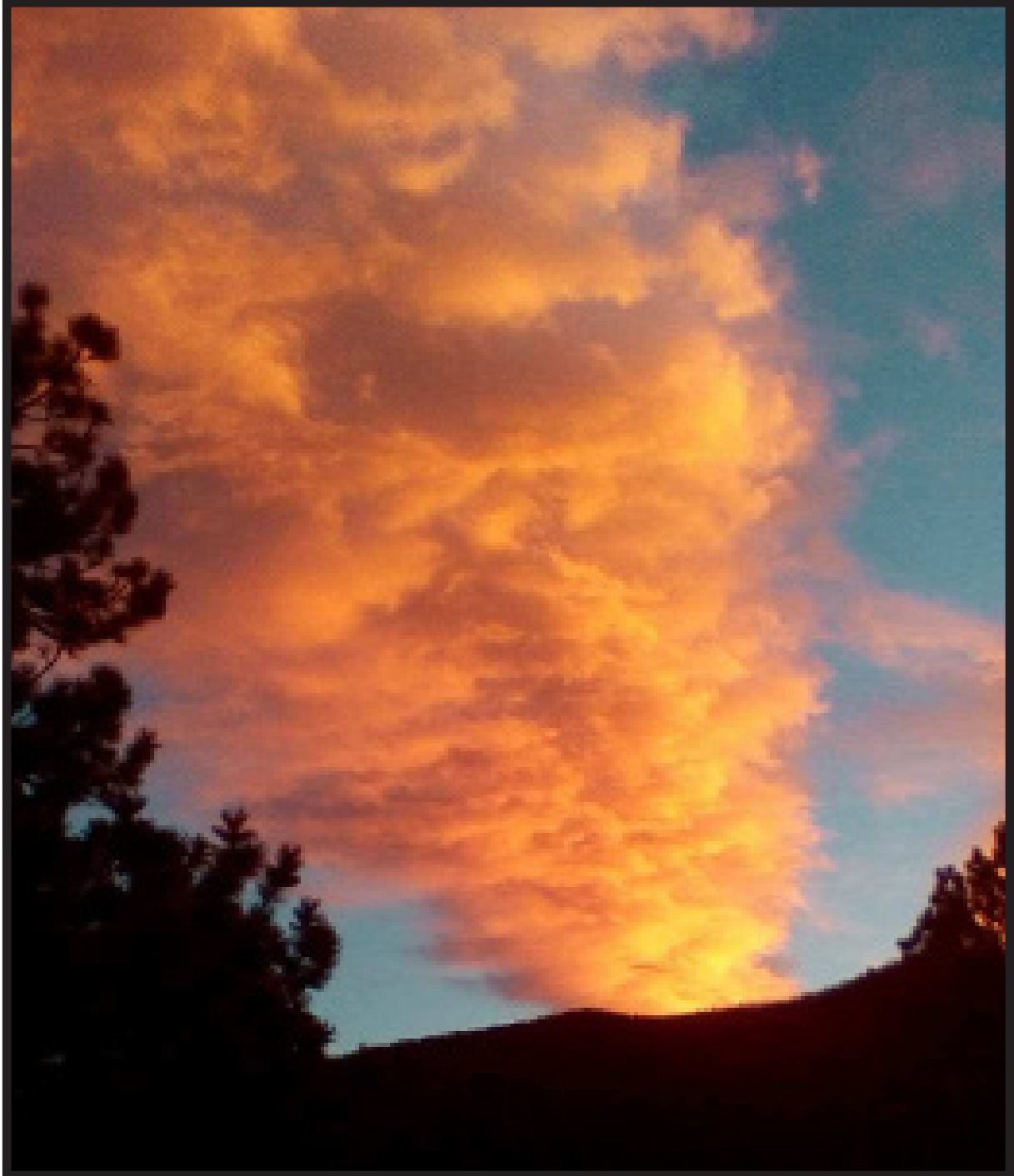


city lights

ESTABLISHED IN 1994 ~ MAIN STREET CHURCH IN BRIGHAM CITY, UTAH ~ NO. FIVE ONLINE EDITION ~ WWW.MSCBC.ORG ~ SPRING, 2018



“I am the light of the world. The man who follows Me will never walk in the dark but will live his life in the light.”

—John 8:12 (J. B. Phillips Translation)

This issue of *City Lights* is the 5th online edition since its inception in 1994 as *The Fellowship*



Jesus, Handmade by Shelley Kancitis, 2018

Spring 2018

Christ Jesus, My Light in the Darkness

“The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn’t put it out.”

John 1:5 MSG

Cover Photo

A Taste of Glory

Pat Gore-Shawnee, Colorado 2017

Meditation Page Photo

Call on Me

Josh Felix, Perry, Utah 2018

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City Lights, the bi-annual online devotional journal of Main Street Church in Brigham City, Utah, is dedicated to the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:14-16 who called us to let our lights *“shine before men in such a way that they may see and glorify our Father who is in heaven.”*

Our words and creative expressions, besides glorifying God, should also encourage our readers. Therefore, all contributions must reveal our Christ-like love to all men, be biblically based, and focused on a stated theme for each issue.

City Lights ministers within the Statement of Faith and is an extension of the Core Values of Main Street Church (<http://www.msbc.org/statfaith.htm>) Contact: Diane at dinahwriting09@gmail.com for publishing guidelines.

Salt and Light Company Writers will meet during the summer to share their writing based on the theme below. Date and time to be announced. We welcome others who are interested in being part of our writing ministry for the Lord Jesus. Contact Diane at 723-8486.

The theme for our Winter 2018 issue:

The individual(s) who influenced me most in my Christian walk.

"The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God, in readiness for God from day one. Everything was created through Him; nothing—not one thing!—came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out."

John 1:1-5 MSG

"For a little while longer the Light is among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you. . . . While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of light."

John 12:35-36
Berean Study Bible

"FOR GOD, WHO SAID, 'LET THERE BE LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS,' HAS MADE THIS LIGHT SHINE IN OUR HEARTS SO WE COULD KNOW THE GLORY OF GOD THAT IS SEEN IN THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST. . . . THIS MAKES IT CLEAR THAT OUR GREAT POWER IS FROM GOD, NOT FROM OURSELVES."

II Cor. 4:6-7 NLT

"Listen Galilee, land of the Gentiles! Although your people live in darkness, they will see a bright light. Although they live in the shadow of death, a light will shine on them. Then Jesus started preaching, 'Turn back to God! The kingdom of heaven will soon be here.'"

Matthew 4:16-17 CEV

Meditation: *Christ Jesus, My Light in the Darkness*



"I am the world's Light. No one who follows Me stumbles around in the darkness. I provide plenty of light to live in." John 8:12 MSG

"Here, then, is the message which we heard from Him, and now proclaim to you: *GOD IS LIGHT* and no shadow of darkness can exist in Him. Consequently, if we were to say that we enjoyed fellowship with Him and still went on living in darkness, we should be both telling and living a lie. But if we really are living in the same light in which He eternally exists, then we have true fellowship with each other, and the blood which His Son shed for us keeps us clean from all sin." I John 1:5-7 PHILLIPS

"But you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do His work and speak out for Him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference He made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted."

I Peter 2:9-10 MSG

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

Psalms 27:1 NASB

"AS LONG AS I AM IN THE WORLD, I AM THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD." John 9:5 KJV

"Make them holy by the truth; for Your word is the truth. I have sent them to the world just as You sent Me to the world and I consecrate Myself for their sakes that they may be made holy by the truth.

John 17:17-19
PHILLIPS

"By Your words I can see where I'm going; they throw a beam of light on my dark path... Everything's falling apart on me, God; put me together again with Your Word."

Psalms 119:105-107
MSG

"Be careful, then, that the light within you is not darkness. So if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it in darkness, you will be radiant, as though a lamp were shining on you."

Luke 11:36
Berean Study Bible

"And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the *Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb*. And the city has no need of sun or moon. . . . for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Revelation 21:23-24 ESV

The Little Girl and the General

By Jim Catlin—Main Street Church, Brigham City, Utah

Quite often it is the nameless characters, the cinematic “extras”, who impact me most deeply when I read the Biblical narratives. Think of the thief on the cross or the woman who wept at Jesus’ feet.

And so it is with this little Hebrew girl who we find as a servant in the house of Syrian General Naaman, apparently part of the slave booty carried off as he oppressed Israel. Had she not spoken up during the narrative in 2 Kings 5:2, she would be lost to us.

As she labored for Naaman’s wife, maybe cooking or cleaning, she came to know the great general Naaman whom the narrative lauds as being “in high favor,” a “mighty man of valor.”

General Naaman was even supported for a time by Jehovah, the God of Israel, while he commanded the army of Israel’s foe, Syria!

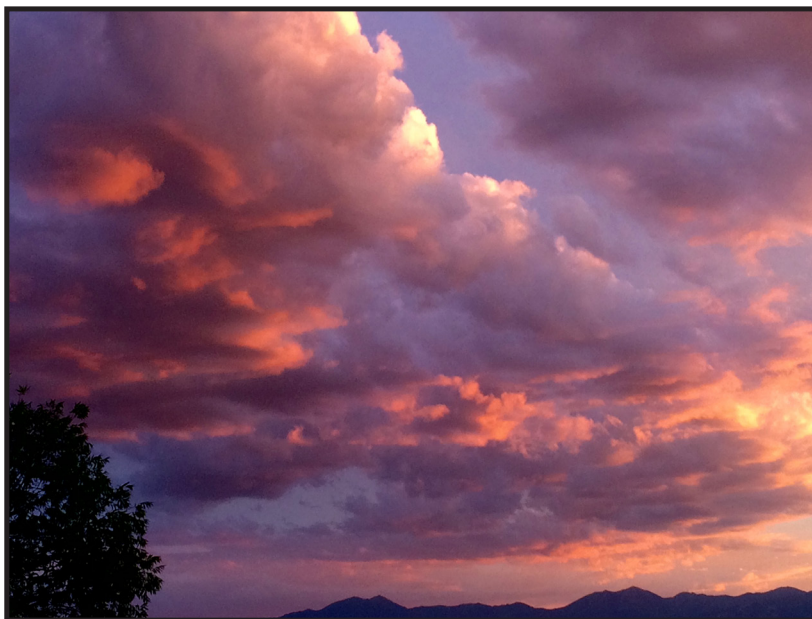
While Naaman was widely esteemed and favored, he was also afflicted. He was a leper.

When you are held captive in an enemy’s employ, you would not think to do what the little girl did next. She said simply to Naaman’s wife, “If your husband will go to Israel, to the prophet Elisha, his leprosy will be cured.”

As I hear her small voice, I shake my head with objections. “Why should Naaman’s wife pass along such a bizarre suggestion?” “Why should Naaman himself pay any heed to her words?” “In light of Naaman’s military history against Israel, why should he think that any good might come to him?”

While I highly recommend that you read the rest of the story, spoiler alert, he follows the little girl’s advice!

She captures my heart because she knows something about God that results in the words of her mouth. She knows that God can heal. She knows that enemies are loved by God too. And apparently, her simple embrace of these truths, her evident faith in this God, swayed the General. I just love this little girl.



