

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A

TO CHANGE THE WORLD

52 DEVOTIONS For People Who Are Making a Difference

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A SUPERHERO TO CHANGE THE WORLD:

52 Devotions For People Who Are Making a Difference

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INTRODUCTION

Good versus evil. Spectacular powers. Capes. Heroics.

Whether it's Superman, Wolverine, Hulk, Spider-Man, Flash, or Captain America—we love stories about superheroes.

While I was never much into superhero fiction growing up and never read the comic books or watched TV shows featuring superheroes, I have seen my fair share of superhero movies over the years thanks to my dad and brother. Every once in a while, my sister, mom, and I were allowed to be "honorary guys" for an evening when we'd watch the newest released superhero movie... accompanied by pizza and a big bowl of popcorn, of course.

Based on all this movie-watching experience, I've concluded that my favorite superhero is Batman. This could, in part, be due to the fact that Bruce Wayne is played by Christian Bale in *The Dark Knight Trilogy* directed by Christopher Nolan. But I also love that Batman is not a hero because he got bit by a spider, was injected with an experimental drug, or was just born with superhuman abilities. He's a regular guy. Sure, he's incredibly wealthy, but otherwise he has nothing to set himself apart. Batman is a hero because he *chooses* to be one. He has to rely on his own intelligence and experience to both survive and make a difference.

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But perhaps what I love most about *The Dark Knight Trilogy* is that Batman is not the only hero in the films. Rachel Dawes, Wayne's love interest in the films, works as an assistant district attorney and dedicates her career to eliminating crime in Gotham City. James Gordon, police commissioner of Gotham, is Batman's ally and shares his determination to rid the city of corruption. John Blake (or Robin) is a young, idealistic police officer who is not tainted by the greed and selfishness that surrounds him.

Regular people who are heroes. They may not be "super" heroes with remarkable powers or extraordinary talents or fame. And their lives may not be any easier in choosing good and fighting against evil, but they are making a difference.

And you can too.

Sometimes being a hero may be flashy or filled with recognition, like running a well-known nonprofit or working in medical missions. But other times being a hero might not seem as glamorous or obvious: caring for a sick neighbor, preparing meals for the homeless, stopping to help someone with a flat tire along the side of the road.

Being a hero means doing one simple act of kindness after another after another after another. Maybe we'll get to see the results of our effort, and maybe we'll never know what impact we've had on this earth until we're in heaven. But

don't give up. Keep on loving and giving and serving to be the hero God created you to be—an ordinary person filled with his extraordinary love.

helsey low

Kelsey Perry, editor

JUST HERE FOR THE FOOD

"It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces Fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it."

—Isaiah 55:11

"I just come for the food."

Those words, when they came out, were bittersweet. While I appreciated the honesty, I was bruised by them. Meals were a huge part of our ministry to children and students, but we had more important things on our minds (or so we thought).

Tyler was one of "those" kids in our student ministry; his mom was neither a member nor an attendee at our church. They lived in our neighborhood, and he was a friend of our oldest son. Tyler had been coming to our youth group for a few months at that point, and I wanted nothing more than for the gospel to sink in. Our youth group was filled with kids just like Tyler. Week in and week out, our church on Wednesday night seemed out-

of-control crazy. In fact, behind closed doors we called it "Crazy Town."

One day, I ran across Isaiah 55:11, so I shared it with our ministry team. We talked about what it meant for us as we spent time with kids who seemingly weren't listening. We prayed with and for each other. We prayed for our kids.

Thanks to the Lord's gracious leading, we began to simply trust in the Word that it would always produce fruit. Months turned into years, and we began to see life-change. The year before I left that church for another ministry, Tyler was one of the kids we took on a trip to Colorado for a weeklong service project. Along the way at our overnight stop in Nebraska, I baptized Tyler in a lake.

Later, after I moved on, I watched from afar as Tyler was mentored by the person who came after me; Tyler has even led youth group at that church. Now he's a freshman at a Bible college in Missouri.

In John 4, after Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman, the disciples return with food and ask Jesus to eat. His response is simple, "I have a kind of food you know nothing about" (John 4:32).

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Tyler just came to our church to eat. And because God's Word always produces fruit, always accomplishes its task, and always prospers, Tyler ate and was filled.

John Mulholland

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for your faithfulness! Even when we cannot see what's happening, you know all things; your outcomes are never in doubt. When we face discouragement because our efforts in telling people about you seem to fall on deaf ears, teach us to live in the hope of your Word. Amen.

KEEPING THE SCARS

"lie awake thinking of you, meditating on you through the night. Because you are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings."

-Psalm 63:6-7

Let's call her Mary.

During my days as a newspaper reporter, I was fortunate to be able to interview everyone from international celebrities to hometown heroes. Mary was one of the latter. She was the first person in the state to join the governor's version of the Welfare to Work program. From crushing poverty to an abusive relationship, Mary had to overcome devastating obstacles to become the woman she was the day I met her. And she did so with a quiet dignity that proved to be an inspiration to everyone she met.

For example, when she had found out the man she was living with was a drug dealer, she kicked him out of the shack that served as their house. And as his final act of retaliation before slamming the door, he cut her throat. Then he laughed as she lay there bleeding to death.

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Mary grabbed a sweater, held it to her ravaged throat, and called 911.

Members of a local church heard about the ordeal, and they decided to "adopt" Mary. They visited her in the hospital, brought her flowers, cards, and gifts, and promised to be there for her once she left the hospital. And true to their word, following her discharge they helped her find a job, someone paid the rent on a small apartment for her for six months, and another member called the local community college and arranged for her to enroll in nursing classes, because that had always been her dream.

In short, the church acted like the church even though no one in the church really knew her.

One Sunday after her first semester at school, a plastic surgeon who had heard about Mary came to the church in an effort to meet her. In a quiet moment, he said, "Mary, if you'll let me, I can fix that scar so that it is hardly noticeable. And it would be my pleasure to do it for free."

She fingered the scar for a moment and finally said, "Doctor, thank you so much for the offer. It is very generous, and I will always treasure the fact that you were willing to do such a wonderful thing for a stranger. But if you won't be insulted, I'd like to keep my scar just the way it is.

"You see, I look at that scar every day, and it reminds me of how far I have come. It reminds me of the people who have taken me in and treated me like I was part of their family. And every single day it reminds me of just how much God loves me."

Thomas Smith

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

God, sometimes I need to be reminded of how much you love me. Thank you for surrounding me with so many things to help me remember, if I will only be open to them. Amen.

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GRABBER

Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him."

-Matthew 14:31

Walking out on Point Pelee in Canada with my son Aaron, who was 3 years old at the time, I briefly noticed a sign to my left. We were on vacation and had not a care in the world and no time to read signs. We were in God's creation surrounded by beautiful birds, fantastic forestry, a picturesque park, and all the time in the world to enjoy it.

Then, very dramatically, as the point grew narrower, a horde of powerful waves came crashing toward us. Fear grabbed my heart as my hand grabbed Aaron's hand even more tightly. I turned to leave and felt his feet leave the ground. It was hard to walk, let alone run, on that shifting sand, but we made it back beyond the sign I had not taken the time to read. Had I read it, I would have been more cautious, as it stated:

Danger! Tip Undertow! No walking, wading, or swimming beyond this point!

The sign further described how the waves would come up unexpectedly with great force and could carry a person out into the depths of Lake Erie. And they almost did that to my son.

This scene returned vividly as I was recently reading Matthew 14, which describes the time Jesus walked on water and Peter asked to do the same. When Peter started to sink and called out to Jesus to save him, Jesus did not give him a lecture on water safety or even chide his lack of faith at first. Immediately, without hesitation, Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed Peter.

Sinking does not only happen when one tries to walk on water; we feel it when things are not going so well in our lives. We may feel like we are sinking emotionally after a friendship ends, financially when our job is downsized, mentally when we feel isolated and "different" from others because of what we believe. I have experienced many of those times.

As I look back on my life, Jesus has always reached out his hand to grab me, whether it was through a friend, colleague, Bible study group, or time in prayer with the Bible on my lap. Since I believe that past experiences are the best predictor of future experiences, I can remain confident Jesus will reach out and grab me without hesitation in the future when I'm sinking. Because of that, my response to

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others has become to immediately reach out and grab them in similar situations, showing them the steadfastness and grace of Christ.

May you always remain confident in Christ's love and care for you. You will not sink.

Hope L. Moran

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, thank you for grabbing me. Help me to be a grabber like you, without fear, without hesitation, but with love and generosity. Amen.

#OPERATIONCHOOSEJOY

And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our Faith. Because of the joy awaiting him. he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne."

-Hebrews 12:1-2

Picture someone in a hospital wearing a clown nose. Now picture that person as a cancer patient hooked up to an IV of all sorts of poisons and chemicals.

That is the image of my friends Carla and Robyn. Robyn is one of my best friends, and she is the main caretaker for her mom, Carla, who was recently diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. I have seen a number of friends and family members battle cancer, but I haven't seen any of them do it quite like this.

You see, Carla and Robyn had an idea one day in the cancer center that maybe they could make this heartwrenching, faith-stretching experience not so much about them. They decided to make it about bringing joy

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to the people around them. So now, every time they go to a chemo appointment, they wear a different costume and bring a bunch of delicious homemade treats for the nurses and doctors. Their costumes have included tutus, superhero outfits, and Broncos gear, including orange and blue dye in the little amount of white hair Carla has left.

I watch in awe as my friends courageously face each chemo session with a new batch of cookies to give away and a bold attitude that says, "I will choose joy, even when my circumstances are difficult."

To further spread the inspiration, Robyn posts pictures and videos to social media with the hashtag #operationchoosejoy. Viewers constantly post comments about how moved they are from seeing Carla and Robyn choose joy in the face of fear, pain, and even death. Carla and Robyn don't do it for the sake of getting a certain number of "likes" or for potential Internet fame. They do it in hopes that they can encourage others to decide to be joyful in hard circumstances and consider serving others when it would be easier to focus on yourself.

Robyn shared with me that she has been deeply encouraged by the passage in Hebrews 12 that talks about how Jesus endured death on the cross for the joy set before him. What was the joy awaiting him? You. And me. And all of his children who get to spend eternity with him in heaven because of the sacrifice he made.

When I think about the price Jesus paid for my life, knowing he did it because he was anticipating spending eternity with me, it gives me courage to face my circumstances with joy. It gives Carla and Robyn the ability to go to a chemo appointment wearing clown noses. I am blessed to witness Carla and Robyn's amazing story, because not only do they inspire me, but they touch so many people with whom they interact. I know they will continue to choose joy whatever happens next.

Lauren Bratten

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, please help me to face my circumstances with joy. I want to reflect your love to others by being joyful and selfless, even when my situation dictates the exact opposite. Thank you for enduring the cross so that you could spend eternity with me. Amen.

MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY

"So be careFul how you live. Don't live like Fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days."

-Ephesians 5:15-16

As we pulled into our friends' driveway, I got a text that said, "Bro. My wife just blew a gasket. Please don't come over right now—just hang back. Sorry."

As I read and reread the text, my kids got out of the car; they had waited anxiously all day to play with our friends' kids. But I quickly called them to get back in the car.

"Why, Dad!?" my 4-year-old cried, expressing his emotions the only way he knew how.

We drove out and parked a few streets away from their house so that my wife and I could figure out what we were going to do. I texted the husband to try to find out more about what was going on. We had known this couple for 10 years and knew they had been through some volatile times in their marriage. We had been through some rough times in our own marriage and had sought them out as

confidants to share the burden of that struggle. But we'd been disconnected in recent years.

In my mind I wrestled with these thoughts: *What would real friends do in this situation, leave or stay? What is it that this couple really needs right now, for us to ignore the circumstances and let them work it out or for us to step into their mess with them?*

I felt a nudge to drive right back to their house and walk in.

But we didn't do that. We drove home. And I regret it.

I know God is in control, but these windows of opportunity don't come around all the time. This was one of those unique situations in which we could have stepped in and been Jesus for our friends. It may have been one of those rare chances to get real with our friends and go beyond the surface of typical interactions.

I spent the next several weeks trying to reconnect with my friend to find out more about what happened and how they were doing. In some ways I was trying to make up for my lack of boldness that day, but there hasn't been a good opportunity like there was that day. This verse came to mind from Ephesians in which Paul says, "So be careful how you live...Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days."

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Don't live your life passively; look for opportunities to step out and use your circumstances and your gifts to bless others. Do things that others are unwilling to do. When you feel that nudge from God to do something uncomfortable, don't ignore it! Go for it!

Jobe Lewis

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, help me to be on alert for those unique opportunities in my life when you are calling me to step out into something uncomfortable. And when you reveal those opportunities to me, give me the courage to trust you and go for it. Amen.

TIFFANY

"God is our refuge and strength, always Gready to help in times of trouble."

---Psalm 46:1

So often in life I find myself planning a way to do something "big" for God instead of just asking him what he is up to. I had dedicated my summer to missionary work, leading high school students in service projects. I would be changing the world for God in some way or another I figured.

I was on my third week of work and was already struggling when my travel plans led me to the small town of Louisa, Kentucky. I had been battling feelings of defeat, realizing the entire trip so far had felt lifeless and absent from true meaning. I was supposed to be mentoring and leading the high school youth who served each week, but they were unresponsive. The youth who came seemed to be there because a parent or another adult made them come, rather than because they had a true desire to serve. They trudged through the week, grumpy and sullen, before they could finally return home. I became hopeless and slithered into a cyclone of doubt about my choice of service work for the summer.

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"I want to make a difference, God. A real difference! I feel hopeless and don't even know what I am doing anymore," I prayed.

It was a quiet, muggy morning in Louisa when I woke up early to organize supplies. I was sitting on the front lawn of the retreat home where I was staying, counting hammers to numbers that felt endless, when the ring of a bike bell sounded behind me.

"What are you doing?" I heard an innocently curious voice ask.

