will raise His child precisely as He says. I will be held accountable, and this is a job I do not take lightly. But with this realization came an intense weight of responsibility. I do not want to mess up.

But, as in the track 12 example, I do mess up. I started to feel anxious. How could I possibly raise God's children perfectly? I'm an imperfect human. There is no way I'll raise my kids according to God's plan exactly. I daily make mistakes.

As I fretted over this, God gave me an image of the "Wii Circle." If you don't know what the Wii is, it's a video game system. Along with this system, you can purchase a fitness program called Wii Fit.

I don't own a Wii; but I went to a friend's house for a game night, and she had one. I played one session of the Wii Fit. I had to stand on a platform that weighed me – in front of everyone! – and I began doing different strength training moves. On the TV screen was a dot that represented my performance. There was a circle around the dot. If I could keep my dot within the circle's limits, I would have a near perfect score.

My dot wasn't streamlined; in fact, it moved and wiggled a lot. Nevertheless, my dot stayed within the circle. As long as it stayed within the circle, my score was great!

When God showed me the image of the Wii Circle, I instantly felt relieved. Of course I would never be perfect. God knows that! He puts a circle of grace around me. Even though I mess up, I

can still do an awesome job at raising my kids, at being a wife, a friend, a leader, etc. As long as I stay within the confines of His grace, I can still make a near perfect score at this life. “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4.16 NIV).

That Stinkn’ I in Pride

A while back I was reading a book about God's grace, and I had to be honest with God. I didn't quite understand the whole concept of grace. I knew it was important because I've read so much about it, but it was obvious I was missing something. I prayed and asked God to help me gain a better understanding, and I had faith that He would.

God kicked-off my lesson in grace a few days later while I was in the shower. (It seems like God always talks to me in the shower). I was complaining to God about how I always make mistakes and that it feels like no matter what I do, what I read, what I learn; I always say, do or think something wrong. I always fail. I always fall. I always sin.

I was acting like the victim in this thing called life, and I pointed my finger at God and demanded, "Why is life so difficult?" "Why do I always stumble?" "Why do I always do something stupid?"

On my spiritual journey, I have an idea of where I want to be, and no matter how I grow, it feels like I always fall short. The person I want to be doesn't put her foot in her mouth. The person I want to be doesn't have insecurities. The person I want to be doesn't have problems with eating, lusting, lying, gossiping, pride, laziness, blah, blah, blah. The person I want to be is PERFECT!!!

Oh! And that's when God pulled a fast one on me. He uncovered my "I'm-the-victim-attitude" and exposed it for what it really was: pride. I wasn't where I thought I should be and I was upset: pride. I couldn't accept the fact that I was flawed and I made mistakes: pride. I didn't want others know my struggles and watch me stumble: pride. My little pity-party was boiling over the flame called pride.

And after God nicely humbled me there in the shower, He gave me a smile (in my mind's eye) and said gently, "That's why you need my grace."

What I realized is that I didn't want to accept God's grace because my pride was telling me that I should be something that I was not. But I am a woman that says things to friends that I later regret. I am a woman who just ate about 15 Peppermint York Patties without stopping to exert some semblance of self-control. I am a woman who has to fight with feelings of insecurity and inferiority. I am a woman who has to stop herself from judging the actions and decisions of others. I am a woman who's stuck in the middle of a battle between her own will and the will of the Holy Spirit. “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Proverbs 11.2 NIV).

I am not perfect, and I will never be. I will fall on a daily basis and those around me will see it. I

can't put on a show for others or for me. Accepting God's grace frees me from being hard on myself. I am not loved because I try to be the best Christian girl possible. I am loved because God created me and He chooses to love me. There is nothing that I can do to make Him love me more or less. I will make mistakes, and I should not care who sees them because I have grace. And I won't use those mistakes to justify playing the victim role again.

Just today I read some of Jeanne Guyon's writings that spoke on this topic. She lived in the 1600s, which comforted me because I realized that even women in the 1600s dealt with this problem and overcame it. She wrote:

"Always guard yourself from being anxious because of your faults. First of all, such distress only stirs up the soul and distracts you to outward things. Secondly, your distress really springs from a secret root of pride. What you are experiencing is, in fact, a love of your own worth. To put it in other words, you are simply hurt and upset at seeing what you really are. If the Lord should be so merciful as to give you a true spirit of His humility, you will not be surprised at your faults, your failures, or even your own basic nature."

Got Make-believe Friends

I think about my friends a lot. I think about their lives and families. I think about any struggles they're going through or about any wonderful blessings they've been given. I pray for them throughout the day whenever they come to my mind.

When my friends are on vacation, I pray that they are enjoying themselves and that God is refreshing their souls. When they come back home, I'm so anxious to hear about what they did and how they relaxed.

When a friend is experiencing a cloudy season, I want to hear about how they are feeling and what God is showing them. I want to see them build strength under the weight of their struggle and grasp onto an outpour of provision that only comes from God.

My friends (and family!) occupy my mind while I work-out, wash the dishes, drive my car and do anything else that allows my mind to wander. The interesting thing is, though, I don't remember being like this. Thinking and praying for my friends continuously each day is a new habit I have formed.

As I was walking at the gym, I wondered what had changed in my life. Why did my mind and heart seem to have more compassion for those friends that God has placed in my life? I know for sure that God is constantly changing my heart to be more compassionate. But, why does my mind seem to always go to them? I'm just a normal friend like anyone else. Compassion and mercy are actually very low on my spiritual gift list.

Then I remembered a few months ago when my daughter was born. I started watching a little TV whenever I had to pump milk or breast feed. There was one particular show that I would watch, and I noticed that my mind was occupied with it. Even when I wasn't watching it, I was thinking about the show and characters and what was happening. I stopped watching the show because I

noticed that I was getting too wrapped up into the storyline.

It took a few weeks, but my mind stop thinking about the show so much. Then I found myself once again thinking and praying for my friends.

It is well known that our minds dwell on those things we pour into it, but I don't know if we fully understand the implications. Now I'm not one to bash TV or music, I just think we need to be cognizant about how much we pour into our minds. Is there room left for our friends, our family our God? Are we watching so much TV that we don't even think about our friends or pray for them? Do some of us not even bother with having friends?

