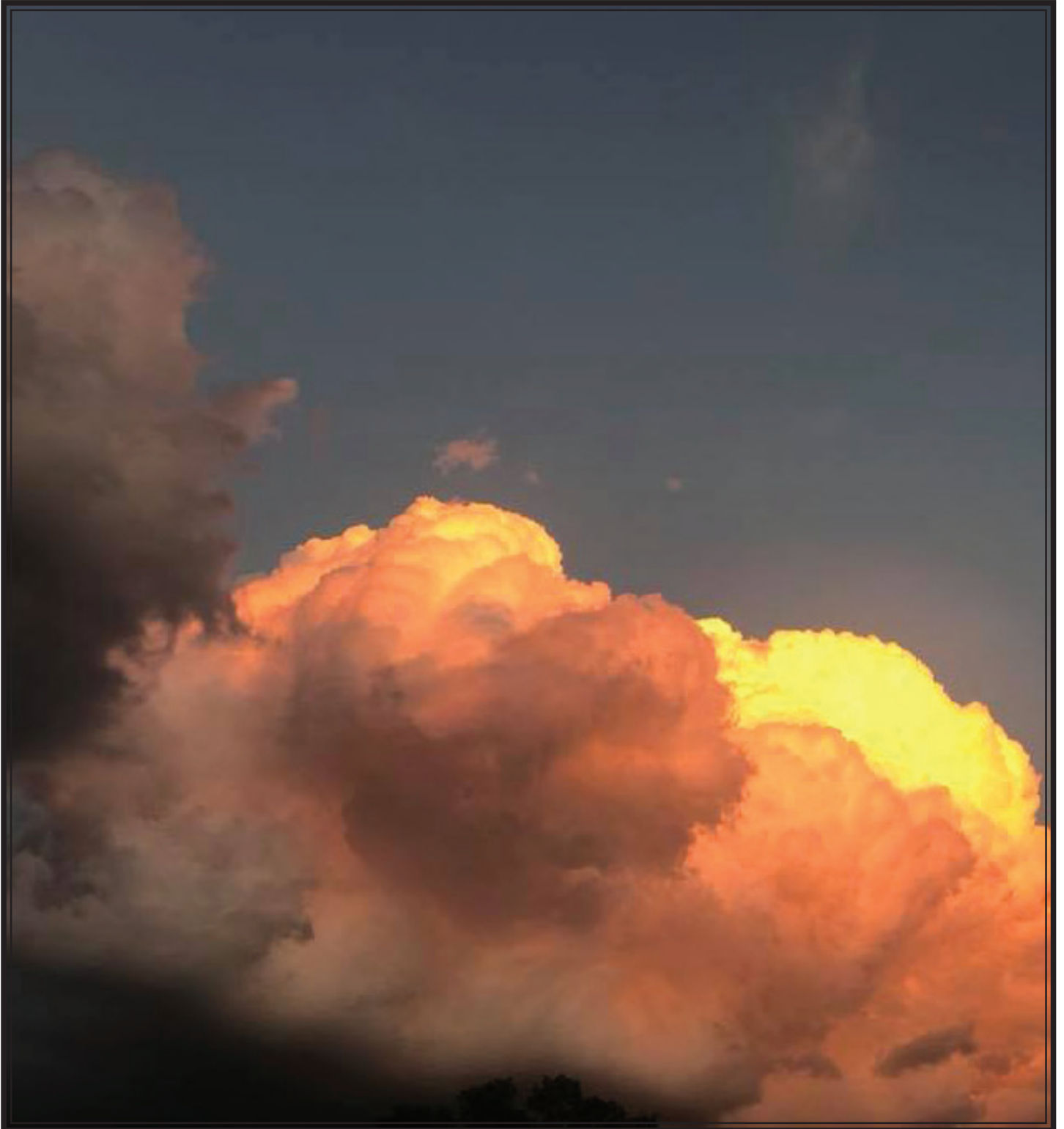


city lights

Established in 1994 ~ Main Street Church in Brigham City, UT ~ No. Six Online Edition ~ www.msbc.org ~ Jan/Feb, 2019



"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it." John 1:5 NLT

This issue of *City Lights* is the 6th online edition since its inception in 1994 as *The Fellowship*



Encouragement. Card design by Shelley Kancitis, 2018

January 2019

God's Surprises

“Surprise us with love at daybreak; then we’ll skip and dance all the day long.”

Psalm 90:14 MSG

Cover Photo

Reflecting the Light

Jenny Bee—Colorado Springs, Colorado 2018

Meditation Page Photo

Melancholie

Sculpted by Albert György, Switzerland

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

Our words and creative expressions, besides glorifying God, should also encourage our readers. Therefore, all contributions must reveal our Christ-like love to all men and be biblically based.

City Lights ministers within the Statement of Faith and is an extension of the Core Values of Main Street Church and its outreach ministries.

<http://www.msbc.org/statfaith.htm>

The theme for our Fall 2019 issue:

The Encouragement of God’s Word

Contact: citylights@msbc.org

The Salt and Light Company will present a unique, hands-on workshop one Saturday in the spring.

“*Discovering Your True Identity in Christ*” will be conducted by Diane Kulkarni and Madeleine Felix. Watch for details.

God's Promises in the Midst of Destruction

"The Spirit of the Lord God has taken control of me! The Lord has chosen and sent me to tell the oppressed the good news, to heal the brokenhearted, and to announce freedom for prisoners and captives. This is the year when the Lord God will show kindness to us and punish our enemies. The Lord has sent me to comfort those who mourn."

Isaiah 61:1-2 CEV

"He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." Isaiah 53:3-5 NIV

"Whenever you cry out to Me, I'll answer. I'll be with you in troubling times. I'll save you and glorify you."

Psalms 91:15 CEB

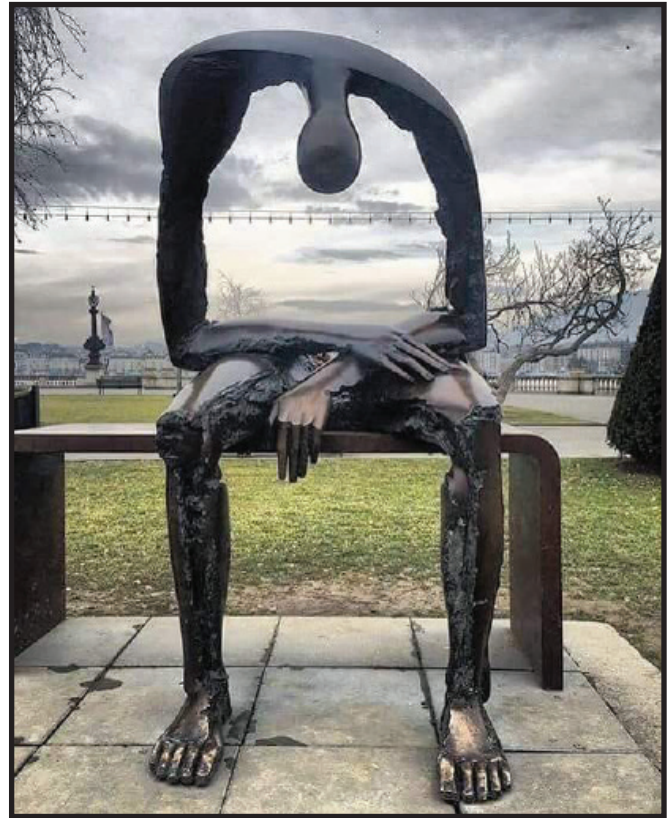
"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in Me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with Me where I am." John 14:1-3 NLT

"He hath said, 'I will never, never leave thee; I will never, never, never forsake thee.'"