I turned my head to see a small girl about 10 or 11 years old, no heavier than 60 pounds, sitting on a pink sparkly bike. She had beautiful big brown eyes and freckles, and she was decked out in snorkel gear from head to toe.

"Hello," I said with a smile of relief. "What's your name?"

"Tiffany!" she answered. "Why are you counting hammers?"

That moment on began a week I will never forget. I quickly learned Tiffany had come from a broken family; she stayed with her elderly grandma across the street because her mother had left and her father was an alcoholic. She shared with me stories of past neglect, and my heart broke when I realized she had never experienced what it was like to be loved and cared for. Following me everywhere she could, I would hold her hand as we walked, and when I did, her

face would light up with excitement, almost as if she had never been touched before. In the evening, I would find Tiffany waiting on the front porch steps for me, usually bringing two red Kool-Aid Jammers for us to drink together. I got to be her friend, and she was mine.

What a gift of a relationship I had been entrusted with by God. I didn't plan on Tiffany or even expect her to show up, but God ordained our friendship from the start. In the midst of my own plans, God was the orchestrator of how I would be used through him. Tiffany was there to bring hope to me, and I was able to share Jesus with a girl who had never experienced Love itself.

Rachel Morgan

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear Jesus, thank you that your plans are the best. I don't have to work through my own self-effort, but rather it is you working through me. Help me to trust that your love in me is more than enough to change the world forever. Amen.

THE SERVANT'S HEART

"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." —Mark 10:45

My family of five took a mission trip with several other families from our church when I was a teenager. We all piled into a bright pink charter bus and drove 14 long hours from Colorado to Juarez, Mexico. Once there, we spent a week on the dusty, overcrowded city streets and spread Jesus' love by passing out Bibles, food, and basic living amenities.

The local families who also traveled with us took care of our needs and served us food and water that wouldn't make us sick. But just two days before the end of our trip, my little sister, who was 9 years old at the time, fell extremely ill.

That day was our biggest day of the trip. Our group was tasked with holding a vacation Bible school at a church for extremely poor families living in a colonia more than an hour and a half out of town. There were no stops on the drive through the sweltering desert. We piled our supplies into the bus, praying my sister's condition would improve.

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lt didn't.

After hours of throwing up, her body succumbed to dehydration and a rising fever. My worried parents stayed on the bus with her since it was the only place with air conditioning. The rest of us set up the VBS.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people were walking along the dirt roads to participate in our event. They were eager to see what the Americans were doing in their secluded neighborhood, of which each house was composed of nothing more than a few wood slabs, tarps, bricks, and a square concrete foundation.

The tiny church lot was packed with people, and the VBS was going successfully. Children's happy screams of laughter could be heard in all directions. The pastor of the church was ecstatic to see so many people learn about Jesus. In the midst of the exciting mayhem, he heard about my sick sister.

Immediately, he asked for her to be brought to him. There was nowhere to lay her, so my parents gingerly laid her on the dirty concrete floor. The pastor and his wife placed their hands on her and prayed loudly to God. The pastor was relentless, asking the Lord to heal my sister, a stranger he had just met. His town was completely desolate, unhealthy, and poor, yet he was asking for the healing of one small person.

The virus left my sister by the time we had to drive home, but the healing Spanish words of the pastor remained with my family. We were there to serve him and his town, yet

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he immediately stepped in to serve us. The love of God shone through him strongly during those moments of prayer. In a remote town that few will ever see, he stood taller and brighter than many people I will ever meet. It was the perfect reminder that Jesus has no geographical boundaries—his love is endless, and his servants are ready to pass it on.

Christie Sounart

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you that your love has no boundaries. You sent your Son so that every single person in this world can be saved through faith. I pray that I may be able to show your love and my faith to those around me and that I may prove to be a servant for your will. Amen.

THE WHISPER I DIDN'T WANT TO FOLLOW

"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray For those who persecute you!" —Matthew 5:43-44

"Get more men on the job by tomorrow or your company will be replaced!" Bill screamed.

At least, that's what I had heard his name was. Everyone just called the mean, intimidating superintendent "Grumpy"...a nickname he was very proud of. It was our weekly jobsite meeting, and the 12-story hotel project was way behind schedule. It didn't matter that the city had held up permits or that the cold winter had delayed deliveries; it was our fault, and we were going to hear about it.

"You guys are the worst firm I've ever worked with!" Bill yelled.

These animated tirades continued, but I learned to take my verbal beatings head on and usually responded with a smile, which only made him madder. Everyone on the jobsite hated him, and the field crews scattered like cockroaches whenever he walked around the site. I began wondering

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what his home life was like, but that would require me to care, so I put it out of my mind. As the project mercifully began to wind down and I began gearing up for my next project, "Grumpy" kept coming to mind. A whisper in my head said, "Pray for him"—the last thing I wanted to do. I knew it was the Holy Spirit prompting me, but I resisted until the last few weeks of the project. The holy whisper continued after completion and began telling me to talk to him about Christ. I reluctantly called and invited Bill to lunch, hoping he would decline, but he nervously agreed.

"How did you put up with me during that job?" he asked after the waitress took our orders.

"My faith gave me strength," I told him. "I know you have a tough job, but I know a Savior who can bring you peace."

He began to tear up. "I have cancer," he said. "It's really bad. I don't think I want to wait around until it kills me."

I was stunned. "Don't talk that way," I implored him. After sharing my faith journey and the hope of Christ, I prayed for him right there at our table in the crowded restaurant.

"I'll call you tomorrow," I told him.

"You can call me Bill," he stated awkwardly.

"Thanks, Grumpy," I said with a smile.

The next day he sent me an email. It was a story circling the Internet of a high school student who gave his valedictorian speech at his graduation...only to tell how he had decided to take his own life after school one day as a freshman but changed his mind when another student helped him pick up his fallen books and walked home with him that day. All it said at the bottom of the email was "Thanks."

We began to talk often, and I prayed for and encouraged him as he began his painful cancer treatment. My friend Bill fought his battle off and on for five more years before finally passing away. But during that time he smiled more than I had ever seen, built many strong friendships, and grew strong in his faith...and no one ever called him Grumpy again!

Sometimes all the Holy Spirit needs is for us to listen to a whisper.

Reagan Perry

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, help me see others through your eyes and pray for those whom I don't understand. May I have the courage to share my faith and to be an extension of your own hand. Give me strength to follow the whispers of your Spirit and find a friend I don't yet know can be found. Amen.

KNOCK AND KEEP KNOCKING

"So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up." —Galatians 6:9

The knocking at the door pulled me from my sleep. My mom called from the living room, "Son, it's Pete. Are you going to church this morning?"

I rolled out of bed, headed for the door, and opened it. My best friend stood there waiting for me. I could see a hint of disappointment in his eyes. Over his shoulder, I saw his family waiting in the car. His dad smiled and waved.

"I guess you don't want to go to church today, huh?"

"No, not this week. I'll try to be ready next week. Thanks for coming by to check. Sorry," I said.

He headed back to the car. I shut the door. Pete had asked his parents to come by every Sunday to pick me up for church because I kept telling him I wanted to go. The problem was that church sounded better on Thursday afternoon than it did on Sunday morning. This was the fifth Sunday in a row I'd been in bed when he knocked on the door. I would have given up, but Pete never did.

He kept coming. I started going. It wasn't all at once, but little by little I made sure I was ready when the knock came. He and his family never made me feel bad about the times I didn't go, but they celebrated when I came. It may have been Pete standing on the porch every Sunday, but it was Jesus knocking on the door.

Many years have passed since those Sunday mornings. Now I'm a Bible teacher and small group leader, but I've never forgotten the impact Pete made in my life. When I get tired of answering phone calls, following up on someone, or preparing to teach, I remember Pete standing on my porch. I remember Jesus knocking at my door...and I keep going.

Your life can make a difference in someone else's life too. Even more, when you help one person follow Jesus more fully, you're helping the people they will help too. When God puts someone on your heart, go knock on their door and don't quit. Love them, encourage them, and bless them. You never know, one day they may just be ready and come with you to meet Jesus.

Cory Mitchell

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, help me be aware of the people in my life who need you, even when it's not obvious. Help me keep loving and serving them even though they may not respond right away. Let me not give up so that they will know how much you love them. Amen.

COLFAX ANNIE

"There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care."

-Isaiah 53:2-3

Ugly! It was the first case of true ugly I had ever seen. It was an intense ugly you just can't look away from. You have to look back just to be sure it's really sitting across the aisle from you.

I was 13 years old. My father was in the hospital, and I rode public transportation to visit him. Each morning she got on the bus when it turned onto Colfax Avenue. Her name was Colfax Annie. She never spoke to me, but I was completely fascinated by her.

Annie's appearance was hideous: huge, misshapen nose, beady eyes, rotting teeth, stringy hair, filthy clothes stretched over a large body. She spoke loudly in words difficult to understand.

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I would ride along, drinking in all of her ugliness.

One evening a man got on the bus. He walked down the aisle, laughed, and plopped down beside Annie, speaking to her in lowered tones. She was upset with him. They got off the bus together. This was not her routine, and I was trying to adjust to the change in mine!

The next morning Annie was even more filthy and wildeyed. After a while she seemed to get straightened out and appeared to be her normal self. I learned from another passenger that Annie was pregnant, and the man was not planning to honor any obligation to her because he was already married. I felt sick to my stomach, revolted, shocked, and disgusted...but not at Annie.

You see, I had grown very fond of her even though we never spoke. It is something I have never been able to understand. I thought about her a lot over the years.

Many years later I saw her at a street fair. I turned around from a booth and looked straight into her eyes. She was clean and calm, but it was her behind those eyes. My heart beat rapidly as I stood there staring, drinking her all in. She had no idea who I was, but I loved every minute of looking at her.

As I stood there gaping, I realized she was not horribly ugly! She was not beautiful by society's standards, but she was very beautiful to me.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A SUPERHERO ...

She never knew the impact those chance encounters had in my life. They help me daily to see beauty in the faces I encounter even if they don't match a picture in a magazine. I am grateful to our Creator for the variety of faces he gives me to look into every day, for the lives he lets impact mine.

I long to look into God's beautiful face, to stare intently at his features, and to drink in the love and eternal life he gave to me so long ago before I even knew I wanted it. The book of Isaiah says there was nothing comely about his human appearance. It's hard to imagine that, because to look upon his face will be the greatest pleasure anyone will ever experience.

Linda Benningfield

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father God, help me to see your beauty today in everyone I meet, knowing each person is your creation, your handiwork. Teach me to love people as you do, not looking at the outside, but understanding the inside. Let me be a blessing you want to give someone today. Amen.
DESERVING RAIN

"For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike" —Matthew 5:45

Sometimes our family is rebellious. We are pretty edgy and all about sticking it to "the man." Nonconformists, troublemakers, outcasts...that is us. We may seem okay, but we can have a problem with authority. For example...

The other day our family decided to spend some time together at the mall. After we pulled our car into the parking garage, a security guard stopped us. He told us parking was for the movie theater only, and if we were going to the mall, we needed to move the car. We were not interested in moving our car, however, so we decided to head toward the theater...but then walked all the way around it and started across the parking lot (out of view of the security guard) to the mall. We walked and talked about how we had won this little battle...we fought the law, and we won!

While discussing our rebellious activity, it began sprinkling a bit...then it began sprinkling a lot. Next came a full-on downpour. We were between the mall and the theater, right in the middle of this huge parking lot, so we just had to let it rain.

Once we were inside the mall walking and drying off, one of our kids said we deserved it. We had broken the rules, so we

were punished. God got us back for not doing right. However, some questions came up. *Would it have still rained if we had followed the rules? What about those who hadn't done anything wrong who were getting rained on as well? Is the rain really a punishment?*

Here is what we decided...the rain wasn't about us. Rain happens. We may interpret it in different ways, but life on this planet involves rain. In fact, it was a little arrogant to think we had influenced any of it. Everyone experiences rainy days and sunshine equally.

In life there will be setbacks. It's not always easy, but remember that the tough days aren't necessarily indicators that you have done something wrong. Most likely, you will mess up. Things won't always go smoothly. But you can't sit around blaming yourself. Where would growth on earth come from without the rain from time to time...and, likewise, how will you grow without seasons of rain?

Accept the rainy and sunny days equally. You don't always deserve the rain...but you do need it.

Mark Cornelison

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, thank you for the rainy times in my life, because sometimes I need it to grow. Help me to receive the rainy and sunny days equally. No matter whether life is good or bad, remind me that you are always the same. May you be clearly seen in how I look to you, no matter the circumstances surrounding me. Amen.

LEFT BEHIND BUT NOT LEFT ALONE

"But when the Father sends the Advocate Bas my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you." —John 14:26

This summer I had two friends move away. One moved to the side of a mountain to build a cabin with her family, and the other moved to East Asia to serve as a missionary. Guess what I did this summer? Laundry. And dishes. And mothered my four children. Whoopty-doo.

So here's how the sad-sack conversations went in my head: How come they get to go on the adventures? Why do some go and others (me) get left behind? It's not fair! When is it my turn to do something exciting, interesting, and glorious?!

Notice the whine in my voice? I do my 3-year-old proud.

As I grappled with the emotions I felt, a few things became clear. First, it is hard being the one called to stay home. Not to negate the difficulties my friends will face in their transitions, but being the one to say goodbye and then not have an adventure as a reward is a challenge. I missed them,

and that was okay. Second, my life had seemed just fine until I got jealous. In my sin, my vision had become clouded.

Was this what it was like for the disciples when Jesus up and left into the clouds? They'd just ridden the rollercoaster, thinking he was dead only to find him resurrected, and then gone on a whirlwind ride of finally knowing for sure he was the Messiah...and then he leaves again. Here he gets to go to God, and they get to stay home and deal with persecution. Maybe that's why Jesus, in his wisdom, left the Holy Spirit. He knew they needed—I need—someone to be company when life looks different than how I envision it should.

