

Fearless Moms' Devotions to Go

**Drawing on
God's
Strength in
Your Life as
a Mom**



Patricia Green

Moms' Devotions to Go Series

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in Your Life as a Mom

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**For Beverly
My own Fearless Mom**

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True Forever

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. Matthew 24:35

When I think about the monumental task of just being a mom, my head spins and I feel queasy. How will I ever live up to my children's ideals? How can I teach my children all they need to know to grow into healthy, well-adjusted, balanced human beings?

I want to give them my own hard-earned knowledge of how to avoid heartaches and headaches. All my journals couldn't hold the wisdom I've garnered while muddling through mistakes and struggling against storms. Even if I passed my writings on to my children, they'd still need a solid truth on which to stand. They'll face their own trials and temptations in their own times.

Teaching my children to chew with their mouths closed and reminding them to say "please" and "thank-you" are important lessons in basic manners. Teaching them to pump a swing and ride a bike were two of my greatest pleasures. Passing on my love for music and the written word is a way to share a bit of who I am with my children. Yet the greatest gift I can give them is something that will last forever.

My work, my writing, and my words will fade from memory over time. When I teach my children about love, especially when I show them God's love, that gift will last a lifetime and into eternity itself. God's love and His word are the hope I cling to as I face each new day. His love overflows onto my family. It's a solid truth on which I stand, and the one on which I build my life.

God's Word is the only truth that never changes. His Word gives direction for any situation; from building real relationships to money management and day to day joyful, hope-filled living. I may never get an answer about where the missing socks go when they come out of the dryer, but for everything else, I can rely on God's Word to put a situation in a pure light, so I can make wise decisions as a wife and mother.

When I grow up, I want to be just like Jesus. I try to imitate Him by knowing all I can about Him. This is what I strive to pass on to my children. Jesus' words never fade, they never fail. God's Word is eternal. It is true. It is solid. My children will grow and leave home. When they do, I want to make sure they know where to turn for solid wisdom, and Who to imitate.

Pray: Father God, thank You for eternal truth. Thank You for Your clear and loving word. Speak to me today through Your Word. Fill me with your Spirit and lead me to make wise decisions while I raise the child(ren) You have given me. Amen.

Who's in Control

[God said] Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'? Job 38:8-11

Eleven months before my first child was born, David, my eleven-year-old step-son, came to live with George and me in San Diego. It seemed I was expected to know how to be a mom; almost overnight. Shortly after David's arrival I became pregnant, and George left on a six-month deployment to the Gulf aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln. Being married for one year and never having really dealt with children, I wasn't sure how to handle a pre-teen boy who challenged my authority.

Every day at work I dealt with people who respected me and my authority as a petty officer in the U.S. Navy. It shouldn't have been a great leap to have an eleven year old respect my authority.

I was wrong. The clash of wills between David and me would last for years. If I had thought being a mom to my own child would be as hard as it was with David, I would've never gotten pregnant! Sometimes my fear of losing control overrode rational thought. If I couldn't control David, how did I expect to be a good parent to my own child? I turned the "parental authority" on full-force with David.

It backfired. David did what pre-teen boys do – he laughed at me. "You can't control me. You're not my mother," he reminded me every day.

"No, but I am your parent," I replied, gritting my teeth.

"You're not a very good one," David taunted. And with those words, he struck the very core of my fear. He played my fears like a master musician. I thought a "good" parent was one who had total control. I couldn't figure out how to be a good parent with a half-grown boy. How could I ever hope to control the one growing inside me?

George came home from deployment a month and a half before my due date. He watched David and me struggle over the control issue. After a few days he said, "You can't win every battle. How important is it that you control everything?"

A light came on. I could not control everything. I had to let go of my fears about my parenting skills. I forced myself to hand control back to God, who directs everything.

I still struggle for control, but now I reach for self-control, rather than trying to control the people around me. It's a long process, this parenting/control thing. It helps to remember that since God controls the boundaries of everything, including the oceans, He handles my control issues, and sets boundaries for me too.

Pray: Father, thank You for Your promise to care for me. Help me lean on You today and lay my fear of losing control in Your hands. Remind me that You control everything.

Think about this: What issues do you struggle with when it comes to control. How important is it that you win every battle? Remember that it's not about "winning or losing" in the process of raising your children.

The Fear Vulture

Strangers are attacking me; ruthless men seek my life – men without regard for God. Selah Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me. Psalm 54:3-4

I love new things. I take pleasure in the slick pages of a new book under my fingers. I love that new car smell. I'm adventurous. I enjoy trying spicy, smooth, rich or crunchy. I dive into the excitement of doing anything 'new.' I laugh at change, tackling challenges and problems head on.

The arrival of my first child filled me with wonder and awe. I marveled, "She's beautiful, perfect, brand new!" Life's greatest adventure. "I'll teach you all about life, sweetheart," I whispered in her tiny ear.

That's when the fear vulture attacked, catching me completely off guard. "Sure, you'll teach her all about being broken."

That stopped me short. "No, I'm up to the challenge."

That fearful bird dug in and deposited doubt in my heart. "You have a short temper. You know nothing about babies," it croaked.

I countered. "I'll learn. I'll be patient with her."

The buzzard chortled. "Really? You're not patient with anyone else!"

I closed my eyes and reached for God's hand. "God is my help, my Rock."

Through the first year of Melissa's life, that fear vulture circled. He pounced on every chance to increase my fears. "You're picking her up too much. You're not holding her enough. You're not feeding her enough. You're at work too long."

Sometimes I slumped into despair, believing the accusations.

I poured out my fears to God in prayer. He answered. I talked to my mother, my husband, my friends, my pastor. Working through the people in my life, God and I dismantled the vulture's roost.

That fear-vulture still circles sometimes; but without a place to rest, it flies away. I haven't found a way to stave off every trepidation, but I know where to place my trust, and where to go for help. I've got a support base in God and in my family and friends. I can face the challenges of motherhood with the same excitement I've always found in new experiences. The fear's not overwhelming while I can say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Psalm 118:6,7)

I can look forward to the adventures of raising my children. God takes my fears and I step forward with wonder and awe, to tackle the job He's placed before me. As long as I have God's strength in me, that fear vulture will never roost on my shoulder again.

Pray: Lord God, take my fears and banish them. Help me rest in You. Give me strength for today and hope for tomorrow. Amen.

Think about this: Do you have a fear vulture? Do you have a support group? Sharing fears and bringing them out of the dark places helps dispel them. Without a place to rest, they slide right off. Give fear to the Lord and take refuge in Him.

Where's My Binkiefier?

I hate those who cling to worthless idols; I trust in the LORD. I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul. Psalm 31:6 – 7

Melissa clung to her small Playtex bottle. “My binkiefier!” With no liquid in the plastic bag, she used the nipple and bottle as a pacifier. She carried it everywhere during the day and slept with it at night. It was her favorite thing, more precious than her naked Pooh bear.

It wasn't even the bottle or the bag that she wanted, it was the nipple. When the first one cracked, I replaced it. She whined for a week, wanting that broken nipple, until the new one was ‘broken in’ to her satisfaction. After that, Melissa watched whenever I washed the nipple and replaced the bag in the bottle. With a little sigh, she'd take it back and pop it in her mouth.

Then one day at the zoo, Melissa's bottle fell from her hand – over the side of a tram car and into a heavily vegetated area. “I need my binkiefier,” Melissa cried. Her desire had gone from want to need. She needed it to calm herself, to go to sleep, to keep the boogiemans away at night.