Hebrews 13:5 (Greek rendering)

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to its foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

—Last stanza of *How Firm a Foundation*



Melancholic. Sculpted by Albert György, Switzerland. Used with permission, 2018. On the shore of Lake Geneva. <http://www.albert-gyorgy.ch/viste-contact/>

"Now seeing the crowds, He went up on a mountain. And when He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And He began speaking and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'" Matthew 5:1-10 MEV

"I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem. It was coming down out of heaven from God. It was made ready like a bride is made ready for her husband. I heard a loud voice coming from heaven.

It said, 'See! God's home is with men. He will live with them. They will be His people. God Himself will be with them. He will be their God. God will take away all their tears. There will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All the old things have passed away.'"

Revelation 21:2-4 NLV

Surprise and Assurance*

Wilderness. 2018 —Lime Kiln Canyon, Arizona by Charlotte Brooks.

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

As an enormous invasion force positioned itself to the south, the modest army of Israel gathered itself to march out and confront the threat before it reached Jerusalem. By all measures, it was a suicide mission for the defenders. The scouts had reported the advance of the consolidated forces of three nations who had intended to make their invasion irresistible. It would be a short fight.

Nevertheless, the defenders marched into the pre-dawn wilderness of Tekoa unable to anticipate when they would stumble upon their aggressors. While the lack of sunlight was a factor—a declining one—the chief reason for their uncertainty was the topographical concealment afforded by the narrow valley through which the invasion was advancing. The foresight of a previous generation had built a watchtower in a carefully chosen place so as to alleviate this tactical blindness and it was to this watchtower that the defenders now neared. Accurate battlefield intelligence has swayed many a battle in the history of warfare but on this day, the generals considered the view from the top of that tower nearly irrelevant.

It was not their fatalism of being out matched—of their certain doom—that made it irrelevant. On the contrary. It was their confidence of a certain win. This was evidenced by their unorthodox lead group—the tip of their defensive spear. Musicians and singers! They walked toward this approaching menace revealing their position to the enemy as hundreds of voices echoed down the corridor of the valley, singing of God’s steadfast love. They were not outfitted with rugged clothes as befitting the wilderness. They wore their worship best. Visually and audibly they seemed starkly out of place.

But their presence represented the third party in this conflict. It was the unseen and omnipotent presence of the God of Israel that turned the tables on the balance of power. That made the view from that tower irrelevant.

Upon first hearing the scouts’ terrifying report about this great horde, the king of Israel gathered the nation and led them in public prayer. No saber rattling. No bluster of pride. He was clearly afraid. After calling upon God and appealing to His faithfulness toward His people, the king finished his prayer with these words: “For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

A prophet named Jahaziel confirmed God’s benevolent answer to the king’s prayer and passed on God’s instruction for the army and the singers to go out into the wilderness and to witness the battle, which was no longer theirs. It now belonged to God.

So with the defenders’ progress halted at the tower, the sun rose as some of their men scaled the tower to gain a view of the still unseen invaders. The singers sang their last refrain, the harmony dissipated down the valley and everyone stared up to the top of the tower. In silence they waited for a word.

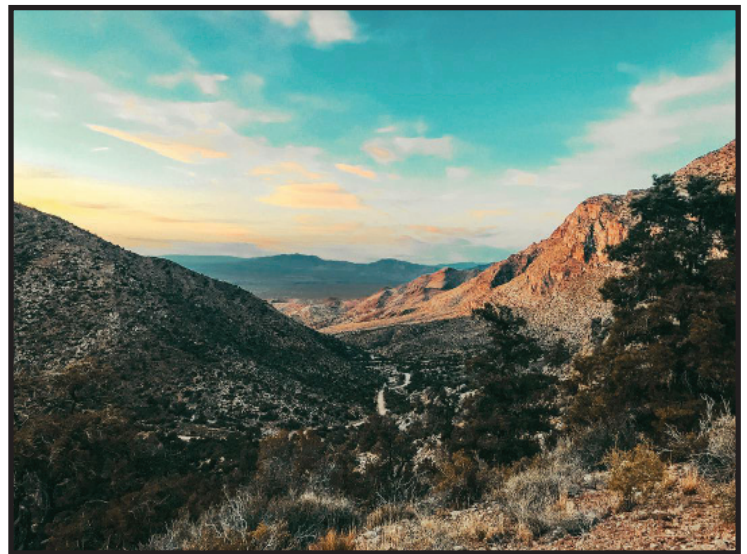
They were all dead. The military pride of three nations. Dead. Every one of them.

Apparently, God had devised an ambush in their midst such that two nations eradicated the third. Then the two allied nations eradicated one another. No one was left to invade Israel.

For those men who mounted the tower, the question arises. Were they surprised by what they saw? Does the certainty of the knowledge of God’s lovingkindness dull the surprise when He engages on our behalf? No. And that is exactly why God instructed them to go out and see.

The never changing character of God—His faithfulness to us, His sovereign love for us, His responsiveness to our needs—still surprises us when it is expressed because of its unexpected creativity. Surprise and assurance are the seemingly contrary partners that surround us in this walk with God. Sometimes it takes climbing a tower after we stop our forward motion and looking out at the landscape. And there it is. Surprise and assurance.

*Read 2 Chronicles 20



An Old Clay Pot

By David Roper—Boise, Idaho

*"We have this treasure in earthen vessels,
that the excellence of the power may be of
God and not of us."*

2 Corinthians 4:7

Over the years I've acquired a number of old clay pots. The one pictured here was excavated from a site dated at Abraham's time (circa 15th century B.C.)—at least one item in our home that is older than I.

It's not much to look at: stained, cracked, chipped and in need of a good scrubbing. It's very fragile. If I dropped it, it would shatter into useless shards.

I keep it on my desk to remind me that I'm an old clay pot, a man made out of mud, of little value apart from the transcendent treasure that the pot contains. *"We have this treasure (Jesus) in earthen vessels."*

Paul continues: *"(As earthen vessels), we are pressured from every side, yet not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed..."* (4:8, 9).

"Pressured." "Perplexed," "Persecuted." "Struck down." These are the pressures the pot must bear.

"Not crushed." "Not in despair." "Not forsaken." "Not destroyed." These are the effects of the counteracting strength of our indwelling Lord.

"... always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus" (4:10a). This is the attitude that characterized Jesus who died to Himself every day. And this is the attitude that must characterize us—a willingness to die to self-effort, trusting solely in the sufficiency of the one who indwells us. *"Not I, but Christ."*

"... that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body" (4:10b). This is the outcome: the beauty of Jesus made visible in an old clay pot.

Pressed out of measure and pressed to all length.

Pressed so intensely it seems beyond strength;

Pressed in the body and pressed in the soul,

Pressed in the mind till the dark surges roll;

Pressed by foes, and pressured by friends;

Pressure on pressure, till life nearly ends;

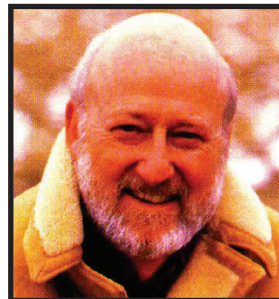
Pressed into loving the staff and the rod,

Pressed into knowing no helper but God.

—Annie Johnson Flint



David Roper says that he and his wife, Caroline, do clergy support, caring for pastors and their families that minister in very small places around the state. Most of them are overworked, underpaid, and under-appreciated. We try to be there for them to do whatever we can to encourage them in the work that God has given them to do.





"Call to Me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."

