

DAILY ENCOURAGEMENT FOR YOUR SPIRIT

MORNINGS
with JESUS

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



I LOVE READING the Bible but I have to admit the verses I can readily quote are usually ones that have been in some hymn or anthem we've sung at church; then I can pull the words out of thin air but only by humming the tune. I look with admiration at those learned souls who not only can recite long passages by heart but will tell you which chapter and verse.

There used to be a guy at the coffee shop around the corner from the office who thumbed through a tattered Bible as he waited for the lunch specials. His life hadn't been easy, as I found out when I chatted with him. He'd lost a kid, multiple jobs, seen a marriage fail but he was full of faith.

One day when we were talking about the Bible and some of the memorable things Jesus said, I admitted to him that I wished I could quote the words without having to look them up.

"But you have the Bible right where it belongs." He pointed to my heart. "Right there."

Here's hoping this issue of *Mornings With Jesus* speaks to you right there. As the old song goes, "Lord, I want to be a Christian, in my heart." Not just by heart but in all our hearts.

Rick Hamlin

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

JULY



SUNDAY, JULY 1

But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. 1 Corinthians 8:3 (NASB)

BEING MARRIED TO THE SHORTSTOP for the New York Yankees certainly had its ups and downs. Because of my husband's job we were sometimes given perks that I was truly grateful for. But other times living in the public eye held many unrealistic standards.

One night we joined another couple for dinner downtown. Midway through the meal I noticed flashes and cameras going off. This wasn't unusual, but what made it strange was that the flashes were coming from outside. People walking by the front of the restaurant noticed that my husband and another ballplayer were eating inside, and the fans were snapping photos from the sidewalk, staging themselves to look like they were sitting next to the players at a meal. Up close the prank was evident, but from afar it looked like they may have been dinner guests! We laughed at the lengths people go to to pretend they know someone . . . but later I thought about how many people approach a relationship with Christ in the same way.

Some people don't feel worthy so they stay outside the glass, pretending to be at the table while purposely standing back. Would a "famous" Savior actually invite us to be His guests? He already has. We're known by God and invited to His table. We don't have to fake acquaintances—we're welcomed into an intimate relationship that never has to pretend. —GARI MEACHAM

FAITH STEP: *Think about a famous person you admire and imagine what it would be like to be close friends. Now imagine you're invited to intimacy with the God of the universe.*

MONDAY, JULY 2

He told them: "Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt." Luke 9:3 (NIV)

YES, I'VE SOMETIMES BEEN CALLED out for finding spiritual applications everywhere I look. But, in light of the practical stories and slice-of-life scenes that Jesus used in His teaching, I'm in good company.

I stood before the mackerel display at the Monterey Aquarium, tempted to pass it quickly. Yet another fish. Because of my husband's passion for fishing, I'm well-acquainted with fish, their habits, their habitat, their anatomy, and . . . their taste.

The mackerel swimming past the tank window seemed ordinary. But it was the shape that formed the life lesson for me.

"Smooth and streamlined, mackerel waste little effort as they swim." So the sign near the tank told me.

How much effort do I waste because I'm not streamlined? I stand in front of my closet, perplexed because I don't know which of my many outfits I should wear that day. I open the pantry thinking about the selections in the freezer and fridge, holding up my dinner preparation because I have too many choices. I thumb through my collection of Bible study materials, debating with myself about which one I should read that day. Soon, the time for study is gone.

Jesus told His disciples to travel lean. Streamlined. We assume He wanted to prove to His friends that He was their provider. But He may also have wanted to communicate that an accumulation of options would only weigh them down and create wasted effort as they swam upstream against the religious current of the day.

Noted, Jesus. Thank You. —CYNTHIA RUCHTI

FAITH STEP: *Toss one extraneous item each day for a month to streamline your closet, pantry, or calendar. Note how it draws you closer to Jesus.*

TUESDAY, JULY 3

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!
Philippians 4:4 (NLT)

I RECENTLY TRAVELED TO NEPAL to provide Bible training for rural church leaders. Eight conferees came from the region that was the epicenter of a massive earthquake in 2015. One afternoon they spoke about the earthquake and how it affected them, but they didn't linger on details. Instead, they focused on the Lord's protection and of His providing food in the quake's aftermath. When they finished talking, the worship music began.

I watched and listened as the men raised their hands and voices heavenward. Smiles lit up their faces, and they burst into dance.

These folks are some of earth's poorest, and yet they model joy, I thought. They prove that joy doesn't depend on material things and happy times. I have much to learn.

I suspect one reason my Nepali friends experience true joy amid uncertainty is that they know their future is secure. They've applied Hebrews 12:1–2: "And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne."

My friends keep their eyes on Jesus. Their faith in Him assures them of even greater joy ahead. They anticipate the day when they'll meet Him in person. Then they'll trade earth's temporary trials for heaven's eternal glory. Oh, that we would experience the same depth of joy!
—GRACE FOX

FAITH STEP: *Identify a joy-buster in your life. Ask Jesus to give you His perspective on the problem and to help you choose joy in the midst of it.*

WEDNESDAY, JULY 4

Keep your eyes on Jesus, our leader and instructor. Hebrews 12:2 (TLB)

YEARS AGO I SIGNED UP for a beginning piano class. The first night the instructor gave us handouts showing the notes for two songs and which fingers to use. Every day I practiced, until I could proudly play the melodies of “Yankee Doodle Dandy” and “Happy Birthday” with my right hand. The second week the teacher added the chords for the songs. *Poof*—my enthusiasm evaporated. Many class members had had lessons in childhood, and I felt like the only total beginner. While I struggled to put the right keys with the correct fingers, those around me could play them immediately. I left discouraged and tempted to drop out.

I’ve had similar experiences in my spiritual life. I’ve launched into a ministry filled with enthusiasm, until I compared my performance with somebody else’s. Then I began to think that I would never be able to serve God as well as others. The secret to avoiding this type of discouragement is to fix our eyes on Jesus. We are called not to give a perfect performance, but to bring a faith that is daily being perfected through His power. When we consider Jesus rather than how we measure up against those around us, we won’t “grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:3, NIV).

I didn’t drop out. And besides mastering “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” I learned the danger of not keeping my eyes focused where they should be. In piano class, I need to keep my eyes on the sheet music. In life, I’m better off keeping my eyes on Jesus. I just need to concentrate on doing my best to play the notes He has assigned to me. —DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *Do you tend to compare yourself with others and get discouraged? During these times remind yourself to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.*

THURSDAY, JULY 5

“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.”

John 15:5 (NLT)

RECENTLY MY HUSBAND AND I traveled with eight of our kids from Arkansas to Montana to visit family and friends. We hadn't seen many of them in years, yet it was easy to catch up. We shared the joys and the challenges we'd both been experiencing, and how Jesus was meeting every need in the midst of it all.

When John and I talk about the children we adopted, the work we've accomplished, or our ministry involvement, we always talk about Jesus. All these things are the result of Jesus at work in us. They are the fruit that is produced when we abide in Him. It's true for my friends, too. Some have lost family members, others have seen their kids make poor choices, but their peace and trust in Christ is also evidence of their abidance in Jesus, their vine.

The vine, in fact, is where believers meet, and our dependence on Jesus is what keeps our relationships strong. Jesus, our vine, supports and supplies our needs as individuals and as part of the body. And even when we travel two thousand miles to reconnect, the distance will not keep us from meeting in Christ together.

Sometimes it's easy to read the Scriptures and understand what they mean to me, but it's also important to look at them to see how the collective followers of Christ are affected. As branches, our dependence in Christ affects all the other branches. And together we can rejoice in all Jesus has done while we continue to trust in all He'll continue to do in us and through us. —TRICIA GOYER

FAITH STEP: *Think of believing friends who are having a hard time trusting in the true vine, Jesus. Pray for them to grow to depend on Him.*

FRIDAY, JULY 6

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Luke 12:27 (ESV)

I HAVE A PAIR OF socks that often gets compliments. I made them from my sheep's wool, carrying my hand spindle everywhere for the month or so it took to spin one skein of every color. Then it took almost a year to knit the intricately patterned socks. Some who saw me working on them asked why I didn't just go buy socks, while others asked me to knit *them* a pair. If I'd received minimum wage for the time it took, they'd have been worth hundreds of dollars. Money wasn't a consideration—I enjoyed every step in the process and ended up with lovely warm socks.

In Jesus's time, making clothing (or any kind of fabric) was even more labor intensive. It's likely that women were spinning or weaving whenever they weren't cooking or cleaning. Leisure time, as we know it today, was a foreign concept for most.

Jesus told His followers that life is more than possessions, and assured them that the Father knew their needs and would provide for them all. He told them not to worry about getting food and clothing because constant toil filled their waking hours.

Most of us buy our socks, but we have the same charge to put down our metaphorical spindles and relax. Jesus wants us to seek the Kingdom of Heaven instead of scrambling to take care of ourselves or store up treasures here. Jesus said life is more than constantly working to meet our physical needs. And if His Father dresses the lilies in more glory than Solomon, we can count on Him to take care of us, too. —SUZANNE DAVENPORT TIETJEN

FAITH STEP: *Give something away today. Loosen the grip on the "stuff" of life and build up treasure in Heaven.*

SATURDAY, JULY 7

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God." Rev. 21:2-3 (ESV)

MY WEDDING DAY WAS ONE of the best in my life. I woke that morning with so much joy in my heart, I thought I'd explode. As we were preparing for the ceremony in the church basement, one of my bridesmaids asked, "Aren't you nervous?" No. After all the months of preparation and the years of longing, all I had room for was joy and eagerness.

I love that Jesus describes the fulfillment of our relationship with Him as a wedding. As a bride I longed to join my groom, in covenant and celebration with our friends and family. As the Bride of Christ, we long to be reunited with Jesus face-to-face, to have our sinful nature cast off forever, to have no more separation.

There is another profound truth in these verses. Just as we wait with great anticipation, He also longs for us. Have you ever thought about how Jesus eagerly waits for the time when we dwell with Him? I often feel like I'm a problem to Jesus. I cause Him so much suffering. I feel like I disappoint Him with my attitudes and actions. It's hard to believe that He's eager for me to join Him in eternity. Yet He makes clear that He longs to dwell with us. He speaks of the new Jerusalem with the enthusiasm of a groom who adores his bride. —SHARON HINCK

FAITH STEP: *Look at some wedding pictures today (yours or someone else's). Thank Jesus for the amazing truth that He longs to spend all of eternity with you and also wants to be part of your day today.*

SUNDAY, JULY 8

“Therefore don’t worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Matthew 6:34 (HCSB)

SOMEONE REALLY WISE ONCE SAID, “Worrying is like praying for what you don’t want to happen.” I don’t know that my worried thoughts can actually influence reality, but they can definitely make me miserable. I’ve consumed lots of time by fretting about things that never came to pass, sometimes spending hours working on solving a problem that never occurred. Meanwhile, whatever was right in front of me, whether a trouble, task, or triumph, went unattended. Silly and sad.

I don’t have a magic formula for eliminating worry, except simply choosing to believe that this verse is true, as demonstrated by the many times I’ve worried needlessly only to have my fears never realized. Lest I beat myself up for my humanness, I can recall the trusty Israelites, prophets, and apostles who all seemed to worry about something, sometimes.