TV friends are easier, I must admit. They do their thing, making you laugh, cry or feel a dozen other emotions. Then, after thirty minutes, they go away. No mess. No hassle. No hurt feelings. No compromise. No insecurity. No arguments. Easy as pie.

But we are forgetting something. Jesus made loving others just as important as loving God Himself. Now that is pretty amazing. Sometimes Christians are so concerned with squeezing in their daily quiet time with God, but we forget to have our daily time with our friends.

How can we possibly make time for friends? We are busy. We have kids, jobs, spouses, ministries, churches, groceries, dishes, school, and a thousand of other things to keep us busy. But none of that matters if we don't have love. What is this life for if we don't have love? What are we doing here running in our own hamster wheels if we are not concerned about love?

I know that I'm not one to talk. Loving is just as hard for me as it is for anyone. I am naturally extremely introverted. It wasn't until I started being obedient to the Holy Spirit that I've been able to focus on others and not on my own insecurities. However, I find that not watching TV forces me to be more extroverted. I'm a lover of stories, especially the ones that God weaves together, and my mind craves the beauty of friendship. So instead of imaginary TV friends, I surround myself with flesh-and-blood friends who are just as lovely and messy as I am! "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you"(1 Thessalonians 3:12 NIV).

Their Baggage is Your Blessing

I'm reading through Joshua several weeks ago, and I'm surprised at how quickly the entire nation of Israel followed Joshua from one victory to the next. This large nation (moms, dads, kids, possessions, animals) was able to mobilize, fight a city, take possession of the city, regroup and do it again. Over and over again I read, "Then Joshua and all of Israel with him moved on. . . ." (Joshua 10.29-43 Message).

I couldn't help but try imagining one of our country's smaller states mobilizing and moving quickly. It wouldn't happen. There would complete chaos, especially in a stressful situation like war. How did a nation of over 600,000 (and that's just counting the men able to fight) possibly do this? They moved as one. They moved swiftly. They moved with purpose and without misstep.

What had to happen in order for them to perform this seemingly impossible feat? Oh! That's right! They were sentenced to a 40 year prison sentence in the dessert by the sins of someone else!

As one of the under 20 year olds who did not die in the dessert because of disobedience to God, I would probably have a chip on my shoulder. I would have been mad at the people whose life-sentence I was serving. I would have blamed my days living out of a tent, learning to make breakfast in the sand and carrying all of my possession on my back on all of my relatives that I knew were the cause of my pain. I would have grumbled and pointed fingers and yelled at God for making me fall victim to another person's mistakes. But what I wouldn't realize is that the 40 year sentence would prove to be a blessing. That 40 year curse would break me and mold me into a person who would later claim victory after victory.

So my point comes down to this: sometimes we are connected to people (may it be a spouse, parent, sibling, son, relative, co-worker, boss, friend, etc.) whose choices and circumstances have greatly affected our lives. We might be mad at a parent for having an addiction, at a spouse for making bad choices, or a daughter who is born with a handicap; and we want to point our finger at God for our unhappiness. But, if we could see through God's eyes to the scope of our existence and see the future victory that we can only claim by walking through this struggle, we might gain understanding and be able to let go of some of our pain.

God can do it! He can use our past pains - the baggage brought on by others and ourselves -- and use it for our future blessings. We learn skills in the dessert that are imperative if we want victory. The reason why the entire nation of Israel was able to mobilize and move so swiftly from one battle to the next was because they had 40 years of practice. They moved A LOT while living in the dessert. Just read Numbers chapter 33. If they would have known that all the moving around in the dessert would enable them to win the land of milk and honey, they might not have complained. It still wouldn't have been easy, but at least they would have been able to see the purpose in all the moving around.

But that is the coolest thing about God: He always has a purpose. Everything that happens – whether by choice or circumstance – can be used for His glory and our benefit. He always has a plan for our lives even when we think it's beyond repair. And He knew exactly what He was doing when He put those people in your life. He knew the parents you were born to, the man you were going to marry and the kids that He would give to you. He knows that their baggage will eventually be your blessing. You just have to have faith that God has always got your back! “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8.28 NIV).

You are Spock

I finally went on my first date alone with my husband since our baby girl was born. And, of course, we went to go see Star Trek. As I watched the movie, I found myself drawn to Spock and his struggle with his two identifies. His father is Vulcan and his mother is human. The species are similar in many ways, but quite different in others.

Spock's two worlds clashed until finally he found his peace with being a hybrid. In a subtle way, it seemed as though he learned to embrace his unique design. I couldn't understand why I was so drawn to his character until I realized that I am like him . . . all humanity is like Spock.

God created humanity inside the material world that He fashioned for us, but the difference between us and all the animals, birds and fish is that He breathed in us a spirit from an alien world. In that instant, we became a hybrid, a mixed breed. We are material (body), but we are also immaterial (spirit).

Whether we realize or not, we are in constant struggle between our body and spirit. Our body knows only this earth, but our spirit is drawn to the spirit world. Why is it that we desire to live forever when we know darn well we will die in 75 years or fewer? Why is it that in the dark of night we feel lost or lonely or hopeless? When all the material things around us no longer distract us, why do we feel without purpose?

That is our struggle as humanity. We need to find our footing as the most interesting and unique creation ever designed. We are a mixed breed, and God loves us for it. He understands our dilemma and knows our struggle. Why? Because He came from the heavenlies and put Himself into a body of a man. Because, like Spock, He had an earthly mother that he loved and an alien father that he desired to emulate. Jesus is the main character of the movie called life, and He found a way to live the perfect hybrid life.

I daily struggle with my two identities, and I feel the war of two worlds inside me constantly. But, because of how Jesus lived His life on this earth and the fact that He died to give me victory over both worlds, I know that I have a map and compass. And I know that wherever the unknown leads me, I can boldly go and trust that Jesus is my way and that is all I need. "Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3.5-6 NIV).

There is a God at Your Local Target

I nervously called a few of my friends for moral support before heading to Target. I was on a mission. This would be my first time taking all three of my kids to a store. I didn't know how I was going to even fit a 4 year old, 2 year old and 8 week old in one cart, but I was determined! I was scared, but I pepped myself up during the drive over there: "Just get what you need and go. Don't linger at the women's clothing. Don't even look that way!"