Copyright: God. Teresa Hanly, 2018

She admonishes me to speak the simplest truths about our God into the most resistant of circumstances. I can say that God desires our wholeness, our healing. I can say that God loves even the enemies of God.

In the epilogue of my musings about this little girl, I wonder what the homecoming scene was like when Naaman first appeared before her showing no traces of the disease. Were there hugs? Were there

knowing glances only? Was there celebration? I love to wonder about this.

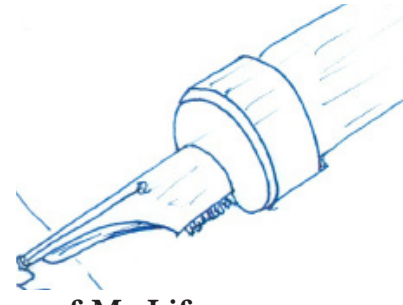
And I marvel about the providence of God. From our vantage point in time, we can see that the seeming randomness of her unjust captivity had meaning and design. God knew that one day this little girl would speak to a hardened General about God’s desire for his wholeness.

As a result, when the story was retold in every generation, the timeless grace of God would go on display because of a little girl.

WHEN GOD WRITES YOUR STORY IN A WAY YOU DIDN'T WANT...

By Vaneetha Rendall Risner

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Have you ever looked around at your life and assumed that nothing is ever going to get better? That the hard things will just get harder and the good things might disappear? That there's no point in hoping anymore because it will only lead to disappointment?

I have.

When my husband left our family nine years ago, my adolescent daughters and I were reeling. We never imagined we'd be a splintered family. All we knew were unbroken families, and suddenly we weren't in that group any more.

We struggled to find our identity together and establish our new normal. I didn't like the way my life story was unfolding, and I mourned what I had lost. In my mind, intact families had kids who were drawn to God. They laughed together and talked around the dinner table. They whispered heartfelt prayers at night and respected their parents' authority.

Our family didn't do those things anymore. At one point, both of my daughters wanted nothing to do with God. God had let them down. They didn't want to trust him again.

The Middle of the Story

And yet last fall, my oldest daughter Katie left for a year to serve the Lord in Africa. Eight years ago, serving Jesus would have been unthinkable to her. Eight years ago, God wasn't real to her any more. Eight years ago, she almost walked away from faith.

On the Sunday that her church commissioned her, the sermon was on Joseph. The pastor said, "Don't be so focused on what God has taken from you that you can't see or believe that God will do something through you."

Those words hit me hard. He went on to quote from Paul Miller's powerful book, *A Praying Life*, "When confronted with suffering that won't go away, or with even a minor problem, we instinctively focus on what is missing, not on the Master's hand. Often when you think everything has gone wrong, it's just that you're in the middle of a story."

Often when you think everything has gone wrong, it's just that you're in the middle of a story.

Hardest Year of My Life

That one sentence kept coming back to me throughout the sermon. It's so easy to focus on what is missing and not on God's hand when you're in the middle of a story. When every day feels like an insurmountable struggle, and the details of the present are all-consuming, it's impossible to imagine anything else is happening.

Eight years ago, we were in an excruciating part of the story. It felt like an unending nightmare. In fact, it was probably the hardest year of my life.

In the middle, all I could see was what had gone wrong. What God had taken from me. What seemed irredeemable and broken. I felt that I had lost everything. And I didn't believe that God would do anything through me or through my circumstances. My husband was gone, my kids were a mess, and my body was failing. How could anything good ever come out of this unimaginable pain?

Why Wouldn't God Answer?

Talking to my oldest daughter one afternoon in 2010, trying to help her make sense of what had happened, was one of the lowest points for me. I told her that God would walk us through the current crisis. She stood up, threw a Kleenex box at me and yelled as she walked out of the room, "Stop talking! Just stop! I don't want anything to do with *your* God."

I sat there, stunned. I wasn't sure what to say. This precious daughter, who had been baptized two years earlier, had decided that my God wasn't her God. She had prayed and trusted and waited for the Lord to change her family situation, yet nothing had changed. Things had gotten worse instead. Her prayers felt pointless, and her faith was crumbling along with our family.

I so wanted a happy ending, tied up with a bow. A restored marriage. Faith-filled children. A pain-free body. I was convinced my daughters would only trust God if their prayers were answered exactly as they were asked. After all, they wanted godly things. Why wouldn't God answer them?

Night after night, I had prayed earnestly for them and with them. I knelt by their beds and we talked to God together. But after a while, they grew disinterested in prayer.



Nothing seemed to be happening.

This Wasn't the Plan

After years of praying with seemingly no results, I too was tempted to give up asking for change. I knew God was at work, but I couldn't see any evidence of it. I wanted to protect my children and to give them everything I thought they needed to have a strong faith, but I simply couldn't. Nothing was in my control. All I could do was cry out to God and wait.

I despaired for my daughters and for myself as darkness seemed to press in on every side. This wasn't the plan I wanted for my life — or for theirs. I felt helpless and hopeless as I couldn't see God working in any of it. I lay awake at night, afraid.

I could trust God for myself — but for my children? That was much harder. It required much more faith.

More to the Story

Despite my fears, very gradually, over several years, both my daughters came to a deep faith. This daughter, who wanted nothing to do with “my” God, pursued a relationship with him again. She started going to Bible study. Her demeanor softened. She talked about Jesus.

She then started leading a Bible study. God became “her” God again. And now she is serving him in Africa. Somewhere, in the middle of all the pain, God became real to her again. He wooed her back. Those desperate years when he was silent, he was not absent. He had been there all along.

We are all works in progress. And we are all in the middle of our stories. We don't know how things will turn out. We do know, however, that nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). He “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17).

But at the same time, our stories may not look the way we planned. Nothing may look like it's tied up with a bow. We may not see our kids return to Christ, our marriages restored, or our diseases cured. But we can trust that God is in the story. And he is the author, orchestrating the tiniest details for our final good. We may not understand why things happen, but we can be certain that God has a glorious

purpose to the pain we are enduring.

I'm still in the middle of my story. And so are you.

While none of us know the joys and trials we have yet to encounter, we do know that Jesus will be with us through them all.

And we can be confident that one day, after the last chapter is written, our story will be tied up with a bow in the most glorious way possible.

Vaneetha Rendall Risner is passionate about helping others find hope and joy in the midst of suffering.



She is the author of the book *The Scars That Have Shaped Me: How God Meets Us in Suffering* and is a regular contributor to *Desiring God*.

Vaneetha and her husband, Joel, have four daughters between them and live in North Carolina where she blogs at www.danceintherain.com.

“I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow — not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. . . .revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:31-39 NLT



Vanquished Dread

By Teresa Hanly—Main Street Church in Brigham City, Utah

"Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him." —C. S. Lewis

My body felt like a petri dish for every germ I came in contact with! I had been exhausted after a full-night's sleep and noticed pain in my glands near my jaws and underarms. I had difficulty breathing and climbing up the stairs with incessant coughing and wheezing that made my ribs feel bruised. I concluded that my "flu" had taken a turn for the worse. My friends insisted I go to the doctor right away. I agreed that I needed some help to fully recover.

There were no openings to see my doctor, so I went to a nearby walk-in clinic. I said to the attending physician there, "I have been sick with the flu for a while now and probably just need a strong antibiotic." He obliged me and sent me on my way.

But while going to the front desk to get my prescription, the doctor followed me there, nervously pacing about. "Is there something else you want to say to me?" I asked him. He showed me a brochure and said, "I am concerned about your symptoms and want you to go to this heart clinic right away and take a stress test to rule things out. I will notify them that you are coming." With a strong family history of heart disease, it seemed a wise thing to do, so I agreed.

I failed the test and was given a nitroglycerin tablet under my tongue. This frightened me. My husband came to take me to the hospital for further testing. My head was spinning as I tried to catch myself up with this new information. I thought, "I came in for treatment for the flu and now I am having an *angiogram!*"

After the tests were finished, the technician and surgeon discussed the results with my husband first, then walked over to me with woeful looks on their faces. There were six large blockages with ninety percent occlusion. My sick heart had been busy making a new vascular system to save my life, but now intervention was needed. The technician gave me paperwork to sign, asking for my approval to go immediately into surgery. "What? My approval? I do not approve of this at all!" I screamed inside my head, while signing on the dotted line.

I was placed on a gurney and whisked down a long hallway in preparation for open heart surgery. "I want to live!" I said quietly, in an effort to grasp tightly to the life that could very well be taken away from me that day. And like Alice falling down the rabbit hole, I fell in.

Suddenly detached from myself and anything around me, I groped in the darkness, searching for God. Was He with me? I did not feel or sense anything, nor did I desire to call out to Him. I didn't know where to "put" God, if seeing Him in the midst of all this meant He had placed His signature of approval on the suffering that had come into my life.

I underwent nine hours of surgery, while heart and lung machines kept me alive. For nine days more, I lay in ICU with noisy monitors by my bedside, detecting signs of life. Afraid to touch the many painful places where tubes ran through my body, I became aware of the stitches that ran

down my chest. Thoughts that I would bear the marks and scars from tubes and extractions of veins used for repairing my heart became a shame to me. I felt patched together like a Raggedy Ann doll, a disheveled, broken version of me.

“I can’t talk to Him,” I whispered to myself. Where dread had filled my soul, no prayer could be uttered.

Then my husband came into the room and set up my iPod with the speakers. My favorite songs and hymns filled the air. Then like a waterfall pouring over me, He flooded in. I could hear the voice of Him who loves me most singing these songs over me. And though my body could hardly shed a tear, my soul wept.

Songs that randomly shuffled through the air, were designed one after the other, to gently open up my soul’s heart back to Him again. He broke through my defenses and revealed that His presence was with me in the darkness there, where dread had disabled.

He gave me songs of faith to utter, when I had no strength or will do it. My hope in Him that was buried by fear, emerged and declared itself to me.

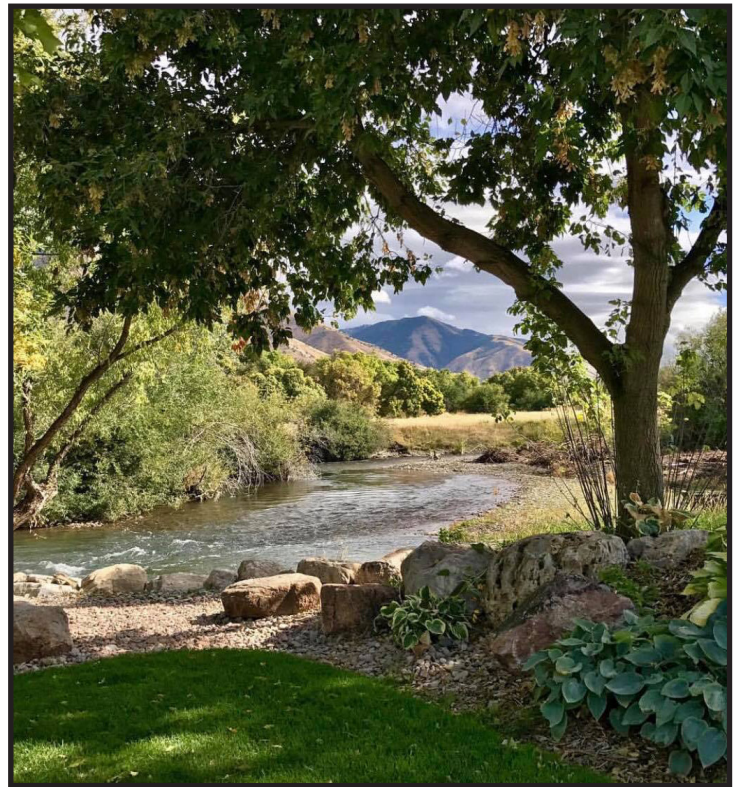
Yes, I do hope in God.
I am His and He is mine!
I will rise.