Thinking about that helps me realize I have a perception problem and not an actual problem. The adventure I'm living now involves laundry and dishes and four kids and leading a life where I'm called. I am sad to be apart from my friends, but I am not alone. I have Someone to walk with on my own glorious adventure...and maybe a visit to a cabin or Asia might work itself into the future as well.

Sylvia Miller

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Jesus, help me to be content in your perfect timing. Forgive my times of grumbling, and give me eyes to see the adventure you lay before me every day. Be with the ones who go and those of us who stay. Amen.

HOT SERVICE

And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

-Acts 20:35

We put on our "Church Ladies" shirts, loaded the van with bottled water, and headed out to serve. It was a scorching summer day, exactly the kind of day we wanted. We knew there were plenty of people who didn't have the option to get out of the heat, and if we could help by giving them a refreshing drink and a smile, we were going to do it.

We started in our small town and immediately found two men replacing some tile on a walkway. They wondered why we were out on such a hot day just to hand out water, but once we explained, they welcomed the short break... and even invited us to finish their job and let them deliver water instead!

After sharing water with others working outdoor jobs throughout our town, we decided to take the rest of the water to a nearby city, knowing we'd find more people to serve. We started in a low-income housing project where

most everyone was sitting outside trying to escape the rising indoor heat as there was no air conditioning. We made sure to ask parents before sharing with children and gave extra bottles to those willing to deliver to family members who were inside. While some might have warned we weren't in a safe neighborhood, we were confident we were safe. We had peace as we gave and blessings as we received, hearing "God bless you!" many times. One man blessed us by flagging us down to tell us we were on a one-way street. Oops.

We continued through other areas of the city, watching for anyone sitting or working outside. We had a fun conversation with two boys on bikes who were intrigued by our efforts to help others. It was simple: We just wanted others to know God provides and refreshes. We shared refreshing sips of water with people, but we were soaked in God's refreshment as we served.

Susan Lawrence

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for refreshing me. You give me what I need because you know what I need. I'm sorry I try to define my own needs and get impatient with my circumstances. I get frustrated instead of relying on you. Help me to take my eyes off myself and notice those around me. Give me the courage to serve them in whatever way you lead. Amen.

THE SOURCE

"God, the source of hope, will fill you Gcompletely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit."

-Romans 15:13

It was a particularly beautiful, cool, and peaceful evening in Indiana, and my friend and I were taking a walk through downtown Indianapolis. As we stopped to rest on a park bench in Veteran's Memorial Plaza, a much disheveled man approached. He staggered very close to us, smelling repulsive and invading my personal space, making me feel uncomfortable. My eyes rolled as I thought of all the reasons he could be coming to harass us: wanting money, needing a light for the cigarette he held in his hands, looking for food...All I wanted was a quiet night with my friend without interruptions, and here stood this man!

But then he spoke to us, and his words stunned me! He thought *we* were homeless! Quickly he directed us to available shelter. He told us which bus to catch to get there. He showed us where we could get food. Pointing down the street, he even showed us places where we could find spots for relaxation and recreation. His words were kind and

caring, showing friendliness with his warm smile. Then he wished us all of God's blessings and walked away...wow!

We often think of the homeless, the people on the streets, as people to whom we need to minister or as people we need to save. This man opened my mind and heart as to how much this group of God's children, who are often easily dismissed, has to give and share. This man was not looking for a handout—he was reaching out with his hand to help someone else—a couple of strangers—and doing so with all the confident hope expressed in Romans 15:13. This man taught me that the hope God gives does indeed come from many different and unexpected sources!

May God enable us to not only think about giving to those we see as less fortunate than ourselves but also *receiving* and *learning* from them about the love of Jesus that is found in simplicity and contentment. God puts people in our path to encourage us, help us, and give us hope. May we keep our eyes open for those people and be open to receiving from them, for *all* of God's sons and daughters have equal access to his goodness and wisdom through the Holy Spirit!

Hope L. Moran

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

God of hope, help me keep my heart and mind open so that I don't miss opportunities to learn and grow from those people you place in my path. Amen.

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HOPE BLOOMS

"The Flowers are springing up, the season of singing birds has come, and the cooing of turtledoves fills the air." —Song of Songs 2:12

"So, how many tulips could you use?" I asked.

Kristin paused before saying, "We have a big team. We'd need a bunch for every female youth leader. Are you sure you can spare that many flowers?"

"I have a lot of tulips. And I want them to go to good use," I said. I told Kristin how many bulbs I had planted last fall.

"Well, I could use all of them. Are you sure?"

I had never been surer of anything in my life. It was May, and the tulips were just a few weeks away from being in full bloom. Yellow and purple blossoms were about to explode, but I wasn't looking forward to having them stare me in the eye. You see, I had planted the flowerbeds as a surprise for my wife, unaware that she was planning her own surprise for me: She was leaving. And now I was left with a colorful reminder of just how unaware I had been that my marriage was coming to an end.

I wrestled with many nagging thoughts after my wife left... I'd invested 18 years of my life in that relationship...and for what? Discouragement told me those years had been a complete waste. Nearly two decades had been ripped from my life, and what was I left with?

But discouragement never gets the last word. Hope reminded me that God, even though he doesn't cause our suffering, is a master at repurposing it. Hope gently chided me for indulging in self-pity. Hope prodded me to repurpose those tulips and create a new reason for their being. So once the flowers were in full bloom, I clipped them, placed them in buckets, and took them to the church.

The next day, this message popped up on my phone from Kristin: "They loved the tulips. Thank you! We're in a budget freeze, and I didn't know what to do for appreciation gifts. It was so fun to watch the smiles on the volunteers' faces."

Now it was my turn to smile. I planted the tulips to bring a smile to one face, but hope allowed those flowers to bring smiles to several faces.

Larry Shallenberger

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for planting hope in our hearts. Thank you that hope is stronger than our hurts and our discouragement. You tell us that hope does not disappoint, and I trust in you. Help me embrace hope, even when it's difficult. Amen.

STREET WISE

"Be thankFul in all circumstances, For this is God's will For you who belong to Christ Jesus."

-1 Thessalonians 5:18

Have you ever seen a flower grow through a crack in a thick city sidewalk? It's quite the phenomenon.

I've seen people bloom in similar circumstances.

On an inner-city mission trip, a group of teens and I came across an older homeless woman whose face and body were as exhausted as the clothes she was wearing. Her speech impediment made it difficult for us to understand her, but we eventually learned her name was Eleanor. She shared how she'd gotten sick and lost her home years earlier, forcing her to live on the streets and make an "honest living" performing small tasks for compassionate restaurant owners who would pay her through food. This explained the various half-filled beverage cups around her.

Eleanor seemed to have every reason by anyone's standards to throw in the towel. She was homeless, penniless, her health was slowly degrading, and she was alone.

Or was she?

Throughout Eleanor's discourse on her life, she repeated a phrase that caught my attention: "I just know that every day my God shall supply all my needs."

I had heard something similar about a hundred times that day from other homeless people who seemed to be working an angle to gain additional empathy and support.

Still, there was something different about Eleanor. Many people know how to talk about God, but few live dependently on the Lord. The more she shared, the more I realized Eleanor somehow knew God personally.

Perhaps that's why she exploded when the students shared they were Christians. She stood up and shouted, "Oh, great! Let's sing!"

In the most off-key voice imaginable, she began belting out a classic hymn at a volume level that probably woke up six city blocks.

It was beautiful.

By the world's standards, a homeless woman like Eleanor gets our pity for how hard her life is and for the many hailstorms she faces. By God's standards, a woman who has a home in Jesus like Eleanor gets our admiration for

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how she lives in the peace of his promises and the shelter those promises provide in any storm. We may be tempted to take a moment and pray for someone like Eleanor. But perhaps you might instead be thankful that someone like Eleanor just might be praying for you right now.

Tony Myles

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, help me to bloom wherever I'm planted. If I get moved into tough circumstances, allow me to bloom there too. May I deepen my roots and put your glory on display through my impediments. Amen.

Pressing Into Prayer

Be joyFul in hope, patient in affliction, FaithFul in prayer."

-Romans 12:12, NIV

It was almost time to take Isabel, my oldest daughter, to the hospital for exploratory surgery. After weeks of doctor visits, the word that weighed upon us like so many bricks was cancer. My wife and I sat in our living room with our children, flanked by parents and siblings, when I said, "Before we go, let's pray." I do not remember the words we prayed aloud for those few moments, but my words were aimed at the God who listens and can do more with a few moments than I could do in a few years.

In the book of Romans, Paul writes important words of encouragement to the people of God. He says, "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

Faithful in prayer. Let's think about that for a minute. The word "faithful" shows up in a variety of ways throughout various translations: constant, persistent, persevering, continuing, devoted.

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Paul is pressing the church to be marked by a consistent conversation with God and is ultimately shaping the picture of the normal Christian life, a life pressing into prayer.

When was the last time you pressed into prayer?

I'll never forget the results of praying with our families over Isabel. The surgery went well, and the doctors removed not one but a cluster of lymph nodes in Isabel's neck, leaving a scar far longer than they had originally planned. After testing, a nurse called to tell me, "The lymph nodes are benign. No cancer." I called my wife, Noel, and gave her the best news ever—it's not cancer! I had to repeat it because I was crying so hard. This was what we were praying for; we were asking God to intervene, and he did.

Then a little more than a week later, Isabel and I were back at the doctor's office for a follow-up appointment, and I had the chance to look at the pathology report.

It read: "Initial Diagnosis: LYMPHOMA." Then underneath, "Post Surgery Outcome." And the specialist whose medical opinion is second to none when it comes to children's lymphatic systems types on the keyboard, "Isabel is well healed."

Yes, I thought, yes she is.

There is *power* in prayer. God loves each of us more than we could ever know; he is a constant companion,

waiting to meet us in prayer with our hopes, our dreams, and our sorrows and fears. God will *always* answer our prayers when our prayers align with his will...sometimes the answer comes in a way we expect, but sometimes it does not. The timing may be different than we thought or the outcome may not be what we expected, but no matter what, trust in the Lord, in his goodness, and in his ultimate sovereignty.

Matt Guevara

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

God, I confess there are times in my life when my devotion is focused outside of prayer. Be honored and praised today because you identify yourself throughout Scripture as a God who listens and acts when I pray. Teach me to be faithful and persistent in prayer. It is a profound truth to know that you hear these words. Thank you. Amen.

JUST A DRINK OF WATER

"And iF you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded."

-Matthew 10:42

We pored over the routes, deciding how many miles we'd go each day, where we'd camp each night, and where to take a day off. Our excitement grew as we read the stories of other adventurers, learned what to take and what *not* to take, and trained. And trained. And *trained*!

After all, a 1,400 bicycle trip is not something you do every day! Starting in Missouri, our route would take us across the eastern third of the U.S. We were ready! We had prepared! We had the right gear, the right clothing, and the right determination.

But nothing prepared us for what we actually experienced. Seeing America up close and personal from the perspective of riding a bike laden with your gear is completely different from riding in a car! Hills take longer, descents are much more exhilarating, and pedaling steadily mile after mile takes on a life of its own. And then there are the people.

People who are part of the fabric of America. People we would never even notice had we been driving in a car. People tending their gardens, fixing their cars, reading on the porch. People who would call out to us, wave to us, and ask where we were from.

One stifling Kentucky day, we rode mile after mile, climbing the hills of Appalachia. With water bottles nearly empty, we stopped alongside the road for a break. Suddenly, a kind voice called out, "Are you thirsty?"

At our enthusiastic reply, the woman invited us up to her porch. We sat there, drinking cool water together. At that moment, it didn't matter if I had the right gear, the right clothing, or the right determination. What mattered was that I had WATER.

Opal told us she cooked hot lunches at the local elementary school come September. She shared about her family, her community, her life. We laughed and talked together until we simply had to leave, knowing it was still several miles before it would be time to stop for the night.

"Opal, can we pray with you before we go?" my husband asked. Her eyes glistened with tears as she expressed her thanks. She told us how much our visit had meant to her. To *her*? She had no idea what she had done for *us*! We exchanged addresses, filled our water bottles, and hopped back on our bikes, *revived*.

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The words Jesus spoke about offering water to those who are thirsty came alive like never before that sweltering afternoon. I'll never forget the woman who took time to show kindness to a couple of sweaty strangers. Her example inspires me to do the same.

DeeAnn Bragaw

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, please show me someone who needs a cup of cool water in your name today. Help me be willing to give the Water of Life to anyone who needs it! Amen.

SPIDERS AND GOLDFISH

"Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts."

—James 4:8

There were goldfish everywhere. Not real ones (thankfully), but those little crackers everyone seems to like. I'm used to finding them in random places, but this was the remnants of a sad goldfish war in which most didn't survive; this was a fresh battlefield.

This is common for us. Our two youngest argue about who ate the goldfish, where are the goldfish, or who has the most goldfish. Sometimes this leads to a mini war with multiple goldfish casualties. My biggest problem was that no one cleaned up. Besides the fact that I think my kids should pick up their messes, there is another reason this matters.

The day before my daughter went ballistic on a spider. According to her, it was "huge," although I couldn't determine its size after she destroyed it with a shoe. Once she had removed its life, she said, "When are we having the house sprayed for pests again?" This got me thinking.

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The spider was not on a suicide mission in our home; it was likely looking for food that my kids had provided. They had created an environment that welcomed the spiders!

Pests aren't pests just to annoy us; usually there is something they want that keeps them around. The cheesy goodness of the goldfish attracted ants and other bugs. Spiders aren't fond of goldfish, but they do think ants are delicious. So by leaving the goldfish lying around, my kids were laying out a welcome mat to something they hated. While spraying the house for pests will help, we could accomplish more by simply cleaning up the goldfish.