Jeremiah 33:3 NIV

God's Surprises*

By Georgia Herod, City Lights Staff Writer—Liberty, Missouri

"Close your eyes and hold out your hands," Daddy said when I ran to greet him as he returned from a trip to town. I squeezed my eyes tight, eagerly thrusting my small open hands before him. With heart pounding in anticipation, I could hardly keep my eyes closed. But I knew the "rules"—I had to try to identify the surprise before I opened my eyes.

Once Daddy had placed it in my hands, my fingers gently wrapped around it, turning it, drawing on my limited

experience to guess what the treasure was—perhaps a Butterfinger candy bar, a rubber ball, a jump rope, or a box of Cracker Jacks. Then, as if a spring had shot loose, I would blurt out my answer and pop open my eyes, squealing, jumping up and down with delight.

I loved surprises then—and I love surprises now:

- a friend asking me to lunch for no reason,
- a "thinking of you" card,
- a hug from a child,
- a call from a loved one who lives far off, or an unexpected bouquet of flowers on a doldrums day.

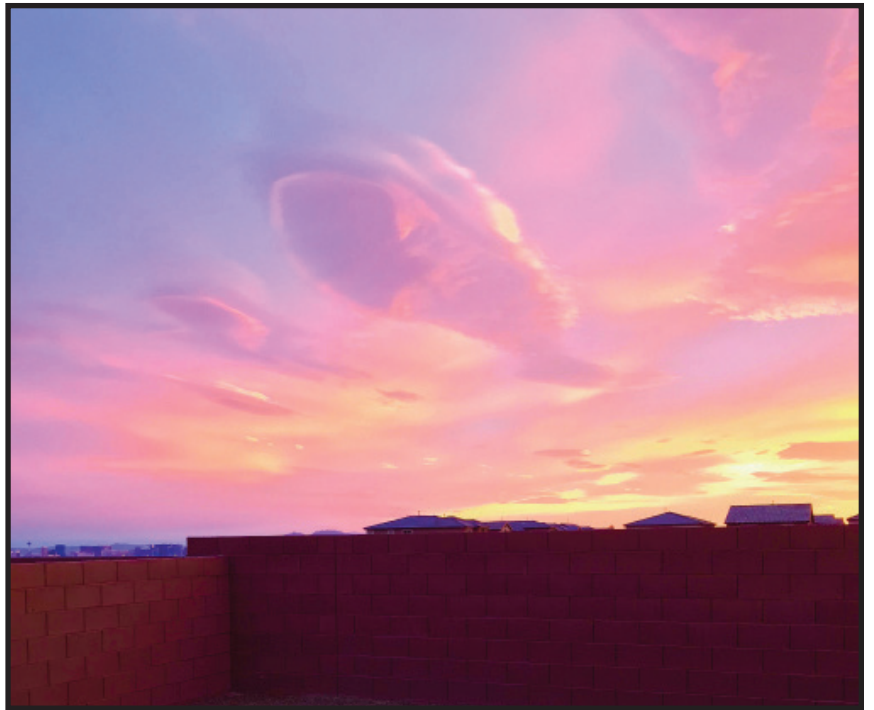
My heart races and my spirits soar when a surprise comes my way.

God must love surprises too—because He shows up at the least likely moments; He shows up in ways I would never imagine. Recall with me a few of God's surprises which we encounter in the Bible—

- He speaks to Moses in a burning bush on the backside of the desert;
- He tells Noah to build an ark when Noah had never seen rain—and months later He places a rainbow in the heavens as a sign of hope;
- He promises a son to Abraham and Sarah, in their 90's. Then perhaps a decade or so later, He asks Abraham to sacrifice that child of promise—but God showed up—and provided a ram in place of Isaac.
- After 400 years of silence, the angel of the Lord appears to a virgin and tells her she's chosen to have a baby who will be the Savior of the world—Emmanuel, God with us!
- Thirty years later, God shows up on the third day after crucifixion as Christ is resurrected.
- A few days later, Jesus Christ, very much alive, appears to His disciples on the road to Emmaus—and their attitudes, perspective, and lives were changed.

In Isaiah 55:8-9, God says, "*My ways are not your ways, and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts.*" I think God loves surprises! Oh, how many, many times He's surprised me in major and minor events in life—by changing my thinking, by redirecting my path, by stretching my faith, or by confronting my sinfulness.

God used my first husband's death to dramatically change my heart and life. It was then that I began to search hard after the Lord and His will. A few months after my husband's death, I moved to begin graduate school and immediately immersed myself in my studies—a great escape from my grief. But then depression came crashing in—and after a long weekend of darkness, anguish, weeping, and nearly despair, searching God's Word, I cried out, "You have to do something—I don't want to live like this; I'm yours." And suddenly the presence of God filled the room as He spoke to my heart: "Georgia, I love you and that's all that matters." The darkness disappeared, as God became "*my glory and the lifter of my head.*" I don't remember walking to school that day—but I'm sure I did. For weeks I walked in a deep sense of His presence.



After marrying James Herod five years later, we moved to Louisville, KY. While he attended seminary, God had me in the school of prayer and faith—and I began to know God as Faithful Provider. Instead of a fulltime teaching position, I got a part-time gift wrapping job, in addition to substitute teaching. James had only a part-time job. One day after we had deposited our checks and paid our bills, we had only \$3.15 in the bank—and there would not be a paycheck for two more weeks.

Although I fell apart in worry and anxiety, I also ran to the Lord. He directed my thoughts to Matthew 6:25-34, where Jesus says, "*Do not worry about what you're going to eat, drink, or wear. I know everything you need. You're valuable. I'm going to take care of you. But if you worry, then you're no different than those pagans who don't know Me.*"

As I spent the day reading and meditating, those last words slapped me in the face: if I chose to worry rather than take God at His Word, I was no different than an unbeliever! In brokenness of heart, I asked God to forgive me. By the end of the day, I had moved toward new trust in Him, claiming His faithfulness to His Word and resting in the promise found in Philippians 4:19—"*My God shall supply all your needs, according to His riches in glory.*"

The weeks passed, and we always had food—a sack of groceries at the doorstep, an unexpected invitation to dinner or lunch, Wednesday night supper at church, a potluck with friends, or a love gift of money.

One morning as I prepared to leave for a teaching assignment, my only pair of pantyhose developed another run. I'd already mended a run in each leg. On the way out the door, I said to James, "I have to buy stockings," but we had no money. Once again I claimed God's promise of provision. That afternoon when I arrived home, I found a letter from the mother of a young woman whom I had befriended as a student and then comforted when she became a widow. The letter said, "A few years ago you gave some stockings to Betty, who gave them to me. Use the money from the enclosed check to buy some stockings." In it was a check for \$10. I wept—and praised God for His faithful provision. I had just experienced Isaiah 65:24—"*It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer.*" My answer had been on the way, even before I prayed for those stockings. God knows; He hears; He shows up—in the most surprising ways.

My family has a lifetime of stories of God's perfect provision for every financial need. All our medical bills were covered when I had cancer and after I was struck by lightning, and when the bills were paid, the provision stopped! In December 1992 after I was diagnosed with cancer in September, our daughter had to have a jaw realignment. When I checked her into the hospital for surgery, the nurse asked me if I were going to pay the \$1000 deductible that day. I said, "Yes," but I had no idea how—I was trusting God.

As I waited during surgery, the pastor of the church we had started in Logan, Utah, dropped by. After he prayed with me, he said, "I have something for you." I felt as if he had said, "Close your eyes and hold out your hands." From his coat

pocket he pulled a check for just over a \$1000! When I shared with him our need, we had another prayer and praise time.