Jesus told the disciples that He was sending the “helper,” the Holy Spirit Who would live inside of us, teaching us and reminding us of everything the Savior said. When the angst about anything threatens to overwhelm us, we can call on the very Spirit of Christ to still our worry and remind us that life is best lived one day at a time.
—ISABELLA YOSUICO

FAITH STEP: *Start a Fear/Fact Journal. Next time you find yourself worrying, make a note of the fear and allow yourself time to fret for five minutes. Then give it to Jesus. Sometime later, revisit your list and note the facts. If you’re like me, you’ll find that so much of what we worry about never happens or resolves itself.*

MONDAY, JULY 9

Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. 1 John 4:18 (NLT)

I HAVE BEEN STRUGGLING WITH learning how to walk on crutches. It has been scary since I have problems with balance. I have a distinct lack of upper-arm strength. I find myself caught up in this ocean of uncertainty, casting about for a safe place to land, both literally and figuratively. I am scared of falling, of losing control and not being able to navigate life in the way I am used to.

The other morning I broke down in front of our boys. I was trying to clean up the house, on crutches, before my mother-in-law arrived. My middle son, Will, asked me, “Mom, why are you so mad?” In a very loud, high-pitched voice, I said, “I am mad because there are so many things that I can’t do that I want to do!” Then I began to cry. And Will said, “But Mom, can’t we help you?” There it was. Love. This is what Jesus is trying to show me. I have been trying to figure out how I can possibly “do” life. And He is saying, “How about being loved? Loved by Me. Loved by your family. Loved by your friends.” Love. Love. Love.

In the middle of being afraid, He offers His Love. Perfect love casts out fear. Love is our safe place to land when life is crazy. Recognizing that we need help. Understanding that we can’t control outcomes. Resting in the truth that Jesus has us exactly where He wants us. And breathing in the truth that my friend, Laurie, speaks out, “God is good and I am loved.” —SUSANNA FOTH AUGHTMON

FAITH STEP: *Trusting Jesus can be difficult when life seems out of control. What is an area of your life where you remind yourself that “God is good and you are loved”?*

TUESDAY, JULY 10

My dear friends, since this is what you have to look forward to, do your very best to be found living at your best, in purity and peace. 2 Peter 3:14 (MSG)

AS THE MIDAFTERNOON SUN WARMED my desk, I clicked off the social media site and felt a little guilty for letting it steal another fifteen minutes. Keeping up with everyone's sparkly online life was addicting but not always fulfilling.

I grabbed my purse and added two things to my shopping list that I'd seen ads for while online. A cherry pitter that removes six pits at once? Earbuds with retractable wires? Yes, please! I'd have time to pop into the kitchen store and the electronics store for both and make it home before my kids' school bus arrived.

While running my errands, I noticed all the new vehicles. When had Buick remodeled the Enclave? And the Lincoln Navigator was pretty. My car was nice . . . for a ten-year-old Honda Pilot.

I scolded myself for getting so distracted by material stuff, the latest and greatest to make life worthwhile, right? Strangely, as I waited in traffic and faced the discontent of desiring more than what I had, I felt my heart rate increase and my peace dissipate.

Is there some magic point in life when I'll be immune to striving for more? Or at least for more of the good stuff that disguises itself as the best, the best being closeness and contentment with Jesus?

Today's verse sums up how we're to live our days. Trying our best, yes. But look at what defines *best*: purity and peace. A heart that is satisfied to spend life loving Jesus and offering that love to others, being steadfastly sure that all will be well in Him.

This life is full of opportunities and distractions. *But Lord help me be preoccupied with You the most.* —ERIN KEELEY MARSHALL

FAITH STEP: *What derails the peace and purity of your faith? Memorize 2 Peter 3:14.*

WEDNESDAY, JULY 11

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. . . . Psalm 32:7 (ESV)

THE SIGN NEXT TO THE jellyfish tank in the large aquarium stopped me before I could focus on the fascinating creatures. “In a world without hiding places, jellies protect themselves by blending in.”

Sometimes it feels like we’re in a world without hiding places. Our pain can’t escape notice. Our failures are paraded on the news or social media. Our mistakes are visible. Our need for solitude is met with a thousand opposing forces. Because of that truth, many try to protect themselves by blending in. A friend of mine was viciously attacked in a school locker room as a young child. In high school, the thought of a locker room made her physically ill. Rather than explain the reasons for her extreme discomfort, she stayed silent but skipped school every day when gym class was scheduled. All through high school. She barely graduated.

The locker room offered her no place to hide. But she couldn’t blend in either. Jesus doesn’t want us to camouflage our pain. Or skip life because it’s hard. He’s the Shelter we run to. But within the shelter of His embrace is an equipping station where we draw strength to survive out there in the exposure of the often unkind world.

He is our Hiding Place. If we stay close enough to Him, we are provided a cloak of invisibility that protects us from being vulnerable to attack. Jellyfish blend into the world around them. We blend into Jesus. —CYNTHIA RUCHTI

FAITH STEP: *Do you own a fish tank? Or did you as a child? Remember having to work hard to find where the well-camouflaged fish were hiding, though they were in plain view? Consider yourself protected by the holiest of Hiding Places today.*

THURSDAY, JULY 12

I want to drink God, deep draughts of God. I'm thirsty for God—alive.

Psalm 42:1 (MSG)

IN THE MIDDLE OF A hot summer day, we were experiencing a cool front, and the temperatures had dropped into the pleasant seventies. As I sat on the porch, a breeze blew through the patio. Eager to fellowship with Jesus, I opened my mouth for whispered conversation.

But before a word escaped, I froze, mesmerized. There, near the bird feeder, a hummingbird flitted from one side to the other, drinking the ruby-colored water. At first, it only took a few sips. But after a few minutes the bird stopped sipping and started drinking deeply. Obviously enjoying the sweet nectar, this time it perched for long periods of time on the feeder, its wings still.

I immediately thought of David the Psalmist's thirst for God. Earlier I had read where Jesus issued an unusual offer to those He taught in the temple one day: "If anyone is thirsty, let him keep coming to me and drinking!" (John 7:37, CJB). Jesus knew the desperation of a dry spirit, parched from lack of nourishment.

Like that hummingbird who returned repeatedly for "deep draughts," I, too, wanted to keep drinking from Jesus. I had experienced droughts in my life when I had settled only for quick sips of spiritual nourishment. But as I grew in Jesus, I knew my very existence and spiritual energy required more than that.

That day on my porch, I joined the psalmist and reflected on Jesus's offer as I whispered, "Jesus, I still want more—I want to drink deep draughts of You daily!" —REBECCA BARLOW JORDAN

FAITH STEP: *Place an empty glass nearby to remind you of your emptiness without Jesus.*

FRIDAY, JULY 13

He makes the barren woman abide in the house As a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord! Psalm 113:9 (NASB)

HEARING THE NEWS I WAS pregnant with our first child was one of the happiest moments of my life. I couldn't believe I was going to be a mom, and my husband, Bobby, was thrilled, too. Though we were in the middle of a hectic baseball season, we set our sights on the due date and the joy to come. But soon into the pregnancy I began to bleed, and after full bed rest, ended up losing our first child to miscarriage.

At first I thought I was okay. No big deal. We'd try again soon and that would be the end of it. But listening to one of the wives complain each night at the games about being pregnant, just about did me in. I wanted to shout, "Don't you know how much I'd love to be in your shoes? Quit complaining!" Thankfully I bit my tongue and silently prayed that Jesus would give me the patience to believe He had good things in store for me as a mother one day. During the miscarriage I had opened my Bible to a Scripture that talked about God making me the joyful mother of children, but I didn't mark where the Scripture was—and though I tried to find it every day after the miscarriage, it remained hidden from me.

One day while journaling I felt as if the Lord promised that when I was pregnant again with another child, He would show me where that Scripture was. Five months later I found that Scripture (Psalm 113:9), and the next day I ran to the store to buy a pregnancy test. Sure enough, I was pregnant! Next to this verse in my Bible is the name of my first child . . . Brooke Nicole. It's a reminder of His promises. —GARI MEACHAM

FAITH STEP: *Use your Bible to mark the dates that God proves to be faithful. Soon your Bible will be full of your life monuments and markers.*

SATURDAY, JULY 14

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Psalm 19:1 (NIV)

ONE THING I ENJOY ABOUT my Facebook news feed is seeing the nature-oriented photos. My friend, Georganne, shared a picture of the summer evening sky with this caption: “View from a front porch rocking chair. I wonder if the world would be different if everyone gazed at the skies before bedtime.” In the comments section, I related how at age fifteen, I gazed at the sky every summer night after seeing my first shooting star. I was convinced that we would have world peace if everyone would look at the nighttime sky. Georganne responded: “Exactly! I’m convinced that sky gazing does something very good for the soul.”

I’ve always marveled at how the sky displays the majesty of God’s creation. I love how the heavens remind me of Jesus all day, every day. Each morning the sunrise confirms that He has a plan and a purpose for me. Every evening the glowing sunset assures me that He will guard me through the night. In between, a sunny sky makes me think about His goodness, while thunderstorms represent His power. Clouds remind me of the peace that comes through a relationship with Him.

A bright star and angels in the heavens heralded the birth of Jesus; a darkened sky marked His death. Forty days after His Resurrection, His followers witnessed Him rising into the sky as He returned to heaven. An angel promised that one day He will return the same way. Yes, we have many reasons to do a little sky gazing, and as Georganne says, “It does something very good for the soul.”

—DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *Whenever you get a chance today, look up at the sky. Tell Jesus how what you see reminds you of Him.*

SUNDAY, JULY 15

“The thief’s purpose is to steal, kill and destroy. My purpose is to give life in all its fullness.” John 10:10 (TLB)

THE OTHER DAY I FOUND my four-year-old daughter, Stella, on the floor in front of her closet in a cluster of shoes. She’d try one on and toss it when it didn’t meet her qualifications.

“Might I ask what on earth are you doing?”

“I’m finding the right shoes.”

“Just pick some! It’s time to go!”

“Mommy, I need to find the best pair for skipping!”

I can honestly say this was a new one. One Sunday after church she flung off her shoes as soon as we walked in the door and told me to throw them away because they were like tigers. When I gave her a puzzled look she explained how they bite and claw her feet. Needless to say, those shoes are no more. But skipping shoes?

My shoe philosophy is a lot more practical. I wear whatever matches, or what is most comfortable. Occasionally I’m fashion minded, pairing just the right boots with an outfit, or a dress with heels. But I’ve never really considered what shoes are best for skipping.

The thing is, we were going to the grocery store. There were no plans for skipping per se, but Stella’s choice of shoes reflects her general outlook on the day. She didn’t know and couldn’t control what else was on the schedule. But she was planning on skipping.

I want my outlook to be more like that—to reflect more trust in Jesus when He says “I came to give life...in all its fullness.” John 10:10 (NCV). If His purpose for me is abundance, I need to plan on joy, no matter what the day brings. —GWEN FORD FAULKENBERRY

FAITH STEP: *Make a to-do list for your day. Regardless of what’s on it, don your skipping shoes before you step out, trusting that His plan for you is good.*

MONDAY, JULY 16

Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.
Colossians 3:17 (MSG)

I LOVE DETAILS. THEY WERE crucial in my nursing career. I look for details everywhere and include them in my own fiber art, even if no one else ever recognizes them. To me, little things matter.