“Your binkiefier is gone, honey. We'll look for it, I promise.” We never found it, I didn't replace it, and soon after, Melissa stopped asking for it.

When I think back on that season of our lives, I wonder what I cling to for comfort. The Lord tells me there should be nothing between us, yet through the years, I've clung to food, sought solace in shallow relationships and turned inward when I'm stressed or worried.

I'm learning – slowly –there is only one who I can truly depend on. I rejoice in God's unconditional love for me. I bask in the warm glow of Jesus' acceptance. And I lay my own ‘binkiefier’ at my Lord's feet and ask Him to be my joy, my comfort and my fortress against this world. He's blessed me with a loving, devoted husband

and three beautiful children. I've found my heart in Jesus, and through Him, can show my children that He is their comfort too.

Journal This: What are your 'pacifiers'? If you turn to anything except God for peace, you turn away from the true source of comfort. Search your life, search your heart and give your fears to the One who can take them away. Lean on Jesus for true peace.

The Lotion Song

Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them. Isaiah 42:10

Bathing my new daughter the first few times was an unpleasant experience for me. My hands shook as I envisioned Melissa slipping from my soapy hands to drown in the inch of water at the bottom of the sink or baby tub. Melissa picked up on my nervousness and she seemed to squirm more. That's when I began singing to her in the tub. But her favorite song seemed to be "the lotion song."

While I warmed the lotion and rubbed her back, belly, arms and legs, I crooned a made-up song that went like this:

Rubbin' and a lovin'
Rubbin' and a lovin'
Rubbin and a lovin' my sweet girl.
Mama loves her baby,
Daddy loves his baby,
Jesus loves you, baby, our sweet girl.

"The lotion song" calmed both of us and created an intimate connection that strengthened our bond as mother and daughter. As time went by, we both relaxed and began to enjoy the actual bath, each of us looking forward to our after bath song. Melissa cooed and giggled and, as she grew older, hummed along. She even sang after she learned to talk, inserting 'my sweet mom' at the end. I sang to Jacob after he was born, and Melissa joined me in the chorus as I added verses suited to him.

God soothes and calms me with songs too. Whenever I'm fearful or afraid, I find comfort in the words He whispers to my heart – usually comforting verses I've memorized. I read from Psalms or the New Testament. I hum or sing hymns from my childhood or make up new songs that invite the Spirit back into my heart to drive out the fear that settles there. The phrase “do not be afraid” occurs over seventy times in the Bible. “Do not fear” occurs over twenty times. That's once a day for ninety days that God tells me that He's got it covered... I don't need to fear. That's His chorus, His refrain in my life.

I feel God's touch and see His smile as He leans close and croons to me ... “Do not tremble, do not be afraid. ... You are my witness. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.” (Isaiah 44:8)

Think about this: Do you resonate with God's tunes? Your child will pick up on those vibrations and resonate along with you! Make up new songs with and for your children. New songs bless your children and send praise to God. Let God's “Lotion Song” comfort and soothe your fears away too.

Inadequate

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

I feel so inadequate. I sit in front of my computer and surf, or play or chat my day away. I find a myriad of other things to do instead of sitting down and writing. I want to be focused on Christ. I want to write for His glory. I want to pour out powerful words that touch others' lives and point them to the gentle power of God's saving grace. Yet, I fail. Again and again, I fall. Again and again, God picks me up and wipes my tears and sets me on the path He's chosen for me.

I do laundry for my family. I plan and cook meals. I vacuum and dust the home. I put band aids on scrapes and kiss tears away. I write and submit. Sometimes I get a check in the mail for my efforts. I want to do more, yet there isn't enough time in the day. Some days I just want to soak in God's word. I want to luxuriate in the 'warm, healing waters' and never leave the relaxation and comfort I find there. Yet my child cries, and the dryer buzzes, and the phone rings. I answer those calls.

In this world, they are as much a call from God as they are from the people and things that make them. They are what God places in my life at that particular moment. God instructs me to give thanks in all circumstances. When I answer these calls joyfully, I make a connection with my Creator. My prayer life is just that... Life. I gather strength for today in His word, and answer His call by answering all the other 'calls' in my life. His grace shines in my responses to perplexing situations and people. I can share Jesus through my actions and my attitude. I can give thanks to God in all circumstances; and wave good bye to 'inadequate.'

Pray: Lord, help me see all the 'little' things in my life as gifts from You. Let me show Your light and love by giving thanks for everything You give me, from hair-pulling situations, to the 'boring' everyday chores. Thank You for all blessings.

The Parent Pattern

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children. Ephesians 5:1

“She looks just like you!” I’m sure it was said in jest to diffuse my anger at that moment, but when I looked at Melissa, I saw my own clenched jaw and narrowed eyes. I sighed, and smoothed my features, struggling for self-control. Melissa’s face relaxed too, and we turned to separate activities.

Later, Melissa looked up at me and smiled. “Mommy, I want to grow up and be just like you!”

I smiled back and squeezed her hand. “Why do you want to be like me?”

“You’re funny and nice and you’re the best Mommy in the whole world!”

High praise from a four-year-old, but I was left with a sense of dread in the pit of my stomach. I hadn’t forgotten how she imitated every move I made. I’m not the best role-model for anyone, but I’m the one my children see most. My temper’s too short. I tend to blurt out cutting remarks that seem funny at the time before thinking how my words affect those around me. My glares can freeze co-workers and small animals in their tracks.

I learned parenting from my parents; the good and the bad. Of course there were things I wanted to do differently with my children, but overall I found myself doing some of the same things my parents did with me. I swatted my children for disobedience. I sent them to their rooms when they whined. I yelled when I lost my temper; just like my father did when I was a child. I’d picked up his parenting pattern from my early years.

Then, when I was a teenager, my father came to a real relationship with Jesus. Over the next few years, the change in him was dramatic. My loud, sometimes very scary father began listening more and yelling less. He

became active in church and he hugged everyone. I saw joy and peace in my father, where before, I'd only seen demanding authority and stress. I saw a man who loved his wife and family and showed it to us.

Now that I'm a parent, I want to show my children something more than a stressed, demanding parent. I want to show them God's love as they grow, not after they became teenagers. So I've got a pattern to follow... His name is Jesus.

Journal: What are some characteristics you have that you'd like to see in your children? Are there traits you'd like to extinguish in the next generation? Think about your words and actions and how they exemplify the pattern Jesus gives us to follow. Keep your list handy when you feel those bad habits coming to the foreground to remind you of the true pattern you want your children to copy.

I'm Lost

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Luke 19:10

The Navy moved us to Whidbey Island, Washington when David was fourteen and Melissa was two years old. During the three-day trip, we stopped for a meal at McDonald's. This one boasted a huge play set that soared up in two-story room. Melissa was delighted. David watched enviously as his baby sister crawled through the plastic tubes and played in the ball-pit. He wolfed down two burgers, inhaled a large order of fries and gulped his shake, all the while eyeing the huge play structure.

When it was time to go, I called, "Come down, Melissa!"

Her small voice trembled in the middle of the twisted tubes, "I can't!"

"Why not?" I asked, craning my neck, trying to locate her in the winding maze.

"I'm lost!"

"Can you find the slide and come down?" I called.

"No!"

"Where are you?"

"I don't know-ow!" she wailed.

I glanced at David. "Go find her."

David dove into the tubes and wormed his way to Melissa. We looked up to see her near the twisted slide, her face and hands pressed against scratched plastic as she gazed down at us, eyes wide. "David's coming to find you, Honey. Don't be afraid," I called up to her.