Teresa Hanly (Tess) grew up in Laguna Beach



California and gave her life to the Lord when she was 14. Her family then moved to Loveland, Colorado where she finished high school, and met her husband of forty years. They have six grown sons and six grandchildren. After 20 years in California raising their children, they moved to Utah where they have lived for 12 years on a small farm in Nibley.

Teresa has been writing stories and poems since she was a young teenager and published a few of them in recent years. She attended Bible college as an audit student and taught Bible studies in church and for 10 years in prison ministry.



My Nibley Home. Tess Hanly

“Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life’s problems fall into place of their own accord.”

– J.I. Packer



The Lord Is My Shepherd

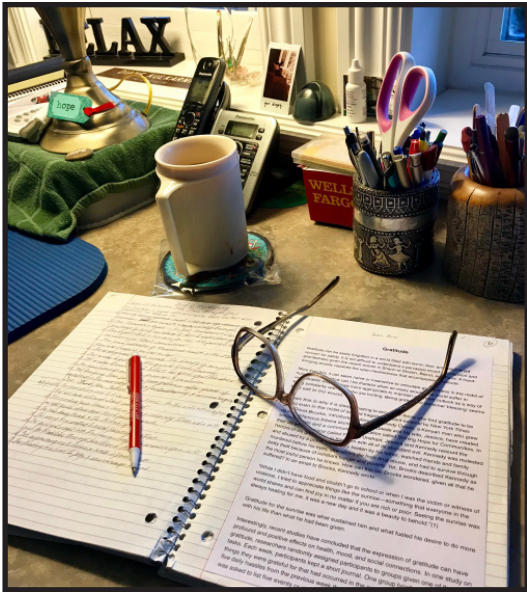
I have all that I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows;
He leads me beside peaceful streams.
He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths,
bringing honor to His name.

Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid,
for You are close beside me.
Your rod and Your staff
protect and comfort me.

You prepare a feast for me
in the presence of my enemies.
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.

Surely Your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me
all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of *the Lord* forever.

King David: Psalm 23 — New Living Translation



Your Story, His Story – Pair God’s story with your story to share a witness for Him

By Lettie Kirkpatrick-Burruss—East Tennessee

Reprinted from the January, 2018, issue of *Missions Mosaic*, Woman’s Missionary Union, Birmingham, Alabama. Used by permission. To receive this issue, or subscribe to *Missions Mosaic*, call 1-800-968-7301.

I don’t have the “personality” required to be an effective witness, at least not by the typical standard of some churches or how-to materials. I am not bold, outgoing, assertive, or clever. I am not even very sharp in quoting Scripture or their references. And for a season, I wrestled with guilt that I was failing in that aspect of my “work” on God’s behalf.

I’m thankful that, through the years, God has mercifully shown me that guilt is false. He led me to understand that my very unique personality and my very personal story is exactly what has equipped me to share the gospel well with certain people He has placed in my path. Consider the experiences He has allowed to come into my life.

- My loss of four pre-born babies gives me ministry to grieving moms dealing with the heartache of miscarriage.
- The care and death of my challenged child opens doors for faith conversations to those families struggling with the devastation of that hurt.
- The early death of my first husband, my widowhood, and years as a single mom connects me with others on that same journey.
- The massive stroke suffered by my second husband, my care-giving years, and his subsequent death created a broad audience of similar “burden bearers” to encourage and share my source of faith with.

I once read a quote that indicated, “Our story may be the key that unlocks someone else’s prison.” But even our experiences alone don’t qualify us to witness for Christ. That power comes from our personal walk with God through those experiences. It is out of the overflow of our faith and hope that we can extend God’s truth, faithfulness, mercy, love, and grace to those on a similar path.

We draw both our ability for that and direction through it from our place of prayer.

Through prayer, God

- heals, restores, and equips us to use our stories in mighty ways for kingdom work;
- directs us to those whose hearts will connect to our stories and their need;
- guides us as we build authentic, credible, and transparent relationships with others who need our story; and
- leads us to understand His will and plan for a consistent witness of both words and deeds, covered with intercessory prayer.

Understanding this, our own God-given personalities can become both a tool and a treasure in reaching our world for Jesus. The quiet, calm nature of an introvert can create a safe place for others to confide in and hear wise counsel. His or her thoughtful words draw attention and respect from listeners.

By the same token, the friendly, outgoing personality of the extrovert may draw out and overcome the reserve of a reluctant person. He or she can often connect with someone who enjoys the fun and action that usually mark an extrovert.

Perhaps you also have wondered what of worth you could possibly bring to the kingdom in the area of faith sharing. Begin now going to God with that inquiry and consider these thoughts.

1. What parts of your story could connect with someone else's life?

- Testimony—Share your story of coming to faith, including life before following Christ, your faith journey, and how believing has changed your story.
- Triumphs—Proclaim lessons God has taught through trials about overcoming weaknesses, restoring relationships, living with heartache, and more. The lists are endless.
- Truth—Using significant Scriptures, share moments when God has spoken through the power of His Word to address a need for guidance, purpose, conviction, and comfort.

2. How can I share?

I can share through

- hospitality (coffee and conversation on a face-to-face, personal level). Bible study discussions can open doors, and so can unexpected and unplanned life encounters.
- written communication. Much power is contained in heartfelt words that can be easily seen and returned to—cards, emails, and text messages. All modes provide options for the witness of written words.
- social media. Create a platform to use your story to encourage, equip, disciple, or witness through a blog, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.

3. Whom do I share with?

- Stay alert for Spirit-led encounters. (My care-giving opened doors to encourage and extend hope to others in similar circumstances.)
- Seek God's direction daily for opportunities to share Jesus in the busyness of life.
- Stir up the gift in you through enlarging your territory with activities and projects that bring you into the path of someone who needs the message of Christ.

I recently attended the annual family camping event held by the family of my first husband. I watched as four generations including the family matriarch, her two remaining children and their spouses, their children, and now their grandchildren gathered together to review their memories and make a joyful new memory. So much has changed in these years. So very many stories, of both tragedy and triumph, fill this family that bears a steadfast faith legacy.

My husband was the oldest, and cancer took his life at age 51. His remaining two brothers drowned together in Alaska several years later. The brother-in-law who survived is at this campsite. My youngest son bears the scars of Afghanistan, and this family rallied around my late second husband during his fight for stroke recovery. This group contains so many personalities, abilities, and temperaments. What a precious picture also of the body of Christ! As we embrace our stories and ask God to give opportunity to use our uniqueness and His work in us to declare the need for Jesus, let's rejoice in knowing it is a prayer that delights His heart.

Lettie Kirkpatrick-Burress loves that God can be trusted to redeem our stories for kingdom purposes. She can be contacted at lettiejkb@gmail.com. Lettie is the author of three books, contributor to numerous publications, and a regular writer for *Missions Mosaic* magazine as well as *Journey*, the Lifeway women's devotional. She enjoys hiking mountain trails in East Tennessee with her husband, Jim, as well as enjoying an ever-growing number of "grand" children. She loves clip-on earrings and dark chocolate mint. Learn more at www.writingforhim.com



Truth Nuggets

1. "Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what He has done for me" (Psalm 66:16).
2. "My mouth will tell of your righteous deeds. . . I will come and proclaim Your mighty acts" (Psalm 71:15-16).
3. "Jesus did not let him, but said, 'Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you'" (Mark 5:19).
4. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

Reflecting on Mary's Psalm

By Dorothy Catlin—Main Street Church in Brigham City, Utah

I am the Lord's. His bond-slave. My life is His to spend as He will.

My soul magnifies the Lord.

My soul is a lens through which His purposes may be more clearly seen,
And so my spirit celebrates the reality of His salvation.

There is nothing He cannot accomplish,
No emptiness He cannot fill,
No desire He cannot satisfy
For those who love Him. (For me.)

He has drawn me into His plan to save.
What more could I ask, or even want?
He has seen me,
He has lifted me up,
He has filled me with good things: His very Self.

Truly, I am blessed!
For there is nothing more that I seek:
Only to serve Him well and glorify Him completely.
And He has given to me what I desire.

Because He has indwelt me,
I celebrate His holiness
And I bow in deepest reverence before Him.

His mercy moves within me and through me to a sin-broken world,
And all who fear Him and hunger for Him in truth will recognize it.

He turns human-thinking on its head,
And pulls inside-out all human effort or achievement.

He has taken hold of His servant (me!) just as He promised from the very
beginning.
The One who speaks reality has spoken His final word in His only begotten Son,
And sent that Son to me.

O, praise His glorious grace!



Alaskan Sunrise. Terri Belah—Wasilla, Alaska.

Two moms finding friendship, faith

By *Christin Taylor*— *New Hamburg, Ontario, Canada*

This article first appeared in *The Washington Post*, 16 March 2018 and is reprinted here with the author's permission. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2018/03/16/two-moms-finding-friendship-faith/?utm_term=.af50f077910c

What are you doing in Indiana this weekend?" Ayesha asked casually. We stood in the PhD office, newly minted PhD students at University of Waterloo, just a few weeks into our program and friendship.

I hesitated, unsure of how much to share. An honest answer would out me, not just as a Christian but a Christian's Christian — the kind who travels to Indiana over the weekend to preach at a conference for pastors' spouses.

I knew Ayesha was Muslim. She had mentioned it in passing during a separate conversation with our colleagues.

This highly politicized moment with a president, heavily supported by Evangelical Christians, campaigning to ban Muslims from the country, makes it awkward for me to share my faith, let alone befriend a Muslim. But friends we have become.

Ayesha and I immediately bonded and slipped into an easy friendship. We are both mothers, both married more than 10 years, and both returning to school after a hiatus with separate careers. In addition to our studies, we are juggling family life and all those perks of parenting like tantrums, midnight wake-ups, cooking dinner, packing school lunches and coaching our kids through their homework.

One morning, Ayesha slumped into the office, visibly creased with exhaustion. "Are you okay?" I asked right away.

We put our books down and spent the morning curled in a corner of the student commons, sipping coffee. Her youngest wasn't sleeping well, and the sleep deprivation was wearing on Ayesha. "Thank you," she told me afterward with tears in her eyes. "Thank you for listening and not judging my parenting." I nodded and gave her a hug. I knew. I had been there, too.



By *Still Water*. Kevin James Bywater—Oxfordshire, England

Given how well Ayesha and I were getting along, I decided to share why I was going to Indiana. "I'm going to preach," I said. She froze.