When I finally got there, I kept Kiki in the car seat and put her on the front of the cart, and I put Levi and Isaac in the basket. I got a bag of popcorn for the boys to split, and I headed straight to the children's clothing. (My eyes did wander toward the women's clothing, and, yes, I had to force myself not to steer my cart in that direction!)

I got to the children's section and asked an employee right away, "Where are the 5T pajamas?" She pointed, and I hurriedly pushed the cart in that direction as Kiki started to cry and Levi

started to yell at his brother for more popcorn. I could feel my heart pumping away like I was in a fight or flight situation.

There was a woman in her late 50s or early 60s browsing the kids' section. She had those eyes that I love to see: full of compassion and understanding. Her skin was beautifully aged, and her wrinkles and white hair only added to her aura of wisdom.

She came over and told me how beautiful my kids were. I nervously told her that this was my first time at Target with all three of my kids. She could tell that I was agitated.

She looked right at me and said, "Don't you mind what people think. Those who would say anything are just grumps who either forgotten or don't know what it is to be a parent." Her countenance became very protective, and I had an image of her vanquishing the naysayers around me with the point of her finger like a Charlie's Angel.

She gave me a few more encouraging words before she went back to shopping for her grandkids. After she left, I thought about what she said. I felt God ask me, "If there was only you at the Target and no one else, would you be so stressed about bringing your kids?"

"No, of course not," I thought.

Then God said, "The only reason you are so anxious is because you value what others think. You should only value what I think, and I love you. There is nothing you can do to make me love you more or less. I love you without condition, to the fullest, all the time. If you understood that, you would never be anxious."

I could feel that beautiful truth deposit itself into my heart, pushing the opinions of others away. If there is nothing I can do to make God love me less, then He doesn't mind if my baby is crying and my boys are fighting over the popcorn. I am loved no matter what I do!

I pray that when I'm in my 50s, I can pass that truth to another mother who has her three kids yelling and hanging from her red Target cart. We only have a few seconds of interactions with people. We can either share our Christ-likeness or our ugliness. As for me, I want to show that there is a God at Target! "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions" (Proverbs 18.2 NIV).

Is Your Life-Bible Crap

I'm reading through the Bible for the second time, and I'm finding it interesting that humanity has changed so much through the years. I was also thinking about my own life and how I've changed. Sometimes I place little value on my own life. There are billions of people who are represented in all of time's humanity. How could one little life be very special amongst the many?

As I was thinking about the evolution of humanity from the birth of Adam and Eve to the homeless generation of Abraham to the guest turned slave generation of Moses to the law abiding

generation of the judges to the awesome kingship of David's generation and then to the calm-before-the-storm generation of Jesus, I realized that all of humanity is kind of like a single life -- a single life represented from birth (Genesis) to death (Revelation). We're probably living in the mid-life crisis generation, you think?

As I was meditating on humanity's transformation during its stay on this planet, God showed me that this Life of Humanity has evolved just like my life has evolved. Humanity has done some amazing things like I have, has done some stupid things like I have, has faced challenges, has failed, has been victorious, has adjusted, has grown and has become almost a different person -- just like I have . . . and I'm hoping I still have a whole bunch of years left (hopefully, so does humanity).

And what God told me next I couldn't believe. I had an image of my life being stacked up next to the Life of Humanity, and God whispered to me, "And your life is just as important!" I had to think on it for a minute.

God has created each of us, just as He created all of humanity, and they are all equal in His eyes -- they are all valuable. All of existence is a beautiful symbol of each of our individual lives. God values us all the same. The Bible represents the Life of Humanity. Humanity's life has already been told. Nothing can be changed . . . there are billions of Bibles worldwide to attest to that! However, our lives are still open books. Our "life-Bibles" can still be written and changed. If we follow our own selfish will, our "life-Bibles" will be boring pieces of crap (pardon my English); however, if we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, our lives will be spectacular!

I want to pray daily that I follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. I want to walk into the beautiful life that God has so wonderfully designed for me. I believe that God gives us some creative license with our lives (e.g. should I paint my house pink or blue?) But, I trust that God has a much better adventure planned out than I could possibly ever imagine. He did a pretty good job creating this beautiful world with its beautiful plants and animals; I think I can trust Him with the beauty of my life.

So plan away God, and help me to walk into the scenes of life that You have designed for me...I promise to paint with the beauty of my own imagination along the way! "So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time" (2 Timothy 1.8-9 NIV).

I'm Obsessed

Lately, I've been obsessed with losing weight! I have about 20 pounds to shed from my third baby. I really want to lose the weight before my 10 year anniversary in June. I've been counting calories, working out and making every effort to lose weight. It's what I talk about, think about and pour a lot of my energy into. I just want to fit into my clothes again! Is this a bad thing? Yes and no.

It is not a bad thing to work hard for a goal. Anything that is of value takes work! I've lost my weight after my other two kids, and let me tell you, it is not easy. It takes a lot of focused energy. However, my goal of losing weight has been my primary focus. My goal of knowing God has taken a back seat.

I realized that I have been missing some of my quiet times (prayer and Bible reading). But, I knew that having a third kid would do this. I really feel like God gives new mothers grace when the baby first arrives. She's learning how to adjust to this world, and you're learning how to adjust to her!

Once I started exercising again and getting back to my normal life style, I should have gotten back to my daily quiet times. I would miss a few quiet times every week and rush others, but I always seemed to have enough time to work out. Finally, a couple of days ago I was heading out for a jog, but I felt sick. I had gotten some stomach virus and didn't think I could exercise. I decided to do my quiet time instead. And God spoke to me. He asked me why I was finding time to work out and not finding time to spend with Him.

I knew that my priorities have been unbalanced. God then reminded me of a song and verse: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33 KJV).

God told me to seek Him first and He will then ensure that I have the right amount of rest, exercise, enjoyment, learning, etc. He will ensure that I have everything I need. Growing more intimate with God must always be my first priority. He will never let me down. If I can make time to go for a 45min. jog, then I can make time to spend with my Creator. He is the key to my peace and happiness. He is the maker of the universe. It is a privileged to get to know Him more!