Just as God remains faithful to His promise to provide for our needs, we can be sure He will provide opportunities to share Christ when we ask for them. While teaching at Weber State University, I would park at the fieldhouse and ride the shuttle to my office. One morning I parked and walked to the shelter, where a young man was staring off into the distance, oblivious to me. Suddenly he turned to me and said, “Do you know what that fish symbol is on the back of that car? Is it some kind of secret society?” What a lead in for me to share Christ.

Another day the Gideons had done a Bible distribution on campus. I had gone to the bus stop and sat down on a bench. Soon a young man carrying an armload of books and a Gideon Bible sat down next to me. He opened the cover on the Bible—where the plan of salvation is—and began reading. In just a bit, I very casually asked, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” Like Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, we had a conversation that continued after we were seated on the bus.

Oh, God does surprise us in both big and small ways. He always hears our prayers, and He always answers—“Yes, No, or Wait.” The biggest “no” of our lives came in 1992 as we were being considered for the pastorate of a Christian fellowship in Saudi Arabia. We had prayed in earnest; we had sensed God’s clear direction; we had shared with our children, who were in agreement. We were ready to pack our bags. But then the letter arrived that said another man had been chosen. We were in shock—we questioned ourselves, the process, and God, not really knowing how to pray except that we wanted to be obedient, no matter what. We had no understanding. We threw ourselves before the Father, knowing that God was sovereign and we could trust Him—but we were being stretched in new ways.

Six months later as I lay in the hospital after a mastectomy, the still small voice of God whispered to my heart, “My ‘no’ was mercy.” God’s answer was consistent with His character, with His desire to protect and provide. How thankful I am that we had already learned to trust Him.

On my first night home after surgery, I awoke about 3 a.m. surrounded by the terror that lurks in darkness. I was scared of the unknowns—chemo, radiation, statistics. I had young children and a wonderful husband. I didn’t want to die. As I cried out to God, tender words calmed my spirit: “*He is kept in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee.*” That was King James English, but I hadn’t used a King James version of the Bible in 25 years. Quickly and quietly, I slipped out of bed, hurried downstairs to find that Bible, and searched the concordance for those words. After several missed attempts, I found them as I turned to Isaiah 26:3. God showed up—He surprised me! He met my deepest need, took away my fear, and gave me peace that night—and throughout the ensuing months as I set my mind on Him.

Joni Eareckson Tada calls God the “glorious intruder.” “He encroaches, presumes, invades, and infringes. He crashes the party. Tears aside curtains. Throws open locked doors. Hits the light switch in a dark room.” He has been the glorious intruder in my life, my thoughts, my pain, sorrow, and brokenness.

Tada goes on to say, “God, an intruder? From His perspective, never. From our point of view? It happens all the time. Whether He encroaches with a gentle, subtle reminder or in sudden, devastating judgment.”

A few years ago, as a result of an uprooting and replanting in location, vocation, and relationships, God intruded in ways I had not thought necessary. In doing so, He revealed idolatry, unbelief, and self-centeredness which startled me. At each point, He carefully guarded my heart, allowing me to confess and repent, waiting patiently for me to yield to His hands so that the jolts would turn to joy.

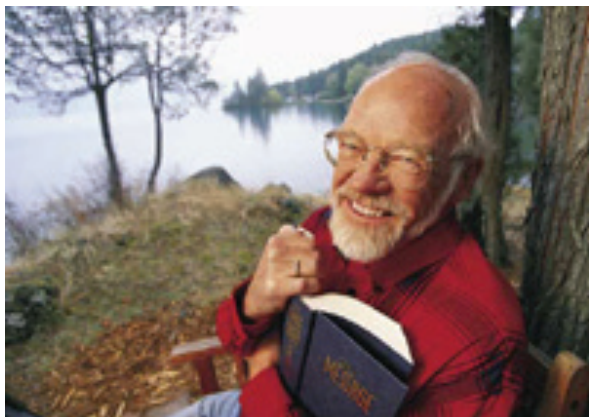
Over the years I’ve become more expectant of God’s glorious intrusion in my life. I continue to wonder at His surprises; in fact, I revel in them, realizing that I’m wondrously blessed because God the Father cares enough to step into my life. Sometimes when I least expect it, He says, “Close your eyes; hold out your hands. Let me surprise you in ways you cannot even imagine.”

**Editor's note: "God's Surprises" was first published in This I Recall, Therefore I Have Hope in 2006.*

Farewell Eugene

By Philip Yancey—Colorado

Blogpost, October 25, 2018. Reprinted with Mr. Yancey's permission



This week, I lost a friend, and the world lost one of God's favorites: Eugene Peterson. Other blogs and websites are reporting on his achievements as a pastor, professor, and author. Rather than repeat the many well-deserved eulogies in his honor, I decided to reflect on a few snapshots that show his more human side.

The Message. Eugene first rewrote the book of Galatians for his local church, the genesis of what would become a 12-year-long undertaking to render the original languages of the Bible into modern, colloquial English. I remember a later weekend when a group of us writers got together to bemoan our plight, gossip about publishers, and share each other's works in progress. Eugene had just paraphrased some of the Psalms, his favorite Bible book, and read them to us to great effect.

Over dinner that evening, the writer Harold Fickett said, "Eugene, I think you've found your calling. Stop whatever else you're doing and paraphrase the entire Bible." Eugene stared at him for a moment, as if questioning Harold's sanity, then flashed his winning smile and gave his patented "Heh, heh" laugh. To our astonishment (and his), he soon embarked on that herculean effort.

More than a decade later, Eugene called me with a question. By then *The Message* was well on its way to selling over twenty million copies. "Philip, what am I supposed to do with all this money?" he asked. "I'm a pastor, a college professor. I'm not used to this stuff."

Vail. One of Eugene's admirers sponsored a gathering of around forty friends at a mountain resort in Colorado and asked me to moderate the weekend. "We'd like you to respond to some of Eugene's prepared talks and also interview him." Great, I thought, I'll save up all the questions that befuddle me and let Eugene answer them.

At the first session, I introduced him by mentioning the single fact that impressed me most about Eugene—not his theological acumen, his accomplishments, or his published works. "Eugene, I heard that when you were a young man, Roger Bannister visited your city shortly after becoming the first human to run a four-minute mile. Is it true that you ran an exhibition race with him and finished in 4:07?"

Eugene gave his familiar smile and leaned back in his chair. "Don't believe everything you hear, Philip," he said. "I think my time was more like 4:12."

As the weekend progressed, I managed to sneak in all of my questions. Before responding, he would always think for a minute or more in silence. His most common answer: "I don't know." No one could out-humble Eugene.

Pastor. As a public speaker, Eugene broke every rule in the book. His voice was strained and hoarse, somewhat like Bill Clinton's. He stood with his feet close together, as though anchored to one spot, slightly rocking back and forth on his toes. I could hardly believe he grew up in the Pentecostal tradition, this gentle introvert who never raised his voice and made few hand gestures. Yet when Eugene spoke, people listened.

The median church in the United States—the point at which half the churches are smaller and half are larger—has 75 regular participants on Sunday mornings. If you take the average church size, including all the megachurches, the average church still has only 186 attenders. I know many dispirited pastors of those "average" churches who look to Eugene for inspiration: whereas the media-savvy pastors of large churches get the publicity, Eugene showed that "success" in the shepherd role is measured more by faithfulness than by glitz and glamour. His life, mostly spent out of the limelight, could be summarized in one of his book titles, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

Tucked away in a remote setting in Montana, Eugene had an amazing naivete about the surrounding culture of celebrity and entertainment. When someone told him that Bono of the band U2 wanted to visit him, he asked, "And who is he?" On the day Princess Diana died, Eugene couldn't understand all the fuss because he had never heard of her. He was far

more interested in another person who died that same week: Mother Teresa.