"Oh."

I grinned. "Is that weird for you to hear?"

"No," she answered quickly, then stopped and chuckled. "Sort of."

Despite the initial awkwardness, my vulnerability opened a new level of sharing between us. Knowing that I was a devout person of faith, whether Christian or not, seemed to open the door for Ayesha to be honest about her own faith.

The more she shared, the more similarities I discovered between us, rather than differences.

"What I want my children to learn," Ayesha told me one afternoon, "is that God loves them more than anyone else in the world. More than even me."

I nodded vigorously. This is what I grew up hearing from my mother and what I whisper to my children every morning as they leave for school, "Remember who loves you most!"

“I want them to know that God is always with them and that he has a beautiful plan for them,” she continued.

There were times when I would double-take. Were we really talking about two separate religions? This is exactly what I want my kids to know, too.

One evening, she and her husband hosted us for dinner. I asked what extracurricular activities her kids were doing in the New Year. “Swimming and gymnastics,” she said, “and Koran school.”

“What do they learn at Koran school?” I asked.

“They memorize scripture.”

I flashed to my childhood, visiting church on Tuesday nights, playing games, memorizing the books of the Bible and scripture. How many times had those same verses I learned as a child come back to encourage me as an adult?

“It helps them with language and literacy,” she continued. “And it’s good for them to know that there are certain texts where it’s important to remember the words exactly as they are.”

That resonated with me. I have tried to do scripture memorization with Noelle and Nathan off and on. After talking to Ayesha, I felt motivated to return to this tradition. She was right. There is something beautiful about memorizing a sacred text, allowing it to work on your mind and heart.

I watched from the dinner table as our children played together. The boys built with Legos while the girls worked on a magic show to perform later in the evening. Surely, our children could tell there were differences between our families. But these differences seemed only to register on the Oh-that’s-cool scale. Then back to playing.

After all, they have much more in common. Not the least of which that both sets of parents make particular lifestyle choices for their children because of faith. Our kids understand that we move through the world differently because of Christianity and Islam.

In the Christian faith, we have this old religious infinitive: “to edify.” Formally, the word means to instruct or improve someone morally or intellectually. But in the context of my religious upbringing, we often talked about “edifying one another” with a bit more warmth.

When we said those words, we meant that we were lifting each other up, that we were helping each other become better than we would be on our own.

Hearing this turn of phrase as a child, I envisioned the word “edify” as full of light. I imagined we were passing light to each other, and the light was filling up the other person, lifting them off the ground, scattering the shadows around them.

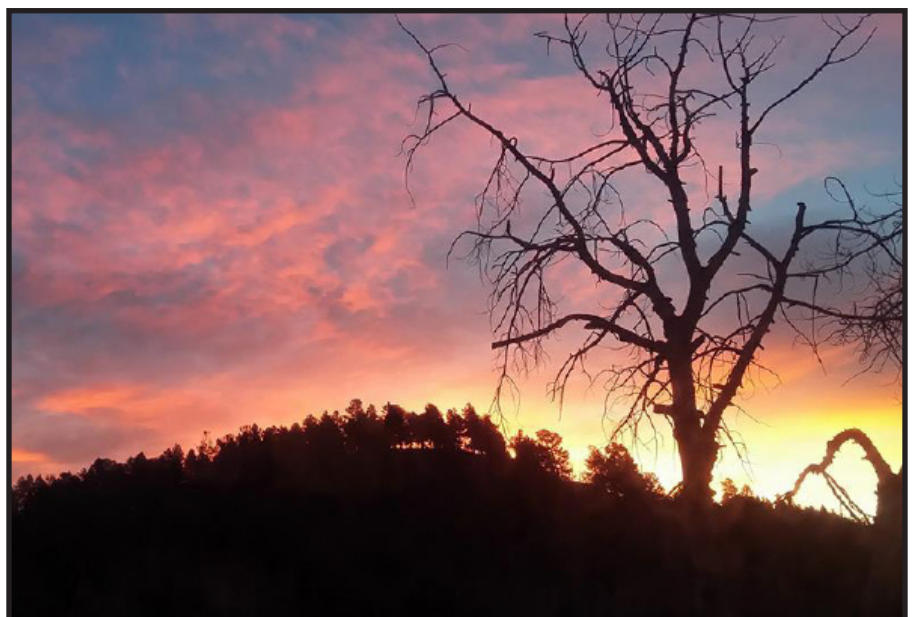
Being Ayesha’s friend has edified me. She has filled me with light and lifted me. She has made me a better mom. She has helped me cherish my faith. Being her friend has reminded me that despite the politics, the vitriol, and the fear propagated by misunderstanding, there is always room for people to come together and share the light of friendship.

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studying rhetoric and composition. She has written two books and published articles in the *New York Times*, *Sojourners*, and *HuffPost*.

She is also the chief editor of the Annesley Writers Forum. You can read more about Christin at www.christintaylor.com.



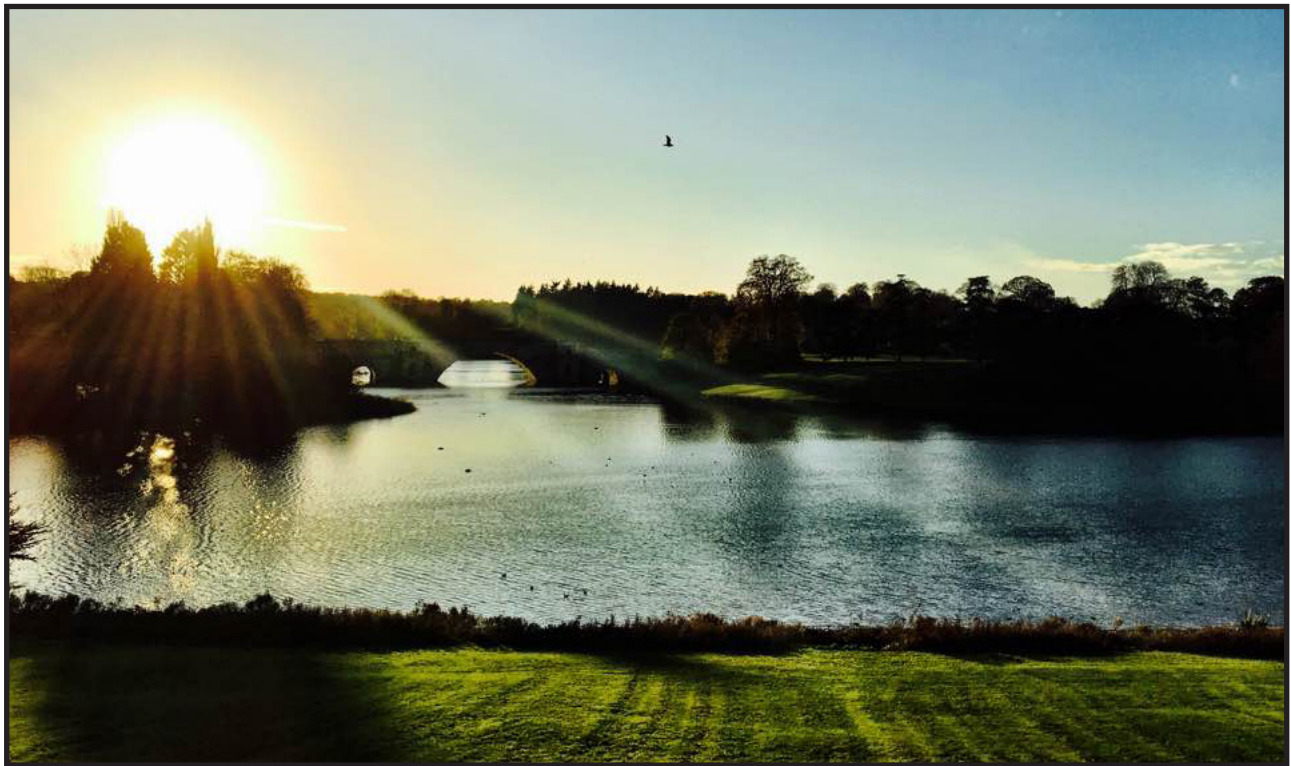
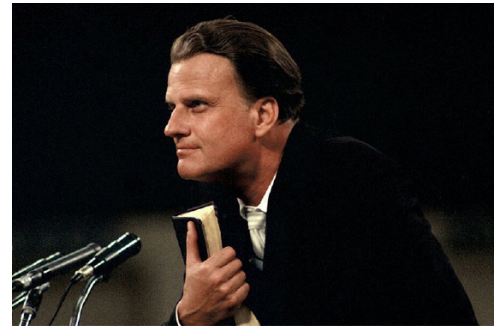
Looking to the Hills. Marsha McLaren, 2018

Remembering Billy Graham

7 November 1918 – 21 February 2018

“This will be said many times in the days to come: few Christians have had a larger impact on the world than evangelist Billy Graham—in all of history. He will be remembered for his character, his accomplishments, and his amazing connections with global leaders over many decades. We will also remember him for his words—and perhaps one phrase that he never tired of repeating: “The Bible says...””

—Mel Lawrenz, *The Brook Network*



Kevin James Bywater

Peace with God

By Kevin James Bywater—Oxford, England

At the mature age of 99, Billy Graham has died. It is said that he preached the gospel around the world. Indeed, and he preached with more than merely his voice. Here are my quick reflections.

In late-1987 I was introduced to Billy Graham by way of a small gospel tract entitled, “Steps to Peace with God.” As far as I recall, it was comparable to the “Four Spiritual Laws” booklet. My aunt, Gayla, gave me the tract, with other items to read and study.

Now, at the time I read the tract I was facing a growing skepticism, perhaps even cynicism, with regards to religious truth-claims. I had been investigating the Mormon Church for some weeks and my confidence in the church and its leaders was quickly diminishing.

I recall studying (more intently than ever before in my life) for hours on end at the university library. Fissures in the foundation of my Mormon faith appeared with increasing frequency. My prayers to God for help and clarity also increased in frequency.

Then came a moment when I realized that I had been captivated by conceptions of God that were distortive, arguably even idolatrous. I had participated in these conceptions; I had shared them.

I had been reading large sections of the Bible at the time and noticed time and again how biblical teachings differed from those of the LDS Church. When I approached trusted individuals with these tensions, either the explanations offered failed to satisfy or I heard remarks demeaning of the Bible.

But these remarks no longer had the traction they might have had. I became convicted that I had been mistaken, misled, and that I needed to realign my affections, my allegiance. But I wasn't certain how. I continued to pray.

And this is where Graham's little pamphlet came in. As I read it through, I was skeptical of how it was using biblical passages. In turn, I would read several verses before and after those referenced in the booklet. Then I often would read chapters before and after. Then entire books of the Bible. And so many things started to make so much sense.

Clarity arrived amidst the confusion, conviction of sins alongside new theological convictions. When I reached the end of the pamphlet (which wouldn't have taken days and days, were I not reading so much of the Bible and researching so much at the university library), there were some pointers for prayer.

My first thought was that these were someone else's suggestions. I didn't want to pray someone else's prayer. But as I read things through, I realized that the words written there were precisely what I wanted to pray. So, kneeling in the dark night, I prayed, weeping with repentance and faith.