So today, before I worked out, I had my quiet time! All my kids were asleep (kind of), so I prayed and read my Bible. And guess what??? I had time to work-out, prepare dinner, take a shower, do a load of laundry, watch a little TV (while pumping) and write this blog entry . . . and my kids are still asleep (actually, I hear one of them moving around)! God is so good!!! Always seek Him first, and He will give you the desires of your heart!

Soul Spring Cleaning

I'm totally pumped about writing this post, because over the past week the Holy Spirit has been showing me stuff that is so awesome!!! There has been so much God-synchrony in my life, and I love it when God comes at you from every direction! It's like He's saying, "This is important!"

My quiet time has correlated with my circumstances, which have correlated with my needs, which have correlated with a book, *Knowing God Intimately*, that my sister sent me! All of it combined has been like riding one tremendous wave of understanding, humility and grace! Wahooo! It has been quite a ride!

I told God about a month ago that I wanted to experience the flooding of the Holy Spirit in my life. I wanted to experience His anointing in a way that I have not felt before. I know that we have an unlimited tap into the Holy Spirit, but I just didn't know how to gain access to it! Don't get me wrong, I feel the Holy Spirit continuously, but I desire to receive the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit and His grace which is mine by right of being co-heirs with Christ as a believer!

So God has made this past week a little boot camp to teach me what I asked of Him (beware whenever you ask God to teach you something -- He will)! What I've learned comes down to this: The Holy Spirit cannot fully manifest itself in a home that is not pleasing to Him. Although as Christians, He does live in our temples (our bodies), He cannot fully make His presence known when we are too busy making our presence known.

You can look at it this way. I like my house to be clean and peaceful. I want my home to be a place that my husband, my kids and my friends feel tranquil, safe and loved! If my house is chaotic or if I continually condemn people here, why would they ever want to come over? My husband and kids might as well shut themselves up in their rooms if I'm going to hurt, belittle or shame them!

The same is true for the Holy Spirit. If our temple (body, soul, mind, emotions, etc.) is doing things that displease the Holy Spirit, how could He possibly fully manifest Himself? I will never receive the fullness of God's Spirit if I am constantly doing things that He cannot stand. And what displeases God? There are so many things that I do: when I condemn or judge one of God's children, He is displeased; when I distrust God's guidance, He is displeased; when I worry or fret about a situation or person, He is displeased; when I feel insecure and don't accept His mercy, He is displeased; when I act self-righteous and do not put the interests of others before me, He is displeased. When we do these things, we take control and put God back into the broom closet. How could He possibly give us His full anointing from the broom closet?

My fervent goal now is to constantly clean out my temple! I know that there will be times when God does a spring cleaning, and I will be extremely humbled for all to see; however, I would like to be constantly aware of the Holy Spirit's voice; and when He says, "Throw that out or clean that mess," I can immediately say, "Yes, Sir!" That way clutter doesn't build up in my home, and the Holy Spirit doesn't have to bring in a cleaning crew to do a massive clean through!

I want to always be mindful of the cleanliness of my temple, so God has control and the Holy Spirit can give me His full measure of grace and anointing. I pray to God to humble me at least once a day, so I can raise my hand up with a smile and shout out, "I receive that!"

I've received a lot of small humbling this past week, and I have done it with a smile. There is nothing wrong with allowing God to show me how to make my temple a better home for Him. What would be devastating is if God told me to clean something up, and I said, "No, I don't think that mess is worth me cleaning. Let's just leave it there" or "That's not really that bad, God, besides look how clean my bathrooms are." God expects 100% from us in every area of life; and although I will never achieve that goal, I sure can try and allow grace to make up for the rest!

So if you see me suddenly raise up my hand and shout, "I receive that," just know that God is working hard to do a good work in me . . . and I am determined to give Him free reign to do so! "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own" (1 Corinthians 6.19 NIV).

What's Your Flavor

I was reading in Matthew and a verse caught me by surprise. It's a verse I've heard a lot, but God showed me something totally different and very cool! "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Matthew 5.13 NKJV).

How would I lose my flavor? I asked myself. And the Holy Spirit whispered to me, "When you try to conform to everyone else, you lose your flavor." My mind came to a complete stop. I have a problem with trying to make sure that I make those around me feel comfortable.

I automatically survey my surroundings and change my flavor a tad just to make sure that I don't stick out too much or that my personality doesn't offend anyone. When I do this, however, I'm losing my individual flavor; and, according to scripture, I've lost my spice and should be thrown out!

God has blessed us each with our very own flavor!!! Some of us are spicy, buttery, herby, peppery, tangy, whatever! And our flavor will not suit everyone; but if we don't cultivate it, our flavor will not excite anyone either. I need to worry more about sharpening my flavor to match what God intended it to smell like and taste like instead of constantly trying to keep it low key so as not to be too distinct.

I now understand that many people will not want to add my flavor to their plate, but they can appreciate it for its unique blend. On the other hand, other people may get a whiff of my flavor and love it, wanting to sprinkle it all over their food. But whatever the case, I'm sure Jesus desires us to be a strong aroma, not a bland, tasteless substance. He created us to spice up His creation, not just to sit around, making no difference whatsoever!

So my challenge to myself is to be the flavor that God created me to be and not to judge others based on their flavor. I think we have become way too picky eaters and any flavor that doesn't suit our fancy we automatically label as gross. Not so! God created a smorgasbord of flavors and they are all tantalizing and wonderful!

From Strength to Strength

God never promised life would be easy. In fact, hardships in life are a guarantee. I used to wonder about this. How come some days with Christ seem so easy and refreshing and other days seem to test my very resolve? Was I do something wrong? If I were a good Christian little girl, wouldn't I always have peace in my heart and a song on my lips?

God gave me freedom from my wrong thinking when I read, "Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they

make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion” (Psalm 84.5-7 NIV).

The first few lines of the verse directly states that we will need strength in this life; therefore, God knows that things will be hard. But we need to understand that this is a journey (pilgrimage) and we must resolve to walk the paths that God directs us on no matter how easy or difficult or how boring or glamorous.

Also, this life is the "Valley of Baca" or the Valley of Weeping, but we can make it a "place of springs," which means this life will be filled with hardships but somehow we can find refreshment and joy. To find a spring in the desert was no small blessing -- it was a life-saving miracle! I am determined to look for those springs because I know they are everywhere. I just need to allow the Holy Spirit to guide me to them.