Humor. Eugene taught us about “ordinary” spiritual disciplines such as prayer, staying married, showing up to worship in boring churches, and bearing one another’s burdens in community. Others are rightly reporting on Eugene’s personal integrity. Like Britain’s John Stott, Eugene presented an example of a Christian leader who practiced what he preached, a role model sorely needed in a time when the media focus on those who succumb to temptation.

At the same time, Eugene had a wicked sense of humor. I love the story Eugene tells in his memoir, *The Pastor*. Serving under the Presbyterian Church USA, Eugene started a new church in Maryland, which after three years grew to a membership of 200. As required, every month he submitted a report to the denomination’s headquarters in New York City, consisting of one page of statistics and another page of his personal reflections. He writes, “After a year or so of doing this without any response...I started to wonder if my denominational superiors were reading past the first page of statistics. I thought I would test out my suspicion and have a little fun on the side.”

One month he described a long slow slide into depression—sleeping little, working as a robot with no spirit, no zest. Should he continue in the pastorate? Could they recommend a counselor? No response. The next month he wrote about a drinking problem that was affecting his Sunday preaching. Where could he get treatment? Again, no response.

The following month, he reported on an affair with a church member who slept with him in the sanctuary, only to be caught out by women arranging flowers for Sunday worship. Each month Eugene exercised his storytelling gifts by concocting more elaborate fictions (always with his wife Jan’s cooperation). He told of spicing up a dull liturgical service with psychedelic mushrooms—could his mentors please advise on whether he should proceed?

After three years, his supervisors invited him to New York for a performance review. Eugene asked if they had read his reports. “Oh, but we did,” the committee assured him. “We read those reports carefully; we take them very seriously.” Then he mentioned such things as his supposed drinking problem, his sexual adventure, and the use of hallucinogens in the service.

“Their faces were blank, and then confused—followed by a splendid vaudeville slapstick of buck passing and excuse making. It was a wonderful moment. I replay the scene in my imagination a couple times a year, the way some people watch old Abbott and Costello movies.”

Home. I thought I had the ideal location for a writer, beside a mountain stream in the beautiful state of Colorado. Then I visited Eugene’s home, built in part by his ancestors, situated on a high ledge overlooking a Montana lake. We stood together outside, breathing in the pure air and the forest scents, drinking in the view.

After a few moments of gazing at this idyllic scene, Eugene told me of one winter when ice was still forming on the lake. A deer in search of water wandered out too far on the ice and fell through. He knew that if he tried to help, the deer would panic and swim even farther into the frigid water. For half an hour he watched as the young doe thrashed around in the water, trying desperately to gain some purchase on the ice shelf, which would always break under her weight. Finally, against all odds, she somehow hauled herself up on an edge of more solid ice. She shook herself and stood there for a moment, her sides heaving, then suddenly bounded up the slope toward freedom.

I thought of that scene when I read the Peterson family’s reports of Eugene’s last days. “He is now in his own bedroom with a spectacular view of Flathead Lake. He is comfortable and well-cared for. It appears that he is talking with people that no one else can see. These, I believe, are not hallucinations; rather, he is being prepared for something too glorious for words.”

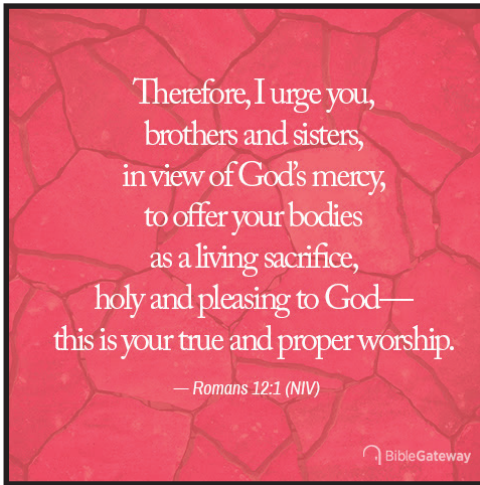
Like the deer, Eugene took one last deep breath and bounded away, free at last.

We’ll miss you, dear friend.



Philip Yancey began his career as Editor of *Campus Life Magazine*, and has connected with more than 15 million readers since his first book was published in 1977. Philip explores the most basic questions and deepest mysteries of Christian faith, and invites readers to join him on his journeys. His books have been translated into over 50 languages, and have been honored with accolades, including two Christian Book of the Year awards and 13 Gold Medallion awards.

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6 Helpful Questions to Discover Your Word of the Year

By Victoria Riollano—Washington, D.C.

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Every year, many will spend December planning for January. We create goals, vision boards, and resolutions that fall by the way side within the first few weeks of the new month. Statistically, only 8% of people actually accomplish their goals for the year.

If I'm honest, I still have New Year Resolutions that are almost a decade old and remain "unfinished." Sadly, like so many others, I have found that these random plans are simply attempts to create quick fixes for the deeper issues at hand.

Years ago, my mentor challenged me to find a word of the year versus creating a list of resolutions. In an ideal world, "words of the year" are different from resolutions. Resolutions are typically inward-focused. For this coming year, you may desire to be at your goal weight, launch your business, and better manage your time. However, choosing a word of the year provides an opportunity to reframe your perspective and develop true heart change that has the potential to impact everyone you encounter.

For example, if your word of the year is forgiveness, you will be more likely to give others grace and forgive yourself when you miss the mark. Your word of the year should be the filter for every interaction. Coincidentally, your word of the year should also empower you to complete your goals.

Here are six questions that can help you choose your 2019 Word of the Year:

1. *What are your areas of struggle?*

As Christians, we must always seek to improve and grow to be more like Him. Although we are aware that each of us have sinned (Romans 3:23), we also know that He calls us to be holy (1 Peter 1:16). In other words, we must recognize that we are not perfect but still seek to live a life that is honoring to Him.

The new year is a great time to evaluate our personal areas of struggle and choose a word or theme that will empower you.

"...We are not perfect but still seek to live a life that is honoring to Him."

A great example of this can be found in the word "joy." Suppose you have experienced so many hurtful situations that you struggle with receiving God's joy. With joy as your word of the year, you can now focus your energy on what it means to be joyful.

The books that you choose and the way you read your Bible should be to truly seek out traces of joy in each verse.

Furthermore, when faced with a difficult choice you can ask yourself, "Will participating in this rob me of my joy?" This word would also cause you to gravitate towards people who bring you joy and situations where you can be a conduit for making someone else's life more joyful.

2. *What Bible verse speaks to your heart?*

In 2017, my word of the year was "victory." This word came from my love of the verse, "For the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory," found in Deuteronomy 20:4. With this word in mind, I spent the year asking the Lord to give me a perspective of victory. In fact, every time a situation would arise that made me feel defeated, I stood on God's Word that He would fight my battles for me.

My word of the year empowered me to learn all that I could on the topic and share my knowledge with others. What was even more amazing is that God took my word of the year and turned it into an entire book that now empowers so many to walk out their victory!

“...ask the Lord to illuminate a verse that speaks to your heart.”

In the same way, ask the Lord to illuminate a verse that speaks to your heart. If you are struggling with anxiety, the Lord may direct you to Philippians 4:6-8. From this passage, we see that God directs us to pray with thanksgiving and supplication when we feel anxious. In doing so, you would find that the Lord will give us a peace that “surpasses all understanding” when we choose to pray in such manner. Thus, the word “peace” may be your word of the year.

You may find that by asking the Lord for a word for the year, He gives you an entire verse that changes your life! There’s no need to settle on one word if the Lord is speaking for you to do more.