But nothing happened.

Now, I'm not sure what I was expecting. An angel? An earthquake? Some sensation? I can't say. But whatever it was, it didn't happen. So, I was determined to pray the prayer again. I explained to God that I really did mean it. And, again, nothing happened. Needless to say, I was deeply distraught. When I awoke the next morning, I prayed the prayer yet again, and, again, there was nothing that occurred indicating that it had "worked." That made three times.

I explained to a house mate what was happening and he recommended that I meet up with someone from Campus Crusade for Christ (now called Cru). It might have been the next day when I met Dave Hunter on the campus of Utah State University. I told Dave what was happening. I had discovered historical cover-ups, false prophecies, changes in doctrine. I no longer had confidence in the LDS Church. But my confidence in Jesus had not waned. However, the prayer I had been praying was not working.

One can only imagine how bemused Dave must have been. But he was prepared with the historic "fact, faith, feeling" train diagram. He named the engine "fact." This stood for the fact of God, His word, and His work in Jesus Christ.

The coal car (the next car) was named "faith." This stood for my love for Jesus, my trust in Him, and repentance from my sins, including the sins of dishonoring God through the traditions of men.

Dave asked if a train could run with an engine and with a fuel car. I suspected that it could. Then he added a caboose and labeled it "feelings." This stood for how one might feel about some truth, and how the truth might already be running, even if one didn't feel that way. Then he noted that the combined truth of God and my faith in Christ meant that God had forgiven my sins, even if I didn't feel like that had happened.

I'll tell you something: my life has not been the same since. The well of gratitude has not diminished to this very day. Sure, there have been trials, struggles, many challenges. But I rest in the knowledge of Jesus' faithfulness, the assurance of the truth of His word, and the enduring love of the body of Christ.

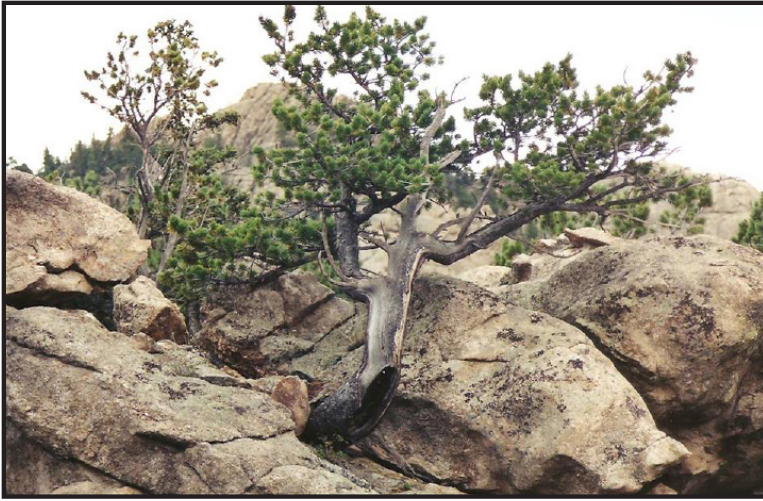
Lord Jesus, thank you for Billy Graham. May he rest at peace upon hearing Your words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Kevin James Bywater grew up in Brigham City and studied at Utah State University. He directs a study abroad program in Oxford designed to cultivate scholarly skills and virtues among Christian students. He and his family reside in the shire, west of Oxford. See oxfordstudycentre.org for further information.



"'What God asks of men,' said Graham, 'is faith. His invisibility is the truest test of that faith. To know who sees him, God makes himself unseen. . . . In a single, silent moment, (Louie's) rage, his fear, his humiliation and helplessness, had fallen away. That morning, he believed, he was a new creation. Softly, he wept.'"

—Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption*



“The Bible Says”

By Georgia Herod—Liberty, Missouri

With those decades-old recollections flooding my mind, I made my way downstairs to the first bookcase, second shelf on the far left, where I pulled off a very worn, tattered copy of a book held together with a rubber band. A Campus Crusade student had given me the book a couple of years before the kindergarten incident. God had used this book, *Faith Is Not a Feeling* by Ney Bailey, to confront my questions, my doubts, my fickleness—the roller coaster ride of my faith journey. It was the beginning of my learning to walk by faith.

As I first read the book and began to search the Scripture, I realized that I needed to know how to regard Scripture. God had answers for that too. “*The word of the Lord abides forever*” (1 Peter 1:25). “*Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words shall not pass away*” (Matt. 24:35).

“*The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever*” (Isaiah 40:8).

My feelings change from day to day, sometimes, moment by moment, but God says that His Word will never change. Truth stands. The truth of God’s Word does not depend on my acknowledging that it is true. As a result, I was repeatedly faced with the choice: Would I base what I believe on my emotions, thoughts, experiences, or circumstances, or on the truth of God’s character and His Word?

I’m not sure when I encountered the practice of “renewing my mind” (Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4:23-24), but bit by bit, I began to seek God’s perspective in a new way, asking, What does God’s Word say about . . . ? When I felt condemned, Romans 8:1 became my light: “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*”

When I felt unloved, unwanted, and unworthy, Isaiah 43:1-4 became my foundation. The Lord God of the universe declares that He created me, redeemed me; He’s called me by name. I am His. He declares that He will always be with me—even when I’m walking through difficult times. He says I am precious and honored. He says He loves me.

When I was afraid, Isaiah 26:3 became my shelter: “He

As my five-year old daughter came stumbling into the house, visibly upset, tearful, and angry, I was sure that she had been hurt physically. She was so upset she couldn’t talk. Trying to console her, I repeatedly asked, “What happened?”

In the safety of my arms, she finally was able to say, “Oh, Momma, you’d be upset too if they said to you, what they said to me.” Who? Said what? Walking home from kindergarten, the neighborhood girls had said to my daughter, “You don’t go to the true church.”

And in that moment when those words spilled out of her mouth, Apologetics 101 began with our children. We walked across the kitchen. I picked up my Bible, turned to her, and said, “All your life you will encounter those who think and believe differently than you do. In this house, we base everything we believe and how we live on the Bible. It’s God’s Word. If we have questions, we will ask, ‘What does the Bible say?’”

Billy Graham repeatedly said in his preaching, “The Bible says.” That phrase was synonymous with “God says.” In other words, what the Bible says is the final authority. I hadn’t always had that confidence. In fact, on that crisp fall day, I was still in the early stages of learning how to walk by faith, of learning to take God at His Word. I wish I could say that I had never wavered in that.

Reading and rereading Kevin Bywater’s reflection brought to mind my own struggle with questioning my relationship with God because I didn’t “feel” loved, because I felt like a failure, because I didn’t feel accepted or forgiven or . . . Did I believe that God is Who He says He is, that He will do what He says He will do? Would I trust Him?

is kept in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee.” When there was more month than money, I claimed Philippians 4:19—“*And my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*” God is faithful!

None of those situations were immediately changed. I learned it took practice to form the habit of taking God at His Word. Before long I realized that God wanted to set me free from longstanding patterns of thinking, attitudes that affected my life in ways I did not recognize. The first “big” one came when my husband and I began talking about having children. He was ready to be a father; I wasn’t ready to be a mother. In fact, I was fairly sure I didn’t want to be a mother at all. Since there’s no compromise on becoming parents, we were at an impasse. We agreed to pray and then discuss the subject again. Why was I so opposed?

Over several weeks I came to see that my attitudes about having children had their roots in my own upbringing. Voices echoed in my head: “I hope you never have children.” “I wish I’d never had children.” “If I didn’t have you kids . . .” Early I sensed that children were burdens and obstacles in life, to be endured, not enjoyed. From my experience, having children wasn’t a noble goal. I definitely needed a renewed mind regarding becoming a parent.

And then, one day as I was reading the Psalms, I was hit with an entirely different perspective. The Bible says, “*Behold, children are a gift of the Lord; The fruit of the womb is a reward*” (Psalm 127: 3).

One verse, two lines—God’s view of having children. In the coming days I processed those words: burden vs. gift; bane vs. blessing; penalty vs. reward. I had a choice to make. On a daily basis, I went before the Lord, asking Him to change my heart and mind so that I’d view becoming a mother from His vantage point.

Within a month or so, I awoke one morning in peace. I had stopped wrestling. As I sat in stillness before the Lord, I surrendered my old attitude and embraced God’s perspective. I was ready to say “yes” to becoming a mother. A year later, our daughter was born.

Does that mean I never had questions again? No. What parents haven’t had questions about their role? But each time I wavered, I’d go back to my commitment to take God at His Word. As a result, I began looking for God’s truth regarding every area of my life—and I came to the

point of saying with Ney Bailey

- God’s Word is truer than anything I feel.
- God’s Word is truer than anything I experience.
- God’s Word is truer than any circumstance I will ever face.
- God’s Word is truer than anything in the world.¹

A few months ago, a friend shared another book: *She Reads Truth* by Raechel Myers and Amanda Bible Williams, creators of a blog which encourages women to read God’s Word daily, to find God’s Truth in contrast to emotions and thoughts and experiences and circumstances, in contrast to the voices that bombard us daily. By taking God at His Word, we can assert . . .

- God’s promises are permanent when the world’s promises pass away.
- God’s covenant is permanent when our good intentions pass away.
- God’s love is permanent when our good behavior passes away.
- God’s mercy is permanent when our bodies pass away.
- God’s hope is permanent when our plans are passing away.
- God’s sovereignty is permanent when our power is passing away.
- The gospel is permanent when our belief is passing away.²

Thank you, Billy Graham, for declaring time and time again: “The Bible says.” Thank you, Kevin Bywater, for sharing your struggle with fact, faith, and feeling. Thank You, Father God, that Your truth will stand forever.

¹Bailey, Ney. *Faith Is Not a Feeling* (Here’s Life Publishers, Inc., 1978), 24.

²Myers, Raechel and Amanda Bible Williams (R & H Publishing Group, 2016), 172.



In the years since beginning to take God at His Word, **Georgia Herod** has learned by experience that children--and now grandchildren--are indeed, a “gift from the Lord.” She and her husband James live in Liberty, Missouri, enjoying their adult children and five grandchildren.

Truth vs Lies

Freedom from Darkness

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What the Bible says about you

Satan wants to fill our minds and hearts with fear, deceit, and doubt. We must not give in to these lies. This 3-step process takes the lies of the devil and speaks the truth of Jesus.

What you think or feel about yourself is often not what scripture says or how Jesus feels. Use this resource as a way to speak truth back into your life.