David crawled up and tried to put her on the slide. She wouldn't go alone, so he worked his way around and slid down with her.

Some days I feel like my daughter in that play set. Somewhere in my life-maze, I take a wrong turn and get lost. God calls, "Come to me!"

I wail, "I'm lost! I'm afraid! I can't find my way."

God replies, "Stay right there, I'm coming."

Jesus knows exactly where I am. He's been here. He shows me the way out of my fear and indecision. He brings me back to my Father's side. I don't have to worry and fret over every little decision. God finds me. He will find you too. He knows where you are and the fears you face. He's calling, "Come to me!"

I have hope, because He knows exactly where I am, and He knows where I need to go. Put fear aside, answer His call and follow.

Pray: Father, I'm calling on You to help me find the way out of my fears. Take my hand and pull me up from my maze of confusion. Comfort me with Your holy presence. When I am unsure of myself, strengthen and guide me in Your way. Amen.

Didn't This Come with a Guidebook?

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

I've always considered myself a self-reliant person. If there's something I want to know, I reach for a book and read. If there's something I need to learn, there's a book on the subject. That's why I excelled at my job as a Navy electronics technician. We fixed everything 'by the book.' We took tests with answers straight from the training manuals. If a radio didn't function according to the technical manual, it didn't go into the airplane. If the book said to adjust a signal to a specific amplitude, there was no deviance. It had to be that way.

If only parenthood came with a book.

All three of my children are different. They each have different personalities with their own little quirks. There's no hard and fast rule-book for daily parenting. A book couldn't tell me why my baby still cried after I'd fed and burped her, changed and dried her messy diaper and walked for miles up and down a dark hallway at half-past three in the morning, wishing for one more hour of sleep before I had to go to work. A book couldn't explain why my step-son refused to put dirty dishes in the sink, and instead stashed them under his bed. Where was the manual that explained why babies loved to smear mashed peas from head to toe and everything within reach, including my inspection-ready white uniform?

This parenting stuff without directions was enough to make me throw my hands up in resignation and try to sell my children at the next garage sale. I read everything I could about parenting, but still found myself groping for answers to the every day problems that surfaced without warning.

God never intended for us to go through life without a guidebook. So He gave us the ultimate Guidebook – the Bible. He wants us to read and learn how to grow healthy relationships between parents and children, husbands

and wives and especially with Him. God's Book doesn't tell me all the specifics I want, but He does outline how He expects me to behave in any situation. When I take time to study God's Word, I'm better prepared to handle anything life throws at me... even the mashed peas.

Pray: Father in heaven, hold my hand as I read Your Word today. Let Your Word sink deep into my heart and take root. Grow Your grace in my life through You. Amen.

To Do: Pick a few chapters or a short book in the Bible (Proverbs has one chapter for each day of the month, or a short book, like Ephesians) and read it every day for one month. Soak in God's instructions and look for ways to apply them in your days.

Do Not Fear! I'm Here!

He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.

Psalm 91:4-6

Jacob, my youngest, suffered from night terrors shortly after we moved for the second time that year. The first episode scared me silly. I bolted straight up in bed, feet swinging to the floor as his first shrieks sliced into my dreams. Flying out my bedroom door, I raced to his side. Jacob stood on his bed, eyes wide and body rigid. His screams poured out as if he were being scourged, torn, burned...hurt in a thousand different ways.

The worst part came when I tried to calm him. He fought and shrieked louder. All I could do was hold him tight and rock him through the terrors of his mind. I felt helpless in the face of monsters I couldn't see. Nothing I did soothed him. I refused to leave even though he pushed me away. I whispered and crooned soft lullabies into his ear as he wailed and thrashed in my arms. I prayed.

Bits and pieces of Psalms or Jesus' comforting words flowed into my mind and off my lips as I rocked Jacob and walked the floor. Jacob's screams subsided to hiccupping, incoherent words. His eyes closed and he relaxed in my arms as I whispered, "I will never leave you nor forsake you..." A calmness settled on my heart as I watched my four-year-old breathe in deep sleep once again.

Jacob's night terrors subsided over time. Each time he woke screaming, I crooned hymns and recited Psalms as I rocked Jacob through those episodes. The doctor said he outgrew them. I know better.

God's Word carries power and comfort. They soothe the deepest fears. His Word calms a terror-stricken heart and mind. God's comfort and peace are always there for the taking. I only have to ask. I call on Jesus in my terror and hide in the shadow of His wings. His faithfulness shields not only me, but my children as well.

Pray: My Father in Heaven, You are the God of all. Today I'm afraid _____. Bring to my mind Your words of comfort and peace. You are faithful and will shield me and my family from _____. Thank you for _____.

Amen.

Something to try: When your child wakes, crying in the night, try soothing him back to sleep with a gentle hymn or Psalm. Make up your own prayer or praise Psalm as you rock your child to calm the terror of the night or memorize lines of comforting scripture for this purpose.

Excuse Me! Did I Lose That?

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Proverbs 12:18

Insignificant things, like a small spark, can set off my temper until I feel as if a raging inferno twists through my insides. I see red. My stomach churns. My heart pounds.

Sometimes it's a messy room. "How many times do I have to tell you to hang up your jacket? Why do you throw your papers on the floor? Do your dirty clothes belong under the bed, or on my couch? Why is there a dirty bowl in here? Look at these beads and string scattered everywhere! Where are the rest of these cards?" With each statement, my voice rises as Melissa scurries to pick up everything I point out.

"Mom! Stop!"

I hate myself when my temper gets the best of me. I struggle to manage it daily. Everyone fears it, including me. Melissa knows my temper. She knows the warning signs. My nostrils flair, my eyes narrow and my face flushes. We've discussed my problem as a family. I've taught Melissa and Jacob to yell, "Stop!" when I lose my temper. It's my cue to leave the room and cool down.

Once I've calmed down, we sit and talk about whatever set me on edge. I'm still stunned that my temper rises so quickly. I don't like it, and it's one thing I struggle with daily. I pray for God to take it away.

I know words can cut my children like a sharp razor. I carry the emotional scars from my own childhood. The Lord knows I don't want to inflict them on my own children. God, in His infinite wisdom has chosen to bless me with children who have even tempers and love me enough to cry, "Stop!" when I lose mine.

God doesn't lose his temper with me, even though I give Him every reason to through my uncontrolled actions and words. He shows infinite patience and kindness to me in His Word and the people He puts in my path. He rebukes me when I lose it and then encourages me to try it His way. Each situation is another opportunity to practice patience, kindness and gentleness. Every day is another chance to grow the fruit of the Spirit. (See Galatians 5:22) Every day, I have to choose my words. Will they cut and slash, or will they bring healing? Only through God's gracious love, do I have any hope of learning self-control. That's one fruit I want to eat every day.

To Do: Feel your nerves frazzle? Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Repeat after me... "God, grant me patience." Open your eyes. Look for the growth opportunity in the situation you face today. Chew words carefully before letting them out of your mouth.

Grafted In

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. Romans 11:17-18

I had no experience as a parent before David, my husband's eleven-year-old son, came to live with us. The clash of wills between us left me drained, resentful and tired to the point of wishing I'd never agreed to have him come live with us. I saw no way of integrating David into my concept of 'family' if he wouldn't follow the rules or respect my authority as an adult, let alone respect me as a parent.