This applies to so many areas of our lives. Many things are out of our control...but what about those things that are? Maybe what many of us don't realize is we have goldfish lying around that need to be cleaned up. These little things add up to the point that, as much as we hate them, we keep the spiders coming around. That's why God reminds us to stay close to him so that we can stay clean. As we draw near to him we are washed and purified, which in turn keeps other struggles at bay.

Looking at life, what cleaning do you need to do? What things do you allow that create bigger issues? Work on changing some small habits that are not benefitting you. Don't worry about changing everything at once. Let God

start with cleaning up the goldfish...then later the pretzels and the apple cores and...

Mark Cornelison

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, I know there are little things I allow, which creates room for bigger problems. Help me see what those things are and clean them from my life. Draw me closer and purify my heart in you. Amen.

AT THIS TABLE

"Dear brothers and sisters, I close my letter with these last words: Be joyful. Grow to maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you."

-2 Corinthians 13:11

My women's ministry team had invited ladies from the local women's shelter to attend our upcoming women's retreat in the hopes that the women would be inspired for a day. On the day of the retreat, one of our projects was sewing shawls to be given to other women. As we sewed, it was evident that one of our team members was really struggling with the concept of a needle and thread. She got frustrated, put her work down, and exclaimed, "I give up!"

A woman from the shelter picked up the project and said, "At this table, we NEVER say, 'I give up!' At this table, we help each other." She then took the fabric and started to lovingly help the woman sew on the needed button.

The very woman our team thought needed encouraging that day turned out to be the best encourager for our frustrated friend. The woman from the shelter shared that she had no real possessions and had come from a

broken relationship...yet she was the one encouraging the other women to never give up! It was through that encouragement that we saw true joy before our eyes.

This woman was not a victim at our retreat. She was an encourager. She was displaying a life of harmony and peace as she talked at that table. She was a leader.

The woman who almost gave up on her shawl was so encouraged that she began working on a second shawl, sewing it to give to a friend who had just lost her pet that week. The encouragement she received allowed her, in turn, to offer more love to someone else.

Oftentimes, we think it is our job to be the leader. To be the best, most shining example of faith. To be the ultimate mentor and counselor to those around us. However, there are times when God chooses someone else to lead. And it is in those times we must recognize God's hand, step back in humility, and let God take over. It is through that taking over that God's power and love will most brightly shine through—much more than we could ever reveal if we try to hold on too tightly to control.

Sheila Halasz

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear Heavenly Father, help me be the leader you want me to be, shining your light for others. I ask that you also help me to have the wisdom and humility to see your divinity in others and allow them to lead as you call. Amen.

ROCK STAR GIVING

"Heal the sick, raise the dead, cure those with leprosy, and cast out demons. Give as Freely as you have received."

—Matthew 10:8

As a private guitar teacher, I've had the privilege of getting to know many incredible kids over the years. Every student I've ever had has taught me more about not just music but life than I could ever teach them. In my book, all of these kids are rock stars. One of these incredible junior rock stars is Casey. Casey has been one of my longest running and most accomplished students. Casey's incredible analytical thinking skills allow this middle schooler to grasp complicated music theory concepts that adults, including his teacher, have a hard time understanding. But the most important part of playing the guitar correctly, as everyone knows, is you have to look the part! And for a long time, Casey did.

Casey's shoulder-length hair was so cool that I always felt like I was teaching a guitar lesson to a real-life rock star whenever we had a lesson. Needless to say, I was slightly shocked when he told me he was going to shave it all off. But then he told me why. Casey had recently heard about a family friend who donated their hair to an organization that makes wigs for cancer patients who have lost their hair. After praying about it, Casey came to a profound realization.

"God wanted me to do it," Casey later told me. Not only did Casey donate his hair, but this middle schooler also raised nearly a thousand dollars for cancer research. Something else he felt God was calling him to do. I was floored. I've taught Casey for years, but what he taught me through his actions and his candid words have taught me unimaginably more.

Casey's willingness to give up whatever God asked him to is such a lesson of faith. God can do so much more with what we give up than we could ever do with the things we hold on to so tightly.

What is God calling you to surrender? Maybe it's money, status, a relationship, pride, or the need for control. It's not easy to release those things we cling to so strongly, but pray about it, give it a try, and then watch for the amazing that God will do.

Oh, and just in case you were wondering, Casey is still a total rock star, even without the long hair.

Andrew Shumate

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thanks for all you have given me. Thank you for giving me the ultimate gift of eternal life with you. I pray you will give me the strength and courage to give what you want me to give, because I know you will use what I give and do more with it than I ever could. In your Son's name I pray. Amen.

THE UNOPENED NOTE

"Wait patiently For the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord."

-Psalm 27:14

"Do you remember when you had us write a letter to ourselves a couple years ago in that small group study?"

I didn't know what my friend was talking about at first, but as she gave me a few more details, the fog cleared. I remembered giving everybody in the group a notecard to write a note to themselves—a note from God, giving them the encouragement they believed he would speak into their lives right then. They sealed the cards, addressed the envelopes, and several months later I mailed the cards to them for a surprise dose of encouragement.

My friend filled in the details of the journey of that notecard during the next several years. When she received it, she didn't open it, choosing instead to tuck it away for one of those days when she'd really need encouragement. Over the years, she came across the envelope a few more times when she was cleaning or sorting. Each time she felt as if the timing wasn't "just right" to open it...until the day she called me.

The words she had written several years before flooded her heart. She was in the middle of a trying season of parenting, and the letter was filled with words specific to parenting. As she told me the story through her tears, she said she couldn't imagine what would have made her write those specific words years ago as a younger parent. But she knew God was speaking to her.

My friend thanked me for inviting her to write encouragement from God, but really it was me who was thankful. She trusted God's timing and received his words at just the right time because of it. In the process, God encouraged me as well—to keep trusting him, especially his words and timing, and to be thankful for friends who share their faith stories.

Susan Lawrence

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for knowing me well enough to know what I need and when I need it. I'm so sorry I rush ahead or lag behind at times. I often want things my own way, but I know that when I trust you, I receive the encouragement I need every step of the way. Thank you for planting seeds today that you will grow tomorrow. Help me be patient. Amen.

TO CHANGE THE WORLD

GREETINGS!

"E verybody here sends greetings. Please give my greetings to the believers—all who love us. May God's grace be with you all." —Titus 3:15

It was already shaping up to be a long, grueling day. Walking into the grocery store, I was upset with myself for procrastinating and adding one more thing to my to-do list.

But walking out of the grocery store, I was so happy I had put this off.

What changed my outlook? A bagger who greeted me warmly. Seeing his name tag, "Que," I asked him how to pronounce his name. After he finished bagging my groceries, he insisted on helping me out to my car, putting the groceries in the trunk, and opening my car door for me! As he wished me a great day, he refused a tip, saying his momma had taught him to help people. I told him his mom would be very proud of him. What a wonderful start to a now great day!

The very next day I was in a rush to get on the road for my trip to Minnesota. I had forgotten to get my neighbor a copy of my house key, and I was grumbling to myself as I drove to Home Depot—an unhappy start to what was looking like another long day. That too changed!

A man with tattoos on his arms and whose name tag read "Malachi" was cutting my new key. While trying to wait patiently in spite of it taking longer than the advertised two minutes, I asked about his tattoos. What ensued changed my day! The words inked on Malachi's arm read, "This too shall pass." He related a story about his great-grandfather in Auschwitz, his own journey with cancer, and another story about King Solomon. These events convinced him that whatever happens in life, "this too shall pass." And it also convinced me! Malachi wished me a great day, and I was on my way. Once again, my day had totally changed.

Two men, so disparate—one known to me only because of a name tag and one known to me by his tattooed arm, one Vietnamese and one Jewish, one slightly built and one big and burly. But they were also two men very much alike: Both turned my mood completely around by greeting me, and both delivered God's message of love to me; coincidentally, Malachi means "messenger of God" in Hebrew. Think of how close I came to missing out on meeting two wonderful children of God! Thank God for sending his messengers to us to lift us up and encourage us even in the midst of our most common daily lives.

Hope L. Moran

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Thank you, God, for people who greet us with joy and with your grace. May we do likewise this day. Amen.

EIGHT SECONDS

"Stand Firm and keep a strong grip on Sthe teaching we passed on to you both in person and by letter. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal comfort and a wonderful hope, comfort you and strengthen you in every good thing you do and say."

-2 Thessalonians 2:15-17

He looked like every cowboy you've ever seen in the movies and on TV. Lean and tanned, the lines of his face were a roadmap of days on the trail and nights by the campfire. He was as comfortable on his horse as most of us are in our favorite chair. He motioned me over as I drove around to the rank of trucks and horse trailers parked behind the cattle complex. He was taking his saddle off his horse and paused long enough to offer his hand and say, "You must be Tom. I'm Alex." Then he removed the saddle and blanket from his cutting horse and let it roam inside the outdoor ring while we talked.

I was a reporter for a mid-sized daily newspaper in South Carolina, and Alex was a champion bull rider and custom saddle maker. He was working the rodeo circuit and had agreed to sit for a brief interview the first day of the rodeo. We sat on the top rail of the ring and talked about his saddles, his life as a real working cowboy, and his adventures as a bull rider.

Many of those adventures included sprains, broken bones, and getting battered by more than a ton of solid muscle and slashing horns, sometimes for little or no money depending on the ride.

It's a life only a cowboy can understand.

I asked, "Alex, what does it take to become a champion bull rider?" He talked about the fact that a rider has to stay on a bull for at least eight seconds in order for the ride to count, and those are the longest eight seconds in the world. Then he pushed his hat back, rubbed his forehead for a moment, and said, "Basically you've gotta want to stay on the bull worse than he wants to throw you off."

This is a similar idea to the one Paul gave the church in Thessalonica. The church received the letter from Paul during a time when many forces were actively working against the church and anything else related to Christianity. It was his hope that their ability to "keep a strong grip" on the teachings they had received would reinforce the idea that God would encourage them and give them the strength to persevere.

Thomas Smith

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, no matter what this world throws at me, you are always there. When the forces that want to separate us become too much, help me to hang on for the full eight seconds. Amen.

The Unkempt Garden

"S till other seeds Fell on Fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"

—Matthew 13:8

The garden was small, maybe 20 by 20 feet. We planted all sorts of vegetables, peppers, beans, and some cherry tomatoes. That first summer we weeded, watered, and then harvested most of the crop at the end of the season. I say most because the cherry tomato plants went crazy, and some stayed on the vine. We just left them there.

The following spring we tilled the ground, preparing it for the year's planting. Again we planted various vegetable seeds, weeded, watered, and watched. What happened next was amazing.

We soon noticed we had a dozen or so volunteer cherry tomato plants. What had been left on the vine had fallen to the ground, only to have their seeds worked into the ground when we tilled the soil. Soon, they'd

rise...with a vengeance! The tomato plants kept coming, and as summer progressed we were overwhelmed with the harvest. We couldn't give the tomatoes away fast enough. That second year, we learned our lesson, uprooting the plants at the end of the season and getting rid of them. The following year we had a normal, controlled garden. But...

As I think about Jesus' parable of the sower, I can't help but wonder if control is what it's all about. I frequently read his tale and then throw my own ideas into the mix. I think about tending and caring for the garden by weeding, watering, and adding fertilizer, and then, at the end of the season, harvesting it. Interestingly, the same Jesus who tells us to pray for hands to help with the harvest also tells us to allow the weeds to grow with the plants so that the separating happens at the harvest time.

What I am left with is the image of hundreds of cherry tomatoes growing all over the place. Completely out of control. A bountiful harvest that, left untouched, will lead to thousands more.

We know Jesus was not talking about agriculture in his parable; he was talking about the gospel—how it's sown, planted, and harvested. This gospel, cast by the Sower himself, will grow, and while we should indeed harvest as

.TO CHANGE THE WORLD

we can, perhaps what we ought to do is sit back and watch it happen.

John Mulholland

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for being the Sower and the Harvester. You cast the seed where and how you wish. The seed grows according to your plan, not ours. Teach us to be humble and accept the crazy, out-of-control growth that you desire rather than trying to control it ourselves. Amen.

LOVE IN AN ENVELOPE

Your love For one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." —John 13:35

Timidly I walked into the class of babies and toddlers. We were new to the church, and I was a little nervous taking our kids to a class of strangers. A woman with a huge smile met us and asked my son's name. She swooped him up in her welcoming arms and took him over to join the other children in their activity. I was a little taken aback by her friendliness—it was almost too much for me, and I'm an outgoing person! But it wasn't long before "Mrs. Bonnie" was a highlight of our week. She became a dear friend to my young son, and he couldn't wait to see her. Bounding down the stairs of the church, he would throw himself into her arms and chatter happily about his life.

One day after church, we invited Mrs. Bonnie and Mr. Lewis over for lunch. Little by little this dear woman wove her way into our hearts simply by loving our children. We moved away, but it didn't matter to Bonnie. For 15 years she has faithfully sent birthday cards to every
member of our family. Each one has a word of Christ-like encouragement and love.

The cool thing is we are not the only family who has been the recipient of Bonnie's love and kindness. She has a fulltime ministry of sending cards out to nearly 100 people a month. People who have been touched by the love of Jesus in an envelope.

She has watched kids grow from toddlers to teens, from babies to brides. She calls on occasion just to check in on "her boys." There's not a thing you could say to Bonnie that would cause her to have anything but good words for "her" kids!

Bonnie has faced serious health challenges. She's unable to help at the church anymore. She misses the children, but it doesn't stop her from serving! She'll send cards to anyone she hears is sick or discouraged, in addition to the birthday cards.

I'm curious to know just how many encouragement-filled envelopes have left Bonnie's address over the years! Looking at my own life, I wonder what I could possibly do that could impact as many people with the love of Jesus as Bonnie does from her small living room. And then I realize, *it doesn't matter*. Bonnie never intended

her "ministry" to become so far-reaching! She was simply loving others, and it grew.

You know, I think it's time to get some stamps for Mrs. Bonnie.