And God also says that He will rain down His blessings and they will form into pools during our trek through the desert. This was like a breakthrough for me. I always wondered why I could feel so close to God and so refreshed and joyful one day and a month later feel exhausted and distant from Him. This is because God promised us "springs" during our walk through this life, not an endless ocean.

Springs mean that we will be refreshed at times, but then we will have to get up, break a sweat, and make our way through the desert by exerting our sheer determination and dependence on God. We will have moments of being rejuvenated, but then God will allow us to use our own two legs and forge ahead through this pilgrimage relying on His strength. We will not be able to drift on a lifeboat, while sunning our backs and waiting for our life to gently escort us to Zion. On the contrary, we'll probably be dragging our broken bodies to Zion, which is okay because ". . . joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8.10b NIV).

And when we each reach our final destination (face to face to God in Heaven) we will be worn-out and depleted, but we will be filled with the excitement and peace that we completed the journey that God created for us. So during my journey, I will rejoice when I come to a spring and I will soak in every last bit of refreshment from it; but when the water is gone and I'm feeling like a cannot take another step, I will find my strength in Him!

No-Thank-You Bite

Have you ever eaten a “No-thank-you-bite”? You are eating with a friend. She offers you food, but you really don’t want to taste it. However, she looks at you with an enthusiastic smile, nudging the spoon toward your mouth.

You are eating at her favorite sushi restaurant (raw fish makes your stomach churn, and you’re there just for the teriyaki chicken) or she just made her award-winning quiche (you really don’t like eggs because the texture is slimy, but the bacon sure smells good). She is over-the-top eager for you taste the food even though you confess that you dislike it.

I do not eat green eggs and ham.

I do not like them, Sam-I-am.

You finally take the bite because you figure that her feelings are more important than your taste buds. You smile and tell her that it's wonderfully made and admit that you can see why people would love it. . . .yet, (unlike the green eggs and ham) it is still not something you would eat again.

I've realized that God also gives us "No-thank-you bites."

I remember when I had just finished grocery shopping, and I drove past a local ministry. All of a sudden, I felt a passion to help this ministry. I knew the Holy Spirit was prompting me, but I had absolutely no idea how I would fit another thing onto my already bulging plate of to-dos.

I kept thinking to myself, "I've never been passionate about this type of ministry before." I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Okay, God. Just tell me what I need to do."

I decided to make my spirit available for God to lead, and I went on about my day. That night I told my church home group that God prompted me to help out this ministry. After I finished telling my story, my friend's eyes bulged out of their sockets. She told us a long narrative about how that ministry has been on her heart for years, but she has never taken the first step of faith to get involved.

The next morning, I picked up my friend, and we drove to the ministry to see if we could help out. My friend chatted away, got phone numbers and took charge of a particular need they had.

I just sat there realizing that God had just given me a "No-thank-you-bite."

My friend went on to organize a beautiful giving campaign, and I tagged along offering encouragement. God used me to "taste" a ministry, so my friend could have an all-out dinner buffet. Isn't God so cool! Can you look back to a time that God gave you a "No-thank-you-bite"? "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age" (Hebrews 6.4-5 NIV).

Just Jump

I love Peter. He is one of the coolest dudes in the New Testament, besides Jesus, of course! I'm a lot like Peter. I see Jesus walking on water, and I'm mesmerized. My eyes are fixed on Him, and I beg Him to call me into the waves. When Jesus finally calls me out of my safe boat, I jump into the water and take off running. About 10 seconds into my full-on sprint, I second guess myself and get distracted.

I see big waves all around me, I feel water spray hitting my face and I hear the wind angrily howling for me to stop (little bit 'o spiritual warfare). My pace starts to slow down, and I think, "What the heck are you doing, Alisa? You can't walk on water! You're going to drown!" aaaannd . . . KERPLUNK! SPLASH! I fall into the water and go into "save my own skin" mode.

As I'm gulping water and gasping for air, Jesus comes to me calmly, picks me up, smiles and says, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

I look up at Jesus and sheepishly say, "Well, at least I got out of the boat! The scardy-cat Eleven are white-knuckling the edge -- safe as can be!"

Jesus sighs, smiles again ('cause He loves me) and carries me (on water) back to the boat. He knows I'm not perfect, but I'm trying.

Are you trying?

Are you sitting in the boat or are you begging for Jesus to tell you it's time to come out? I don't think Jesus was disappointed because Peter jumped out of the boat and sank. I think Jesus knew how much Peter was capable of accomplishing, but Peter didn't trust himself or Jesus.

Jesus knows our potential because He put it there. We've just got to trust Him.

Don't be scared to jump out of the boat for Jesus. He wouldn't tell you to jump if He knew you would sink. Not only does Jesus believe you can walk on water, He believes you can run up waves, back flip off whitecaps and do a victory dance all the way back to the boat. Why? Because that's God promise to you! God says that "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4.13 NIV).

This promise is what distinguishes us from the rest of the world. Christians should be doing the most crazy, amazing things and the world should be gawking! We shouldn't be known for our self-righteousness or our judgementalness. We should be known for our amazing feats, our love for others and our love for God.

Don't be scared! God has all the cosmos in His hand; I'm pretty sure He can handle your little (but important) life. And wherever you fail, God will slip in His grace. God's grace fills in all the cracks of our imperfections. His grace mixed with our obedience is an extremely beautiful and powerful thing.

Be obedient today and jump out of your safe boat. Overcome your fear and prepare yourself for the ride of your life!

What has God been telling you to "jump into"? Are you holding onto the edge of the boat, thrashing around in the water, timidly walking toward Jesus or showing off for God with your back flips?

Garbage in Garbage Out

There were two trees in the Garden of Eden: Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God warned Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, but they Snake tempted them to eat a fruit from this tree. They did, and their eyes were open to their nakedness.

We all know this story, and we pity Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden apple, yet we consume poisonous apples daily and think nothing of it.