Science recognizes this as well. When Edward Lorenz, a scientist in the 1960s, tried to take a shortcut by omitting the last three of six decimal places in his weather prediction program, the results were vastly different, giving rise to what is now called the butterfly effect. Can the tiny breeze from a butterfly's wings result in a tornado a continent away? Apparently so. Everything matters.

This comes as no surprise to God, Who made this interconnected world and has always been meticulous about details. His directions to Moses regarding the Tabernacle in Exodus and His detailed instructions to the Israelites in the book of Leviticus reveal this. David, too, gave his son, Solomon, comprehensive instructions regarding the construction of the first Temple. Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, says, "There is immense significance in everything that we do."

Details matter to Jesus, too. He came to accomplish His Father's will—"not a single detail missed" (John 6:39, MSG), carrying out His Father's wishes "down to the last detail" (John 14:31, MSG). He told His Father, "I glorified you on earth by completing down to the last detail what you assigned me to do" (John 17:4, MSG).

And little you and me? When we follow Jesus, we can be "sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good" (Romans 8:28, MSG). —SUZANNE DAVENPORT TIETJEN

FAITH STEP: *Offer Jesus moments in your day. Then live those moments.*

TUESDAY, JULY 17

"I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you." John 15:11–12 (NLT)

WHILE WATERING THE FLOWER BOX on our front porch, the spray suddenly stopped. I squeezed the handle more firmly, checked the setting, and wiggled the hose. Finally I found a kink in the line that had stopped the water from flowing. Once I untangled the hose, the water sprayed freely, and I was able to finish watering my flowers and herbs.

There are times when joy seems like a meager drip in my life, even though I know Jesus promises to give it in abundance. When I realize that I've stopped raining joy on those around me, it's a good signal for me to check for blockages and tangles. Jesus linked His promise of joy with His command to love others in the same way He loved. Often when my joy dries up, I discover that I've begun to focus so much on my own needs or hurts that I've stopping letting Jesus's love for others flow through me. The knot grows tighter, my spirit shrivels, and I have nothing to pour out into the lives of others.

My first response when I recognize lack of joy in my heart is to try harder. Like twisting the nozzle or squeezing more intensely, this does no good if I'm not open to the Source. I need to remind myself that I can run to Jesus, ask Him to change my heart, to live in me, to connect me to the Source of joy, so I can love others as He does.

Like the generous spray that waters my flowers, joy flows naturally when He forgives the sins that block our relationship. Because of Him, we can open our hearts to His love again and overflow with joy. —SHARON HINCK

FAITH STEP: *Water a plant today. Think about anything in your life that is blocking the free flow of Jesus's love, and ask Him to restore your joy.*

WEDNESDAY, JULY 18

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. James 1:23–24 (ESV)

MY NEW HOME HAS A mirror on the closet door in the bathroom, right behind the vanity mirror. It also has much better lighting than in my old home, with a sunny skylight above the master bath sink. You can see everything. The other day I got a good look at myself, and I have to admit, my bathing suit rear view was a little disappointing. It made me think: *What's with all that cellulite? And am I really getting bags under my eyes at fifty? Maybe I should have used more sunscreen.*

I also caught glimpses of blemishes that my mirrors and lighting don't show. Mainly I saw ingratitude for many of my blessings, including my husband. *Hasn't he been running both kids to school every morning so I can make my deadline? Didn't he just fold yet another pile of never-ending laundry? And he thinks I'm really beautiful, despite the cellulite, and tells me all the time.*

There are many examples in the Bible where we are urged to embrace gratitude and humility, like in Matthew 23:12 and Ephesians 5:20. Those verses help us recognize who we really are, even on our very best days, and what we are charged to do. Jesus vocally confronted hypocrisy because it is the heart of pride. The call to humility and gratitude sets us free from the spiritual blindness that so often prevents us from enjoying our lives and everyday blessings.

—ISABELLA YOSUICO

FAITH STEP: *Next time you find yourself criticizing anyone or anything, take a moment to ask Jesus to help you to reflect on three positive aspects of that very person (or thing) who's troubling you.*

THURSDAY, JULY 19

*Then Jesus called the children over to him and said to the disciples,
“Let the little children come to me! Never send them away!
For the Kingdom of God belongs to men who have hearts as
trusting as these little children’s.” Luke 18:16 (TLB)*

ON THE NEWS RECENTLY I watched a video clip of six-year-old Jordan Warrick being baptized in the church baptistery in Louisville, Kentucky. According to the pastor, Jordan had been looking forward to this for a long time. Evidently too long.

Before the pastor could finish his usual words, Jordan yelled, “I’ll do it!” and hit the water headfirst, self-dunking his body. Mouths flew open and laughter filled the church as friends and family watched in disbelief. When his father’s video of the baptism was posted on Facebook, it went viral.

Maybe that’s the kind of attitude or spirit Jesus was referring to when some parents came to Him one day, asking Him to bless their children. His disciples tried to shoo them all away, but Jesus stopped them. Welcoming their cherub faces, He used them to teach the disciples a lesson: “Let the little children come to me!”

Trusting, eager hearts—like the children gathered around Jesus—make up the Kingdom of God. Jesus loves the bold anticipation of a new disciple committed to Him, ready to say, “I’m a Christian,” and get on with the business of living for Jesus. Childlike faith knows where blessings and answers lie: in Jesus.

Later that week as I observed a smiling, senior adult being baptized in our own church’s baptistery, I thanked Jesus that He is not concerned with age. His salvation is for everyone willing to come to Him like a little child. —REBECCA BARLOW JORDAN

FAITH STEP: *Ask Jesus to give you a childlike spirit, always eager to follow Him.*

FRIDAY, JULY 20

Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. . . ." John 6:35 (NLT)

I ENJOY SAMPLING DIFFERENT VARIETIES of bread when I travel. In the Middle East, I dip pita bread in lentil sauce. In Nepal, I fold *roti*—a flatbread that resembles a tortilla shell—and use it to scoop curried vegetables. In eastern Europe, I smother rolls in cheese curd and forest berry jam for breakfast. And for dessert, I like warm crepes stuffed with cooked apple slices.

Bread is a staple in most cultures. In biblical times, *lechem* was such a significant part of the diet that the term referred to food in general. Perhaps that's why Jesus called Himself the Bread of Life. He knew people would understand the symbolism. He, like bread, is vital for sustenance.

It's possible that Jesus also used the symbolism to teach people that He wasn't an ordinary religious teacher or leader. As manna in the desert came from heaven, He came to meet our need. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, Moses didn't give them bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:32–33).

Nothing less than the Bread of Life satisfies our spiritual hunger. We might try to fill our appetite with a career, money, material possessions, or even relationships, but these things are like empty calories—they might quiet our hunger pangs for a while, but they won't nourish our souls. They'll never meet our craving for unconditional love, forgiveness, and purpose.

Jesus alone feeds us so we'll never hunger again. —GRACE FOX

FAITH STEP: *Incorporate bread into one of your meals today. As you eat it, thank Jesus for being the Bread of Life. Ask Him to give you an appetite for Him.*

SATURDAY, JULY 21

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:31–32 (NLT)

SCOTT AND I RARELY LEAVE our three boys at home alone even though our oldest is fifteen. It wouldn't be safe...for them...or the neighborhood. They tend to go at it. The same was true for me and my siblings when we were left on our own. We would get into fights. I have two sisters and a brother. We weren't kind to one another. We weren't loving. We weren't thoughtful. In fact, we could be mean. If there was a disagreement and Mom wasn't around to sort it out, it got ugly.

When I didn't get my way, I often resorted to screaming, hair pulling, and scratching, followed by punching, kicking, and throwing toys. It was every boy or girl for himself or herself. Learning how to be kind takes some work. It doesn't come easily.

Our natural tendencies are selfish; just ask any two-year-old. But Jesus isn't keen on violence or name calling or trash talking. He wants us to treat one another with the utmost kindness. Each of us is special to Him. Jesus longs for us to treat others with the same genuine love and care that He gives us. When we show each other mercy, the world changes. We begin to resemble Him when we are kind to one another. Peace steps in. Love abounds. Relationships flourish. Cultivating kindness and forgiveness not only changes us, it changes everyone we come in contact with. —SUSANNA FOTH AUGHTMON

FAITH STEP: *Be strategic about being kind. Ask Jesus to show you the people who need your compassion and forgiveness today and reach out.*

SUNDAY, JULY 22

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. Luke 18:1 (NIV)

WHEN I LOOK AT MY prayer list and find blank spaces in the “Answered on This Date” column, the following parable becomes a bedtime story that comforts my soul so my sleep is undisturbed despite the blanks. It’s a “bedtime” story Jesus told in the daylight.

He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought.” Luke 18:2 (NIV). The story describes an interchange between the judge and a widow who’d been wronged. She asked for justice. The judge refused. Providing justice for an uninfluential widow held no priority for him.

She kept asking. And asking. And asking.

Finally, the judge gave in. She bothered and embarrassed him. He gave her what she needed so she’d leave him alone.

At first reading, I wondered what Jesus could have meant by using that example. Our Judge is not unjust. He exudes compassion. He not only respects but cares for our every need. Begging seems to disrespect both God and our humanity.

But Jesus tells us specifically at the beginning of the story that He wants us to find within it encouragement to pray continuously and not grow discouraged.

He bookends the story with this poignant line: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” Luke 18:8 (NIV). Jesus is faithful to us, faithful to answer quickly or to hold us tightly if the answer is slower in coming. The real question is, “Will *we* be faithful to ask, to keep asking, and to trust Him?” —CYNTHIA RUCHTI

FAITH STEP: *What request is lingering on your prayer list? Put a gold star next to that request—an award for endurance—and keep praying.*

MONDAY, JULY 23

“So don’t be anxious about tomorrow. God will take care of your tomorrow too. Live one day at a time.” Matthew 6:34 (TLB)

IT FELT LIKE AGES SINCE my husband and I had gone on this two-mile mountainside hike. At times we trudged up winding tree-lined paths, being careful not to stumble over roots and jutting rocks. Other parts of the trail took us through open spaces with easier walking but no shade in the hot sun. At one point I figured we must surely be close to the end, but my husband informed me that we had only walked about a half-mile. My heart sank, but I knew he had a keen sense of distance. After that, each time I asked for an update, I dreaded the answer.

I prefer the kind of trail with markers to delineate each tenth of a mile. Some nature trails even offer a brochure with a map to show your exact location and what lies ahead. Wouldn’t it be nice if life worked that way? How much easier it would be if we had markers that showed our progress and how much farther we had to go to reach our destination. And a map would be nice to reveal what type of terrain or obstacles we could expect ahead.