WHAT I THINK OR FEEL

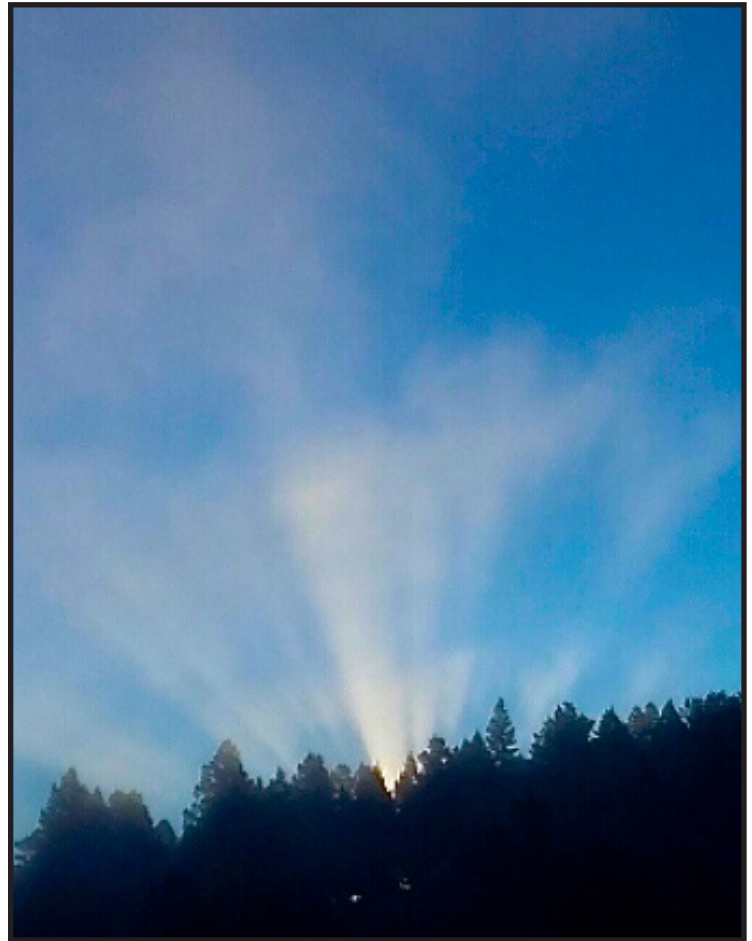
I am unworthy and unacceptable.
I am alone.
I feel like a failure and inadequate.
I have no confidence.
I feel responsible for my life.

WHAT IS TRUE ABOUT ME

God has accepted me.
God is always with me.
God gives me adequacy.
God makes me bold and confident.
God is responsible and faithful to me.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

Romans 15:7, Psalm 139,
Deuteronomy 31:6, Romans 8:38-39,
2 Corinthians 3:5-6, Philippians 4:13,
Proverbs 3:26, Proverbs 14:26,
Philippians 1:6, Philippians 2:13.



Faithfulness Every Morning. Marsha McLaren

Editor's Note: During the last two weeks of July 2015, my second cousin and two believing friends died suddenly. Another was diagnosed with terminal cancer and a good friend lost her son in a car accident. In the midst of shock and loss, I was comforted with the knowledge that eternal life is promised to all who belong to God because Jesus has redeemed us with His life. I ask myself: *Since I don't know the day of my own demise, how can I best prepare for meeting my Savior?*

“So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.” Psalm 90:12

Numbering Our Days

Written in 2015 and dedicated to my good friend, Pauleen Dolling
2 February 1943 — 27 November 2017

By Diane Kulkarni — Main Street Church in Brigham City, Utah

Today, I drove into the cemetery to visit the grave site of a dear friend, someone I have known most of my 42 years in this place. We grew close some time ago when we discovered how many interests we shared in common, particularly, our love of Bible study.

As I stood there looking down at her headstone, memories came flooding back of our times together in various groups, mental snapshots of insight, tears, and laughter. Vivid scenes of her and a friend coming early to help me prepare for our study group and the three of us on our knees praying for those who would be taking part will always stay with me as a demonstration of their love.

I smiled, remembering one particular gathering she and I attended when something my husband said about deciding to take me to Israel on a tour inspired a surprising response from her, which later became the context for an against-all-odds event that still amazes me. Her unique sense of humor that night never fails to bring a big smile to my face. But that's another story.

Coming out of my reverie, I noticed how many headstones of a variety of sizes, shapes and colors formed neat rows and were encroaching on the once-vast soccer fields on the south side of the burial ground. When my husband and I first arrived in this small northern Utah town, we had walked through the oldest part, reading headstone inscriptions to get a feel for who the early settlers and later Mormon pioneers had been, the ones who had expanded the town or farmed the surrounding countryside.

As we drove by on Saturday mornings, we saw teams of exuberant youth and their cheering parents enjoying baseball and soccer. Their excitement had echoed off the nearby hills. Now all I heard was a low breeze filling the space as the dead crept silently toward the baseball diamond.



Light out of Darkness. Watercolor by Judy Christopher—Grants Pass, OR

My maternal grandmother's voice took me back 55 years to when she was driving us somewhere in her little pink Rambler station wagon. As we passed Mount Olivet Cemetery, she quipped: "Dinah, people are just dying to get in there!" We both laughed, but her casual remark stayed with me.

And then I was transported to my mother's memorial service in 1974, held just six weeks after her mother's passing. So many family and friends came, even the men who worked in the brickyard where she had been the bookkeeper. They had dressed up to honor her. Everyone's words were

comforting, even in my fog of loss, particularly those who had known her during her seven years in AA. They had nothing but praise for her faithfulness to them.

When it was time for the service, we all entered the sanctuary. Rosy light filtered through the stained glass. I held hands with my sister and brother. Within a few minutes, a pastor none of us knew read Psalm 90 written by Moses. I have revisited the wisdom found in verse 12 many times: "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom."

The unique thing about my visit to my friend's grave today was there were no tears or sense of loss. We had often talked about how glorious it will be to finally see

Jesus face-to-face and live with Him for eternity. Every time we met, we expressed our thanks to God who had given us the precious gift of friendship to encourage us all our years.

I wonder what it will be like to reunite with her one day in Heaven. As I stood looking down at her headstone. I took in the exquisite details she had selected as her legacy in stone. They would remind her family and friends of what she treasured and followed, the words of Jesus: *"Love one another as I have loved you."*

Taking in those words, I remembered our last summer lunch at a drive-in out on noisy Highway 89. She told me that although she was in very good health, she'd decided to "put her house in order" so that her children and grandchildren would have no stress when she and her husband passed away. She listed the various things she had taken care of, including finalizing their estate planning, writing out their preferred funeral arrangements, buying a cemetery plot, and planning for the perfect headstone.



Pauleen and Diane

The stonework of her memorial was intricate and unlike anything I'd ever seen. "This is so beautiful," I said. "I never knew your maiden name."

She smiled, telling me that she was so happy with the workmanship of the stonemason, in particular the addition of the cross and two doves, symbolizing the Holy Spirit. "I love the passage," she said.

We walked back to her car and I thought of Moses' words about presenting a heart of wisdom to God.

"You know, you have inspired me!" I said, buckling my seatbelt and putting on my sun glasses. We drove out of the cemetery, heading for lunch at Arby's,

"I have given this a lot of thought since we talked about your plans during the summer. I finally found what I'd like to preserve as my legacy. Jesus' words from John 11:25-26 would have to be condensed to, *'I am the Resurrection and the Life...he who believes in Me will never die.'*

And if there is room, I'd love to add a postscript found on a card tucked into my mother's AA devotional. But of course, I'd have to put it in the past tense." She looked at me with a smile, expecting the punch line.

"It will read: 'I couldn't. He could. So I let Him!'"

"In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't."

– Blaise Pascal

Pauleen Guthmann Dolling, the second of 11 children, was born in Grand Island, Nebraska. She gave freely of her time and resources to those in need and loved the Lord with all her heart. She spent many years with us studying the Bible and teaching others in her church. She is survived by her husband, Bill and their five children, 13 grandchildren, and 13 nieces and nephews.



Because Our Stories Live On. . . .

The following stories, written by close friends of mine, were contributed for various writing projects designed to encourage others. Pauleen Dolling, Mary Lou Thirkill, and her daughter, Denise Green passed into God's eternity last year, but their stories live on! —*Editor*

Pauleen wrote this in 1999 for our first collection of stories called *God's Wisdom Project: Remembering and Celebrating God for His Faithfulness*.

I Need a Private Time, Mother

Wendy's eyes were cast downward as she slowly trudged up to the door. She normally bounced up the path, so I knew she was upset about something. Cute freckles always added an extra special warmth to Wendy, but today she was different. Her long brownish-red bangs hid her hazel eyes. "Mom," she said softly as she hung up her jacket in the front closet. That was another clue to her feelings. She usually hollered, "Hi!" when she came in and dumped her jacket on the door near the rocking chair. She normally carried on a nonstop monologue--she's fun to listen to as she shares her day's stories. "Mom," she said again.

"Yes, dear," I said, coming from the kitchen. "What is it?" "I need to talk to you. Could we have a private time?" She walked into my bedroom and lay down on the bed. I followed her and shut the door. I laid beside her and waited for her to start the conversation.

"Mom," she began. "I don't know what to do. The girls asked me today if I was going to join The Group again this year. They want to know right away because they are all going bowling tomorrow night."

"What did you say?" I asked. She turned on her side, away from me. "I said I would have to talk it over with you. . . . I just keep remembering how rude some of the girls were to me last year, and I don't know if I want to go through that again."

I recalled the hurt she had expressed many times when she felt like she wasn't good enough, when she wasn't chosen for a game, or the time when no one wanted to ride in our car when The Group went on an outing. Those incidents, apparently, were still stinging her heart--and mine.

"Madge and Jane are joining and they said they wanted me to join, too." Wendy went on, "I really like them and I like to do things with them, so in a way I would like to join again." I could tell she was torn between wanting to belong and knowing deep down that only two girls out of the whole group would treat her well.

"You could always make plans to do something special with just Madge and Jane and not have to worry about joining The Group," I said, trying to give her another option.

"Another thing I was thinking about," she said. "I really don't like selling all those cookies!" Her freckled nose crinkled. "If I joined, I would tell them that I don't want to sell cookies."

"That would be all right with me. You know how I feel about those things." After having had three other daughters who were in The Group, I had had it with cookie sales and deliveries! Yes, trying to decipher addresses from a rain-soaked paper takes more than good eyes!

"I really don't know what to do--I want to join and I don't want to join," she said, sitting up on the side of the bed. "What should I do?"

"Honey, I can't tell you what to do. That is something you need to decide for yourself." Wendy's eyes looked up in deep thought.

"I will be confirmed this year and that will mean extra work at religion class. I don't know if I can handle that and The Group on the same day," she said. "If I say I'm not joining, the leader will probably call to find out why. Oh, Mom, I don't know what to do."

"Have you ever heard about laying out a fleece before the Lord?" I questioned.

"No. What's a fleece?" She asked, her interest piqued.

"In the Old Testament, a man named Gideon needed some advice and asked God for an answer (Judges 6:36-40). He put out a fleece, which is the hide of an animal. He said to God. *'If the fleece is wet in the morning and the ground is dry around it, then I will know what to do.'* The next morning, the fleece was so wet, he could wring out the water, but the ground around it was dry. Still, he was unsure of God's will. He wanted to make sure it was God's answer. The next night he told God that if the fleece were dry in the morning and the ground around it was wet, then he would be sure the answer was from God.

The next morning, the fleece was dry and the ground was wet. He knew then that this was God's confirmation for him. So Wendy, do you want to lay a fleece before the Lord, to see if you should join the Group or not?"

"I guess that would be okay. But what do we do?" Her eyes lit up.