Tree of Knowledge is the symbol of evil. The snake is the symbol of the fallen Arch Angel Lucifer (Satan) who before his fall was called "the star of the morning, son of dawn" (Isaiah 14:12 NIV). The fruit is the symbol of the fruits of evil. Adam and Eve's consumption of the fruit is the symbol of sin. Sin separates us from God. God is all good. Something that is 100% genuine cannot mix with any other elements. God is 100% good; therefore, everything that is the opposite of good (evil, sin, darkness) cannot mix with Him. Those things are un-God. There is no in between. God did not create evil, but since He created good, the opposite of good exists.

God gave Adam and Eve free-will and they chose to allow evil enter into a creation that was made all-good by God. They consumed sin with Satan, and this sin corrupted God's beautiful design. Because of God's mercy and love, He came down to this corrupted earth and became a man we know as Jesus. Jesus felt the full repercussions of sin -- He felt pain, hunger, temptations & death; yet, He lived a blameless life. Our 100% perfect God came into our 100% corrupted world to show that He could still live a 100% blameless life. He consumed no apples while He walked among us, yet He tasted the fullness of their poison. He took that poison within His body, so that whenever we take bites of our apples, He pays the price.

There are fruits of evil all around us, and we daily have the choice to consume them. These fruits are on TV shows, movies, music, books, Internet, conversations, relationships, actions, thoughts, attitudes, etc. I'm not going to go into the specifics of what is evil and what is not. If you are a Christian, you have the Spirit of God residing in you. If you are daily allowing the Holy Spirit to guide you, He will tell you what is good and what is evil. You'll feel it in your soul. Read Galatians 5:16-23 for more information.

Our culture today relishes in pushing the boundaries of the knowledge of evil. Every aspect of media and day-to-day life dives into the unexplored knowledge that seems beautiful, delicious, new and interesting. It all appears exciting at first: a provocative new love affair, a sophisticated act of mayhem, a piercing insight of torture, a hilarious act of perversion, a subtle twist of purity. And we fill our hearts and minds with it. Christians are consuming sin by the fistful, and we think that we are doing nothing wrong. We act like we have it all together; but when disaster hits, our true colors show. Many Christians are depressed, defeated and distraught. We have forgotten that what goes in, must come out.

I'm not saying that you won't experience hardships because you will. Jesus lived a blameless life, but He experienced the effects of sin because the world is corrupted. Yet, with our choices we can tip the scales towards blessings or towards curses. Before the Israelites entered the Promise Land, God told them that they can choose a life of blessings or curses (Deuteronomy 30:15-16). God said specifically that the path to blessings was not hard to achieve: "Now what I'm commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach" (Deuteronomy 30:11). How do we achieve the path of blessings vs. the path of curses? Here is a simple formula:

Consuming fruits of sin from the Tree of Knowledge of Evil = a path of curses

Consuming fruits of God from the Tree of Life = a path of blessings

God told the prophet Ezekiel to eat the scrolls (Ezekiel 3:3). King David meditated (ponder and contemplated) on God's laws because they were like honey (Psalm 19:9-10). Jesus broke the bread and said, "Take it; this is my body" (Mark 14:22). God's Word, God's Commands and God's Son are all fruits from the Tree of Life. What I fear for myself and for other Christians is that our daily intake of fruit is 99% from the Tree of Knowledge and only 1% from the Tree of Life. God has tested me on this, and I failed miserably (Psalm 26:2); but I'm determined to do better!

God makes a promise to us. He said that if we consume from the Tree of Life, we shall be blessed. My prayer is that Christians (me included) would drop all the apples and start clinging to God's Word. Satan was once the bearer of light, and he can make sin seem beautiful. The beauty of sin is rooted so deeply in our lives that it's hard to see it; and the only way we'll ever be able to distinguish it is if we explore the opposite -- God! When we start cultivating a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God, all those apples that seemed acceptable at first start to repulse us. Once we experience the holiness of God, the ugliness of sin become extremely apparent.

The world has made the Tree of Knowledge seem so exciting and awesome, but the fact is that nothing is more exciting or awesome than the Tree of Life! It is up to Christians to choose the path of blessings and show the world how totally amazing our God is! I know that the apples in your life may seem to taste good and look trendy, but I promise you that if you sacrifice them for God and replace them with fruits from the Tree of Life, you will be blessed. I can make such a bold promise because God promises it in His Word.

I love when Christians make an effort to set themselves a part from the world, yet maintain a high regard in the world's eyes. I can think of several Christian - athletes, singers, movie stars, scientist, entrepreneurs and writers - who are admired by Christians and non-Christians. In the New Testament when the church was in its early stages, the Bible says that many people *admired* the church members, though they didn't join the church (Acts 5:12-14). Not everyone is going to become Christians and not everyone is going to agree with our faith, but we still should be admired for our integrity, our work ethic, our selflessness, our compassion, our talents and our love for others. We still should lead lives worth emulating. That is why it is so important to eat from the Tree of Life!

Tablet of My Heart

When I was sixteen-years old, I stopped having my period for about five months. I didn't know what was going on. I had never been intimate with anyone; and instead of seeking guidance, I tucked away my problem and lived in fear. In my ignorance, I could only think of the Virgin Mary, and I became trapped in a warped, religious thought process that filled me with guilt and anxiety. I didn't know much about the Bible, but what little I did know, I applied to my situation and came up with ridiculous conclusions.

When my period finally started again, it literally felt like the world was lifted from my teenage shoulders. The entire incident was tucked away into the pockets of my heart and forgotten about it.

Just recently, I was discussing jogging with a friend of mine who teaches kinesiology at our local university. She was training for a marathon and talked about some of the effects of training – one of which was loss of period. Finally, after fifteen years, I discovered why mine had disappeared for five months. I had been on the track team that semester. What a revelation! Something which had caused me so much grief as a teenager had such an easy explanation.

The story is laughable now, but it doesn't erase the misery I lived in all those months. I realized that my ignorance had caused so much grief. If I had only sought counsel, I could have saved myself from immense confusion – confusion that involved the Bible.

Sometimes as Christians we take our limited exposure to the Bible and apply it to our situations or, worse yet, to our friends' situations. If we are not reading and studying God's Word on a regular basis, our ignorance can cause damage to ourselves and to others. Moreover, if we do not seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and surround ourselves with godly influences, we will be isolated in a confusing world of religious traditions and biblical fragments.