I struggled with David and my feelings for three years, complaining to George when he would listen, and complaining to God every day. Bitterness lodged in my heart and grew like a weed. Melissa, a toddler, picked up my attitude toward David and began to imitate me. Horrified, I begged God to show me how to change.

God answered my cry. One Sunday, Pastor preached on Romans 11:11-24. "We are the grafted branches," he said. "God promised a Savior would come for all nations, through Israel. The early church leaders, all Jews, had a difficult time accepting the fact that Jesus died for everyone, not just the Jewish people. Because Jesus died for everyone, we're all part of God's family."

We're all part of God's family through Jesus. Jesus died for everyone – including David.

If God could accept me, a sinner, into his family, then surely God could change my heart and graft David into my heart too. After all, I am not the root of this family. Christ is the root. Since I proclaimed that with my mouth, I asked God to transform my heart to match. He did! It took time and patience on my part, and thanks to God, David is now firmly grafted into my heart and I love him as my own.

With God, there are no broken branches; there is no such thing as 'ungraftable' people into His family. Through Him, my family is led from hurt and resentment to joy and acceptance.

Pray: Father God, please heal wounds caused by _____. Give me the strength and wisdom to be peaceful, so my family can be whole in You. Amen.

Think about this: Who do you think is 'ungraftable' in your family? Are there stepchildren or half-siblings? What about people in the extended family that just don't 'fit'? Remember that God makes families just the way He wants them. Pray for patience and wisdom and help heal the spots where God is grafting new branches into your family. After all, we are all children who are grafted into God's family.

Mine!

But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. Isaiah 43:1

“Mine.” Melissa clutched her grubby blanket. Tears filled her eyes.

“It needs to be washed, Honey.” I said, tugging at the dirty piece of cloth.

“My blankie!” My daughter refused to give up her favorite blanket, even though it had snuck through several months without a wash. Melissa ate with it, slept with it, held high tea on it, used it as a dazzling gown or a super-hero cape. The blanket had jelly, dirt and some sort of weird green stain across it. And it smelled. Definitely time for a wash. If only she would let go.

She finally gave up her blanket after I promised she could put it into the washer and take it out of the dryer.

I chuckle as I remember that scenario, but the chuckle fades as God reminds me that I cling to my own sin, like Melissa clung to her blanket. The time I didn't defend a friend from gossip pops into my head; or when I told my study group I was sick when I really just wanted to finish reading the latest thriller novel. The sad part is, in my human nature, I don't really want to change my selfish ways. I'm comfortable with my familiar patterns.

But God knows everything about me. He sees the sin I try to hide, He holds out his hands and says, “You need to be washed.”

I wrinkle my nose and pout. I cling to my grubby little scraps. “Mine!” I echo my daughter's cry.

God is patient. He gently reminds me just who I am. "That's not really what you need. It's not who you are," He says. "I have summoned you by name, you are Mine." The more I study God's word, the more I long to pattern my life after Jesus, my Redeemer. The less I clutch at my sin and turn to the cross, the more I feel His love and mercy. Asking forgiveness and receiving God's grace makes me feel lighter... more joyful. It's one of the most precious parts of being God's child.

Pray: Heavenly Father, today I turn _____ over to You. Thank You for forgiveness and mercy. Help me turn to You for cleansing each day. Thank You for washing my dirty blankets. Amen.

Journal: What secret sins do you cling to? Do you struggle with them every day? Write them in your journal, then bring them to Jesus. He will take your ragged sins and give you a clean start each day, each moment.

Solid Food

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Hebrews 5:13-14

I hold a spoon to Melissa's mouth while my mother snaps the picture. My daughter's first bites of solid food slide into her mouth. Her jaw works up and down and her tongue pushes most of the slurry rice out to dribble down her chin. Click! Smiling, I push it back into her mouth. Melissa laughs, waves her fists and kicks her legs, causing her bouncy seat to rock up and down. Click! Another snapshot.

These first bits of solid food mark another step in Melissa's development. She needs solid food to continue growing; to be healthy and strong. With each new grain or vegetable, these first bites are fun to watch. Her eyes open wide, then she squints and the food comes back out. I patiently scoop it back in until she swallows. Then she opens her mouth for the next bite. Although meal times are messy, I enjoy these moments with my daughter. I need that connection as much as she does.

God feeds me the same way. Bit by bit, spoonful by spoonful, He forges a connection. Sometimes I wrinkle my nose and try to avoid swallowing. I don't like His bitter words telling me I'm not perfect. I want to spit out those which point out my secret sins. I try to ignore Him when He says everything I do grieves Him. Yet God knows I need these words, even though I don't like them. He's my loving Father. He knows what's best for me, and He knows exactly what I need to grow. I need more than milk. I need His hope.

He knows my fears. He holds me close; soothes me with smooth words of forgiveness and grace. He feeds me with sweet fruit of love and mercy. I open my heart and soul to take in these nourishing bits. I turn my eyes to the Cross and lay my sorrows, my tears, my fears at His feet. In return He feeds me hope, kindness and faithfulness. Fruits of His Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience. Oh how I need those.

I share them with my family, my friends and those I see every day. I am created to share God's fruit of the Spirit. I spoon another bite into my daughter's mouth, knowing she needs each bite to grow. I open my heart and mind to take in God's perfect Word, so I can grow strong and healthy, too.

Journal: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit. This fruit grows in us as we grow strong in God's word. Pick one fruit you would like God to 'grow' in you. List areas in your day where you can practice sharing this spiritual fruit with others.

Fearless

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Selah Psalm 62:5-8

I love getting e-mail from my close friends, Linda and Dave. Linda stood as my maid of honor at my wedding. Dave was my supervisor at my first duty station in the Navy. The subject line of this e-mail contained one word: Linda. This was not good news. Before we left the military, Linda was diagnosed with breast cancer. Between alternative and traditional treatments, her cancer went into remission for almost 2 years.

Heart in my throat, I opened the e-mail and read. *Linda's cancer has spread to her brain.* Tears made the rest of the e-mail blur. I scrubbed tears away. *I ask you to pray. Prayer is the best thing for us right now.* Linda is the mother of a pre-teen boy, a wife, a Navy Veteran, a sister and a friend.

God constantly amazes me. I'd been leading a Bible study focused on prayer in my women's group. I'd just heard an outstanding speaker talk about how prayer brings us into close, intimate contact with God.

I picked up the phone and called. "Hiya, Trish!" Linda's cheerful greeting startled me. How could she sound so ... up? "How are you?"

How am *I*? I've just been told my best friend has brain cancer. Then I smiled as I pictured her sitting in their car, smiling at Dave, chatting on the phone. "It's been an up and down week." I smiled as I shared my excitement about a writing contract I'd just received. Linda cheered and laughed. We chatted and caught up with each other on bits of our lives. "Know that I'm praying for you," I said as we got ready to hang up.

“I know. I can feel the thousands of prayers. I feel strong. I’m at peace, restful. God’s timing is perfect. He put just the right people in my life at just the right time,” Linda said. I could hear the smile in her voice. Fearless.

Sometimes at night, I lay awake wondering what would happen to my family if something were to happen to me. I worry about everyday things like bills and health and if the children will make the right friends at school. After talking to Linda, I think more about being fearless in the face of fear. I know where I’ll spend eternity. Knowing that God gives Linda strength to face her spreading cancer fearlessly, gives me strength to face my everyday problems.

Pray: Heavenly Father, You are the source of all our hope. Today I let go of _____. I place _____ in Your hands and know that You care for me through every storm. Help me let go of my fears, my worries, my anxious thoughts and place them at Your feet. In Jesus, amen.