"I don't know for sure, but we'll think of something. Let's sleep on it and talk about it in the morning." I hugged her. "Try not to worry about it now."

The next morning she jumped up the stairs and into the kitchen for breakfast. "Did you think of anything last night, Mom?"

"About what?" My brain was not functioning at that hour.

"About The Group." She looked at me, a bit disgusted.

"No, but something will come. Just give it time." Wendy started to pour her cereal. "I forgot to tell you, but my Spanish teacher said we would have a test either Wednesday or Friday this week. I hope it's on Friday because Tuesday is full with religion class and The Group, if I join, and I wouldn't have time to study until late at night."

"That might be a good fleece," I said slowly. "What do you think? If your test is on Wednesday, then that is the Lord's answer that you shouldn't join. If the test will be on Friday, then that's your go-ahead to join." I took the milk carton from the refrigerator and handed it to her.

"That sounds okay with me, and I should find out today because it is Tuesday," she replied. "Also, I need to let them know because they will be bowling tonight." She ate her breakfast slowly, stirring her cereal and staring out into space. I was sure her mind was busy digesting our conversation.

The children all left for school. My mind, too, was turning over previous years of "private times," which had started when the oldest child, the only boy, Justin, began school. He was five years old in May when Wendy, our fifth and youngest child was born in July. By that time, I was feeling bedrugged and frustrated with all the demands of rearing five little ones under the age of five. I felt I needed time alone with each child, which seemed an unlikely possibility. There was always too much activity and too much noise for me to concentrate. It would be hard to try to understand the emotional needs of an individual child without decisive action.

It seemed like the only thing I accomplished was providing for their physical needs. From feeding, bathing, and changing diapers to helping the older ones dress, wash and eat, I managed to do the laundry and get the meals on. Keeping the house neat was a chore.

I also felt that I needed to talk to the children on an individual basis. It was all "group work" at that time. The children were cute, trying to help fold clothes or climb up on chairs to wash the dishes. They loved to help bake cookies. There were times when I just prayed for a few minutes without them. I lived with mixed emotions the majority of the time.

Soon after Justin started school, I decided that he and I needed to get away from the confusion. So a little routine began. Once Justin came home from school, collected himself and was ready, he and I went into my bedroom, closed the door and lay on my bed with all his papers, projects, feelings and thoughts of the day. No one was allowed to disturb us during this time. This whole procedure lasted anywhere from 10-20 minutes.

The children knew that their time would come, although sometimes I thought I was too busy or did not even want to listen. The first one home would begin while the others sat on the couch, waiting for their turn. It looked like a confessional scene.

At first, the "private time" was a good way to go over their work and projects. Later, it become more involved as they revealed their deeper feelings, moral dilemmas and decision-making. As they grew, what began as a daily routine became a once or twice-a-week routine. Now they walk by me and say, "I need a private time, Mother." They go into my bedroom. I naturally follow because I'm curious about what is on their minds. Lately, it is more often I who feel the need to talk to one of them, so I say, "I need a private time with you." I'm sure the one in question is just as curious to find out what is on my mind!

The activity of the house has certainly tripled or even quintupled since the children have all emerged as teenagers and are not as willing to share their innermost feelings and activities with me, but that's okay. I see it as cutting the apron strings. Maybe they are even trying to save some of my nerve endings. Those are times I thank God that I am a blonde--the gray hairs don't show!

The doorbell just rang and my reflection vanishes. I guess the day must begin and the dreaming stop--things to be done, errands to run. I'm glad I opened the door to a friend with a warm heart and an open ear. The day passed quickly, and soon it was time for the children to come home from school.

Wendy rushed through the door. "Mom, they are going to call at 4 o'clock to see if I can go bowling. . . I decided I want to go and I want to join The Group after all. I want to go to all the activities and Jane wants me to come, too." Her words were spilling out so fast I could hardly understand. She was full of excitement and anticipation.

"Honey, come into my bedroom." I took her hand and we sat on the side of the bed. "When is your Spanish test this week?"

Her eyes were filling with tears. "I don't care when it is. I want to go bowling!" She crossed her arms together, took a couple of deep breaths and said, "It's tomorrow, but I don't want to do that fleece thing. I want to go bowling. Besides, what do I say when they call? I don't want to tell anybody about a fleece."

"I don't blame you, but you need to stick to the bargain you made. God will not let you down. He has something else planned for you, but you need to obey Him." I felt unsure.

She was so excited about going bowling--and who was I to say this was really God's way? I was tempted to give in and say, "Go ahead."

The telephone rang. She looked up at me. "That's probably them now--what do I say?"

"You'll have to say what you think best," I said, trying to keep my feelings out of the statement. She walked out into the kitchen and picked up the receiver. "Hello. . . This is Wendy. . . No, I won't be able to go with you tonight. . .

Thank you for calling." She hung up the phone and went downstairs. I closed my eyes and whispered, "Please, Lord, don't let her down."

The girls in The Group questioned her many times during the week about her decision. Some of the more "popular" ones ignored her or asked her if she thought she was too good to join. All these things hurt and were discussed in our private times.

"You know, Mom," she said, "they will probably treat Sally rudely again this year, even though she did join. And no doubt, I would have gotten it, too. I'm glad I don't have to put up with it."



Fruitful. Watercolor by Judy Christopher

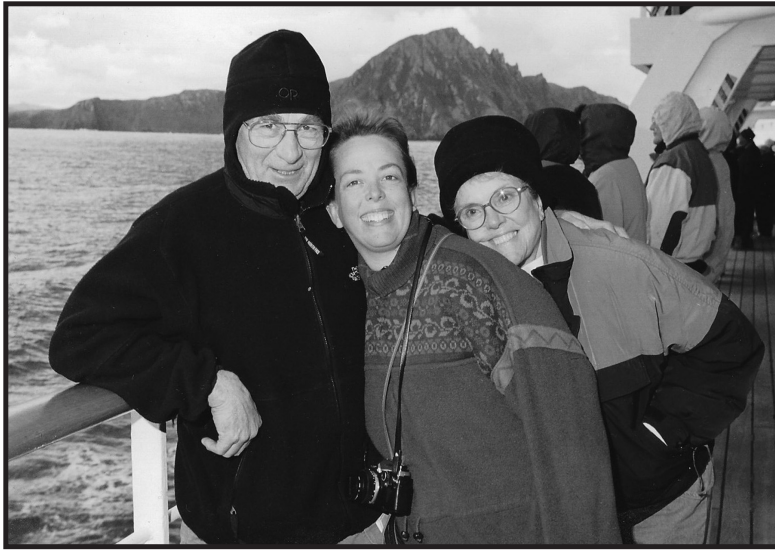
The following week another test was scheduled for Wednesday and we took that as an affirmation from God. The Lord has filled her life with enough that she doesn't miss the added activity. He has answered a mother's prayer.

I am now realizing that those private times with Wendy and the others set the groundwork for our communication. I was unaware of it at the time, though "Soul" was the content of Wendy's private time.

I am so grateful and thankful that each of them has shared their lives with me throughout the years. Now that they are all teenagers, we have passed the small talk communication. I didn't understand or fathom that through the years, a few minutes alone talking with a child could bring such positive results.

I just wondered why the bedspreads wore out so fast.

Pauleen Guthmann Dolling, the second of 11 children, was born in Grand Island, Nebraska. She gave freely of her time and resources to those in need and loved the Lord with all her heart. She spent many years with us studying the Bible and teaching others in her church. She is survived by her husband, Bill and their five children, 13 grandchildren, and 13 nieces and nephews.



Mary Lou (left) with husband, John, and daughter, Denise—Cape Horn.

Some years ago, Dawn, a very good friend of mine, moved to Redlands, California. While she was there, she got into some eastern religions, studying and perfecting some meditations to the point where she could go out into a freezing snow storm without a coat and not get cold. “It’s mind over matter,” she said.

We were both into this philosophy thing before we met each other, and because we had so many interests in common, that’s why we became good friends. Our friendship continued in more depth after she moved to California, because there were many opportunities there to look into the occult. She sent me a few books to study on my own.

Then she wrote that she and a few of her friends had gotten together once a week to work on the out-of-body experience. “One girl got out and then couldn’t get back in,” she told me, “so when she finally did, I decided never to dabble with that again.”

The next thing she did was get involved with a group of born again Christians who prayed a lot. By then she was confused by all religious philosophies. One day she went skiing. At the top of the hill, she said, “I give up! I don’t know if You’re true or not. If You are true, You’re going to have to show me *right now!*”

She skied down the hill, fell, and broke her neck. She laid there in the snow and said, “All right, if that’s the way You want it. I’m Yours.”

Once off the hill, a doctor did X-rays and diagnosed her injuries as a sprain. Her husband tied her in the seat of the car to get her home, which was 300 miles away. Once at home, they couldn’t see a doctor until the next morning. When he examined her, he admitted her to

“We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.”

Proverbs 16:9 NLT

Steps Directed by God

1980

By Mary Lou Thirkill—Ogden, Utah

11 September 1931—23 July 2017

the hospital, but they didn’t operate for two weeks. She told me that the whole time this was happening, she was talking to God and He was answering her. The night before the surgery, she told her nurse that she wanted to talk to a minister or a priest. A priest came and she told him that she wanted the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Although he didn’t understand what she was asking, he prayed what she asked and baptized her. She said, “I felt a complete feeling of warmth over my whole body and raised my hands, saying ‘I’m healed!’ I had such peace about it from then on.”

On the surgical table, the doctors found a hole in her head. They did everything needed and brought her back to her room. She didn’t have pain, and refused all medication. She told me that she was bathed in a warm light the whole time she was in the hospital.

At the time all of this happened, I’d only heard that she’d been seriously injured, was in a full body cast at first and later in a neck cast. She and her husband came back to see us. He went skiing with my husband, John, and Dawn stayed to talk with me. We sat for long periods of time. I was impressed with her calm inner glow. She was at peace with herself, and I knew there was something different, a happiness that I wanted for myself.

At this time, she was completely healed and had no pain. She was not wearing a brace. She’d had plastic surgery for the back of her head because no hair had grown over the bald spot. “I can do anything I want, like cross-country skiing and playing tennis, but I won’t be downhill skiing anymore. When I fell and broke my neck, I knew I was in God’s hands and whatever happened, I belonged to Him and He was mine.”

“Know that the LORD Himself is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.” Psalm 100:3 NASB

She told me about the group she was involved in and the joy they had and the way they prayed. What really appealed to me was that they spoke in tongues and I'd never heard of that, except when we were kids, we'd run back and forth in front of the Pentecostal church, scared to death. I asked her about this and she made me take out my Bible to look up references. I asked her many questions, but she told me, “You really ought to get into a Bible study and I think we should go to the Lutheran Church for it.”

“No way! I can read it myself,” I said. Besides, I had nothing to do with the Lutheran Church.

“Mary Lou, the Lord told me that this is the year for Mary Lou to hear the Truth.” She had come to tell me, and I was amazed.

The next day my encounter group met. We always read books like *I'm OK, You're OK*. I went over there after trying to read the book of Revelation in the *Good News for Modern Man* (New Testament), but I couldn't get through it at all. So I tucked it into my pocket. A friend, Donna, was passing out the current book we would be reading, and being smart-mouthed, I said, “I don't think I'll read this today. I want to read this book.” I pulled out the *Good News*. “I'm reading Revelation, and I must admit I'm having a little trouble with it.”