Jesus understands how discouraged we get from obsessing over the unknowns in our future. That’s why He advises us to focus on one day, one moment, at a time. We can ask for wisdom to deal with a difficult business meeting, healing words to offer an estranged relative, or maybe strength and stamina to get through today’s chemotherapy treatment. Regardless of the challenges we currently face, we can always trust Jesus to give us, not just our daily bread but whatever we need to end each day on a victorious note. —DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *Each time you’re tempted to worry about the future, remember Who holds it in His hands. Pinpoint the challenge you’re facing right now and ask Jesus to supply what you need today.*

TUESDAY, JULY 24

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. Galatians 5:16–17 (NIV)

OVER THE SUMMER THREE OF my children, eight years old and under, loved playing out front with their friends. We live in the back of the subdivision at the end of a cul-de-sac so it's typically safe. The problem is all of the trouble my little kids get into without direct adult supervision. Most of the time my neighbor or I are there, but there are times when we need to slip inside the house. It's during these times when one of the kids decides to cut someone else's hair or tackle each other on the asphalt. Without the watchful eye of an adult, little children tend to turn to mischief quickly.

The truth is I find myself doing what I ought not to do when I'm not mindful of oversight from the Holy Spirit. I make unwholesome media choices or choose to pretend I didn't see a friend at the grocery store instead of opening myself up to her. My flesh wants to gratify myself, hide my flaws, and not get too wrapped up with the needs of others, but this is not what Jesus's Spirit wants.

Walking by Jesus's Spirit is not complicated, but it does take surrender. It means pausing to pray and asking Jesus to meet you and fill you in the moment. Then it's listening to His still, small voice inside that urges you, not only to cease to do evil but to learn to do well. Only Jesus's Spirit will tell us what to cherish and cultivate in our hearts. When we give Him permission, He will guide us in doing what He desires in our lives. —TRICIA GOYER

FAITH STEP: *Pause this moment and ask Jesus's Holy Spirit to help you to stop following your own desires and instead strive to follow His.*

WEDNESDAY, JULY 25

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 2 Corinthians 4:17 (NIV)

MY HUSBAND AND I WERE staying at a friend's cabin on the banks of Lake Superior. We strolled the beach, admiring the beautiful smooth stones covering the shore. Waves rolled in, rubbing rocks against each other. Over the years the water had shaped granite and quartz into stunning rounded sculptures. Glimmers of crystal sparkled in the sunlight.

We collected a few samples to bring home. The agates and the fragments of precious minerals shine because their surrounding rock was first broken open by storms and pounding waves, and their surface was then polished by the constant action of abrasion.

I used to growl at this verse in 2 Corinthians. In my opinion, my troubles weren't light or momentary at all. We live in a world where the free-will choices of other sinful humans can cause injustice and suffering, where disease can attack out of the blue, where disagreements can separate us from those we love.

Jesus has great compassion for our pain. He is able to bring His transformative grace into our most hurtful experiences. This verse doesn't mean we should buck up and pretend the pain isn't so bad. It simply reminds us that one day we'll look back and discover the long-term gifts that He produced in the midst of the abrasive sand, the crashing waves, and the day-after-day pressures. On that day, when we glimpse the eternal glory, we'll agree that glory outweighs any pain. —SHARON HINCK

FAITH STEP: *Set a few smooth stones on your kitchen table as a centerpiece and use them as a reminder that the abrasive struggles in your life will be used by our Savior for glorious purposes.*

THURSDAY, JULY 26

Since everything here today might well be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements melt down that day—but we'll hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness.

2 Peter 3:11–13 (MSG)

MY FAMILY VISITED THE KENNEDY Space Center and had the rare opportunity to watch an Atlas V reconnaissance rocket launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida. From our viewing site, we could feel the rumble of 1.5 million pounds of thrust that would carry the rocket to its orbit 22,000 miles over the equator. The launch simulator showed us what that much force feels like.

We saw the Space Shuttle Atlantis up close and read about its many missions and the millions of miles it traveled.

In a word, it was *awesome*. Or maybe *awe-inspiring*. While I was there, I wondered how many other people were seeing Jesus, Lord of the Universe, behind it all. What a missed opportunity it would be to spend hours marveling at humanity's advancements into space but to overlook Jesus, the One who died and rose to save us and to give us eternal life—life that extends limitlessly beyond what we humans could ever discover ourselves.

Today's Scripture reminds me that everything we see is temporary and, as remarkable as this world is, the Redeemer's glory is so much greater. —ERIN KEELEY MARSHALL

FAITH STEP: *Spend part of an evening gazing at the night sky. Ask Jesus to reveal more of Himself to you as you look for Him in the world.*

FRIDAY, JULY 27

Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. Psalm 51:2 (NLT)

MY HUSBAND AND I RECENTLY went on a guided fishing trip. After eight hours out on the water, we were famished, having had no food since our predawn doughnuts. One man familiar with the area suggested a restaurant. But first, we had to clean up—really clean up. Not knowing the boat would travel at forty-five mph for long distances, I had left my hair loose. Now it was a mass of tangles. My clothes were dirty and soaked in sweat. My legs had been splattered by bits of yucky stuff when our guide dressed the fish with an electric tool. After we showered and changed clothes we met our friends in the hotel lobby. One of the wives commented, “Y’all clean up good.”

Some people think they have to “clean up” before they can have a relationship with Jesus. I’m so thankful that’s not the case. He extends His forgiveness, mercy, and grace to anyone willing to accept them. Once we admit our need for a Savior, Jesus goes to work cleansing us from the inside out. He washes away the penalty for our sin so that we can receive eternal life. Then, He begins transforming our thoughts, attitudes, and behavior so that we can reflect His character.

This transformation is a lifelong process. At times we still get dirty living in a sin-marred world. But that’s no reason to avoid Jesus, allowing guilt or shame to hinder our fellowship with Him. He has given us a wonderful promise in 1 John 1:9: “But if we confess our sins to him, he can be depended on to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. . . .” (TLB) Whenever we slip up, Jesus stands ready to give us a fresh start. If we ask Him, He will do what we cannot do for ourselves: clean us up completely. —DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *Prayerfully examine your heart for anything you need Jesus to clean up. Meditate on 1 John 1:9 and thank Him for His promise to purify you.*

SATURDAY, JULY 28

No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:39 (NLT)

LIFE CHANGED DRASTICALLY FOR A friend's family when leukemia struck his sixteen-year-old daughter. He and his wife never expected this. Who does? Nor did they foresee months of weekly eight-hour drives to the nearest children's hospital for chemotherapy. Circumstances forced them to adjust work schedules, find a place for their other daughter to stay when they were away, and trust the Lord to provide for extra expenses.

Our friend sent regular e-mail updates to prayer partners. I marveled at his positive outlook. This was understandably a very difficult time, yet he kept his focus on the Lord and His promises, and he always listed reasons to praise Him.

In my travels, I've met other people who walk similar paths, but not all navigate the journey as well as my friend. They question Jesus's presence and purposes. They doubt His power to heal or to bring about something good from suffering. Sometimes they feel as though He doesn't love them anymore. Nothing's further from the truth.

Suffering is common to humankind. When our turn comes, let's remember that circumstances are not the barometer of Christ's love for us. They change from day to day, but His love remains constant, steadfast, tried and true.

Nothing—not even the circumstances that flip our lives upside down—can separate us from Christ's love. Amen. —GRACE FOX

FAITH STEP: *Get two pieces of paper. Draw a stick figure of yourself on one. Draw a heart shape and write "Jesus's love for me" on the other. Glue them together and use it as a bookmark.*

SUNDAY, JULY 29

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Matthew 1:1 (ESV)

SO BEGINS THE GOSPEL OF Christ, followed by a list of names. Beyond a mere biographer's introduction, with this list God communicates His loving mercy, understanding, and grace.

Jesus's family tree included adulterers, murderers, drunks, cowards, lonely widows, the disabled—undesirables by the world's standards. However, many also claimed a singular virtue or moment of simple and often reluctant greatness that earned them a spot in Christ's story, the greatest story ever told. What a comfort!

One of my favorite authors, Isabel Allende, writes fantastical, multigenerational sagas that cover the lifetimes of dramatically flawed people within epic tragedies to beautiful effect. I sometimes borrow this device in thinking of my own family.

My mom was mentally ill and my dad was an alcoholic. My lineage also includes adulterers, illegitimate children, and assorted other not-so-secret sins, wreaking havoc on generations.

Before Christ, my own story and sense of self were overshadowed by what seemed to be my inescapable genealogy. Yet, both my parents were also remarkable people who imparted in me gifts that I appreciate more and more each day.

My newfound understanding of the Gospel tells me that just as God deliberately wove an eternal tapestry with a motley crew of wayward humans, He is weaving a brilliant tapestry of my life, touching others in the process. The backstory may be a jumbled mess, but the tapestry is coming along nicely. —ISABELLA YOSUICO

FAITH STEP: *Be creative in drawing your family tree. Thank God for using all of the members to weave the tapestry of your life.*

MONDAY, JULY 30

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. 1 John 4:18 (KJV)

I'VE NOTICED THAT MANY OF the things I'm initially afraid of aren't as scary up close. For example, the first time I went snorkeling I was terrified. My husband, Stone, and I were in Egypt in this tiny village on the Red Sea. I wanted to snorkel there because it had a reputation of being one of the best places for snorkeling in the world. *But what if a shark ate me? Or I got stung by some deadly coral? What if I drowned? What if I got lost and no one ever found me and my parents never knew what happened?*

"Honey. You need to do this. We can hold hands. Seriously, I promise you will love it." This from a husband who grew up in Hawaii and had no fear of snorkeling. "Fish are our friends," he said.

So I tried it. And it was one of the best experiences of my life. I was transported into a new world. It was amazing.

I've had similar experiences in other places, and with people I first thought were scary. My piano teacher's dog was as big as a horse, but all he wanted was to be loved. The meanest professor in law school turned out to be a big teddy bear when I got to know him. It's a recurring theme.

We see this dynamic with Jesus as He walks through life. He reaches out to people who others—and especially religious people—fear. The woman at the well. Lepers. Foreigners. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Even the thief on the Cross. When He brings them into proximity, the fear fades. Perhaps we should follow His example.
—GWEN FORD FAULKENBERRY

FAITH STEP: *Is there a person or group you most fear? Find a way to connect with them. Give love a chance to work its magic.*

TUESDAY, JULY 31

Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I'll come right in and sit down to supper with you. Revelation 3:20 (MSG)

WHEN I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH a heart rhythm disturbance, I was told I needed a pacemaker. We explained this to my granddaughter, Mara, and answered her questions. After the procedure, her other grandmother found her crying. When asked what was wrong, Mara said, “Will Grandma have to ask Jesus into her heart again?” At eight years old, she’d misunderstood and, thinking I’d had a heart transplant, was worried about my salvation.

We laugh about it now, but I’m still touched by her concern. It’s curious that some people who’ve had heart transplants report unexpected changes like craving foods they never liked, appreciating different styles of music, or showing aversions to sounds that never bothered them before. Some who met the donors’ families discovered that the changes reflected the likes and dislikes of their donors. Scientists are researching what they call cellular memory to discover whether emotions or moods can be stored in parts of our bodies other than our brains.

The Bible refers to the heart as the center of our spiritual life.

We believe when the Father draws us to Jesus (John 6:44). And when we open the door of our hearts, Jesus comes in.