Think about this: Do you pray for material needs? Do you pray for strength, patience and courage in the face of scary situations? No matter what your needs, no matter what your prayer, God *does* listen. He does hear. God does answer. Trust in Him at all times; pour out your heart to Him, for God is your refuge. Fear not.

Are We There Yet?

In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps. Proverbs 16:9

I swung the diaper bag into the car. Checking off a mental list, I buckled my three year old into her booster seat and secured her baby brother in his carrier beside her. At six o'clock in the morning, I drove through dark streets to the sitter's house. The back roads were familiar and the headlights showed enough of the surrounding woods to make it seem like we flew through the early morning gloom. I had time to think, to dream. A soft, sleepy voice drifted behind me as Melissa sang along with the CD.

In the quiet time, my thoughts wandered forward. Should I volunteer to help at the preschool next Friday? Should we take that 1,500 mile trip we planned for this summer? How would Jacob take traveling so far? How would Melissa, an active three-year-old handle it? When should we put the house up for sale? George retires next year and I complete my enlistment in the spring. Would George find a job before we moved? Where would go? When would we get there?

Melissa broke my chain of thought and asked, "Are we there yet?" I answered automatically, only half-hearing her question. "Almost dear." The music continued to play. "Are you sure this is the way to Miss Nanette's house?"

"I'm taking a different way today. Does it really matter how we get there?"

"I just don't want you to get lost."

I chuckled and realized I'd been musing about the same things. Does it really matter how we get to our destinations? God says it does. He says it matters so much that we can plot out all our courses, but He will direct our steps.

This is still a huge comfort to me. The Lord directs my steps. He directs my life, and the lives of my family. We are here for a reason. We are here to fill other lives with the hope and joy that knowing Jesus brings. It's not our job to plan the journey... it's our job to step out in faith and hope... and make that journey. Don't worry. The Lord determines the steps.

Journal: Do you have a plan for your life, or the lives of your children? What are the steps that only the Lord can direct? Know that in each step of life... God truly does have purpose and direction for us.

Expectant Request

Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation. Psalm 5:1-3

My children come to me with their requests. “Mommy, buy me a new toy.” “I need new shoes.” “Mom, my pants are too tight!” “I’m hungry, thirsty, tired, hurt.” “Mom, I need your help with this project.” The requests are varied and sometimes, urgent. “Mommy, I need to go potty NOW!”

Their requests range from needs to wants, from emotional support to physical comfort. They don’t always come to me first, and sometimes their own actions and decisions get them into trouble. That’s when they come to me, expecting an answer to their problems. They don’t always like or understand my decisions, but I always act in their best interests.

How often do I bring my requests before the Lord? I can solve my problems on my own. I am self-sufficient. I work hard. I can take care of myself. I...I...I... fall flat on my face. That’s when I turn to God for help.

He listens. He hears my cry. He’s always open. “For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.” (Is 49:13) He never sleeps. His attention never wanders. God is always ready when I lay my requests before Him. Morning, noon or night, He soothes my fears and eases my worries.

God always answers prayers. I have to remember that His answer isn’t always the one I want. I can’t control His answers, but I can control my reactions to them. God knows what I need and has only good in mind for me. I can only pray that my children will understand my answers are in their best interest, even when the answer is 'no'.

Prayer: Lord, today I'm feeling _____. I worry about _____. I cannot control _____. Please take these from me. I trust You to fix them. I trust in Your good will for my life. Amen.

Reflect: "I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation." What are your requests today?

No Matter What

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

I pull everything from my pockets, step onto the scale and wait. "I've got you." The clerk smiles as she jots a number on my card. My spirits sink when I see it. Up again. Not even a pound, but it's still a plus sign next to that decimal point. Can't I do anything right? I exercised, I wrote everything down, I stayed out of the M&M's. With a sigh, I step off the scale and collect my things to go sit through a meeting.

Melissa and Jacob bounce into the next room. I plod along behind them and take a seat. Melissa plops down beside me and looks at me with eager eyes and a bright smile. "How'd you do Mom? Did you lose any weight this week?"

"No," I mumble. "I gained a little bit." I stuff my papers into the organizer, take out a clean food tracker and try to focus on the subject for the week. I pray for the strength and fortitude to keep working this program.

Four small arms circle my waist as I bend over my weekly planner. "That's okay, Mom. We love you just the way you are." Jacob's voice carries through the room. Several women smile. "Yeah, we love you no matter what," Melissa chimes in. "You'll do fine next week."

My children love me. They love me no matter what I look like and no matter what my weight is. When they look at me, they see 'Mom.' "You're the best Mom anywhere, ever." Melissa tells me this at least three times a week. My husband says, "I love you," every day, without fail.

Their acceptance and love remind me that God loves me no matter what I look like, no matter what I eat, no matter how many times I give into temptation. He loves me when I goof off on the computer instead of doing laundry or writing a promised article. He loves me if I yell at my kids instead of taking a deep breath and listening to them when they try to explain why the living room looks like the Tasmanian Devil tore through it. God loves me so much he took all my punishment for being a willing sinner on the cross at Calvary.

My husband's hugs and my children's words remind me that God grants me a fresh start each day. I don't have to beat myself up over my failures. I am greatly loved by my family. I am loved beyond all measure by the God of love Himself. If angels or demons can't separate me from the love of God, certainly these extra pounds cannot. I hug my children and then settle back to start fresh, knowing I've got a support system no matter what.

Think about this: What are some of the biggest challenges you face? How does failure affect you? Are you one who feels 'unlovable' because you can't manage everything, or are you one who's secure in herself? Know that no matter what, God loves you just the way you are. Surround yourself with people who love you no matter what. Rejoice in God's great love for you today.

Ow! That Hurts!

“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Revelation 7:16-17

“Don’t touch that. Don’t pull on that. Don’t put your face near the dog’s mouth. Don’t... Don’t... Don’t...” How many times do I have to say, “Don’t!”? Some days it seems to be an endless flow of “don’ts” but how else does they learn? Letting her pull the lamp over on herself would be painful for her and me, not to mention expensive. It’s impossible for me, as a mother, to watch my child move toward an open flame on the stove without pulling her away and saying “hot!”

How hard it must be for God to watch me run after things that don’t bring me closer to Him. I daydream of a bigger house, more money, a different car, instead of appreciating what I have now. I hunger for things of this earth, trying to fill a need that only God can fill. It hurts when I’m not satisfied even when I manage to grasp what I’ve run after.

Melissa touches the fire when my back is turned. She screams and runs to me. I fold her in my arms and we run cold water on her little fingers. Her cries subside to sobs and then to hiccups as I smooth a bit of aloe across her red skin and we put a bandage on them. Melissa turns her eyes to me and says, “Hot, Mama!” I nod.

“Yes, I told you it’s hot.”

God warns me what will cause harm in my life; envy, jealousy, gossip, pride. He tells me what I need to be satisfied; His Word, His love, His joy. Yet I still reach out and touch the fire. I’m burned every time. I run back to God and cry. He holds me close and says, “Let Me heal you. Let Me show you what is good and right

and true.” I find comfort in His arms. He’s there for you too. Run to Him when you’re not satisfied and let Him fill you.

Journal: Make a list of things you run after in this life that don’t satisfy your soul. Do you run after perfection? Do you want a spotless house? Can you have a perfect toddler or a perfect body? God tells us these things will never satisfy our deepest longings for acceptance and self-worth. Instead of chasing after material things, pursue God. He is the only One who knows what you truly need.