3. What areas in life to you remain “unsurrendered”?

Most of us make every attempt to be a “good” Christian. Outwardly, we check the boxes of going to church, reading our Bibles, and sharing Christ with those we encounter. However, each of us has an area of our life that we would be embarrassed for the world to see.

These aspects we may even try to “hide” from God by not praying about them. Perhaps your lack of organization causes your home to be unkept or greed causes you to spend more money than you know you should. You may even struggle with deeper issues like severe shame or bitterness.

“Ultimately, our goal is that God would mold us more and more into His image.”

A careful look at these unsurrendered areas will illuminate a need for change.

For example, if you secretly struggle with greed, you may find that your word of the year should be “contentment.” The word contentment should not only help you with spending frenzies, but also with overeating and being jealous of others. Thus, by focusing on one area of your heart, multiple areas of your life including your health and relationships will start to evolve.

Ultimately, our goal is that God would mold us more and more into His image. This means we must be willing to allow Him into every part of our hearts.

“But now, O LORD, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand.” (Isaiah 64:8)

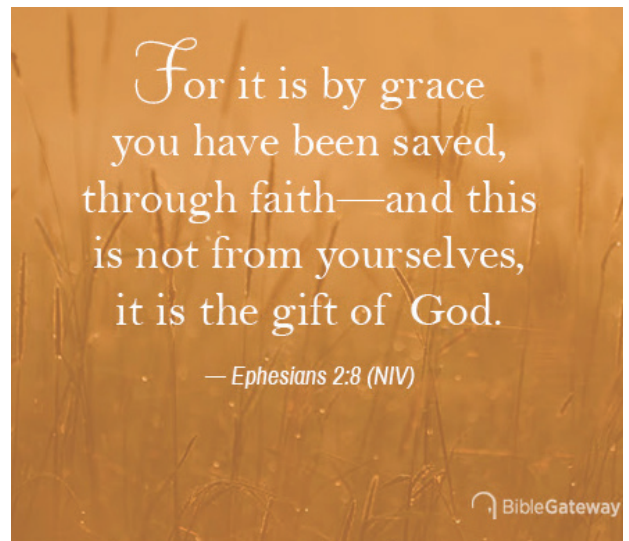
4. What are you passionate about?

The things you love the most may be the key to your word of the year. For example, if you are passionate about your family, your word of the year may be “intimacy.” With this as your word, your goal would be to create intentional moments of family time and foster environments of trust. This word will also help you to prioritize what is important when presented with opportunities that will take you away from your family.

“Your passion may be what God uses to change another person’s life.”

Another example of this can be seen if you have the heart of an advocate. Your word of the year may be “compassion.” Just like with the other words, you would naturally seek ways to be compassionate to those who are disenfranchised or neglected by society. Your passion may be what God uses to change another person’s life.

This method is a great one because your word will align to what you already believe. This will help your corresponding actions to flow effortlessly.



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5. Which Fruit of the Spirit most resonates with your heart?

Galatians 5:22-23 provides us with a bit of a spiritual “cheat list.” By considering each of the themes of these verses, we can easily find a word that resonates with our hearts. In these verses, we are reminded that those who are planted in Christ (John 15:5) should display these characteristics at all times. How beautiful would it be to spend an entire year focused on any of the below aspects of who God is!

- Love,
- Joy
- Peace,
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control

6. What is God telling you in prayer?

Although there are many great tactics to finding a word that can carry you through the year, the best way to proceed is to simply ask the Lord. Remember, He does not operate within the boundaries of time (Psalm 90:4). He knows what you will need to carry you throughout the year. He is well aware of the trials you will face and breakthroughs that you will need. Throughout the Bible, He reminds us that when we are unsure, we must ask for wisdom and believe He will answer (James 1:5, Ephesians 1:17, Psalm 16:7-8).

“Ultimately, we should all desire for His voice to be what guides us through our year.”

When we trust Him for the plan, we can be assured that He will see us through every step of the way. Ultimately, we should all desire for His voice to be what guides us through our year. May this year’s word for your life strengthen your relationship with Christ and empower you to be a vessel of hope for everyone you encounter!

Victoria Riollano is an author, blogger, and speaker. As a mother of six, military spouse, Psychology professor and minister’s wife, Victoria has learned the art of balancing family and accomplishing God’s ultimate purpose for her life.



Recently, Victoria released her book, *The Victory Walk: A 21 Day Devotional on Living A Victorious Life*. Her ultimate desire is to empower women to live a life of victory, hope, and love. She believes that with

Christ we can live a life that is ALWAYS winning.

You can learn more about her ministry at <https://www.victoryspeaks.org> and www.facebook.com/victoryspeaks. She also has a podcast called Victory Talk with Victoria (available on iTunes, Spotify, Castbox and Google Podcasts).

*Lord, give me eyes
that I may see,
lest I, as people will,
pass by someone's Calvary
and think it just a hill.*

— Author unknown



It Tastes Like Heaven

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

Fasting is one of those disciplines that we don't quite know how to talk about. Or maybe we just don't want to talk about it. Jesus said "when you fast, don't tell anybody" (or something along those lines), so we're a little sheepish about bringing it up. But Jesus also seemed to assume that fasting would be a normal activity for spiritually-minded people, right along with praying and giving. His instruction about these three was essentially the same: don't make a show of it for the approval of others, but let it be a private expression of your personal devotion to God. He even went so far as to say that if our motivation is only to gain people's admiration, then that's the only reward we'll get from it. (Matthew 6:16-18)

So why am I writing about it? Because fasting surprised me. And then God surprised me.

Jesus said, "*Your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*" That statement has always intrigued me—as if there were some secret spiritual goodies reserved only for those who fast (or give, or pray). The whole idea of "rewards" sometimes twists up our thinking. Should we pursue spiritual disciplines just because there will be a reward if we do? Doesn't the idea of rewards for certain behaviors contradict our understanding of law and grace? What sort of reward was Jesus talking about, anyway? It's been four years since this discipline came into my life, and I'm only just beginning to glimpse His meaning. I'm coming to understand those rewards differently than I once did.

It appears that the Lord Jesus often fasted. Sometimes it was premeditated and purposeful like those 40 days in the wilderness, but at other times it was simply thrust upon Him by circumstance. Mark's gospel records that the crowds gathered "*to such an extent that they could not even eat a meal.*" His family thought He'd gone crazy and came to collect Him, but He was undeterred from ministry (Mark 3:20, 32). John's gospel tells of the time Jesus had remained alone at Jacob's well, tired and hungry, while His disciples went into town to buy food. In their absence, a woman approached; the ensuing conversation began with a simple drink of water, but ultimately led to the salvation of countless Samaritans. When the disciples returned, they found Jesus apparently not hungry anymore. They were baffled when He told them, "*I have food to eat that you know nothing of... My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to accomplish His work.*" (John 4:32-34) His physical hunger had taken a back seat to the deeper satisfaction of offering Living Water to that soul-thirsty woman, and enjoying her response of faith. Another circumstantial fast!

I had stumbled into my exploration of fasting in a similar, almost accidental, way. Preparing for an event I would be leading, the weight of the spiritual significance of it kept me so engaged that I had not stopped to eat all day, even though I knew I was hungry. But then the Lord whispered to me "Why don't you wait to eat until we've finished this?" I was surprised and intrigued—this felt like an invitation! As the evening's worship unfolded, I was aware of a secret, lovely, personal sweetness permeating it all. I doubt if anyone else was even aware of it, but I had not expected this—might it be

a “reward” of my fast? I decided to consciously experiment with fasting over the next few weeks, testing these unfamiliar waters. Weeks grew into months, which have now become years. I continue to grow in this discipline. I’m coming to understand that the power to engage in a circumstantial fast is a fruit born of the discipline of regular fasting.