DeeAnn Bragaw

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

God, please show me today how to live in such a way that my words and simple actions impact another person for you. Use my life to bless. Amen.

IT'S NOT COMPLICATED

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

-1 John 4:10

"I love you like I love strawberry milkshakes...I love you like pigs love pies."

A quote out of a children's book can take very deep root in a 6-year-old's heart as it did in mine. The concept of loving someone as much as a milkshake? Wow!

"Is that possible? What does that even mean? What kind of love could this be?" I wondered.

Every night after my favorite book, *I Love You, Good Night*, had been read, my dad would kiss my head, turn out the lights, and I would lie awake mulling over those powerful words until I had exhausted every option of what that kind of love truly meant.

"And what about pigs?" I wondered. "Do pigs eat pies? Do they really like them? Do they love them? If pigs love pies and my dad says he loves me more, that's a lot, right?"

It's funny what our human brains can or can't comprehend no matter how simple the statement. And still to this day I sometimes struggle with the complete realization of love! What it is. *Who* it is.

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

To this day I often still feel like a 6-year-old girl, lying in bed daydreaming of my Father's love for me. *He loved me first? Before I ever loved him?* Still a childlike wonder mystifies me as I experience revelation after revelation of my Heavenly Daddy's love. It's so simple, and yet I so frequently complicate the simple! He loves me! That's it.

I so often feel the urge to share the love of Christ that I have experienced with others around me. But I find myself, instead, discounting opportunities to speak a word of encouragement to someone. There are times when I shy away from mentioning how the Lord has touched me, not because I am ashamed, but rather because I feel I may not have a significant or elaborate enough way of expressing my true experience of him!

It's silly how the Lord often speaks to us in pictures and parables as if speaking to a small child, and yet we take what he says and complicate it! If only we could

always take him at his word...He loves us! More than strawberry milkshakes, more than pigs love pies, Jesus Christ loves us!

Rachel Morgan

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord Jesus, thank you that before time began you dreamt of me. You loved me before I ever loved you. Help me take you at your word like a child. I pray for more revelation of your love for me. Help me to receive it so that I may be able to share it with others. Thank you that it's simple. Thank you for loving me. Amen.

THE UNOFFICIAL EMPLOYEE

"And don't Forget to do good and to Share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God."

—Hebrews 13:16

I loved the neighborhood where my family lived for nearly 10 years. It was older—there were no sidewalks, and every house was unique. On one side of the track was farmland, where horses would occasionally wander over to the nearest fence and let you pet them, and the open space gave us a magnificent view of sunsets over the Rocky Mountains. While our neighborhood allowed us to pretend we lived in the country, across the road from our neighborhood, conveniently, were all the basics we needed on a daily basis—a grocery store, ice cream shop, Starbucks, and a gas station.

The gas station was our family's usual hub to fill up our cars, get a car wash, stop for an ice cream sandwich after school when we were younger, and get a jumbo 64-ounce soda to share on our family movie nights. As we were over there on a regular basis, my parents became friends with John, who worked the late-night shift. While paying

for our gas or drinks, they would chat with him for a while about his family or ours. His day job was working with his dad in their family business, and he worked nights at the gas station to bring in some extra income for his family. Whenever we were there talking with John, Nathaniel was usually there too.

By most people's definition, Nathaniel could be considered homeless. He lived on the edge of our neighborhood in a shed behind a family's house. He had no bathroom and no kitchen, but that was his home. You would often see him out walking between the neighborhood and the shopping center. My parents had given him a bike so that he could get around easier. He was friends with some of the people who worked at the grocery store, sitting outside talking with them on their breaks, and he was friends with John too.

Nathaniel didn't just hang around the gas station talking to John when he was there. No, Nathaniel would be restocking lids, wiping the counters, taking out trash, and even holding the door open for customers as they entered. You see, John had given Nathaniel a job. It wasn't anything official; no paperwork was involved and no paychecks were sent. Nathaniel would come to the gas station for a couple hours to help John, and John paid Nathaniel out of his own pocket.

My family later moved, but I haven't forgotten about John and Nathaniel. Normally if I met someone like John, a man working a second job at a gas station, I would probably—

wrongly—be quick to judge. Without knowing the person or their story, I would think they were someone to be pitied or someone who probably needed help themselves, working a lower-end job to make ends meet.

But John didn't see himself that way; he was happy to be able to support his family, and he saw someone else whom he could help...and he did. He didn't wait for someone else to come along who had more money or more to offer in assistance. He gave what he had.

What a Christ-like example! Isn't this what Jesus taught? It doesn't matter what we have or don't have. We are called to love others, to give and to serve like Jesus did. There is no "perfect time" to begin. We will never have enough money or enough spare time...the right time is now, with what we have and who we are *now*. We don't need to be afraid to give of ourselves, because God has promised he will take care of us and give us all we need. We can trust him!

Kelsey Perry

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Thank you, God, for your promise of provision. Lead me closer to your heart, and give me the courage to trust you as I step out in faith and give of myself and what I have to serve you and to serve others. Amen.

SAY IT LOUDER NOW!

"This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be aFraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

—Joshua 1:9

I'm not exactly a brave person. In fact, being a worrier is what I'm known for among my friends and family. They always seem quite amused at whatever my latest worry is. For example, a huge fear of mine at the moment is being attacked by bats while I sleep. I grew up in a house with bats in the attic...so I'm sure it isn't exactly out of the realm of possibility.

All jokes aside, fear and worry are the biggest struggles for me in my Christian walk. Worry over life at the moment, worry for the future, worry about when I'm supposed to step out in faith, worry if I'm following God as he is leading me or not. I *know* I am to trust God and that he will protect me. It's his promise. But it's still not easy for me.

One of the roles I've been blessed with over the years is being a Sunday school teacher to preschoolers. In a recent

lesson, the children were memorizing Joshua 1:9. In my lesson prep, the actual words of the verse didn't really stand out to me.

On that Sunday morning, I was struck at the irony of *me* teaching about trusting God. We practiced the words to the verse and added some fun hand motions. We started by saying the verse as softly as we could, and then we gradually grew louder as I shouted, "Say it louder now!"

I was brought to tears as I watched Kenzie, Mason, Cameron, Jaxon, and the rest of their 3-year-old classmates shout as loudly as they could how God is with them all the time. Later when we were discussing the different circumstances in which God is with us, I had quite a chuckle hearing their examples (you can use your imagination!).

In that moment for those 3-year-olds, the thought of God being everywhere was enough. It filled them with joy and excitement. They weren't asking questions or doubting. God is the friend who doesn't have to leave and go home.

As I was cleaning up the crushed cheerios on the floor, I realized I should have the same exuberance over God's presence in my life. I truly don't have to fear because he is with me always.

God puts all kinds of people in our lives to inspire us and remind us of what's important. That Sunday, those fifteen 3-year-olds spoke more truth into my life than they could have ever realized. They reminded me it's okay to trust God without hesitation or fear.

Jessica Burkell

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father God, thank you for children. Thank you for their spunk and enthusiasm. Thank you for their contagious excitement. Thank you for using them to teach us important lessons. When fear starts to creep in, help me remember that no matter what I'm facing, you are always with me. In your name I pray. Amen.

AWKWARD CLARITY

"F another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense."

—Matthew 18:15

Ed and I had only known each other for a few months when he sent me an odd text message. It read, "I need to talk with you about something awkward. Can I come over after work?" I replied back that he could, wondering where the conversation might go.

Two hours later we sat down in my basement as Ed began to talk: "I was thinking about something you said the other day about Jesus. You were talking about the 30 years before he began his public ministry and speculated that he wasn't doing a whole lot during that time except for working like a common man."

"Yeah," I affirmed. "No one knows for sure how that all played out, but if that's all he did it just shows his commitment to live in the shoes of everyday people like us."

"I believe Jesus was being faithful to his Father in living that life," he explained, "and I don't feel comfortable saying he wasn't 'doing a whole lot' when that seems rather important."

We talked for a while on the topic, taking turns speaking and listening. Eventually, Ed wrapped up his thoughts on it and smiled. I paused then asked, "You'd mentioned there was something awkward you wanted to talk with me about?"

"That was it," he explained.

"Oh, well...to me, that's not awkward. We can talk about stuff like that anytime."

"What made it awkward was that I felt angry with you for what I thought was a demeaning statement about Jesus. There was a time in my life when I thought less of him than I do now, and I rebelled hard when I did. Since getting my life back on track with God, I want to honor him. I figured part of that means honoring you, so instead of harboring a grudge or assuming the worst, I wanted to sit down and hear your heart so that we could clear it up."

Let's face it...this is rare. Ed not only openly approached me on other topics in the future, but he also dared others to seek me out if he heard them gossiping or slandering with suspicion. I'm not surprised at how quickly he and I became friends.

It takes more energy to be fake than it does to be real. We'll waste hours, weeks, months, and years being covertly

awkward with each other instead of having an overt halfhour conversation that could restore everything. Which way will you live?

Tony Myles

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, you know me better than I know myself, just as you know others better than I know them. Dare me to get up and walk toward people I have issues with. Help me to yearn for awkward clarity more than lazy conclusions. I commit to pursue this as you show me how. Amen.

HUMBLE YOURSELF

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

—James 4:6, 10

I like being in control. I recently moved, and, yes, everything was packed perfectly. I always dot my i's and cross my t's to make sure everything is done well.

But even when I try so hard to perfectly plan and coordinate everything, I still get frustrated and frazzled. It rains when I don't expect it. I break a fingernail. I ask someone over for dinner, and she insists on bringing a main dish when I wanted to plan the whole thing. Then the line is too long at the post office, and everything in my new place isn't in its proper location yet; translation: my house is a wreck!

Walking outside I see the clouds above the mountains slowly and playfully sliding by. In the moment I remember they are God's creation too...just like me. They don't look worried or frazzled or unhappy.

Peace drifts over me as the words of James 4 lodge in my brain, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the

humble." And later in the same chapter, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

I must admit for the umpteenth time (that would mean it is a really bad habit) I didn't pray (or actually talk) to God about my issues. Stuff will get done in God's time and will, not in my power.

Maybe my priorities are mixed up. Why worry about putting everything in a proper place anyway, when I could downsize my "wealth" to others in need? The rain we've been having is beautiful here. It nourishes everything it touches. I could just stop, enjoy it, and be thankful. And my fingernails; well, the broken one still looks better than all the rest.

My friend Carrie bringing over the main dish should make me happy if I weren't such a control freak, wanting to do everything my own way and all by myself. I should appreciate her friendship and willingness to contribute to our meal so that we have more time to enjoy each other over dinner.

The post office most always has lines at certain times of day. I could come at a quiet time or make a point to brighten someone's day with conversation while I wait. It might just be a "God-moment," being able to plant a fruitful seed in someone else's life.

In the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah believes in little prayers to get things done in his life. When he was scared, unsure, faced with opposition, or just off track, he would shoot a little prayer to heaven. So much so that his life was an ongoing conversation with God over everything that concerned him, big or small.

When I humble myself before my God—the almighty, powerful, omnipresent God—my life is better. When I admit I can't do things myself and ask for help, wow, things change. Humbling myself acknowledges I have given my life over to my Creator, and he will lift me up.

I repent! So for now, before I forget again, I am conversing with God about everything—the ticking parking meter down the street and, of course, my attitude in general, which so easily gets out of whack! It makes me a calmer person and easier to get along with too. I just take a deep breath and know God has everything covered...I don't need to pretend I am in control.

Pamela Gilsenan

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

God, remind me daily that you want a relationship with me because I am your child. Help me humble myself and talk with you all the time about the big and small issues in my life. Amen.

GIFTS AND ALL THAT JAZZ

"All must give as they are able, according to the blessings given to them by the Lord your God."

—Deuteronomy 16:17

When I attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill there was a beautiful common area on campus surrounded by trees and flowering plants. During the spring, in particular, I would make a point to walk through the area on my way to Franklin Street's coffee shops and other college hangouts. In the shade of massive oaks, the aroma of honeysuckle and lilac was intoxicating, and the experience was both old and new each time I made my way across the beautiful expanse.

On a particularly warm spring day as I crossed the common on my way to meet my study group, I heard what sounded like someone playing a saxophone off in the distance. I followed the sound for about five minutes until I saw the source of the sound.

It was indeed someone playing a sax. And I do mean playing. About 30 feet away on a corner of the street stood

a round little man in khaki shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and a pith helmet. And he was making that tenor sax sing. He was obviously a jazz player from way back.

I walked closer, mesmerized. The notes cascaded around the gathering crowd in an effortless stream, and you could feel the raw emotion in the strains of "Amazing Grace." From there he launched into an equally powerful arrangement of "A Quiet Place," and no one moved.

We just stood there, transfixed.

After a few minutes, he opened the case at his feet, took out a red bandana, and wiped his face. As he took off the pith helmet and wiped his bald head, I took out a dollar and dropped it in his case. As I walked away, he called out, "Hey, man, don't do that."

He picked up the dollar and held it out to me. "Here, cat." (Now I *knew* he was a jazz man.) "Put this back in your pocket," he said.

"No," I replied. "That's for you. You were really making that sax wail. In fact, I could stand here and listen to you play all afternoon."

He tucked the dollar in my shirt pocket and grinned, "Then that's payment enough."

I looked at him for a long moment and shook my head. "I don't get it," I said. "There are always musicians out here playing for money. And you're the best I've heard."

"I appreciate that, and you're very kind to say so," he said, "but I'm not playing for the money."

"Then why are you playing?"

He smiled and tightened the ligature screws. "Because I can." He adjusted the mouthpiece and said, "You see, God gave me a gift, and this is my way of giving a little something back to him."

Thomas Smith

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, help me to learn that sometimes I need to offer my gifts simply because I can. And maybe in offering the gifts you've given me, someone will come to accept the ultimate gift of you. Amen.