Crying Out

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed. I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his purpose for me.

Psalm 57:1-2

When my children cry, I tend to react in one of two ways. Either a lump forms in my throat, and I want to cry with them, or I get angry. It seems to depend on who's crying and why they're crying as to my reaction.

My daughter rarely cries unless she's hurt either physically or emotionally. I can understand her tears. When Melissa cries, I sit and listen. It seems to be enough for her. The teardrops dry, the sobs subside and she moves on after a short rest in the shelter of my arm.

Jacob, however, can turn his tears on and off, seemingly at will. If I ask a question that he can't answer right away, his face screws up and the tears fall. When I ask why he's crying, he doesn't answer and I get frustrated. My voice rises. He cries harder. It's a vicious cycle. I've learned to take a deep breath and control my voice when Jacob gets upset, otherwise he'll cry all day without resolution. After his tears dry, he'll rest on my lap, head on my chest and we'll sit quietly and talk about what's bothering him before he gets on with his day.

I might cry in front of my husband if I get very frustrated or frightened. I'll always cry over a good book if I connect with the characters. When that happens, I tend to let it all out and cry for other, more personal or private reasons. That way I can blame my tears and emotions on the book.

Tears are the relief valve for our strongest emotions. Fear and joy, anger and love. God gave us tears. It would be a shame to not use them. God also grants faith and enough strength and grace for the day, for each moment of our lives. God knows just what we're going through. He's felt our pain, our elation, our sorrow, our love. God knows tears.

Just like my children cry to me, I pour out my hurts and worries to God. It's good to know I can vent these strong emotions in God's presence. In Jesus, there is purpose in our lives, even in our tears. I love knowing that someday, all our anger, hate and pain will be wiped away, then the only purpose for tears will be joy and love. I try to remember God's grace and mercy as I wipe away tears, both my children's and my own.

Pray: Father, thank You for tears. Thank You for comforting me when I cry out. Thank You for letting me be a comfort to my own children when they cry. Help me see through the tears to the purpose and direction You set before me. In Jesus name, Amen.

Can You Hear Me?

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

2 Chronicles 7:14-15

“Mom! Can you hear me?” Jacob calls.

I can see him from the corner of my eye, but don't turn my head. “Yes, I can hear you.”

“Are you SURE?” His volume goes up a notch.

I continue to work. “Yes, why?”

“Because you're not looking at me!” he finally shouts. Each word is precise, clipped. “You have to look at me to hear what I'm saying to you!”

He's right. I'm looking at the computer screen, trying to balance the budget, plan a shopping list or some other project that demands my concentration. I turn to my son as he stands at the top of the stairs, his head thrust forward, brow furrowed, fists clenched at his sides... and I re-think my priorities.

Jacob straightens and smiles. “Now you can hear me with your whole body!”

I usually listen for my children. I listen at night after they're asleep, for sounds of distress. When they're outside playing, I try to distinguish between shrieks of joy, shouts of anger, or screams of pain. But listening for my children isn't the same as listening to them. Jacob and Melissa want me to listen ‘with my whole body.’

The same is true in my spiritual life. Do I listen for God with 'my whole body'? Even when I think I'm listening, do I really hear what He's telling me? God usually doesn't talk to me the way people talk. It takes a different sort of ear to hear God's voice in my life. Sometimes God talks through His Word, as I study the Bible. He talks to me through a Sunday sermon that touches on what I've been struggling with privately. God speaks through the conversations I have with my mother, my husband, my best friends. He even whispers through my own wandering thoughts. He brings to mind certain scripture when I wrestle with a difficult decision.

To hear God, I must be open and accessible, receptive to His guidance. Just like I know the difference between a shriek of delight and a screech of pain in my children's voices when they're not in sight, I have to discern between God's guidance and my own willful desire. It helps to know God always listens to me with complete attention. He cares about my day, my struggles, my fears and hopes and listens with His whole being.

It's a small thing, but it's not easy. It takes practice. It takes a willing ear and open heart to hear God's voice. It takes listening with my whole body, just like He listens to me.

Journal / To Do – Practice listening with your whole body. Make eye contact, lean forward. Try to listen like God listens. Even babies respond to this kind of listening. Journal differences you notice in your new listening skills. As your children grow, show them how much they're loved by listening with your whole body. Tell them of God's great love and that He listens the same way all the time.

No Burden

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. 3 John 1:4

Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Psalm 127:3

He's only eight pounds. I cradle Jacob, my youngest. I hold him close, rock and croon him to sleep. I love to feed him as he lays in my arms. He kicks and coos in his car seat as I carry him to the car or to church or to visit my neighbors. At the end of the day, my arms ache!

I look at the extra bills. The diapers and wipes, the clothes and shoes, the furniture and accessories, the special food and dinnerware. I juggle the budget with all the finesse of a practiced acrobat. George and I used to be able to go where we wanted on a whim. Now we plan each trip, watch each dollar, consider each invitation with David, Melissa and Jacob in mind. And oh... all the responsibilities! Good schools, day care providers, babysitters, teaching good behavior, worrying about their health and welfare, not to mention college! At the end of the month, my brain aches!

Some of my friends shake their heads and say, "Never. I'm never having children. It's too much of a burden on my lifestyle." I just smile. I used to think the same way. Until David came to live with us. Until Melissa was born. Until Jacob completed our family. I never knew joy like the joy I have watching my children grow into their own skins. Their personalities are unique and I'm constantly amazed at how they learn new things, seemingly overnight.

There's nothing like discovering the world all over again through the eyes of a child. There's nothing like the feel of my children's arms around my neck as they plant a soft kiss on my cheek. There's nothing in the world to compare to a child's first, unprompted, "I love you, Mommy."

God gives children to be a joy and a blessing, not a burden. My house rings with laughter more often than it shudders with bickering. I enjoy sharing life with my children. I love to watch their eyes shine with new discoveries and I'm happy to lend my shoulder to cry on when they discover that life isn't all green grass and sugar cookies.

I used to think children would tie me down. Even now I know there will be more challenges and frustrations in raising my children, yet I've found God's blessing in them. They've set me free in ways I'd never dreamed. There's no burden here.

Pray: Lord, thank You for the joy of children. Thank You for blessing me with the freedom to follow Your lead in parenting. Help me see the joy and cherish each child, each new discovery and each new day as a blessing from You. Amen.

Is That All?

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Colossians 3:11

Colored bits of paper, bright strings of ribbon and assorted toys, clothes and books lay scattered across the living room floor. Our children exclaim with delight over a new game as they toss socks and long underwear into a pile to be examined later, while reaching for another pretty package under the twinkling tree. It's a familiar scene played out in almost any home with small children.

Jacob turns to me after all the presents are opened. "Is that all?"

Is that all? A hundred dollars worth of gifts encircle him like a small snow-fort. He's got enough building blocks to last a year. He received almost everything he asked for on his Christmas list, and he still asks, "Is that all?"

His question makes me pause. How many times have I turned to my Father in heaven and asked the same thing? I've prayed for specific things before. A healing, enough money to cover the cost of a major car repair, for God to lead me to godly friends, for my children to find friends who share their faith... all these requests have been answered in their own time. And sometimes still, I look up and ask, "Is that all?"

I smile at Jacob this Christmas morning and lift his sturdy body onto my lap, cuddling him close. "No, dear. There's a gift we get that's bigger, better and brighter than all this combined." I point at the packages he's just opened. "Let me tell you a story."