Like those with new physical hearts, we can’t help but be changed. “Let the word of Christ . . . have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives” (Colossians 3:16, MSG).

Give Him free rein! —SUZANNE DAVENPORT TIETJEN

FAITH STEP: *Is it hard to believe that Jesus is right there inside of you? What might this mean for you as you walk through your day? Ask Him to show you.*

AUGUST



WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 1

In the temple [Jesus] found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.

He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. John 2:14–15 (NRSV)

A FRIEND OF MINE TOLD me how different his two sons are. One is so gentle that my friend has to teach him to defend himself against bullies. The other one is such a fireball that my friend worries he is too aggressive, and works with him on being more kind.

As we discussed these differences, I told my friend I think these issues sometimes become complicated by our ideas of what is “Christian.” What I meant is that it seems easier for most people to relate to the gentleness of Jesus than this Jesus who makes a whip of cords and turns over tables. Perhaps it’s our focus on the narrative of the Cross and how He suffered for us. I don’t really know the reason—I just know it’s easier for me to accept. By nature I’m more like my friend’s gentle son. And while that probably seems sweet at first glance, it has caused me enormous problems.

Somewhere along the line I got the idea that being gentle was all a Christian should be. That translated into my being a doormat at times—an easy target for bullies. I thought it was being like Jesus not to fight back, to let people abuse me, and I was so wrong. It was only as an adult that I embraced what a fireball Jesus could be as well. When I created more of a balance between the two extremes, I became a healthier person. —GWEN FORD FAULKENBERRY

FAITH STEP: *Are you naturally softer or more assertive? Too much of either good thing is not Christlike. Pray and ask Jesus to help you find a balance, to make you more like Him.*

THURSDAY, AUGUST 2

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:10 (ESV)

SQUIRRELS ARE THE BANE OF my garden. This year we finally grew a wonderful crop of tomatoes after several years of unhelpful weather, bugs, and other problems. The first plump tomatoes began to turn red, and I grabbed my gardening basket, excited to harvest.

Instead I found all the best tomatoes had huge bites taken out of them. Others had been plucked, gnawed, and then discarded. Later when I looked out of the window, I saw the culprits at work. I chased them away, muttering about the wretched pests.

Then I remembered a visit from a New Zealand friend. One day as we sat on the front steps chatting, she noticed squirrels leaping across the yard. She was transfixed. “They are like little dancers. Look how their tails move so gracefully.” She explained to me that New Zealand doesn’t have squirrels. She found beauty where I hadn’t seen any.

Sometimes our lives feel pestered by insults, hardships, and calamities. We may even feel wearied by dealing with a few squirrely people in our midst. Yet in Christ, there can be beauty within the struggles. Our struggles and weakness remind us to lean on Him. And when we turn to Jesus, we are strengthened by His faithful love and guidance.

Later that day, when I was confronted by additional hardships, including physical pain and emotional discouragement, I asked Jesus to help me view all challenges with new eyes. With His help, I was able to embrace the words of the apostle Paul, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content.” —SHARON HINCK

FAITH STEP: *Spend a moment observing a squirrel today. Ponder how sometimes the things that annoy us can become beautiful through Jesus.*

FRIDAY, AUGUST 3

But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 1 Peter 1:15–16 (ESV)

THE BEACH IS LITTERED WITH things that once were something different—a pebble that used to be a much larger rock or a piece broken off a cliff an ocean away, an empty crab claw, a bit of frosted glass that at one time had a life as a container.

I walked a beach a few weeks ago that had stretches of sand interrupted by stretches of ocean litter. Piles of seashells—the hollowed houses of evicted clams. Human refuse like plastic rings from six-packs and water bottles not decomposing fast enough.

The remains of lives lived and purposes now silent.

Life, too, is littered with debris. We rake the beach of our personal histories. But another storm hits and the sand is piled with fronds and driftwood and seaweed that no longer floats but lies in rotting piles.

How does Jesus handle what washes up on the shores of our lives? He delights in beauty, so He likely pockets the stones shaped like hearts. But the human refuse?

He knelt and washed the disciples' feet when they accumulated the dust of this world. So Jesus is the one collecting the worthless things so He can dispose of them. If we let Him.

Like the disciple who argued against having his feet washed, we often resist letting Jesus do His cleanup work in us. It can pile up, inviting critters and bugs and becoming a tripping hazard for others, unless we step aside and let Him have His way.

Theologians call the process sanctification—continually being made more holy, more like Him. —CYNTHIA RUCHTI

FAITH STEP: *Sit for a moment after reading this. Imagine Jesus washing your hands, your feet, your mind of all that has washed ashore. Thank Him.*

SATURDAY, AUGUST 4

Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us. Romans 8:34 (NLT)

HAVE YOU EVER ENCOUNTERED A situation so daunting or complicated that you didn't know how to pray through it?

I recently experienced a relationship hiccup when a friend misunderstood something I'd said and took offense. I initiated two conversations to try to resolve the conflict, but they failed. It seemed that the more earnestly I prayed about it, the stronger the tension between us grew. One day I took a long walk and talked with Jesus about it. Mostly my prayers sounded like this: "Help! I don't know what to do."

Don't be afraid or discouraged, I sensed Him say. *Trust Me. I'm praying for you.* The latter four words changed everything.

I'm always encouraged when other people tell me they're praying for me, but knowing that Jesus intercedes on my behalf takes things to a new level of reassurance. His prayers are offered in wisdom and faith, and they're always according to God's will, in my best interest, and for His glory.

Day and night, Jesus intercedes for His followers. He's mindful of our human frailties and aware of the temptations and trials we face. He knows when we need wisdom, patience, courage, creativity, strength, rest, and the ability to forgive and to control our tongue. The mere thought makes me want to wave a victory banner even as I continue to wait for Him to bring resolution to my relationship hiccup. —GRACE FOX

FAITH STEP: *Draw a picture of today's key verse. (Don't worry if you're not a Michelangelo!) Even drawing a simple sketch will trigger fresh insights about what the verse means.*

SUNDAY, AUGUST 5

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. John 1:1 (NIV)*

AS A NOVELIST, I STRIVE to create new worlds. I spin stories that I hope will feel real, have an emotional impact on readers, and reflect truth. When I write in the fantasy genre, the idea of creating a “story world” is especially challenging. I grapple with shaping the geography, the history, the scientific principles, the flora and fauna, and the characters who inhabit this new universe. My mom joked with me the other day: “No wonder your head hurts, you’re making a new world.”

Ultimately, though, my efforts to use words to invent a new world are only a poor shadow of the creative power of Jesus, the Word. We see Him, with the whole Trinity, present at the beginning of time. He spoke and the world spun into being. This simple truth reveals many things about the nature of Christ:

Jesus is eternal, the beginning and end. That means He can help us deal with our pasts and that He steers our futures.

Jesus is creative. As part of the Triune God, He devised a universe out of nothing, with all its endless beauty. That means He has fresh answers for our problems.

Jesus is powerful. A simple word from Him formed skies and oceans. His breath gave soul to us. This means that when danger frightens us, we can trust in our strong Shepherd, who gave His life to save us and has defeated the enemy of sin and death.

When I dwell on this verse, deep gratitude wells up in my heart, and becomes a prayer. “Lord, you spoke and life began. Please speak over my heart and bring me new life.” —SHARON HINCK

FAITH STEP: *Create something today — a sculpture of clay, or a poem, or a song, or a painting. As you form it, thank Jesus for creating, preserving, and loving you.*

MONDAY, AUGUST 6

Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass.
1 Thessalonians 5:24 (NASB)

AFTER A TENSION-FILLED SIX-HOUR RIDE to the African airport, my entire mission's team missed their flight home, and I felt responsible. Many things contributed to the missed flight: the wrong size van sent for the ride, heavy traffic, and new airport security in Uganda—things beyond my control. But I slipped right into my “blame” place and began to berate myself. Crouched on the floor of the hotel bathroom, I let out bellowing sobs. I hoped no one in the neighboring rooms would hear me, but I'd reached a point of no return. “I can't do this.” “I'm not equipped.” “Someone else can do this better than me!”

In the midst of my sobs I remembered something I wrote on a sticky note and placed in my Bible years ago. “If He calls me to it—He will equip me for it.” I repeated this phrase out loud and, Kleenex box in hand, left my room to lead our team through the next challenges. It's tempting to think we aren't called or equipped for the tough things we face: parenting, marriage, career changes, health upsets, financial decisions—but Jesus is faithful and will bring every big challenge to pass. Our skill set is irrelevant and can actually get in the way of fresh faith. He's leading us to new opportunities to trust, not to fall apart. Even if we need a few minutes on a bathroom floor to remember! —GARI MEACHAM

FAITH STEP: *Grab a note card or a sticky note and carry this message with you today: If He calls me to it—He will equip me for it!*

TUESDAY, AUGUST 7

I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. Philippians 3:10 (MSG)

MY HUSBAND AND I HAVE moved a lot. We enjoyed the years we lived in Illinois and Utah. But when he got a job in southeast Texas, I felt excited to be moving closer to Tennessee where we'd both spent the first thirty years of our lives. I told my friend, Kathryn, that I looked forward to getting back to the South, although I'd never wanted to live in the Deep South. Kathryn, who'd spent the first eight years of her life in Mississippi and Alabama, said, "Hey, if you're gonna go south, deep is the only way to go!"

We laughed over her comment, but I later decided it might be a good motto as I faced another move—and then another one soon afterward to south Louisiana. A reminder to fully embrace our new location, to jump in and explore all it offered. Sometimes that proved easy (fresh seafood and friendly people); other aspects were difficult (extreme humidity and the danger of flooding). But I'm still making an effort to adapt to our new home state rather than treat it as just another stop along the way.

I want to have that same committed attitude toward Jesus, too. I don't want to be His follower in name only, or to be satisfied with a superficial relationship. I believe that the choices we make every day determine how close our relationship with Him is. Are we studying His Word and doing our best to obey it? Do we talk things over with Him throughout our day? Once we experience the closeness that He desires, we'll surely say, "When it comes to knowing Jesus, deep is the only way to go!" —DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *Tell Jesus you want to know Him on a deeper level. Ask Him to show you which steps you need to take to nurture your relationship.*

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 8

You, friends, are well-warned. Be on guard lest you lose your footing and get swept off your feet by these lawless and loose-talking teachers. Grow in grace and understanding of our Master and Savior, Jesus Christ. Glory to the Master, now and forever! Yes! 2 Peter 3:17–18 (MSG)

BACK IN HIGH SCHOOL I went on a summer youth-group camping trip to Matthiessen State Park in Illinois. It's a beautiful area, and we took time to explore some of the canyons, creeks, and waterfalls.

In order to reach one waterfall, we hiked through a creek for a half mile or so. The water was mostly calm, but in one spot there was a four-foot drop between two boulders that we had to maneuver around, gripping rocks to keep from being swept down the rapids.

I was petite, so standing against the current required a lot of effort. My feet slipped on the mossy rocks, and down I went.

Fortunately, I was able to grab hold of one of the boulders and reach up for help. The water's force would've pulled me under, but I was rescued in time.