In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster wrote, “More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us.” The truth of this statement has come in the form of some not-so-welcome surprises about myself. I’ve discovered that when I am not eating I’m still very self-indulgent in countless other ways, and when I’m hungry these “selfie” voices get louder: ‘You’re already working hard just to contain your hunger, so you don’t have to do anything strenuous today, not even the simple household things’... ‘Just tell them you’re fasting...’ Though I’ve now been practicing this habit for years, there is still a constant temptation to simultaneously cut myself some slack, and to call others’ attention to my fasting.

Next came the temptation to reduce my new-found discipline to a superstition: ‘Now that you’ve established this habit, you’d better not skip it or God will take back His rewards.’ Or a means of manipulation: ‘He hears your prayers better when you’re fasting.’ Or to codify it into Law: ‘Don’t you dare skip it for any reason... and you’d better not quit!’—as if occasionally neglecting to fast on my now customary days would somehow disqualify me from God’s blessing in some other way.

All of these discoveries led me to the conclusion that fasting, even though begun for a spiritual purpose, may still become a “work of the flesh”: something to be accomplished by my own human determination, with the expectation of earning God’s blessing. Anytime I give weight to the idea that my fleshy efforts merit God’s favor, then I’ve rendered those very efforts useless in the spiritual realm. Jesus said “*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.*” (John 6:63 ESV) There is no value in bringing discipline to the ever-hungry flesh if I am not at the same time seeking soul-nourishment from the life-giving Spirit of God.

So what about those rewards Jesus spoke of? They are subtle, and very personal. Though they are distinctly spiritual, they have a practical effect. Early on in my experiment, I decided to fast on the one day of the week which was already set apart for my study of the Word. It made sense to me to directly link this new discipline to one which was already well established; I hoped it would help to improve my focus on what I know I’ve been called to do. As it turns out, fasting or not, I’m still rather distractible! But the Lord has graciously rewarded me in subtle ways. Over time, I’ve found an increased perception in my study of the Word, together with a clarity of expression, and increased ability to respond soundly in the moment of teaching. This is not just my imagination. Since I have been growing in this discipline, the Lord has surprised me with invitations to speak in other contexts and other places. I did not expect this, and have not sought it—He has simply brought it about.

This past summer, I served for a week as a volunteer at a rather elegant resort retreat for women in foreign missions, and the meals were fabulous. My servant-assignment was to meet with women individually, praying with them and for them. One morning I woke with the distinct impression that this would be a good day to fast. But it was not my regular fast day! Under any other circumstance, it would have never crossed my mind to bypass the magnificent morning buffet. But I knew my prayer-appointment log was full for the entire afternoon, and the Lord was inviting me. This was indeed new territory in my fasting journey.

Lately, I am aware of an increased satisfaction in the Lord, a deeper sense that He is truly enough. Along with this, I am finding a fresh calmness of spirit; I find random discomforts sometimes becoming unexpectedly more endurable. But perhaps the biggest surprise of all is the quiet, joyful anticipation I feel when a time of fasting is approaching. I don’t dread it; I actually look forward to it.

As I write those words on the page, I’m amused, and vaguely shocked at myself. Whoever would have expected that? As one who has had a life-long love-affair with food, I’ve found that to be a great surprise.

While I certainly cannot yet say with Jesus that “*my food is to do the will of Him who sent me,*” I’ve begun to wade in the shallows of what that means, and to sample the taste of His joy and satisfaction. And I find, after four years of applying a steady discipline, that even when I am not fasting, the impulse to eat no longer has quite the death-grip upon me that it once had. I find no real hardship in delaying a meal. Frankly, fasting just isn’t that hard.

And then there’s this: no matter what it happens to be, *the first thing I eat after a fast tastes like Heaven!*



To God Be the Glory: 2018 by Susie Hertzell. Sunset in Smithville, Missouri

Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is spent

By John Milton—1673 A.D.

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide;
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
I fondly ask. But patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, “God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Editor's Note: Although this message was posted on Leslie Leyland Fields' blog before Christmas, the content applies throughout the year, because the gifts she recommends are timeless.



This Season, What to Give When You Have Nothing to Give

By Leslie Leyland Fields—Kodiak Island, Alaska

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Do you feel a bit bereft of Christmas Spirit this year? Or—just wondering what you can give that would be meaningful? This is for you. First, a story.

When I was 12, I went reluctantly to a birthday party. Karen was two years younger than me and I didn't know her that well, but there were few parties in this tiny town and there would be cake. Which meant sugar, and we didn't have much of either at my house.

We sat around the kitchen table, six of us. After the birthday serenade, I ate my cake slowly, letting the frosting melt in my mouth. Karen began tearing open her presents. I stopped eating my cake. The gifts were lavish, to my eyes. Model horses, a dollhouse, toys from department stores. The kind of toys we didn't have. I wasn't jealous—these were things for other people, not for us, but I sat in dread. And then—there it was, my present. It was a book, a fifty cent paperback I had just received from Scholastic Books. It was meant for me—a book about a horse. My family had no money for a present and I had nothing else to give her. Karen's family wasn't rich but they owned the local store. I knew it was a pathetic present, almost an insult. But I had one more thing to give—I had a dollar. That was all the money I had right then, one limp wrinkled dollar bill and I had no way of making more. I placed the dollar in the middle of the book. I had wrapped my entire fortune in newspaper, tied a ribbon I had found somewhere around it all and brought it to the party.

Karen held the book indifferently, flipped through it, saw the dollar, "Thanks Leslie" she said perfunctorily and it was over. But I felt the heat of shame flush my face. It was the worst gift at the table, just like at every birthday party I went to. And—I had given it not out of generosity, but out of fear and embarrassment.

In this season of giving. What if you have little to give?

What if you're sad, dealing with the death of someone you loved?

What if you have few resources to buy gifts this year?

What if you're not jingly with merriment this month of wintry dark and cold?

What if you don't decorate for Christmas this year at all?

What if you're a tiny bit resentful for the thousand things you're supposed to carry off this holiday season for everyone else?

What if some of your gifts are given out of obligation and avoidance of shame rather than love?

That makes you just like everyone else. And if you're on the other end, if you're a Christmas magician and a godly fairy-mother, this is for you, too. Because these are three things we ALL need this season. These are three things we all can give this season:

• GIVE THE TRUTH.

Last night a dear friend called and asked how I was. "Kinda lousy, actually," I told her. I told her why. I told her about not sleeping, about the rain and the dark, the book, teenagers, the season. I had to say it. It costs too much to pretend. She heard me and spoke back. I was not alone.

I'm not telling you to cry on every shoulder you see. I'm not telling you to wallow in self-pity. But allow yourself to speak the truth of your struggle to your nearest friends. Pema Chodron writes, "How did I get so lucky to have my heart

awakened to others and their suffering?" Let trustworthy hearts be awakened. Truth in all its forms is a gift. Friendships don't survive without it.

• GIVE STORIES

No matter how old they are, tell your children stories of when they were young. Let them love the stranger who is their younger self and let them see your love for her too. Tell your own growing-up stories---about Christmas, about school, the memories that make you laugh. Without family stories, we are exiles in the present, marooned without context, without history. Even sad stories can contain beauty and comfort. Pass it on. When there is only silence about the past, we wander, homeless searching for somewhere to belong. Giving your children a heritage is giving them a home.

•GIVE GENEROUS WORDS GENEROUSLY

No matter your bank account, no matter if you live in a travel trailer at an RV park or a mansion on the mountains, you possess something priceless: the power and the ability to speak even the dead back to life. You know the words we wait our whole lives to hear. Maybe these are words you yourself have not heard. Don't make people wait as you have had to wait.