THE STRONGEST STRENGTH OF THE WEAKEST WEAK

"He has made his people strong, honoring his FaithFul ones."

-Psalm 148:14

When the doorbell rang, I opened the door to find a package on the porch. Waving at the delivery driver, I walked into the house, curious and excited! I hadn't ordered anything online; this was an unexpected surprise! My boys appeared at the sound of the doorbell and were just as curious as me. Tearing open the packaging, we found a cookie jar complete with homemade cookies! YES!

I first met Marva when she was a young 75 and my family was new to the area. Immediately touched by her sweet demeanor, Marva and I instantly became friends. Two days a week she came to volunteer in my classroom. Marva would listen to kids read, grade papers, and do all kinds of projects for me. Nothing was beneath her dignity; she did everything I asked her to do with the sweetest of attitudes. I called her "Marvelous Marva." The kids affectionately called her "Grandma T." They called her Grandma T because her

last name begins with a "T," but that nickname made *me* think of something else!

I had seen some reruns of an old TV show with an actor named "Mr. T." He was strong, capable, and not someone you wanted to cross! I thought of Marva, Grandma T, and couldn't help but smile—Grandma T is not physically strong nor someone who would frighten you in any way! In fact, she's really pretty weak. Suffering from severe osteoporosis, her back is misshapen and causes her constant pain. But you would never know it, because Grandma T possesses strength beyond the strongest TV character. Hers is the strength of a heart full of faith and love for others. She became a rock in my life, gently reminding me God's strength was there for the asking and daily offering her own strength to bless me and my students. One day Marva got sick. When she grew weaker and eventually had to move out of state to stay with one of her sons, we were all heartbroken.

And then the cookie jar arrived! Munching on cookies with my grateful boys, I laughed and tenderly remembered how Grandma T had given of herself time after time. I read the note she'd included with the cookies, encouraging me to be faithful and reminding me that she was praying for me.

The weakest of the weak? Are you kidding me? Grandma T is the *strongest* of the strong.

DeeAnn Bragaw

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, what can I do for you today? Please show me how I can make your presence sweet in the lives of those around me! Help me remember what true strength really is, and make me strong in you today. Amen.



REMEMBER

"Then Joshua said to the Israelites, "In the Future your children will ask, "What do these stones mean?" Then you can tell them, "This is where the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry ground."" ___loshua 4:21-22

I've often struggled with my identity. I'm a pastor, father, husband, runner, son, uncle, brother, Christian, sinner...the list could go on and on. This past year, the church in which I served went through a nasty time—dozens of people left, and it was devastating for all of us. I even lost my job in the midst of it; my identity as "pastor" was gone. Over time a group of us got together and met for prayer and Bible study to share our common story and rebuild. We also remembered. Soon we took on a new identity; we called ourselves "The Outcasts."

September 11, 2014, was the 13th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in America. Like previous years, many articles were written, stories were told, and video replayed. It is interesting that over time events like this become an abstract thought. Without the reminders of the event itself, we are inclined to not only forget, but we

lose the ability to acknowledge them as shapers of our identities.

When the Israelites were finally ready to enter the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering, God sent the priests ahead into the Jordan River with the Ark of the Covenant held high. When their feet touched the water, the water upstream stopped, and the people could cross. God then had the people gather 12 stones, one for each tribe, from the middle of the riverbed and then construct an altar when they camped that night.

This was not the first time they had done this. Throughout the Exodus the Israelites built these altars, each with the same purpose: to help the people remember who they were. And each time they were built, there was a similar challenge to the people from God, "When your children ask why this is here, tell them about me...remind them of their identity as one delivered by the Lord."

As "The Outcasts" met, we had to consistently remind ourselves of our identity in Christ. What we learned was that many, if not all, of our other identities were fleeting and empty. We had clung to them, and when they were taken from us, we forgot we were loved by the God who sacrificed himself for us. But God did not—does not—forget us. His memorial was Jesus on the cross. Like the pile of stones in Joshua 4, the cross is a reminder of the act and the

outcome. In it we are again reminded of who we are: a people loved by God regardless of circumstance and situation. We are his.

John Mulholland

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for remembering me. You know not only the number of hairs on my head and the many things *about* me, but you know me personally and intimately. Help me to remember my identity as yours, regardless of my circumstance, and put me into relationship with people who share that identity so that we might remember. Amen.

ARE YOU LONESOME TONIGHT?

have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself."

—Jeremiah 31:3

She was 13 years older than me. She taught me how to dance the stroll and the jitterbug. She sang to me all the popular songs of the day, and I learned the words carefully so that I could sing with her. She loved Elvis. Her favorite song was "Are You Lonesome Tonight," and she sang it with such feeling and reverence. I liked her version better than his and loved listening to her beautiful voice.

My sister Myrna Irene was a beautiful woman. Later in life, I watched her battle against breast cancer's horrible weapons, exhausted and confused about what was happening in her life. She was 58 years old when that terrible disease took her life.

When Myrna became ill, I had just finished esthetician training. She made copies of my first service brochure and carried them in her purse. While she was in the hospital getting treatments, she would hand them out to people, and

I was completely blown away by that gesture of love. She told the nurse, "This is my sister, and she gives the best facial you will ever have. You should call her."

I was only able to give Myrna one facial before she passed away, and it was not under the best circumstances. It was in her tiny, cramped bedroom in her old double-wide mobile home with her head at the foot of her bed so that I could sit at the end to give her a facial. She had never had a facial before and so much wanted to experience it. She loved it!

As I sat there giving her the facial, I looked around her bedroom. Everywhere on her walls were pictures of her family, including pictures of me. I was important to her, and my dreams were important to her. She hung my picture on her wall and hung on to my dreams with me—even as she faced her own overwhelming struggles. I miss her love and support so very much.

I can remember the loneliness and desperation I felt before I chose to accept the love Jesus had for me. Now I have the assurance that Jesus' love is the greatest love I will ever have or ever need—a love that is even greater than the love we will experience from those who care most about us here on earth. That's what gets me up every morning and keeps me walking toward him. I stumble, I moonwalk backward, and I fall down. But he lifts me up and gives me a little push in the right direction

when he sees me faltering. I just have to keep my eyes and my heart open for that little push.

I know someday Myrna and I will sit side by side at Jesus' feet. I can't wait for that day! And I can't wait to dance with her again. The words to her favorite song, "Are You Lonesome Tonight," have a lot of meaning for me on many levels—especially if you substitute Jesus as the singer rather than Elvis. Odd, but it makes a lot of sense! Try it.

Linda Benningfield

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear Father, comfort those who are without someone they love today and remind them that you are always standing by their side and that your love is a blessing. Teach us to love others as you have asked us to—no matter what struggles we ourselves are going through. Amen.

THE (NOT SO) NORMAL STUFF

"God has given each of you a gift from Ghis great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another."

-1 Peter 4:10

It was our first potluck at the church we'd been attending for a couple months. It was a larger church than we had previously attended, and we hadn't met a lot of people yet. The potluck was the perfect opportunity, and we enjoyed the conversations so much that we were still there when clean-up began. We folded chairs and tables along with our new friends.

Someone picked up the broom and started walking up and down the gym floor to make sure everything was clean before school started the next morning. I looked more closely and realized the person holding the broom was the same person who had preached the sermon just a couple hours earlier. I had appreciated the sermon, but in that moment I appreciated his willingness to sweep the floor even more. Service comes in all forms, and titles or expected responsibilities aren't meant to be limiting walls.

It's not the only time I've seen someone pick up a tool outside a person's usual toolbox. I've seen people take out the trash... and clean up the floor because the bag broke on the way out the door. Someone who stepped out of a worship service to rock a baby so that a young mom could go into the service and take a break. A small army of people who climbed onto a roof in the dark to keep the rain out of the building after a tornado damaged the structure. A group of young men who moved a single mom out of a difficult situation (even though she had the heaviest furniture ever made!).

I want to sweep the floor, take out the trash, hold the baby, and fix the roof. Oh, wait. My fixing the roof might actually make it worse! But I want to have a servant's heart and fit together with others who look for opportunities to serve sacrificially—service in the (not so) normal stuff.

Susan Lawrence

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, guide me to step out of my comfort zone to help others. Help me to not measure what I do by my own or others' expectations, but let me rely on you instead. You know what is needed, and you can guide me to the right places at the right times to use me. Help me accept other people's help too. I want to serve alongside others to honor you. Amen.

POWER IN WEAKNESS

"My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."

-2 Corinthians 12:9

Our culture values the strongest, fastest, and the best in any category. Whether we're talking about sports, business, academics, or some other pursuit, we want to know who is at the top. Who's the strongest? Who's the fastest? Who has the biggest company? Who's the best?

But God comes along and says, "My power works best in weakness." Weakness? Typical for God to take the way we look at things and flip it on its head.

It reminds me of a married couple I encountered on a short-term mission trip. Charles and Ruth were 81 years old at the time and signed up to go on a trip to Cuba with about 15 other people. We had a busy schedule set for that week in mid-July, and Cuba is not known for its cool summer temperatures. At 81, Charles and Ruth didn't move as quickly as the rest of the team. They weren't as energetic. They didn't stay up late with us each night. But

they were there, and their hearts were alive to serve those in need in Cuba.

Charles and Ruth had a program to educate locals on basic nutrition principles, which they had presented to people in several different countries around the world. We were able to have them present the program to some single moms who had kids with disabilities. Ruth and Charles poured their hearts out and used their program and their gifts to bless those moms. As I watched the mothers interact with Ruth and Charles, I saw the power of God at work. Ruth and Charles weren't flamboyant speakers. They didn't have a flashy media presentation. They weren't professionals, but in their humility and desire to serve, the mothers engaged with them in a way that never would have happened otherwise. God's power was made perfect in the "weakness" of Charles and Ruth, and the result was life-impacting. They took a passion and interest they had and humbled themselves so that God could work through them. Even at the age of 81, they continue to trust in the strength that God provides to accomplish more than they could on their own.

What about you? Are you worried about stepping out because you're afraid you're not "the best"? Do you think that because others have flashier gifts, they're more suited to serve?

What if you trusted in the way God looks at things? What if you stepped out in your weakness and let his strength shine?

He's given you gifts and passions to use for his glory. You have a willing heart, so step out, trust God, and see what he might do.

Jobe Lewis

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, I love knowing I can be a part of your plan in the world. Help me overcome my fear of not being good enough and trust that your power is made perfect in my weakness. Amen.

BUTTER AND SUGAR SANDWICHES

"Once I was young, and now I am old. Yet I have never seen the godly abandoned or their children begging For bread."

-Psalm 37:25

My parents were part of the World War II generation. My dad fought in Germany, while my mom stayed home with a new family start-up. Both survived the Great Depression and had seen their share of lack. By the time I came along in 1959, my dad was 14 years home from the war and further from poverty, but the spirit of the Great Depression still crept into the corners of our lives and snuggled in among the cobwebs. A typical snack while I was growing up was a butter and sugar sandwich, the cuisine of a country that had been steeped in privation. Although our family had sufficient means by then, my dad being a deputy sheriff, the poverty spirit still nipped at my parents' heels; and subconsciously or by osmosis, it was passed on to us.

As the Lord began to liberate me from that way of thinking, I made the vow that every young married couple makes:

I will do things differently than my parents. Although I still find myself falling back into certain patterns, there are a few things that came out intact. To my knowledge, butter and sugar sandwiches were never on the menu for our own five children even though we were pastors all their lives and at times life could still be lean.

The Lord brought me a revelation a number of years back, and I thought of how King David reminisced in his psalms. He said that all through his life, when he was young and now that he was old, he had never seen the righteous forsaken nor God's seed out begging for bread. I vowed before the Lord that I would mirror this principle before my family and pass it down to our grandchildren: There will always be plenty in the Father's house.

Throughout 33 years of marriage and family, no matter whether I was unemployed, low-incomed, or prospering, there has always been plenty.

Our five children and ten grandchildren all live within 15 minutes of us, so large family gatherings are often and a must. When we come together, there is always plenty of food, love, and laughter. The principle must be shared: If God is our Father and in his presence he prepares a table for us, I know his table is not sparse; no butter and sugar sandwiches for us.
.TO CHANGE THE WORLD

Always know and be reminded that in your Father's house there is always plenty. Give generously to others and live in the faith and expectancy that God will provide.

Dave Rhoades

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, in our world of uncertainty, let me know that YOU are my sufficiency, provider, comfort, and stay. Let me know your faithfulness and provision and pass it on to others. Thank you that there will always be plenty in your presence. Amen.

A LITTLE GOWN. A LOT OF LIGHT.

"In the same way, let your good deeds shine out For all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." —Matthew 5:16

Maria cried as she held the tiny gown in her hand, but these were not tears of sadness. She had been drained of those over the preceding days. Her newborn daughter would never leave the hospital. Emilia had been born too soon. Her underdeveloped body could not sustain her life, and she had passed away only days after taking her first breath. No, these were tears of joy over the Angel Gown that Emilia would wear for burial. It was a simple item, but it was light in the middle of darkness.

The little gown proclaimed Emilia's worth and dignity. It proclaimed the impact and value this small child had on the world in such a quick but powerful way. It said she was not forgotten or missed, but seen and valued. Maria cried tears of joy, because she could hear the song it sang over Emilia.

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Weeks before, Barbara sat behind a sewing machine carefully crafting Emilia's gown. She took the material from donated wedding gowns and worked them into a declaration of life's value, with each hand-sewn bead and embellishment proclaiming the handiwork of God in every life. The hours devoted were intended to wrap the mourning parents in love and the small child in glory.

Barbara was a talented seamstress in the retirement stage of life. Her children and grandchildren had outgrown wearing Nana's handmade clothing, but she had not lost the desire or skill to sew. So Barbara prayed, asking God to show her how to use his gifts to bless someone else. God responded.

A few days later, she saw a story on the evening news. A story about Angel Gowns. The story told of the huge need to provide dignity and celebration for the lives of small children who were born sick or premature and would never leave the hospital. Barbara knew this was her answer. She responded.