Losing our footing of faith can happen swiftly when we aren't on our guard. Spending time with God, reading the Bible, praying, and being in fellowship with other Christians helps us to grow and to understand Him. Maintaining those habits is like packing on spiritual muscle that helps us stand firmly against fears, worries, goals, and temptations that contradict what Jesus really wants for us.

Following Jesus's path will include beautiful experiences. But when we face slippery spots, living in Him will provide the strength and steadying handholds we need. —ERIN KEELEY MARSHALL

FAITH STEP: *When have you slipped in your life's journey? Maybe a decision you regretted or a time you wished you had trusted and rested in Him more? Choose your footing today, and trust Him to be your sureness.*

THURSDAY, AUGUST 9

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

Matthew 11:28 (NIV)

WE HAD JUST RETURNED FROM a wonderful wedding anniversary trip, the finale to a yearlong celebration. Reluctantly, I looked at a hastily scrawled to-do list. A mountain of work waited for my attention, but my spirit sagged, and my energy lagged. Over six hundred e-mails, an empty refrigerator, and a looming writing deadline faced me. How would I ever catch up?

For several days I attempted to make a dent in the workload, but weariness would overtake me. I almost nodded off in my prayer time. Writing taxed my brain muscles, and grocery shopping zapped my energy. One morning, I gave up and lay down at noon—for just a few minutes—I told myself. Four hours later, I woke up, rebuking myself for being lazy.

I couldn't understand what was happening until I looked up “jet lag” on my computer. According to one article, it could last the same number of days as the time zones we had crossed in traveling. We had crossed five. I thought back to the day we returned from our trip. The first night home, I slept thirteen hours—but it still wasn't long enough. I sighed with relief and gave my body permission to catch up.

Jesus knows our makeup. He created us with precision. I understood in a fresh way Jesus's invitation to find rest in Him. Our bodies do get tired. And physical weariness can affect every part of our being. Instead of questioning our spiritual or emotional condition, sometimes all we truly need is rest, sweet rest in Jesus. —REBECCA BARLOW JORDAN

FAITH STEP: *Examine your workload alongside the amount of sleep/rest that you allow your body each week. See if there is some room for adjustment.*

FRIDAY, AUGUST 10

My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness. Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:9 (MSG)

THREE YEARS AGO EVERYTHING CHANGED for me. I needed a routine medical procedure and was told it was scheduled for the coming Friday. I was on call for newborn emergency transports that weekend and no one else could cover my call, so I requested that the procedure be rescheduled for the following week. That's why I was in an ambulance instead of at home recovering from outpatient surgery that Saturday. I lost the hearing in my right ear after an abrupt pressure change when the back doors opened. Although my hearing loss, which was originally thought to be total and permanent, improved enough that a hearing aid helps, I still struggle with balance and cognition.

My mother used to say, "No good deed goes unpunished." I have to say it irked me that this happened because I'd been trying to do a good thing rather than just accepting the appointment as scheduled and calling in sick. I knew I wasn't indispensable. The hospital would have survived without me.

I wonder, though, where following Jesus enters the picture in the specifics of my life, and this incident in particular. Was He caught off guard and surprised by what happened? I don't believe He was. Jesus knows me and knows I follow Him. I came to a fork in the road and made a decision that had consequences.

I am different now. Weaker, but depending more on Him.

His grace is sufficient. —SUZANNE DAVENPORT TIETJEN

FAITH STEP: *Paul's weakness kept him from pride. Imagine your weakness being the place where Christ's power rests in you. What might that look like?*

SATURDAY, AUGUST 11

Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (NLT)

EVERY SWIMSUIT I HAVE EVER OWNED has been bought after trying on about seven hundred of them. But recently I found an ad online for a tankini that looked promising. They asked that you measure yourself with a tape measure and choose your size accordingly. The suit was only seventeen dollars. Cheap and easy . . . my love language.

Yesterday it arrived. I opened it and started laughing. Apparently, they measured the top half of my swimsuit at about a women's size eighteen. And the bottom half? A kids' size 3T. I could donate it to a preschooler. My son, Will, saw the bottoms on the table and said, "No, Mom. Just no." You can understand Will's concern. I should have known better. There are no shortcuts in swimsuit shopping. Or in life, for that matter.

The life that we long for comes when we submit every inch of ourselves to Jesus. No shortcuts allowed. It is not easy. It is not cheap. But the end result is total transformation. We can live on our own terms but it never gets us what we want or need. We want to be His, transformed by His love and grace and right thinking. We want to be found in the center of Jesus's palm, fulfilling the life that He has for us. It just doesn't get any better than that.

—SUSANNA FOTH AUGHTMON

FAITH STEP: *Where are you in your walk with Jesus? Are you trying to take shortcuts? Ask Jesus to show you His plan and path for your day as you welcome transformation.*

SUNDAY, AUGUST 12

“For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There will always be flour and olive oil left in your containers until the time when the Lord sends rain and the crops grow again!” 1 Kings 17:14 (NLT)

A WIDOW HAD ONLY A handful of flour and a little oil left in her kitchen. But as she was gathering sticks outside for a fire in order to prepare a last meal for herself and her son, the prophet Elijah approached her and asked for a drink and a little bread. The woman apologized: She didn't have enough to feed him. But Elijah persisted. He told the woman to first make him a biscuit and then to prepare a meal for herself and her son. The woman obeyed, and from that day on until God sent rain, she had a daily supply of oil and flour.

Just as Jesus fed the multitudes with only a few loaves and fishes from a young boy, we have seen Him turn a little into more than enough. As a young couple who lived not only from paycheck to paycheck, but who had to stagger their bills for payment, and who had no savings account for vacations, college, or children's weddings, and few resources for future retirement, we've experienced Jesus's provision for us repeatedly in times of drought—often in miraculous ways. Through the years we've given back to Jesus out of our limited resources, watching Him multiply the rest.

I began writing with only a flame in my heart and little training, simply offering Jesus what I had. But He has been more than faithful to take that desire and turn it into downpours of blessings.

When you give to Jesus whatever you have, trusting Him with the outcome, the promise in Philippians 4:19 will always stand. He truly will provide for all our needs. —REBECCA BARLOW JORDAN

FAITH STEP: *Today offer Jesus whatever you have. Then watch and see how He will use your limited resources for His glory.*

MONDAY, AUGUST 13

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. 2 Peter 3:18 (ESV)

LAST SUMMER, MY HUSBAND, DAUGHTER, and I went to the state fair. We arrived in time to watch the horse-riding competitions. I've always loved horses and gentle rides. However, the riding we saw was on a completely different level. Sitting in the front row, I felt the energy of the horse as it galloped past, leaning into the curve and kicking up dust. Teams of riders then charged around barrels, weaving tight patterns in perfect timing.

The power and skill of both horse and rider astounded me, and I clapped until my hands were sore. When the announcer introduced the next competition, children rode in and wove their ponies between poles. I realized that I was watching the early process of developing the skills for barrel racing.

The stages of growth in the riders reminded me of our spiritual journey. When we begin our walk with Jesus, we are like those children on their ponies, enjoying the ride.

As we confront new obstacles, He deepens our faith. We learn to adjust our balance, lean into Him more, and focus on Him. Like a rider galloping at full speed, we learn to take more risks in our faith and trust Him in difficult times. Sometimes we fall. Our mistakes make us even more aware of our need for His grace. Other times we dig into the Word. Scripture, fellowship with others, and time in prayer all help us grow in our knowledge of Jesus.

Let's heed the invitation of 2 Peter 3:18 and grow in both "the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." —SHARON HINCK

FAITH STEP: *Watch a video of rodeo events and think about the steps of growth involved. Ask Jesus to help you grow in Him today.*

TUESDAY, AUGUST 14

*They have stumbled off the ancient highways and walk in muddy paths.
Jeremiah 18:15 (NLT)*

SCROLLING THROUGH PICTURES ON MY phone, it was easy to be distracted by scenes of Mount Hood, Mount St. Helens, Cannon Beach. I flipped through images of a week at a beach in South Carolina and a fondly remembered vacation in Charleston.

It was good to be reminded of where we'd been.

Someday my husband and I are going to pack our bags, get in the car, and head for destinations unknown. It will be a vacation unlike the others, which were carefully researched, planned, and mapped out. We'll stop at every location that catches our interest rather than adhering to a schedule. We'll choose the slowest route. We'll check out places that aren't on every tourist's must-see list.

But side roads don't work well on *spiritual* journeys.

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet often warned people to return to God's ways. But the people replied, "We will continue to live as we want to, stubbornly following our own... desires." Jeremiah 18:12 (NLT).

A few verses later, veering off His path sounded like this: "My people... have deserted me;... They have stumbled off the ancient highways and walk in muddy paths." Jeremiah 18:15 (NLT).

God's way is Jesus. *The Way*. He is a faithful path. But that doesn't make the trip boring. Ask anyone who has followed Jesus. Heartening sunrises with mercies new every morning and sunsets with the promise of the sweet sleep of a soul at peace. And curves and cliff edges that have us clinging to His robes. Boring? Never.

Life with Jesus is always a grand adventure. —CYNTHIA RUCHTI

FAITH STEP: *Take a look at your travel itinerary for today; your heart's pursuits and habits. Can you confidently say they stick to the main road—the Way—the path Jesus carved and invites us to follow?*

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 15

So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

Romans 5:11 (NLT)

SOMETIMES AN INTRODUCTION CAN CHANGE a person's life. It happened to me at the outset of my writing career. At the time, I intended to develop a line of greeting cards, so I produced ten samples and sent them to a publisher with high hopes of landing a contract.

An editor, in a rejection letter, dashed those hopes, but he introduced me to a well-known card designer who gave me some tips.

That designer and I became friends. When his wife developed cancer, he asked me to join their prayer support team. Later I wrote his story for a widespread publication, and countless readers received encouragement through it.

I'm forever grateful to that editor for making my friendship with the card designer possible. But I'm far more grateful to Jesus for making my friendship with Almighty God possible!

We can try to gain access to God by being good people. We can hope to develop a relationship with Him by obeying rules, or volunteering time. But our efforts fail without Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me" (John 14:6, NIV). His death and resurrection provided the means for us to enter into a relationship with God and to enjoy friendship with Him forever.

This relationship is too precious to keep to ourselves. Let's pray for the loving boldness needed to introduce others to Jesus so that they might enjoy friendship with God, too. —GRACE FOX

FAITH STEP: *What does true friendship look like to you? List three characteristics of a good friend and then consider how Jesus demonstrates those qualities.*

THURSDAY, AUGUST 16

The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. Deuteronomy 33:27 (ESV)

THERE ARE NO WORDS TO describe some moments in life. For example, after a day and a half of driving, we pull into the driveway at our daughter and son-in-law's house. As soon as I step out of the car, the front door swings open and two little bodies come flying out. I lean forward, stretch out my arms, and suddenly my granddaughter and grandson are plastered against me. Then I go into the house and greet whoever is holding the baby. When I stretch out my hands, the baby leans toward me. No words.

If an ordinary nana feels such joy when her grandchildren hurl themselves into her arms, can you imagine how Jesus must love it when we run to Him? When we feel weak, His arms support and strengthen us. During times of grief and hurt, His arms comfort us. If we're lonely, He wraps us in tenderness and love. And the best part of all? His arms are always there. Everlasting arms ready to hold us up through each season of life.