So we settle in and I tell my children how God became man in the flesh of Jesus Christ. And through that glorious gift, we have the hope of something more. We have hope of eternity with God. We have the hope of

peace and joy and comfort in our hearts here on earth. There is no sweeter gift than peace. There is no greater gift than love.

My trust is in God. It's that hope which sustains me through this life. It is the hope I strive to pass on to my children. It is this hope I long to share with my friends and everyone I might touch in my day to day life. "Is that all?" Yes. Jesus Christ, God's greatest gift, is all we need.

Journal: List everything you can think of that God has blessed you with. Next list everything you can think of that you believe is *not* a blessing. Look at the second list again. Are there things on this list that God has put into your life for a purpose? Is there a spiritual fruit that you can pluck from these situations on your second list? (See Galatians 5:22) Open your eyes and your heart to everything in your life and see that Jesus has covered it all with His great love. Take joy in every circumstance and know that Christ is all we need.

First Place

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. Deuteronomy

6:5

“Daddy! Mommy! We won first place!” Melissa ran to us, clutching her T-ball trophy. “It’s a *girl* trophy with my name on it and everything!” She pointed out each detail and then leaned close. “Everyone got one. Does that mean everyone got first place?”

As I watched Melissa play that first year of T-ball, I often thought about winning and losing. The teams were all co-ed, the girls and boys playing together on each team. In T-ball, everyone bats and everyone runs the bases each inning. No one keeps score. T-ball stresses catching and throwing, batting and running bases in the correct order, rather than strategy. Each player hits at least one ‘home run’ during the season. There are no losers. Everyone comes in first place.

I don’t mind teaching my children how to play games, but when it comes to everyday life, there are winners and losers. There are first, second, third and last places. As a wife and mother, I have to make choices about where to place certain issues on my priority list. What’s worth my time and energy? How do I approach the tasks for the day? Is prayer and quiet time high on the priority list? I can’t do everything first, and sometimes important things get shuffled to second or third, or last place.

Where do I place God in my life? Does He come before breakfast? Does He come after my work day is done? How much room do I give Him to work in my actions, words and attitude? What place does He occupy in my heart?

I want God to be first, but I find myself snatching a minute here or a second or two there for Him. The kids have to be washed and tucked into bed. I need to plan dinner for the week. This last load of laundry must be

washed and folded. I barely have time to sit down, let alone set fifteen minutes aside to do a quiet devotion during the day! My God-time gets relegated to third place, fourth place or worse, it just gets dropped.

God demands first place in my heart when He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart." It's not a request. He wants my heart to reflect His love and concern for the people around me. "...for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts." (1 Chronicles 28:9) When I plan dinners for the week or fold laundry, God looks at my attitude, my willingness to do everyday routines in service to Him. I've realized that I don't have to reflect quietly every day to place God first in my life. He loves a quiet and cheerful heart. He loves a willing servant. I can turn my heart, my mind and my strength to doing everything to the best of my God-given abilities. This way, there are no losers; by placing God first, I always win.

Journal: What daily things keep you from focusing on God? How can you turn these worldly distractions into Godly direction? Don't stop trying to carve out some quiet time with God during your day, but don't beat yourself up over it either. God knows your heart. Put Him first place in your attitude, and everyone wins.

Desire Me

I belong to my lover, and his desire is for me. Song of Solomon 7:10

He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. Isaiah 53:2

The weight gain bothered me. George, my husband, still looked at me as if I were the most beautiful woman in the world. I'd lost most of the weight before I became pregnant a second time, then miscarried. The birth control shot caused another weight gain. George still showed me love and affection, even though I worried about my weight.

Reading through my devotions one morning, I came across the verse in Isaiah. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Isaiah talks about our Savior as being...plain. Ordinary. There was nothing special in appearance that would stand out among His people. Jesus wasn't taller or more handsome than His followers. Yet people loved Jesus. His disciples followed him everywhere. People still follow Him, even in the face of intense persecutions. What is it about Jesus that causes so many people to love and follow Him?

His words bring comfort to hurting souls. His actions heal broken lives. He looks at me through the eyes of a Groom, looking at His bride. Jesus looks at me with unconditional love every single day. He doesn't see a broken down, overweight body, my 'clay pot' flesh and blood. Jesus looks at my spirit. He is the lover of souls. Not my body, but my spirit.

I ask George what he sees when he looks at me. George smiles and says, "I see the woman I love." Even though I haven't lost that extra weight from my last pregnancy, he still looks at me through the eyes of love.

What a blessing God gives me through my husband! My children look at me the same way. They don't see an overweight woman. They see Mom, who loves them beyond anything they can imagine.

God loves you the same way. He loves you no matter how you look on the outside. I only hope that what's on my inside reflects His great love for me, so I can love that way too.

Pray: Lord, let me see myself as You see me. Uplift me with Your perfect desire. Let me focus on what's important, not what will fade away.

Journal: Write down everything positive you've ever heard anyone say to you. Read this list every day. Be the person God designed you to be. You are His creation. You are important. You are desirable!

True Freedom

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 8: 1 - 2

The baby's crying. I wade through scattered clothes where I dropped them last night before collapsing into bed. What happened to the days when I woke to an alarm clock, or the sun peeking through the curtains? What happened to my days of freedom and peaceful solitude? Those mornings of playful conversation and tickling my husband are a blurry memory right now.

I pick up my daughter and cradle her close, humming 'You are my sunshine'. Her sobs subside and she gurgles as I bounce her gently on my shoulder, making my way to the kitchen for her morning bottle. The dishes in the sink lay stacked from last night's dinner. My bare feet slap sticky linoleum. I sigh, settle into a chair, and close my eyes as Melissa guzzles her breakfast. Where did my freedom go?

I reflect on my younger years as I feed my daughter. Responsibility meant getting to the movie theater before the show started, and keeping a good stock of dried noodles in the cupboard. With no one else to take care of, I did what I wanted, when I wanted. My thoughts wander to all the things I did to fill my days and nights. Money, alcohol and shallow relationships were all paths I trod in search of something to fill an inner, empty space. Freedom? No, now that I thought about it, it really wasn't.

I became a slave to my empty passions, searching for meaning in my life. Nothing the world offered satisfied my longing for something more. It wasn't until after my daughter was born that I realized the kind of miracle I'd been waiting for.

Melissa shifts in my arms and I watch her eyelids droop as she sucks the bottle. I stroke her baby-smooth skin and breathe in her unique baby scent. George shuffles into the living room and kisses the top of my head and I lean back and sigh. This is true, satisfying freedom. This is the freedom to give and receive love. The relationship with my husband and children are more satisfying than the shadows I chased in my single days.

I realize now that God's given me His Spirit of Life. His Spirit is unmatched by anything I've ever done during my 'free' single years or even before George and I had children. God freed me from selfish ambition and pride when he gave me children. He freed me from an aimless existence when he gave me Jesus Christ for a friend and Savior. I have only to look at Melissa, asleep in my arms, listen to the snores from David's room, and feel George behind me to know true freedom. The freedom to love unconditionally.

Reflect: What fills your soul? What do you reach for when you long to be satisfied? God fills all the empty spaces in our lives. When you feel that empty longing for "something more", reach for God's loving embrace. He will satisfy every longing, every desire in the way that's right for you.

Dancing to God's Beat

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary. Psalm 96:1-6

“Oh turn it up, I love this song!” I crank up the volume and Melissa, Jacob and I sing at the tops of our lungs. The children wave their arms, trying to act out the words. They shout, more than sing, but the feeling is evident. I grin and tap my fingers to the beat on the steering wheel.