Maria will never meet Barbara—she will never know her name. But the love Barbara had demonstrated will not be forgotten. Through Barbara's skills, God gave hope and blessing to Maria in a very dark hour. And for this light, Maria praised God.

We all have skills that God can use. It's why he gave them to us. All we need to do is open our eyes and ask God to show us how. The light within you can push back another's darkest moments and reveal the heart of God.

Cory Mitchell

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, show me the gifts and skills you have given me. Open my eyes to see how I may use them to demonstrate your life to another. Let your light in me shine out into the darkness of this world for your glory and somebody else's good. Amen.

SQUELCHING THE SILENCE

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

-2 Timothy 1:7

In elementary school, a note to my parents often would be written in my report cards next to a solid line of A's. My teacher would write that I was doing excellent academically, but she was concerned I was being too quiet in the classroom. I was fearful to participate in class discussions, and I wouldn't talk much with the other students.

My timid nature painstakingly followed me through the already awkward years of middle school. Once a classmate even asked me, "Are you mute?!" I could feel my face burn with embarrassment as I defensively whispered, "No!"

As I entered college, I was overwhelmed by the pressures to be social. Before each meal in my dining hall, I would take a huge, calming breath before carrying my food tray to a table to eat with other students. Each booth set up on campus became a dodging exercise to avoid uncomfortable conversations. But I couldn't avoid one of

those conversations. In fact, it became a turning point for me socially and spiritually.

Allison, a woman about 30 years old, was sitting at a table in the student center advertising a Christian group on campus. Trying to avoid eye contact, I slinked by. She called out to me and lured me to the table with the promise of free ice cream. Because, after all, what college student can resist free ice cream?

After a brief conversation, she asked to meet with me oneon-one the following week. I agreed to the get-together, and from there she became my mentor, encouraging me to stay grounded spiritually while branching out to find new friends. Allison became my motivator to seek God before anything else. The more we met, the more I tried to spiritually center my life rather than drown in my college anxiety. Weeks passed, and I began making new friends. I was growing more confident with the Lord as my foundation. By the end of my freshman year, I was happily part of a close group of friends. It was an amazing feeling wondering what my friends and I should do for fun on a Friday night rather than worrying if I'd be watching a movie by myself. What a glorious change!

Without the gentle encouragement of Allison, I think I would have struggled much more with my shyness and fear. Instead, she was able to guide me to the Spirit, which in turn equipped me with a new outlook on approaching people. With confidence, I could clearly speak to people and genuinely care about them without my own insecurities taking over.

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It doesn't take much to impact a person's life. For Allison, her simple belief in me and her persistence in encouragement helped me grow out of my timid enclosure. The experience made me realize God blesses us with special people in our lives during times of need. And it is up to us to stand tall, look them in the eye, and have a conversation!

Christie Sounart

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

God, thank you for placing people in my path to encourage and mentor me when life gets hard. Help me recognize those moments when I can be a blessing to someone else, and give me the confidence to bravely reach out to connect with them. Grant me the words they need to hear from you! Amen.

How DEEP THE FATHER'S LOVE

"And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is."

-Ephesians 3:18

My fingers were wrinkled like prunes, and my eyes were stinging with chlorine. But at the end of a long day of swimming, nothing seemed to matter more to me and my younger brother, Micah, than trying to touch the deep end of the pool. We clung to the side of the pool as water splashed onto our faces in a rhythmic kind of pattern; swimmer after swimmer jumped off the high dive as we devised our best plan of action in order to touch the bottom of the pool.

After plans and calculations, we deciphered we both couldn't do it alone. We were too young and too light to get to the bottom. We would have to help each other.

Pulling myself up out of the pool, we initiated our plan of action. I sat on the hot cement with my feet dangling into the water. Micah slid his shoulders under my feet, almost as if I was standing on him.

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"Are you sure we can do this, Rae?" he asked me in an anxious tone.

I laughed, "Of course we can, silly! You ready?!"

Together we counted, getting louder with every number, "One, two, three!" Off I slid from the side of the pool, using my feet and momentum to push him deep, deep into the water.

That day after we had both touched the bottom of the pool, something in my spirit seemed to soar. What a delight it was to work toward something with my brother and for both of us to get along and enjoy it! We both pushed each other (literally) to our goal, and with that each of us experienced the rush of plunging deeper and deeper into an unknown territory of blue water bliss.

The father heart of God is so much greater than we can often fathom. His love is deep, deeper than any lake or sea. His love is wide and long—wider than any ocean, longer than any river on earth. What an endless love we have to explore!

And with this boundless love from our Father in heaven, we are also given relationship. The idea of relationship was invented by the Creator of heaven and earth! Dreamt up by our God so that we would not be alone in our journey and that we would have the joy of discovering the true depth of Christ's love!

Unlike a swimming pool, the depth of Christ's love for us has no end. And in the beauty of this truth, sometimes relationship gives us the little push we need to become even more saturated in the goodness of God. Praise Jesus for a love greater than a swimming pool and the opportunity to enjoy him with the people in our lives he has given us!

Rachel Morgan

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Heavenly Father, thank you that your love truly has no end. Give me grace to submerge even deeper into your abounding goodness; and as I do, help me embrace your love so that I can enjoy it and share it with the people you have specially placed in my life. Amen.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

" can never escape From your Spirit! I can never get away From your presence!"

-Psalm 139:7

"What do you want to do?" my friend Mike asked me. Six years old and bored in late summer, we were wandering around my backyard trying to find something to fill our time.

"Let's help my dad out by cleaning up the yard a little," I said.

At my feet were stones, some small and some big, which would cause a problem when my dad mowed the lawn. I hefted the biggest rock I could find to get it out of the yard, but where to go with it?

I was near the back fence, so the solution seemed obvious. I tossed the rock out of our yard and into the yard of the house behind us. Problem solved.

"Hey! Quit throwing rocks in my yard!" the neighbor man yelled at me.

I didn't realize he was out in his yard and saw me. Getting caught doing something wrong, even innocently, I was terrified by the fact that I had been found out, that I had raised the anger of a stranger.

I did what almost any 6-year-old would do. I ran into my house and hid. I had done something wrong, got caught, and now didn't want to have to face the world.

Psalm 139 is all about how deeply and how well God knows us. It talks about how the Lord is with us in all things, no matter where we go or what we do. We all experience those times when we are not exactly proud of what we have done. We may feel bad about our actions and the people we may have hurt. We might feel that the best solution is to run away and hide from the face of God so that he won't see our failure.

But we cannot hide from God. No matter where we go, God is there. No matter what we have done or failed to do, no matter what we feel about ourselves, we must remember that God is present with us. He is always with us.

God's unavoidable presence is a presence that offers help. God cares for us. He tends to us, providing us with safety and salvation, hope and a second chance. We are never away from God. The Lord is here to guide us and to hold us fast—that is, he will help us to withstand any troubles. All we must do is remember God is with us in all places and at all times and cry out to him.

Roger Emerson

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, please remind me that you are with me in all things. No matter what good or bad I do or don't do, I cannot escape your great love. Thank you. Amen.

ENJOYING THE CONVERSATION

The Lord is close to all who call on him, yes, to all who call on him in truth."

-Psalm 145:18

I've always loved the conversations I have with my kids, but conversations with my sons and the ones with my daughter are very different in nature. My two sons are quick to speak with one-word answers and classically speak when spoken to. My daughter, however, has a few thousand words a day that must be expressed in order for her to live each day fully.

One afternoon after work, I lay on the bed with her waiting for dinner to be ready. I listened to her talk about her day at school, what her brothers said to her that day, the story of something a friend did to another friend at school, and I answered all her questions about my day, my favorite colors, and what I had for lunch. After a few minutes, we both sat still and quiet, leading me to believe we had expressed all the words that could possibly be spoken in our hour of time together in her bedroom.

Then the silence was interrupted with a question that showed how very much my daughter valued the words

spoken between us: "Dad, what is your favorite math problem to solve?" Now, I know she wasn't really asking me if I preferred addition to subtraction; she was asking me to keep talking with her. It just happened to be the one question on her mind at this given time. Most importantly, my daughter was expressing to me the heart of one who wants to desperately connect with her father, even if it leads to silly questions about our favorite math problems.

It strikes me as convicting that my language with God doesn't come near this level of desperation. How I wish for moments when I have his full attention to the point of running out of things to say. The thing is...I do have his attention. The problem is in my lack of conversation, not his lack of listening. My lack of desire springs from my own selfishness and lack of discipline. It's not about what I read, what I study, or what devotional I'm working through with day-to-day desire. It's about seeking out those moments when I can, like my daughter, lay with my face toward the sky and just talk. Talk to him like I talk to someone who cares for me unequivocally. Talk to him like someone whom I can't wait to hear from.

It's my wish that we all have the heart of an 8-year-old when we approach our Heavenly Father. It is his desire to have us, as evidenced in Psalm 145:18, be close to him

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with our words, thoughts, and actions. Staying in close communication with our Father throughout our day can lead to changes in us and through us greater than we could ever imagine.

Jonathan Cliff

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you so much for being a Father who listens, loves, answers, and is willing to just sit quietly with me. Having your ear always at attention is my permission to draw close to you in my prayers and conversations. May I be more aware of your presence throughout my day and continue to draw closer to you. Amen.

ATTITUDE CHECK

" nstead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes."

-Ephesians 4:23

"This is the worst spring break ever!" I thought as I reclined rather pathetically on my couch. It was spring break my junior year of high school, and I had just gotten my wisdom teeth yanked out.

This was not how I wanted to spend my spring break, lying around with gauze in my mouth, watching boring daytime TV, and eating chilled mashed potatoes for just about every meal. Not to mention that everything seemed to be in a fog because of the pain meds. My parents had even taken the liberty of posting the embarrassing video of me coming out of anesthesia online for the whole world to see.

I was feeling pretty sorry for myself when someone started knocking on the door rather obnoxiously. My dad instructed me not to get up and answered the door. It was my friend Nate. He was standing outside the door with his trademark goofy grin and a big tub of chocolate ice cream.

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"Hey, man, I brought you some ice cream!" he said.

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"Thanks!" I tried to say through my swollen gums.

Nate always made himself right at home in anybody's house, and today was no exception. He rummaged our cupboards until he found bowls and utensils and then started dishing up ice cream (my mom eventually stepped in and helped in order to put a stop to the impending mess). After placing the leftover ice cream in the freezer, he sat down next to me, and we ate our ice cream and talked about the same silly, nerdy stuff we always talked about. Soon my other friend Dixon showed up. Nate had invited him. He was quickly served some ice cream before we put in a movie.

Sometimes when we're in a less-than-enjoyable situation, all we really need is an attitude adjustment. When my friends stepped in and saved my spring break, they didn't change my physical condition. My head was still in a fog; my gums were still swollen and were actually hurting worst because of all the talking. But what changed in a big way was my attitude. I was no longer throwing myself a narcissistic pity party. My friends did exactly what God knew I needed.

The next time you're feeling down or sorry for yourself, pray about it. God can help lift even the most downtrodden of spirits. And the next time you encounter someone with a less-than-stellar attitude, instead of avoiding them or the issue, pray for them and ask God how you can be

a blessing. The most simple acts of kindness can help brighten someone's mood and let them know you care for them through any ups or downs.

My friends didn't do anything super spectacular, but it made all the difference in the world to me. A simple act of kindness goes a very long way.

Andrew Shumate

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, help me to have a positive attitude, no matter my circumstances. Give me the vision to see those who are struggling, the courage to approach them, and the means to brighten their attitude as well. Thank you for the friends and family you have given me who can lift my spirits when I'm feeling down. In your Son's name I pray. Amen.

A LIGHT FOR ALL TO SEE

"No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house."

-Matthew 5:15

My friend Jeny has an incredibly beautiful singing voice. People even comment when we are just singing "Happy Birthday" to a co-worker. "Wow, she is good! Why doesn't she make a career out of that voice instead of working here?" Jeny just smiles when she hears that kind of talk.

She does sing with our church worship team, though, which she considers to be an honor.

"It's the least I can do since I was given this gift. Remember," she laughs, "'no one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket.' So this is the candle God has given me, and I plan to hold it high."

Before her turn comes on the monthly rotation, we quietly let it be known at work that Jeny is going to sing with the church worship team. The rest, of course, is up to God. We ask him to touch the hearts of those who don't know him

and also those people we work with who have gotten very far away from him.

It is always interesting to see who shows up thinking they have come to hear Jeny sing. They all seem to stay for the entire service, and sometimes folks actually start to attend on a regular basis and even get involved in church functions. Other times, co-workers will say they have gone back to a church they were attending years before. They had forgotten how important it is to be part of a local church. It is something they want for their children.

Whatever happens, on the Mondays after Jeny sings, the lunchroom is all abuzz about Jeny and her church. Table conversations are less guarded, and people talk about their feelings toward God and the church in general. People ask questions and ask for prayer too. All of this because of Jeny's humility and her willingness to use her gifts for God's glory.

What gifts and talents has God given you?

Pamela Gilsenan

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

God, you have given all of us gifts. Some are very visible like singing, and others, though equally important, are not as easily noticeable. Please help me identify and use each gift you have given me to advance the Kingdom. Thank you for others who share their gifts with me, lighting my way to you. Amen.

GOD CALLING

While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. But the angel said. 'Don't be afraid. Zechariah! God has heard your prayer.'" —Luke 1:11-13

While working at a secular job, I began to feel a nudge, a small indication that I should do something to serve God. I began to consider going into ministry as a pastor or church leader, but the idea was frightening and beyond my understanding. I felt the nudge, the pull, when I was at work. I felt it when I was at home. It was even stronger when I was in church services.

"I didn't sign on to be a pastor's wife," my wife reminded me more than once.

The concept of being in ministry was a difficult idea for me to deal with, and after months of worrying and thinking and considering, I finally asked for a sign.