As Christians, we are commanded by God to write His Word on the tablets of our hearts (Proverbs 7:2-3 NIV). God doesn't command this because He wants us to jump through religious hoops in order to be worthy of His favor; He commands this because He knows that only with His Word in our hearts will we be able to stand firm in our faith (Matthew 7:22-25 NIV).

When we write the Scriptures on our hearts, we are better able to overcome temptation, negative thoughts, low self-esteem, depression, and any other struggle we face. The Bible is our sword against the enemy whose only ambition is to destroy us (1 Peter 5:8 NIV). Also, if we are rooted in God's Word, we can be a blessing to others. We can come along side our Christian brothers and sisters during their time of need and point them to Christ. The best way to bring someone closer to Christ is by using the anointed Word of God.

We become a more effective mouthpiece for God when we sit down with Him and study His Word. In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, God reprimands the false prophets who led the people away from Him. God said that if only they would have spent time with Him, they would have proclaimed His Words and the people would have been saved (Jeremiah 23:22 NIV). We can't be expected to help others align their lives to God's will if we are not reading the Bible. We won't even be able to help ourselves because our ignorance will keep us smothered in shame, confusion, and hopelessness.

The Bible is filled with amazing promises that are woven throughout every story. We need to diligently seek those promises so that we can claim them! King David compares God's Word to honey (Psalm 119:102-104 NIV) and to silver and gold (Psalm 119:72 NIV). We need to cling to the Bible like it's the most valuable thing we own because it is! Without it, we are lost in a world of darkness. And if we as Christians are lost, who will be the light that shines on the cross for

those who are seeking a savior?

Will you make it your determined purpose to know God more (Philippians 3:10 AMP)? Will you join me at making an exerted effort to read your Bible regularly and allow God to teach you? It might seem confusing at first, but God will meet you right where you are. The Holy Spirit is the Supreme Teacher. God wants to fill you with His promises. He wants you to have abundant life (John 10:10 NKJV). He will teach you if you yield to His guidance.

Let us no longer be tied to our ignorance. We need to hunger for more than small pieces of Scripture wrapped around our limited human understanding. We want God to fill us with His holy understanding and share insights with us that will free us from confusion. If we study God's Word, surround ourselves by godly influences, and stay obedient to God's direction, our path will not be so hazy like it was for me when I was sixteen. Once the scriptures are written on the tablets of our hearts, the Lord will become our confidence, and He will protect us from the snares of the world.

To be Childlike

God has been showing me the importance of being childlike. As an adult with kids and a ton of responsibilities, it is hard for me to feel and act childlike. I knew there was a way to be as carefree and devoted as a child, otherwise God would not ask it of me; but I couldn't comprehend how to do it.

I prayed and asked God to show me how it would be possible to live like a child while surrounded by the pressures of the world. God finally spoke to me through the actions of my first born, Isaac.

Every day, without fail, Isaac brings me in a flower that grows around our house. I constantly have to throw away wilted flowers from a small glass filled with water and replace it with a beautiful peach or pink one that he has picked for me that day. Sometimes, my poor little glass of water is overflowing with pretty flowers that my son has brought to me.

Whenever he hands me a flower, no matter if I'm bringing in the groceries or trying to prevent Levi, my second born, from running into the street, I try to put a big smile on my face and take the flower as if it is the most breathtaking piece of foliage that I've ever seen.

I remember thinking, "You better soak this up because one of these days he will stop bringing you flowers." Time seems to steal the unabashed devotion and loyalty that children have.

I could have disciplined Isaac, got angry with him, been too critical or have done a million mommy-missteps that day, but Isaac will still bring me a flower. He remembers no wrong, and he always sees the beauty in me - his mother. He loves me without condition or expectation. And that is precisely how God wants us to love Him . . . like a child.

I've come to realize that living childlike has nothing to do with a system or an attitude that I need

to adopt, rather it has everything to do with loving others and God without condition and expectation and with unabashed devotion and loyalty. If I can do that, then I will have achieved the biggest step of living like a child. "The Lord protects those of childlike faith; I was facing death, and he saved me" (Psalm 116.6 NLT).

Hope Deferred

I love to meditate on Proverbs 13.12: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, But desire fulfilled is a tree of life" (NAS).

God sometimes gives us promises that won't be fulfilled for a long time. Why He does this, I do not know. Why, for instance, did He anoint King David to be King when David was just a boy? Why did God give Moses the passion to save his people when he wouldn't be ready for the task for another 40 years? Why did Paul have the ambition to change the world before he was even a Christian? Why does God allow the passion to burn within us, securing a promise for us years before that very promise will be fulfilled?

This hope that Proverbs 13.12 describes reminds me of the hope that we have in God's promises. And the part about making the heart sick really encourages me. I used to feel badly for desiring a promise so much that it hurt. But this scripture acknowledges it and doesn't try to make light of it. Although I know that we shouldn't question why God has postponed a promise according to His sovereign plan, it still is nice to know that God understands our heartaches.

But what is really cool is that when the promise is finally fulfilled and our patient obedience finally pays off, we will receive a "Tree of life." I never really contemplated this. I just thought it sounded good. But when I did some research, I found that the "Tree of life" represents a bounty of blessings, not just one.

During my quiet time, I researched what fruit the "Tree of life" could produce, and I was blown away. I went ahead and picked 12 fruits that I would want on my tree: peace, authority over sin, healing, strength, wisdom, Christ-centeredness, blessings, God's will, success, favor, understanding and protection. Now I think those fruits are worth waiting for until they are ripe and juicy!

Snuff that Torch

I'm so excited about this post because I asked for understanding and God totally came through! I've been reading in the Bible a lot about how honored God's name is. Isaiah and Psalms assert over and over again that the name of God should overwhelm us with respect, awe and reverence. Every time I read the Bible, I knew that I was not able to show the respect due Him because I did not have a good understanding of His sovereignty. I love God and I strive for obedience, but I became increasingly aware that my respect for God was way out of sync from what it should be. "God," I asked, "Help me to understand 'hallowed be thy name.'"

The same night I said that prayer I read two verses in the Bible that really stuck out to me.