When I read the story of Esther approaching her husband to intercede for the Jewish people, I can't help but contrast King Xerxes with our King of kings. Esther knew that anyone who approached the king in his inner court without being summoned would be executed, unless the king held out his golden scepter. But we are invited to approach our loving Savior with confidence that we will receive grace (Hebrews 4:16). When I remember the times I've run into Jesus's nail-scarred arms, there are no words to describe those moments. —DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *What do you need from Jesus's everlasting arms right now? Try to visualize His pleasure when you run to Him, trusting Him to hold you up.*

FRIDAY, AUGUST 17

We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 (NASB)

EVERY AUGUST I'D RETURN TO my third-grade classroom to begin the ritual of preparing for the start of the school year. Desks were neatly placed, quotes about reading hung on the walls, and twinkle lights gave the room a dreamy glow. When my room was ready I'd say, "I'd be a fantastic teacher if kids didn't have to come in and mess up my room and my plans!"

The truth is that people, like children, are messy. They have habits and behaviors that we must learn to nurture rather than ignore. When our lives rub against lazy or needy people, it's tempting to try to "fix" them and then be on our way—but Scripture invites us to something deeper. To walk alongside the weak, frightened, lonely, and fainthearted, we need the power of patience. Patience is the fruit of the Spirit we'd like to skip, because the only way to grow this fruit is to be annoyed and tested.

I once worked with a woman whom everyone backed away from. She was needy, she was lazy, and she seemed to push her work onto anyone else she could find to take it. Every day as I pulled into the parking lot I asked Jesus how I could affect her life with His discipline and grace. Wouldn't you know I was placed with her on a long-term project that demanded a lot from both of us. During this time I was able to teach her the respect of sharing loads. We soon thrived as a team, and people began to enjoy her quirky personality. Without patience and intentional love, she never would have become the woman she longed to be. It showed me yet again the great power of Jesus's tender care. —GARI MEACHAM

FAITH STEP: *Ask God for one person to love whom others may find annoying.*

SATURDAY, AUGUST 18

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Hebrews 12:1–2 (NIV)

IT WAS WINDOW-WASHING TIME AT the Marshall household. I woke up that Saturday morning thinking I'd do some mirrors and picture glass, and then suddenly I was washing away fingerprints from interior French doors, windowpanes, and trim. By that point, I decided, why not go outside and get it all done?

It had already been a long day when I noticed the renewed sparkle of our home and was motivated to finish the job. The afternoon sun was hot and made it difficult to keep streaks from showing. But I kept on. I finished two sides and moved toward the back. Along that outside wall, tall windows offer a glimpse into our kitchen. And along those windows is a row of rosebushes. They're vibrant pink, with lovely blooms that seem to last forever. Those bushes were between the windows and me, but I saw enough space to wedge myself into so I could clean the outside glass.

It wasn't enough to keep me from the thorns! Dozens of them, all poking, painful nuisances. I was entangled.

Isn't that how the enemy works? Even when we're doing our best to clean out old habits and distractions that keep us from seeing Jesus clearly, we feel the thorns of temptations, attitudes, worries, and other problems that try to trap us.

I finished the windows, but I got a reminder to watch for the enemy's snags, and to appreciate Jesus's help in taking on the enemy's thorns for us. —ERIN KEELEY MARSHALL

FAITH STEP: *Bring your camera on a walk in search of roses. Post a picture and ask Jesus for help to keep from getting entangled by the enemy's thorns.*

SUNDAY, AUGUST 19

This will be a Sabbath day of complete rest for you, and on that day you must deny yourselves. Leviticus 23:32 (NLT)

THERE ARE FEWER THINGS HARDER for a busy mom than to sit down, sit still, and rest. As a mom with ten kids—eight in the home—there is always something to pick up, clean, or cook. There is always someone who needs help or attention. The idea of rest, truly resting, seems impossible even on Sundays. Half of the day is spent getting everyone ready for church and attending it. The other half of the day is spent attempting to prepare for the week ahead. Yet for all of us busy people, rest is exactly what we need.

The Lord first spoke of Sabbath rest to the Israelites who had just escaped from Egypt, where they'd been slaves for hundreds of years. As slaves, they didn't know what rest was, but God wanted them to realize that their lives were no longer just about work and duty. He invited them to be His people, not because of what they did, but because He'd chosen them. The Sabbath rest applied to the first day of the week, and to appointed holy days. And knowing the human heart, God knew they'd have to deny themselves.

As a wife and a mom, rest feels like denying myself. When I do take a break, that means I can't check items off my list, or feel content with a pile of folded laundry, or gaze around at a freshly cleaned room. Resting is denying my need to achieve, yet it's also realizing that I'm enough on my own even if I'm not productive for a day. When I decide to rest, I acknowledge that it's not what I do, it's who I am in Jesus Christ that matters. —TRICIA GOYER

FAITH STEP: *Right now, plan ahead for Sunday to be a day of rest for you. Find ways to clear a large chunk of time just to be present with Jesus—without achieving anything.*

MONDAY, AUGUST 20

It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Philippians 4:7 (MSG)

I HATED THAT MY PARENTS were worriers when I was growing up, and I told myself I'd be a more carefree mother. I'd let my kids climb trees without saying, "Be careful!" and wouldn't imagine worst-case scenarios. Then they began to have accidents. By the time the ER staff greeted my son, Zachary, by name on our third visit in two months, I'd turned into my mother. I tried to keep my three kids safe by anticipating anything that could go wrong, believing I could somehow keep them from harm.

Needless to say, it didn't work. I annoyed my children, modeled fear, and allowed worry to take over more territory in my life. The children have flown the nest now, but I still waste energy and inner peace worrying. It's bad for my health, shows a lack of faith, and does absolutely no good.

David, the man after God's own heart, said, "Do not fret—it only *causes* harm (Psalm 37:8 NKJV). Worry weighs us down and is a symptom of wanting our own way. Worry turns us inward and takes our focus away from Jesus. God's Word always condemns worry, and never encourages it.

Jesus didn't worry. We don't have to, either. Here's how: "Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down" (Philippians 4:6–7, MSG).

Sounds good to me. No worries! —SUZANNE DAVENPORT TIETJEN

FAITH STEP: *Jot down every worry you have. Then put it out of your mind. During your prayer time, use your list of worries to shape your prayers.*

TUESDAY, AUGUST 21

Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalms 37:4 (ESV)

SOME PEOPLE (WINK) HAVE USED and abused this verse to “hustle” God. “God,” I’d bargain, “I am delighting in you by reading my Bible, praying, and serving at church, so give me what I want.”

In my ongoing negotiations with God, I have often tried to get Him to do my bidding by my pretend obedience, worship, delight. I’m not talking about all-out lying, like a scam artist bilking millions. I’m talking about obeying, praying, because I want things to go my way, because somewhere in my heart I believe I’ll get demerits if I don’t. I’d try hard to conjure “delight in the Lord”, when I’d really rather “delight in a pedicure”. How foolish of me! God sees right through my manipulation. Remember the Pharisees? Am I so different?

Sometimes God gently reveals this to me, and I’ve chosen to stop whatever practice simply as an act of faith in a God of grace.

I delight in my children. Just holding them fills me with deep satisfaction. This delight is not manipulative. It’s spontaneous and true. But it’s also not enduring, even with my precious kids. I still get up to check e-mail. Likewise, I cannot contrive to delight in the Lord. Getting to a place where He is genuinely enough for me happens only when there’s nothing else for me to consider. But there’s always something else. When I have soaked up so much of Him and shed so much of me, usually the hard way, the desires of my heart gradually change, as they have.

Thanks to Jesus, I don’t have to try so hard or even try at all. He blesses me because of His gracious love and Christ’s perfect delight, not mine. —ISABELLA YOSUICO

FAITH STEP: *Are you hustling God? Admit that to Him and talk to Him honestly about your desires. Then leave the results in His capable hands.*

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 22

"Your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."

Joel 2:28 (NASB)

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE days you wish you didn't have to endure. While working in Uganda, my mission team missed their two-day flight back to the United States, and we were faced with the possibility of not getting home for another week. To make matters worse, every hotel within miles of the airport was booked solid. We had no way to get home and nowhere to stay. In the midst of this frustration we remembered the name of a hotel we hadn't tried. Nearing the midnight hour, one of my staff members listlessly dialed the number, expecting the same response. To our surprise, the hotel manager said he had room for our team, so we stuffed ourselves back into our van and drove to the address.

After settling our team members into their rooms, the hotel manager asked to speak to me privately. He explained that immediately before we called he was awakened from a deep sleep by Jesus Christ. He told me that Jesus explained there were people in trouble, and he was to help them. I almost fell off my seat! We both had chills on our arms as he spoke, and to top it off, he was a Muslim man married to a Christian woman. "Why would Jesus show Himself to me?" he kept asking. All I could say was, "He loves and trusts you, and He heard our prayers for help."

Before leaving the hotel a few days later, my team gathered around our new friend and prayed for him with joyful thanksgiving. I've never forgotten his kindness, nor the revelation that God can speak in any way He chooses—even in the dead of night to a man who hasn't yet embraced Him. —GARI MEACHAM

FAITH STEP: *When was the last time you heard something about Jesus that knocked you off your feet? Thank Him today that He is alive, real, and active all over the world.*

THURSDAY, AUGUST 23

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.” Luke 4:18–19 (NLT)

I TEND TO BUCK THE rules. I have had this tendency since I was a small child. Just ask my parents. I caused them no end of consternation. I saw rules as a barrier to my freedom. Rules shaped my view of how I saw Jesus. He was all “don’t dos” and “can’t haves” as far as I was concerned. What fun is that? It wasn’t until my college years that I realized that, without Him, I would destroy myself. I was all good intentions and bad choices.

I slowly began to recognize that His ways weren’t a barrier to my freedom. They were the only way to freedom. His laws weren’t a blockade to fun; they were my jumping-off place into the safety and protection of His wide arms. Jesus’s intentions for me weren’t a load of backbreaking rules. His intentions were to liberate me from sin. To set my feet on a path of freedom. To unleash a new creation from the prison of bad habits and self-destruction. He was beating back my soul-crushing desires and selfish thinking so that I could live free in Him.

I am still learning this as I lean in and know Him more. Jesus is all about freedom. Freedom from addiction. From pain. From suffering. From heartache. From sin. From loneliness. From fear. How can we not see that? How can we not embrace it? His way of living is so beautiful and life-giving. Let’s hold on to Him with both hands and let Him set us free. —SUSANNA FOTH AUGHTMON

FAITH STEP: *Go for a walk or a run. Open your arms wide. Imagine yourself receiving all the freedom that Jesus has for you.*

FRIDAY, AUGUST 24

"As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, And at the last He will take His stand on the earth." Job 19:25 (NASB)

I UNDERSTAND THAT THIS EARTHLY life includes problems and troubles, but honestly, some seasons of our lives are especially hard, aren't they? My husband and I have just passed through a year that seemed to bring one crisis after another: unexpected job termination, serious illness and hospitalization, the turmoil of relocating again, the death of a parent. If I include my extended family, that adds other major crises to the list.