We pull into the church parking lot and go inside. The band at church plays the first chords of the same song we heard on the radio. Melissa sings at the top of her lungs, bouncing on her toes, while Jacob does the same motions he did in the car. I glance around at other worshipers, watching for an adverse reaction to my children’s exuberant worship. Most people smile and nod, singing along. Others lift hands in their own praise. I don’t see any frowns, so I relax and sing, tapping my foot to the beat of the music, finally losing myself in words of praise as I worship my Creator.

Later, I reflect on my actions during praise songs. They’re different when I’m alone, with my children, or in church. My church worship seems more restrained, more controlled. I’m caught in that web of other people’s opinions and how they view me. God tells me to sing a new song to Him, to praise His glory and splendor. He doesn’t tell me to look for reactions to that praise.

When King David brought the Ark of the Covenant back from the Philistines, he danced before God “with all his might.” (2 Samuel 6:14) His wife rebuked him later for disgracing himself in front of everyone. David replied, “It was before the LORD, who chose me ... when he appointed me ruler over the LORD’s people Israel

—I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes.” (2 Samuel 6:21-22) David, Israel’s greatest king, didn’t care what the people thought. All that mattered was celebrating before God, showing his thankfulness and praise in the only way he could at that time.

I close my eyes and thank God for my own, unabashed children. I will raise my hands, my face and my voice a little higher. I will sing with all my heart. Shout to the Lord, most worthy of praise! Dance to the beat of God’s drum in your soul as we sing a new song to Him! We are created for His praise, to take joy in Him... along with the joy we see in our children as they praise God with such exuberance.

Pray: Lord God Almighty, let me praise You with exuberance today. Fill me with Your Spirit so I can worship You in all I do and overflow with joy that my children may be blessed.

Try this: As you become more familiar with the hymns and songs of worship, try closing your eyes and opening your hands. Let your children shout out the words and dance beside you, if the music and the mood is uplifting. Feel the joy of worship in the music and in the words. Let God move in you through praise.

Just Because

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9

Melissa likes rice. She likes oats and sweet potatoes and peas and carrots. Melissa likes milk and bits of scrambled egg. She likes hamburger and bits of chicken. Melissa seems to like all the things I like.

Melissa likes looking at every piece of green growing in every crack of the sidewalk. She likes pulling dandelions and gripping them so tight the stems break in her fist. Then we place them in a glass with water. We set them on the table for a special dinnertime centerpiece. I like it.

I like it because my daughter picked the flowers for me. She arranged them in the glass for her daddy. She explains to David why the flowers are in the center of the table at dinnertime. “Just because.” That’s all the explanation she’ll give. It’s all she needs to give.

I think I need to take a lesson from my baby girl. I ask God “why” a lot. I search for answers in my daily readings. I pray and wait for answers. I wait, and wait. Nothing... until I read how God’s thoughts differ from mine. Then my focus shifts... God does things on His own schedule. He does them for His own reasons. God can say to me, “Just because. Just because I care about what happens to you. Just because I know if you do this, you’ll get hurt. Just because I love you.” I don’t have to understand. I just have to trust in God’s “just because.”

Think about this: What does your child like to do “just because?” What do you like to do “just because?” Are these good things? Do they produce feelings of contentment, joy or peace? Look for one thing each day that reflects God’s “just because” love for you. Delight your children and yourself with these things.

The Muffin Man

A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. Proverbs 17:22

I could've scolded. I would've been angry if I hadn't been trying to keep a straight face. I knew Melissa had just told a big, fat lie. She spoke with all the sincerity of a two and a half year old child who knows exactly what she just said.

The blueberry muffins smelled so good right out of the oven. I'd set them on the table to cool, and then stepped outside to check on the dogs. When I came back in, one muffin sat topless, and another had a perfect stripe across the top. I looked at Melissa. She sat on the couch, watching Sesame Street. "Melissa."

Wide blue eyes stared at me. "Yes, Mommy."

"Who took the tops off these muffins?"

"The Muffin Man."

I turned away and slapped my hand over my mouth, struggling to contain that burst of laughter. Didn't all those child experts say that if you laughed when a child did something wrong, it only encouraged them to do it again? Lying is the one thing I abhor in a person. How can I teach my children that it's wrong to lie when I'm laughing too hard to talk?

Yet, how many times have I made a joke to cover a mistake, to cover a lie? God still loves me. He hates my disobedience, but He loves me more than I can imagine. How can I do any less for my children?

Taking a deep breath, I turned back to Melissa. “Honey. I know there’s no Muffin Man in the house today. I know that you and I are the only ones here right now. I know that someone saw what you did when I wasn’t looking. Do you know who that ‘someone’ is?”

Melissa looked down at her hands and nodded. I sat beside her and pulled her into a hug. “Do you know that no matter what you do, I still love you?” Another nod. “I don’t like it when you tell a lie. Do you know who else doesn’t like you to lie?”

She looked up at me, eyes brimming and whispered, “The Muffin Man doesn’t like me to lie about him.”

I laughed. How can I help but laugh at my child’s answer? I could get angry and frustrated, or just laugh and enjoy my child while she’s still so young. God has given her a joyful heart. He’s given me a child that gives out joy and laughter as easily as a fountain spouts water. How could I not drink? Her life lessons will continue, but these joy-burst moments are fleeting. I’ll grab them and refresh my dry bones.

Journal: Are you the mother of a toddler? What things do they say that take you by surprise and fill a moment with joy? Write them down if you can. Cherish them. God has given us laughter and joy to brighten our drab days. Grab those moments and let them refresh your thirsting soul. Laugh with your child today.

Trust me. Really!

We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you. Psalm 33:20-22

I hold my hands up and smile. “Jump! Mommy will catch you.”

My son stands on the pool deck, thumb in mouth and eyes wide. I wait. Jacob removes his thumb from his mouth. “Promise?” I nod and keep my arms outstretched. “Come closer,” he begs. I move a step closer to him. Jacob reaches toward my hands, but can’t touch them. He leans forward, but I’m still too far away. “Come closer, Mommy. I can’t reach you!”

I am much like my son when it comes to worrying if I can really trust God. I am afraid...afraid of failing my children. I’m afraid of failing at this mom thing. I fear the deep waters of life and only want to sit on the edge and dangle my feet, pretending to swim.

Yet I can still feel that tingle of joy, that great satisfaction of seeing God working in my life when He makes me face those fears; when I finally lay them before Him and He washes them away in the flood of His grace and mercy. It’s not an instant thing. Sometimes the fears wash back like the ocean tides. But God is still there. Waiting with outstretched arms. Waiting for me to jump. Waiting for me to trust.

Jacob finally takes a deep breath, stretches out his arms and leaps off the edge of the pool. I catch him while the water splashes over us. He clings to my neck and yells in my ear, “You caught me! You caught me!”

We bounce around the pool. “Of course I did! I love you!”

If he can jump, I can jump, too. God's waiting to catch me. He'll catch you too. Stand up. Take a deep breath. Jump into His waiting arms. It's the hardest thing I ever did, but next to that leap of faith, being a mom is a splash!

Pray: Father, help me trust Your promise of steadfastness. I sometimes fear that You will move, that You won't catch me when I fall. I'm afraid to jump into the unknown. Help me jump, Lord. Remind me today that You are here, and will always catch me. Shield me from my doubts and fears so I can shine for You.



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