Although I didn't know it yet, God was already showing me how to understand "hallowed be thy name." I circled the two verses and meditated on them for the following several days. The verses are found in Isaiah 50:10-11 NIV:

"Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from my hand: You will lie down in torment."

Finally, after almost a week of contemplating these verses, the Holy Spirit broke through my ignorant little mind and said to me that if I snuffed out all the other torches that I have lit for myself, then I would automatically show God respect, honor, reverence, love and obedience. I wouldn't even have to try to conjure these feelings for Him because my entire existence would be dependent on His light. He would be my only fire in this dark world, my only path through a maze of wilderness and my only life-line to an everlasting life full of joy, peace and love.

I tried to think of the little torches that I have lit for myself, and sadly I found a lot. I rely on my health, my looks, my money, my husband, my kids, my friends, my education, my productivity, my personality, my entertainment, my accomplishments and other people's praise and good opinions. All these things are good things, but when they become little flashlights that we use to see in the dark, they distract us from the One True Light and the only light that matters. And in reality, those little torches I light are as fleeting as the world we live in and the time that we're given on this earth. Why would I want to base my life on little fires that burn out in an instant?

God told me that if I snuffed out my little fires, I would be able to follow His path for my life and fulfill that coolest mission He has created for me. He told me that He has an awesome adventure laid out for me, but I need to focus completely on His light or I would definitely get lost and miss my mark for what He has planned. And how sad I would be in retrospect when God places before me the crazy ride of a life He had planned, and I realized I totally blew it because I was too busy running after tiny sparks in the night.

God also told me that if I relied solely on His fire, then I would thoroughly understand "hallowed be thy name" because I would follow Him closely for fear of getting lost. I would keep my children near Him. I would be obedient to Him. I would do all I could to stay near His flame, so I wouldn't lose myself in the abyss. I would spend all my strength growing His fire because I would know that my entire life and the lives of my family would "lie down in torment" without it. And this torment would not be of God's doing; it would be totally be of my own doing. God does not create evil. We create evil when we live a life absent of God. God's hand is all good, all powerful and all loving. He gave us a choice to cling to His hand or not.

The other cool thing that God told me is that He wants to bless His children. He wants to give us the desires of our heart, whether they are accomplishments, health, money, friends, excitement, whatever. If we do not make little torches of those things, He will give them to us freely. God will be much more liberal with His gifts when He knows those things will not lead us away from

Him into torment. Like any good parent, He will not give His children anything that will destroy them.

So my challenge to myself is to make a list of my torches and to pray that God helps me to distinguish their light. And I know that I will continually have to take inventory on what is leading me away from God, because every season has its new distractions. And although I still do not fully appreciate "hallowed be thy name," I do think I'm on the right path to understanding.

Stepping Through Weakness

I had a miscarriage about two months ago. This would make my third. Separating the miscarriages were two full-term pregnancies, which both led to fun nights of labor and two beautiful boys.

Before my last miscarriage, I told myself and others that I would have no fear. If God wanted me to have a baby, He would protect the pregnancy. Therefore, I went on with my life as usual. I did not live in fear, and I would not take any extra precautions. I thought if I stopped exercising and if I started acting fragile, I would be doing a disservice to God's power. If I changed my habits, I would show a lack of trust and faith in God. I told my friends that I was going to trust God in everything, and He would make my baby safe....

I had a miscarriage shortly after. I was shocked to say the least, and I was confused. I had just set God up to show His power and He didn't come through. He didn't protect my pregnancy, like I professed He would. I wasn't mad at Him. I didn't blame Him. He allows all things: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." But, I did wonder, "What did I do wrong?"

Now fast forward to about a week ago. I found out I was pregnant again. I was feeling tired, so I took a pregnancy test just because I had one leftover. I wasn't expecting to be pregnant, and I stared at the "pregnant" test answer on the digital reading. I showed it to my husband, and He too was surprised.

This time I was determined to take extra precautions. I still believed if God wanted me to have another baby, He would protect the pregnancy, but I wasn't about to go testing His power. I'm being realistic, I thought to myself. This is my sixth pregnancy; I'm not going for a jog or heading to the gym.

Again I talked to my friends and told them that I wasn't going to work-out or doing anything too vigorous. Instead of saying God's going to protect this pregnancy, I asserted that I was going to do all that I could to protect this pregnancy.

I felt like a hypocrite, and I felt like I was downplaying God's power. He is master of all, and here I was trying to take fate into my own hands. Later, I had a talk with God. I told Him I was very confused about the entire situation. I felt that I had let Him down, and that I was being a very bad Christ-like example.

During this time, our pastor preached a sermon about our weaknesses. He basically said that God gave us weakness not to bring us down, but to show His glory. I always thought I understood this. God showed His glory through Moses, even though Moses didn't talk well. God showed His glory through Gideon, even though Gideon was scared. God showed His glory through Mary, even though she was a simple, young Hebrew girl.

Finally, God revealed the mystery that I didn't see! One of my weaknesses is a very volatile first-trimester. I've had miscarriages before; therefore, I must acknowledge the weakness and act accordingly. I cannot jog, I cannot jump down the stairs, I cannot play sports. I must understand that my body needs complete rest during my first-trimester.

God gave me the weakness for a reason. He doesn't necessarily want to cure me of it; He wants me to succeed through it. Instead of expecting God to take away my weakness, I should have asked God for awareness on how to work within the limits of my weakness.

God does miracles. He does them all the time and cures people all the time. But what I've realized is that God designs us purposefully with weaknesses. He doesn't necessarily want to take them away; He wants to see us succeed with them.

God's power and glory can be seen if He cures a man of his crippledness, but how much more glory is seen when that man runs a Marathon with crutches? Is God's power not seen when His children draw strength from Him, accomplishing unbelievable things even despite their weaknesses? Can God be more proud when a sinful and flawed child of His claims victory even though all odds are against Him?

What God showed me was so profound. He wants us to be the miracle! He wants us to do the impossible! He wants us to understand our weaknesses and not pray them away, but rather He wants us to pray for a way through them! God's beauty is seen when we accept His grace over our flaws and we muster up the strength to forge ahead, claiming onto His supernatural power which is rightfully ours as God's children. Though the road will be a lot more difficult, I will carry my weaknesses and allow God to strengthen and develop me with every step. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8.26 NIV).