"Dear Lord, show me a sign I will understand," I prayed as I left work one day. As I pulled out of the parking lot and

began my drive home, I got behind a car with an unusual license plate. I love finding odd and amusing license plates, and I was intrigued by the strange collection of letters on this one. I studied it for miles and miles until at last I deciphered what it was.

"Dominus!" I shouted. "Master! I am following the Master!" And as I said the words, the car ahead of me turned, and I never saw it again.

Recalling all I went through to determine if God was calling me made me remember that those incredible moments when God broke into my heart were not on a mountaintop or in a grand cathedral. They happened while I drove home from work, attended a small service at a local church, and in the quiet moments of life. I realized God's incredible presence can be found in the everyday occurrences of our lives.

In Luke 1 an angel appears to a man named Zechariah, a priest in the Temple, and predicts the birth of Zechariah's son. He would not be the Messiah, but the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah is being invited into the incredible story of Jesus, God's story of salvation. What strikes me, however, is the "when" and "where" of the angel's appearance. The angel appears in the Temple, true, but not on a special holiday or during some grand ceremony. Zechariah was going about his duties, a commonplace

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occurrence for him, when the angel announces the aweinspiring news.

This was a message of earth-shattering importance, a message of hope for a people who had no hope. And the angel came during an average day in a familiar place. But that is the story of Jesus Christ—a profound Savior who comes for the ordinary person—a story of hope that breaks in to our everyday lives.

Roger Emerson

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear Lord, help me to see your presence in the ordinary times of life and in the extraordinary moments. Help me to know you can break in with your love at all times and in all places. Amen.

COMPLETE PERSPECTIVE

The Lord is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart."

—Psalm 28:7

Her late husband was a Chicago Bears fan too.

I know this because it was the first thing Pat said when I met her. I was chatting with a friend at a local café, and she was cleaning the booth next to us. For being a senior citizen, Pat had a spring in her step that overshadowed the casual energy of the teenagers with whom she worked.

"My husband loved the Bears," she explained, introducing herself. "I saw your hat from across the restaurant, and it reminded me of him. He's passed on into eternity now."

"Oh, that must be bittersweet," I empathized. "How long ago did you lose him?"

"I haven't lost him," she corrected. "I'll see him one day when I get to see my Lord Jesus too. I can't wait for that day!"

"It sounds like you're a Christian. I am too. My name is Tony."

"Well, nice to meet you, Tony. I'm Pat."

"If you don't mind me asking," I began, "what's your story? How did you end up working here?"

"After my husband died, I sank into a tough spiral. For six months I didn't want to do anything. Then one day I felt God

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say, 'You're done doing nothing, Pat. You're still alive for a reason. Get out there and do something.' So I did."

"How do you like working here?" I asked.

"I like the people a lot, even though so many of them think I should get out there and get remarried," she said. "I keep telling them I don't need someone in my life to be happy. That's Jesus' role. I have no interest in filling my gaps with anyone other than my Lord. And you know what? He's faithful. So I'm going to be faithful to him."

Pat's resolve was refreshing, especially since she intentionally defied the concept that you need to be with another person in order to be happy. Even after decades of marriage, she's not demanding that another person complete her but is instead being a complete person in Christ. So much so, in fact, that she'll walk up to perfect strangers and turn them into friends. Guess which bakery I can't help but frequent now?

It may take a tragedy or a six-month spiral to discern just what is worth wanting in life. While many people stay stuck in a funk, others see it as the breeding ground for clarity and a complete perspective. Whether you're single, married, or single again, God wants to help you think within the box before you demand he get you out of it.

Tony Myles

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, I ask you to guide how I think about other people, including in the area of my love life. May the worth you give me overpower and inform how I relate to others instead of the other way around. My heart is yours before anyone else's. Amen.

THEN SINGS MY SOUL

Vorship the Lord with gladness. Come before him, singing with joy." —Psalm 100?

Sitting in a cramped, unused kids' Sunday school classroom in the impoverished town of San Isidro, El Salvador, my church team and I were trying to cool off from the intense heat and humidity that inevitably accompanies a 90-degree day in the tropics.

We were there to help build the foundation for a bigger school for the local children. After hours of hauling bricks, cutting rebar, and digging in the saturated ground, I was exhausted. But as I sat in that cramped classroom reflecting on my day, my thoughts once again drifted to a little girl named Karla.

Karla was an adorable, smiling local about 8 or 9 years old with long brown hair and bright eyes. Like most of the kids who hung out with us as we worked, she lived in a tiny cinderblock home close to the church. She showed up every day to watch us work and instantly was able to energize our group without saying a word of English. On a particularly strenuous day, she came up to me, held my hand, and smiled. It was impossible not to feel her joy! My only regret that week was that I couldn't speak with her in my simplistic Spanish.

TO CHANGE THE WORLD

On our last night, however, I had a moment of connection with her and everyone else with whom we had worked so hard. My group was to be honored in a special church service. After individually recognizing us, the congregation began to sing a worship song in Spanish. It took us only seconds to realize it was a song we knew as well, and we began to sing the same song in English. Our integrated voices rang loud in the small church, a beautiful melody of English and Spanish intertwined.

The moment was powerful. I looked into the congregation and realized Karla and I were speaking the same language at that moment—a language of praise to our God.

That moment in the church has stayed with me as I've encountered other cultures in the years since. When we worship the Lord, he hears all of us in the same way. It is our ultimate connection with each other and with him!

Christie Sounart

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for being a connector for us all! Please help me remember that you hear everyone in the same way, no matter our language or lifestyle or culture. Show me the ways I can continue to worship you, and give me the courage to boldly worship you with other people when the opportunity is there. Amen.

FROM MUNDANE TO MEANINGFUL

"Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers For all believers everywhere."

-Ephesians 6:18

I was fresh out of Bible college and ready to change the world as I began work in my first congregation. It was there that I met Alma.

Alma was 85 years old and had served as the Sunday school secretary for 25 years. Every Sunday she collected the offering baskets and attendance records from each classroom. Then she sat patiently in the office while she updated each student's attendance record and counted the donations.

Twenty-five years in this one volunteer position? Really?

"Alma, what keeps you motivated to do this task?" I finally asked her one day. (It was the last thing I'd be willing to do since I didn't see any eternal significance in the tasks, and, frankly, it was rather boring.)

TO CHANGE THE WORLD

She looked at me and said, "Oh, I'm not just taking attendance. Every time I put a checkmark next to each student's name, I pray for that child. I ask God to be with them, their families, and help them grow closer to God."

At that moment, I felt like crawling under a rock.

Alma was motivated to serve in this position (for 25 years!) because she saw the greater good. She took a task and turned it into a ministry. She taught me a valuable lesson: Everything we do for the Kingdom matters, no matter how mundane or insignificant it may seem. Because people matter to God.

Two months later I visited a fourth grade Sunday school student, Jessica, who had just been hospitalized for a ruptured appendix. Her parents were anxious, but Jessica remained calm and optimistic. We prayed before her surgery, and I told her not to worry because God would take care of her.

She replied, "I know, because Miss Alma told me she prays for me each week in Sunday school."

I still think of Alma today as I see church volunteers handing out worship bulletins, changing dirty diapers in the nursery, serving refreshments, and a hundred other tasks that need to be accomplished so that we can live out our call to "be the church." Alma used her gift of intercession to add

significance to the task of taking attendance. She knew what it meant to "pray...at all times and on every occasion." Even the occasion of placing checkmarks next to a name on a class roster.

What daily tasks has God called you to do? Take the kids to a soccer game? Cut the lawn? Walk the dog? Because of Alma, I'm challenged to connect the mundane to mission, the earthly chore to the heavenly outcome—even if that means taking out the trash. Thank you, Alma!

Bob D'Ambrosio

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Dear God, thank you for helping me see how the tasks in my life can be opportunities to serve you and others. Help me to be watchful for ways to use my gifts as I go about my daily life. Amen.

A SIMPLE HAIRCUT

"And the King will say, 'I tell you the Atruth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!"

—Matthew 25:40

Jim limped into my Sunday school group, and everyone noticed. He smelled of alcohol and body odor. His clothes were dirty and worn. A little air seemed to have been sucked out of the room. I welcomed him, pointed him to a place to sit, and continued teaching with one eye fixed on him. Everyone was doing the same.

Soon Jim blurted out an off-topic question. Eyes moved about wondering what to do. I responded and directed Jim back into the lesson. He did it again, but on topic this time. The lesson ended, we prayed, and the group broke up. Jim exited as we prayed, and inwardly I hoped that was the last I'd see of him. It wasn't.

Jim came again and interrupted with more questions. Outside of class, the group discussed what to do about him. We had learned he lived in a nearby men's home. He worked when he could get it. He drank to ease the pain his broken body caused. He found our church because it was close to the bus route. Though he made us uncomfortable, we decided to let him in.

"Let's see what happens," we said. Everyone agreed to try.

Fast forward a few months, and Jim came along on our group camping trip. He sat by the lake and untangled the kids' fishing lines. They climbed all over him and loved him. He loved them back. He was part of the group, and he helped with anything he could. We began to love him in all his quirky and uncomfortable ways. His eyes grew brighter.

One day, I invited Jim into our home for a haircut. As he stood on the balcony of our small apartment, I cut his hair. I could see humility and gratefulness in his eyes. I was humbled too. We didn't talk much, but as the Spirit connected us, the love was obvious. He saw Jesus in my service, and I saw Jesus being served in his eyes. It was a moment I'll never forget.

It's not easy to serve those whom our culture calls outcast and undesirable. It's awkward and messy. Jesus said I was serving him when I served Jim, and that day on the balcony I understood. The image of God—of Jesus—is in each of us. God put it there at the beginning. It's just buried. When we serve, we acknowledge the value of the person and reveal the image of God. In doing this, we help Jesus in his work.

Cory Mitchell

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, help me embrace awkward moments and inconvenience to call out your image in the life of another by serving them. May your love flow through me into the life of another so that they can see you too. Amen.

ANGEL IN DISGUISE

"Do not despise these small beginnings, For the Lord rejoices to see the work begin."

—Zechariah 4:10

When my daughter was only a few months old, she got a urinary tract infection and had to be admitted to the hospital. Because infants' bodies do not localize infection, the doctors were concerned the infection would spread throughout her body. For several days we were stuck in the hospital while the doctors ran a number of tests. Of course, when your baby is only 2 months old and you are a new mom, every test feels traumatic and every possible outcome runs through your head. But after a few days, my daughter was much better, and we were only waiting for a few more results and doses of antibiotics before we could go home.

On the last day in the hospital, I met one of the most remarkable women I have ever met. I was sitting on a hospital bed with my little one when a custodian walked in to clean the room. As she swept around me, I suddenly recognized her. The first day we were in the hospital my daughter had to get a spinal tap to see if the infection had spread. The doctor had taken her down the hall to do the procedure, and my husband had gone with them. I just couldn't bear to watch. So I stayed in the hospital room with tears streaming down my cheeks as

I heard her wailing down the hallway. This same custodian had walked by our room, and through the open door she saw me crying. She simply told me she would be praying for me and continued on her way.

I told her I recognized she was the same custodian who had offered to pray for me a few days before and that it had meant a lot to me. As we got to talking more about faith, she told me many stories about different people she had prayed for in the hospital and even miracles she had seen. She explained to me her family often encouraged her to find a better job that wasn't so physically demanding as she got older, but she believed God wanted her to stay as a custodian at the hospital so that God could continue to use her there.

I was struck by this woman's incredible humility and pure desire to serve God. I am inspired by her to act boldly, speak kindly, and never be too good for something God has for me. Although I can't say I aspire to be a custodian at a hospital, I aspire to be like this woman whose name I don't even know. If you are struggling to feel value and purpose with where you are at right now, take this story as an encouragement to be the hands and feet of Jesus right where you are.

Lauren Bratten

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Lord, thank you for giving me the opportunity to spread your love and power to those around me. Please give me the courage to listen to you and pray for others who need a touch from you. Amen.

NEW SHOES

"This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" -2 Corinthians 5:17

My favorite week as a family was here; we were off to do mission work in the Dominican Republic. I was looking forward to handing out new shoes to the village. It is rare for the children and adults to get new shoes; most of their shoes are handed down and worn out with holes. I have seen shoes put back together with the hopes that they will last a little longer. This would be an exciting time, but I never realized how God was going to teach me through it all.

As we were finishing up on one of our days there, I noticed a little girl crying. I started in her direction, when I noticed her shoes. They were so small on her feet that her toes were sticking out the front. I went to the boxes of new shoes and found a pair that would fit her perfectly. While walking toward her with her new shoes, a huge smile came across her face and the crying stopped. I asked her if she would like a new pair of shoes. With a huge grin, she nodded yes, and I placed the shoes on her feet. She stood up and twirled around, looking at her feet and smiling. She ran over to others just to show off the new shoes.

What happened next was beautiful; she walked over with her old shoes and hurled them as far as she could into a pile of trash. She then turned around, put her hands on her hips, and smiled. Although nothing was said, I knew what she was thinking. She had no need for those old shoes anymore.

As I have thought back on this moment, I have come to realize the picture God was showing me.

My little friend was so satisfied with the new that she didn't need the old anymore. She threw out the old and fully embraced the new. This is exactly what God calls us to do. We can embrace our new life in Christ and walk in confidence because we are made new. We don't have to hold on to past issues, like guilt from things we have done, failures that keep playing in our minds, or the thoughts that we don't deserve a new life. Even when we have embraced Christ, we still sometimes run back. However, there are things we need to throw into the trash, confident of the new creation we are in him.

Mark Cornelison

A PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, I thank you for removing the old me and giving me a new life. Your gift of grace is beyond anything I could have ever asked or imagined. Now help me see that the old is gone. When I allow myself to focus on what was, remind me that it no longer exists and give me eyes to see this new way in you. Amen.