Donna said, “That's a pretty good book to read, and if you're interested, tomorrow morning we're starting a study at the Lutheran church. If you'd like to go.” *Maybe this isn't all a can of worms; maybe I'd better start listening.* So I went.

But I met Olivia there, a woman I just despised and she didn't like me either. It seemed we were always being thrown together, so it was difficult to get through those encounters civilly. And now here she was again, at the Bible study. *Asking questions!* One of the things that really turned me off about her was that in the encounter group another lady and I had just read Taylor Caldwell's book on reincarnation and both of us loved it. I felt that concept answered all my questions about life.

So Olivia informed me that it was occult. *Who are you to say?* From then on, whatever she did irritated me and nothing she did could fix that. When I got to Bible study, there she was and I thought, *Oh no!* She knew everything, which irritated me even more.

I wrote to Dawn to tell her about the study and she wrote back saying, “Pray for the Holy Spirit to show you the truth, and He will.” She talked a lot about being raised in a Christian home where the Trinity was a basic belief. I was familiar with the Spirit, so every time I went to Bible study, I prayed for Him to show me the truth and He did. The Bible became like food. I couldn't get enough of it.

Then Olivia, this darling person I hated, answered some of my questions. We were studying Acts 2 about the coming of the Holy Spirit on believers in fire, power and pentecostal experience. I went to a prayer meeting with Olivia. I walked in the door and those people hit me with so much love. They were beaming and I was crying, so they gathered around me, laying their hands on me. One prayed that God would fill me with His Spirit. I went home later believing that Jesus had come into my life.

Twenty-four hours later, I was vacuuming my rug and fear came upon me, a physical fear that someone was pushing me down, and for no good reason I became afraid. I didn't know what to do or why I was so frightened, so I called Olivia, but she wasn't home. I called Dawn in California and asked her what might be going on. She wanted to know what happened and I told her I felt terrified. “Do you still believe in reincarnation?” she asked.

“Sure, why not?” I said.

“You're going to have to renounce that and every one of your old beliefs. Ask God to come and cleanse you and take their place.”

So each day for the next three weeks, I was reminded of something I needed to release, even things I thought were benign. I asked for forgiveness and the Holy Spirit cleaned them out. That included all the books by Edgar Cayce, which I'd read. One day I could not read anything; the words were scrambled. I turned on the television and the words were garbled. When I opened the Bible, however, I could read it, so I went to sleep with it on my stomach.

The cleansing process went on for three weeks. At the end of that time I had such a peace. I knew who God was and that He lived inside of me and everywhere. He'd actually chosen me and told me that He loved me.



I filled up two garbage cans with my occult books, some were no doubt valuable because of their age and their binding. I dumped all my books on Christian Science, Astrology and the old ouija board that my son destroyed with a hammer. If I forgot something, God directed me how to find it. Eventually, all of it was gone.

During all of this time, Dawn's words kept me steady, "This is the year for Mary Lou to hear the truth." I also held on to the idea that since God protected the baby Moses set adrift on the Nile, He would protect me, too.

I think I became involved in the occult because as I was growing up, I didn't get answers to my questions. People would always answer me with, "When you get to Heaven, you can ask God and He'll tell you." So I began searching on my own and went into the occult thinking the answers to my questions would be there.

No one ever told me that these things were forbidden in Scripture, that's why I'm sharing now.

Deuteronomy 18:9-14:

"When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, be very careful not to imitate the detestable customs of the nations living there. For example, never sacrifice your son or daughter as a burnt offering. And do not let your people practice fortune-telling, or use sorcery, or interpret omens, or engage in witchcraft, or cast spells, or function as mediums or psychics, or call forth the spirits of the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord. It is because the other nations have done these detestable things that the Lord your God will drive them out ahead of you. But you must be blameless before the Lord your God. The nations you are about to displace consult sorcerers and fortune-tellers, but the Lord your God forbids you to do such things."

Mary Lou Thirkill was a loving mother, a talented portrait artist, as well as an enthusiastic skier and tennis player. She spent several years in our Brigham City Bible study. Her husband of 67 years, John, passed away two months after Mary Lou and six months after their daughter, Denise Thirkill-Green. Two sons, seven grandchildren, and three great grandchildren are surviving.

“Wait on the *LORD*: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the *LORD*.”

Psalm 27:14 KJV



My Makeover

By Denise Thirkill-Green—Rogersville, Alabama

3 July 1964—20 March 2017

Denise wrote in 2006 for our second collection called *This I Recall, Therefore I Have Hope*.

May 14th, 2005, started out like any other Saturday—except that I was admitted to Huntsville Hospital in Huntsville, Alabama, with a heart rate of 288 beats per minute and a blood pressure rate of 70 over 40. I was very afraid.

A couple of days and several tests later, the electrocardiologist said the results showed I was suffering from Supraventricular Tachycardia (SVT). A procedure should be performed to recreate the SVT and try to ablate or destroy the pathway or group of cells that were causing the abnormal heart rhythm. At this point, I came unglued. I just knew that my days on earth were nearly done.

My mother and husband, who are very strong believers in God, began sharing religious stories and reading Bible verses to me. I was not a faithful person but had started attending a small church in our new community. The minister of that church stopped in to check on me. Many people were praying for me, and I was comforted. The ablation procedure was unsuccessful, but I survived!

This was one of several blessings I would be receiving from our Lord during “my makeover.” Upon recovery, I was sent home and placed on a medication that would regulate my heart rate. Several months passed. I continued going to church, but life didn’t change too much for me, except for the addition of a daily pill.

I died on August 25, 2005. I was preparing to play tennis and collapsed. I have no recollection of this and am told that is for the best. When I was found, I was blue, not

breathing, and had no pulse. Someone ran to the courts, shouting, “We need medical personnel!” At that time, I received another blessing: an anesthetist, an R.N., and a doctor were all close at hand and began CPR. Moments passed, and I still had no pulse. Still, God made a way for me to survive: the Women’s Tennis Association had recently purchased an Automated Electronic Defibrillator (AED) and arranged for training. This AED was used to re-establish my heart rhythm, and I was transported to the hospital.

Again, I was afraid, VERY afraid. I finally listened to what God was saying to me: “Child of mine, it is time for you to turn your life over to Me. It is time for you to pay heed. It is time for you to believe and to share My Word.”

On August 29, 2005, I underwent surgery and received an internal defibrillator, sort of my very own personal paramedic. Going into the procedure, I was not afraid, nor was I panicked. I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if it were my time to die, I’d be going home to be with the Lord.

Shortly thereafter, I was baptized and am continuing to learn all the glorious ways of Christ Jesus. I share my blessings and God’s Word every opportunity I get, and my opportunities continue to expand. I have since become a board member of the Madison County Medical Alliance that, among several projects, is raising funds (and awareness) to make AEDs available throughout the local community. With this responsibility, I participate in outreach programs where I share my experience.

No words adequately express my gratitude, for God has truly blessed me. I am a new person both inside and out. I hope that I am kinder, more understanding, and more enjoyable to be around. Of course, I'm not quite the finished project. My makeover is my newfound belief and faith and God's grace that shines within me.

September 2006 - - Addendum

March, April, May, and June of 2006 have been difficult. I experienced numerous "appropriate" firings from my defibrillator, which can be an electrical shock to the heart muscle of approximately 750 volts at one time. After several visits, my cardiologist in Huntsville could not determine the problem and suggested I go to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Maryland.

I made the necessary arrangements with the recommended doctors and also established travel plans for a quick trip: travel on a Saturday, tests to occur on Monday and Tuesday, and then return home on Wednesday. However, the short visit turned into two weeks, most of it spent in the hospital. After my last scheduled test on Tuesday, while resting in the hotel, my defibrillator went off again and the doctors who had been conducting the tests said I needed to return to the hospital as quickly as possible. I was admitted and had more tests done.

They determined that my medications should be changed and that I should be monitored for a couple of days. I was sad, but quite honestly, the only place I was at ease was at the hospital hooked up to monitors and a lidocaine drip, which prevented arrhythmias and therefore stopped any more shocks from the defibrillator.

I was released and told I could go home. HOME! I've never liked that word more. We spent that Friday seeing what we could of Baltimore and readied for our flight the next morning.

On Saturday, June 10, my husband, Paul, and I were on our flight relaxed and kidding around with one another. The door to the plane had been secured and the plane began backing away from the terminal. "Oh no, oh no, oh no!" I cried. Paul grabbed my hand and BAM! My defibrillator went off. Paul asked me what I wanted to do, and all I could

say was, "I want to go home."

In the past, one shock had been painful, but I had been able to return to relatively normal activity within an hour or two.

Bam, bam, BAM! Three more times my defibrillator shocked me. This had never happened before, and the pain was excruciating. Paul told airline personnel, who stopped the plane, and we returned to Johns Hopkins. Once there, after more evaluations, every test came back inconclusive. I had to spend another week in the hospital, placed on additional medications that, thanks to God, are currently keeping my heart regulated.

My experience on the airplane that day was horrible, but God was ensuring I didn't get too far because He knew there was more to be done; I needed to remain in Baltimore

until I was stable. During the weeks and months that followed, I received comfort from God through my Bible readings, family and friends, periodicals, various religious books that I'd been given, and prayer. My life would have been unbearable without God.

It's been over three months now since my last shock. I have returned to driving and a relatively normal lifestyle. I recently got on an airplane to surprise my mother and brother for their birthdays (70 and 50, respectively). It was my first flight since receiving the four shocks in a row, and I was terrified, but God was with me. He was my rock. My family and I had a tremendous celebration of life.



Unfolding Watercolor by Judy Christopher.

My story is traumatic, but I simply wouldn't have the amazing relationship I have with God if it hadn't been for my makeover. You know, it sounds crazy, but I'd do it all again. Thank you, LORD, for waiting on me, getting my attention, for nurturing my heart.

Denise Thirkill-Green enjoyed life with her husband, Paul on the Elk River in Rogersville, Alabama. She worked in Huntsville, Alabama, for ATK Thiokol as a Contract Administrator. In her spare time, she assisted the American Red Cross and the Madison County Medical Alliance with their Automated External Defibrillator (AED) fundraising efforts. Denise was involved in a local church and continued learning more about Jesus until her passing.

“But ask the animals what they think—let them teach you;
let the birds tell you what’s going on.
Put your ear to the earth—learn the basics.
Listen—the fish in the ocean will tell you their stories.
Isn’t it clear that they all know and agree
that God is sovereign, that He holds all things in His hand—
Every living soul, yes, every breathing creature?”

Job 12:7-10 Msg



Marvel Up Close. By Sharmila Felix—Perry, Utah

Did you know? “The dragonfly’s eye has 30,000 lenses, takes 200 pictures per second and is more sophisticated than the most expensive HD camera ever invented. These incredible creatures need these super powerful eyes because they are visual hunters and have impressive vision being able to see in color as well as ultraviolet light and polarized light. This enables them to see reflections of light on water.”

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