During such unsettling times, it's easy to get shaken by the uncertainty of life, especially when our minds are filled with questions. *Why is this happening? How will I ever get over this? What does the future hold? Will my life ever resemble "normal" again?* Surely these questions also filled Job's mind during his period of severe trials, when it seemed that everything good was stripped away from him. Yet even in the midst of expressing his grief, confusion, and pain, he occasionally burst forth with a statement of faith. Regardless of his feelings and circumstances, one thing Job knew: He had a living Redeemer whom he would see face-to-face one day.

It's okay to question why things happen to us. While we may never understand all the reasons during this lifetime, we can cling to what we do know: Jesus loves us so much that He died for us. He holds our present and our future in His hands and is working out everything for good. Meditating on these truths puts our earthly trials in perspective. —DIANNE NEAL MATTHEWS

FAITH STEP: *Make a list of your favorite Bible verses. Choose a few to be your designated statements of faith for when you go through a "Job" season of life. If you find yourself struggling to pray, begin with one of these affirmation verses.*

SATURDAY, AUGUST 25

“You profane me when you say, ‘Worship is not important, and what we bring to worship is of no account,’ and when you say, ‘I’m bored—this doesn’t do anything for me.’” Malachi 1:12 (MSG)

BOREDOM HAS RARELY, IF EVER, entered my vocabulary. Perhaps I owe that to my pastor father, whose motto was, “Always have something to do today, something to do tomorrow.” I remember a few of his side hobbies: growing an orchard, restoring old Model T cars, and helping build missions. The joyful duty of pastoring filled his days, as well as, of course, being a dad.

My mom kept busy, too. A piano teacher, substitute schoolteacher, collector of small antiques, reader of a gazillion books, great cook. All that and being a pastor’s wife and pianist/organist for many of their pastorates. And being a mom.

Following their pattern, I’ve always enjoyed a variety of interests in life. But I changed my father’s slogan to, “Always have something to look forward to today, something to look forward to tomorrow.” Anticipating what Jesus may bring on any given day helps balance all my activities. I do procrastinate with less pleasant tasks. But I never want the tyranny of something urgent to block the joy of my journey.

Through the prophet Malachi, God accused the high priests of presenting imperfect sacrifices. They had become bored with worshipping God. They failed to understand the joyful purpose of Christ-centered living (Matthew 23:23).

Our lives are consumed with worship. Boredom could mean that we are failing to see Jesus’s perspective in life. But if we let Him, Jesus wants to put joy in our journey. —REBECCA BARLOW JORDAN

FAITH STEP: *Make a list of things that bring you joy. Include at least one of those activities daily, along with spending time with Jesus.*

SUNDAY, AUGUST 26

A thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.
2 Corinthians 12:7–9 (ESV)

SCHOLARS THEORIZE THAT PAUL MAY have suffered from an eye ailment. I think Paul's thorn could just as easily have been fear, gluttony, drunkenness, or something else less plain-vanilla. Whatever the case, Paul knew God and himself enough to know that God was allowing the affliction to remain in Paul.

Jesus removed a few of my thorns when I became a Christian, some so swiftly and completely that there was no denying Who did it. Other failings have improved over time.

But I have a few defects and weaknesses that linger. I've thought to myself, I'd be much more effective if I were, well, perfect.

Here is where Paul nails it. My weaknesses are the best things I have going for me. If it wasn't for them, you can be quite sure I'd be ready to take the reins of my life, and maybe yours, too. Yikes!

My failings keep me humble, and sometimes so broken that I cry out to Jesus. When I reach that point, I see Christ's grace rush in and something wondrous happens. I feel a deep sense of peace and freedom, and I also see God using me in a remarkable way.

In my flesh, I have contempt for weakness. Viewed in the light of Christ and Paul's retellings, I, too, can boast of the weakness that allows Christ to work through me. —ISABELLA YOSUICO

FAITH STEP: *Take a few minutes to write about the thorns Christ has taken from you and those He's left behind. Thank Him for both!*

MONDAY, AUGUST 27

Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant . . . [not] in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that. Ephesians 5:2 (MSG)

LOVING PEOPLE IN A WAY that makes them feel cherished is an art form. Cherished is how my brother and sister-in-law made me feel during a recent weekend visit to their home. They anticipated my every need and extended themselves to make sure I not only had a place to pillow my head but a comfortable place to pillow my heart as well.

They went out of their way to meet my quirky dietary requirements. If I started to feel thirsty, almost before I could voice it or head to the sink to get a drink of water, one of the two of them was at my elbow with an array of options. They remembered how much I'd enjoyed a local restaurant on my last visit, knew my favorite music, insisted on carrying my bags even though I could have done it, and rearranged their schedules to accommodate mine. They set a place for me at the table so I could catch the best view. They listened unhurriedly. Loaded with their own concerns, they volunteered to shoulder mine, too.

When the weekend was over, they packed leftovers and treats to send home with me. Before we parted—and this is the most cherished moment—they wrapped me in their embrace and prayed for me.

It was at Jesus's feet that they learned the art of cherishing others. They'd experienced His extravagant love, watched how He anticipates our needs, and determined to pattern their caring after His. Aiming for something higher and purer than hospitality, they demonstrated what we all need: to feel cherished. —CYNTHIA RUCHTI

FAITH STEP: *Somebody in your circle of friends and family is thirsty for a sip of Living Water, hungry for a bite of Bread, longing to know the extravagant love of Jesus. Are you the cherisher who will show them what it looks like, tastes like?*

TUESDAY, AUGUST 28

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. Romans 8:1–2 (NLT)

I LOVE CONNECTING WITH OLD friends. On Facebook I'm "friends" with people I haven't seen since elementary school. And recently we had our family photos done by a friend whom I've known for twenty-five years. At the end of the photo session, Jessica and I reminisced about how we first met and marveled at how much has changed in our lives. It's wonderful to have such a long history with someone... well, unless there are things in your history you wish to forget.

Sometimes when I connect with an old friend, I cringe over all they know about me. About my poor relationship choices or the fistfight I got into after one homecoming football game. People who've known me a long time know about my teen pregnancy, too.

It's also amazing that while those memories are still there, the condemnation is not. Because I've given my life and heart to Jesus, all the sin that used to bind me no longer holds me captive. Because of Jesus I have freedom and life in the Spirit. I'm not just fixed up; I'm new and clean. And I also make different choices.

As 1 Corinthians 1:30 says, "Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin" (NLT). This is not only a message for me, but for all my friends who are still carrying the burden of sin and condemnation. Because they know where I've been and what I've done, they're also an eyewitness to the transformation Jesus brings. Knowing this reminds me not to hide from my past, but to tell those in my past that they can be transformed by Jesus, too. —TRICIA GOYER

FAITH STEP: *Reach out to an old friend this week. See the renewal of your relationship as a chance to share all that Jesus has done in your life.*

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 29

Jesus saith unto him, Go thy way; thy son liveth. And the man believed the word that Jesus had spoken unto him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him, and told him, saying, Thy son liveth. John 4:50–51 (KJV)

THE LAST TIME I WAS in Berlin, I saw a mural painted on a building that read “Believing is seeing.” It was in German, but I loved it. It’s a good way to describe faith, as the evidence of things unseen. We witness this in practice by the nobleman in John 4 who comes to Jesus asking for a miracle. He believes—and then he sees.

How often I demand that it be the other way around. As an academic, I’m trained not to accept any argument that is presented without evidence. First you show me evidence, then I might believe your claim. There is no risk involved in this; as long as the evidence is sufficient, the point is proven. No chance I’ll be fooled or look stupid for believing. No way I’ll have hope and then be disappointed. I’m in control of the outcome. Every time.

As He did with many human concepts, Jesus turns this idea upside down. He invites us to see beyond a scientific dimension into a spiritual one. Faith doesn’t defy logic. It transcends it.

Case in point: If seeing is believing, I will approach my illness with the fear of disappointment until I see my test results. But if believing is seeing, I can move forward in confidence that I am healed. I don’t get to choose how He does it, or whether it’s even physical healing that He’s accomplishing in me. But I trust that He heals me, because Jesus calls Himself my Healer.

For a believer, the difference between these approaches is peace that transcends our understanding. —GWEN FORD FAULKENBERRY

FAITH STEP: *What do you most want to see? First, believe.*

THURSDAY, AUGUST 30

When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, "Dear woman, here is your son." And he said to this disciple, "Here is your mother." And from then on this disciple took her into his home. John 19:26–27 (NLT)

MY HUSBAND AND I SPEND months preparing for our annual eastern European ministries. We host a booth at mission conferences, process application forms, sort and pack donations, organize teaching materials, train volunteers, and purchase airline tickets. Add a myriad of household chores prior to departure, toss in a few short nights, and we're tired before we reach the airport.

Our usual flight leaves at 9:00 p.m. Because we're early risers, we've already been awake for fifteen hours by the time our plane takes off. We'll travel for more than twenty hours to reach our final destination. I can't sleep on airplanes, so my body aches with fatigue by the time we arrive in Budapest.

It takes effort and prayer not to become self-focused when I'm overtired. I rely on supernatural strength to answer volunteers' questions and ensure their needs are met before I go to sleep.

Jesus never succumbed to a self-focused attitude. Even as His life ebbed away. Despite pain that defied imagination, He acknowledged His mother standing near the cross. Then He saw the disciple John, and He connected the two. By doing so, He ensured that His mother's needs would be met after He was gone.

No one would have blamed Jesus if He'd overlooked this act of kindness, but doing so was not in His nature. He came to serve. And He stayed true to this mission until death. —GRACE FOX

FAITH STEP: *Stand at a window and look outside. What do you see? People driving or walking to and fro? Ask Jesus to love people through you and to give you strength to remain others-focused, especially when you're tired.*

FRIDAY, AUGUST 31

*“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.
I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.
No one can snatch them away from me.” John 10:27–28 (NLT)*

NOT ONE OF MY FRIENDS or family members will sit by me when we go to see a suspenseful movie. They even refuse to sit next to me in a good, old-fashioned drama. I tend to become totally engrossed in the movie, especially if the actors are in trouble. I begin interacting with the characters by yelling out to them. This is why no one wants to share popcorn with me.

My movie behavior is not a new development. When *Titanic* came out what seems like ages ago, my family took a vote to see who would have to sit with me. They didn't want to be associated with me when I was shouting out for people to “Jump!” and “Swim!” and “For goodness' sake, help those people get into the lifeboats already!”

I think Jesus is yelling out to us in the same way when He watches our lives play out. He interacts with us when we make choices and decide on our paths. He wants to save us. He calls out, “Come to Me!” and “Let Me save you!” Unlike my ineffectual, movie-screen yelling, Jesus has words for us that can change our lives, words of truth and hope and light. Words that can and will shape us into the people that He intends for us to be.

Jesus has a plan and a path for us, and if we listen for His voice of love, He will direct us. He will guide us. He will save us. His words are like oxygen, sustaining us no matter what we are going through. If we listen for His voice, He will always rescue us.
—SUSANNA FOTH AUGHTMON

FAITH STEP: Read *John 10* and then take some time to listen to Jesus's voice. What is He saying to your heart?

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*“Ask, and it will
be given you; seek,
and you will find;
knock, and it will
be opened to you.”*

LUKE 11:9