Tell them now:

"I love you."

"You're amazing."

"You're such a good father."

"You're an incredible son."

"I'm sorry."

"You're the most caring person I know."

"You're so beautiful: outside-in and everywhere."

"I'm so proud of you."

"I forgive you. Will you forgive me?"

"I'm always here for you."

And, there's a fourth. Maybe the most important:

• GIVE the reason for the hope that is within you, especially if that hope is Jesus.

When we do these things, we're doing something that echoes that first Christmas: we're giving a touch of Jesus.

This year, in this space, I hope I have done this for you, friends? I have tried—To speak the truth, the truth of my own life and struggles, and more essentially, the truths of God; to Tell Stories that help us all find home, and to speak Generous Words, to let you know you are heard and seen and loved.

And, remarkably, you have done the same for me. I thank you, I thank you from a holey and grateful heart.

"... all our stories are, in the end, one story, one vast story about being human, being together, being here. Does the story point beyond itself? Does it mean something? What is the truth of this interminable, sprawling story we all of us share? . . . Either life is holy with meaning, or life doesn't mean a damn thing." —Frederick Beuchner

Leslie Leyland Fields is the multi-award winning author/editor of ten books, including *The Wonder Years: 40 Women Over 40 on Aging, Faith, Beauty and Strength* and *Crossing the Waters: Following Jesus through the Storms, the Fish, the Doubt and the Seas*, which won *Christianity Today's* 2017 Book Award in Christian Living. (also available as a DVD video series). Since 2013, she's been leading The Harvester Island Wilderness Workshop (with guest writers Ann Voskamp, Philip Yancey, Bret Lott, Luci Shaw, Jeanne Murray Walker, Paul Willis, Gina Ochsner.) On odd-numbered years, Leslie leads The Lake Michigan Writer's Workshop, teaching all levels of writers the craft and art of spiritual memoir.



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What Suffering Reveals About Your True Self

By Paul David Tripp—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Here's what happens in times of suffering. When the thing you have been trusting (whether you knew it or not) is laid to waste, you don't suffer just the loss of that thing; you also suffer the loss of the identity and security that it provided. This may not make sense to you if right now you are going through something that you wouldn't have planned for yourself, but the weakness that is now a part of my regular life has been a huge instrument of God's grace (see 2 Cor. 12:9.) It has done two things for me.

Suffering Exposes Our Idols

First, it has exposed an idol of self I did not know was there. Pride in my physical health and my ability to produce made me take credit for what I couldn't have produced on my own. God created and controls my physical body, and God has given me the gifts that I employ every day. Physical health and productivity should produce deeper gratitude and worship, not self-reliance and pride in productivity. I am thankful for what my weakness

has exposed and for being freed by grace from having to prove any longer that I am what I think I am.

Suffering Exposes Our Discomfort in Trusting God

But there's a second thing that has been wonderful to understand. Perhaps we curse physical weakness because we are uncomfortable with placing our trust in God. Let me explain. Weakness simply demonstrates what has been true all along: we are completely dependent on God for life and breath and everything else. Weakness was not the end for me, but a new beginning, because weakness provides the context in which true strength is found. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that he'll boast in his weakness. It sounds weird and crazy when you first read it, but it's not. He has come to know that God's "power is made perfect" in his weakness. You see, weakness is not what you and I should be afraid of. We should fear our delusion of strength. Strong people tend not to reach out for help, because they think they don't need it. When you have been proven weak, you tap into the endless resources of divine power that are yours in Christ. In my weakness I have known strength that I never knew before.

When We Feel Entitled

One thing that shaped the way I suffered physically was unrealistic expectations. Suffering shouldn't surprise us, but it almost always does, and it surely surprised me. I did go into my sickness with my theology in the right place. I did believe that I lived in a groaning world crying out for redemption, but it was battling with something else inside me. There was this expectation that I would always be as I had been, that is, that I would always be strong and healthy. There was little room in my life, family, and ministry plans for weakness within or trouble without. In fact, there was no room for any disruption at all. So much of the way I thought about myself and planned was based on the unrealistic expectation that I would continue to escape the regular disruption of one's life and plans that happens in a world that doesn't operate as God designed it to operate.

Preaching Truth to Our Unrealistic Expectations about Suffering

I wasn't singled out; God hadn't forgotten me or turned his back. I wasn't being punished for my choices, and I wasn't receiving the expected consequences for poor decisions. My story is about the regular things that happen to us all because we live in a world that has been dramatically damaged by sin. In this world sickness and disease live, and our bodies break down or don't function properly. In this world pain, sometimes chronic and sometimes acute, assaults us and makes life nearly unlivable. We live in a broken world where people die, food decays, wars rage, governments are corrupt, people take what isn't theirs and inflict violence on one another, spouses act hatefully toward each other, children are abused instead of protected, people slowly die of starvation or die suddenly from disease, sexual and gender confusion lives, drugs addict and destroy, gossip destroys reputations, lust and greed control hearts, bitterness grows like a cancer, and the list could go on and on.

You Will Have Trouble

The Bible doesn't pull any punches. At every turn, it informs and warns us about the nature of the world, which is the address where we all live. Whether it's a dramatic narrative of life, or a doctrine that informs, or a wisdom principle about how to live well, Scripture works to prepare us, not so we would live in fear, but so we will be ready for the things we will all face. God gives us everything we need so that we will live with realistic expectations and so that moments of difficulty will not be full of shock, fear, and panic, but experienced with faith, calm, and confident choices.

We All Suffer, but We Don't All Suffer the Same Way

Although I had the right theology in place, somehow, at street level, my expectations were unrealistic, and unrealistic expectations always make suffering harder. My point is that I am a living example of the truth that you and I never suffer just the thing that we're suffering, but we also suffer the way that we're suffering it. Each of us brings to our suffering things that shape the way that we suffer. We all suffer, but we don't suffer the same way, because our suffering is shaped by what we carry into the difficulties that come our way.

What Will Shape Your Suffering?

Here's what is so important to understand: your suffering is more powerfully shaped by what's in your heart than by what's in your body or in the world around you. Now, don't misunderstand what I am saying. My suffering was real, the dysfunction in my body was real, the damage to my kidneys is real, the pain I went through was horribly real, and the weakness that is now my normal life is real. But the way that I experienced all those harsh realities was shaped by the thoughts, desires, dreams, expectations, cravings, fears, and assumptions of my heart. The same is true for you. Your responses to the situations in your life, whether physical, relational, or circumstantial, are always more determined by what is inside you (your heart) than by the things you are facing. This is why people have dramatically different responses to the same situations of difficulty. This is why the writer of Proverbs says: *"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."* (Prov. 4:23)

What Are You Carrying into Your Suffering?

Like a stream, your attitudes, choices, reactions, decisions, and responses to whatever you are facing flow out of your heart. The heart is the center of your personhood. The heart is your causal core, as dry soil soaks in the liquid of a stream. Suffering draws out the true thoughts, attitudes, assumptions, and desires of your heart. It really is true that we never come empty-handed to any experience. And we surely always drag something into the suffering that enters our door.

What about you? What are you carrying around that has the power to cause you to trouble your own trouble? What has the power to allow you to forget that no matter what painful thing you're enduring, as God's child it's impossible for you to endure it all by yourself? The One who created this world and rules it with wisdom, righteousness, and love is in you, with you, and for you, and nothing has the power to separate you from his love.

Content adapted from *Suffering: Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense* by Paul David Tripp. Used with permission, 2019. The article first appeared on Crossway.org; used with permission.

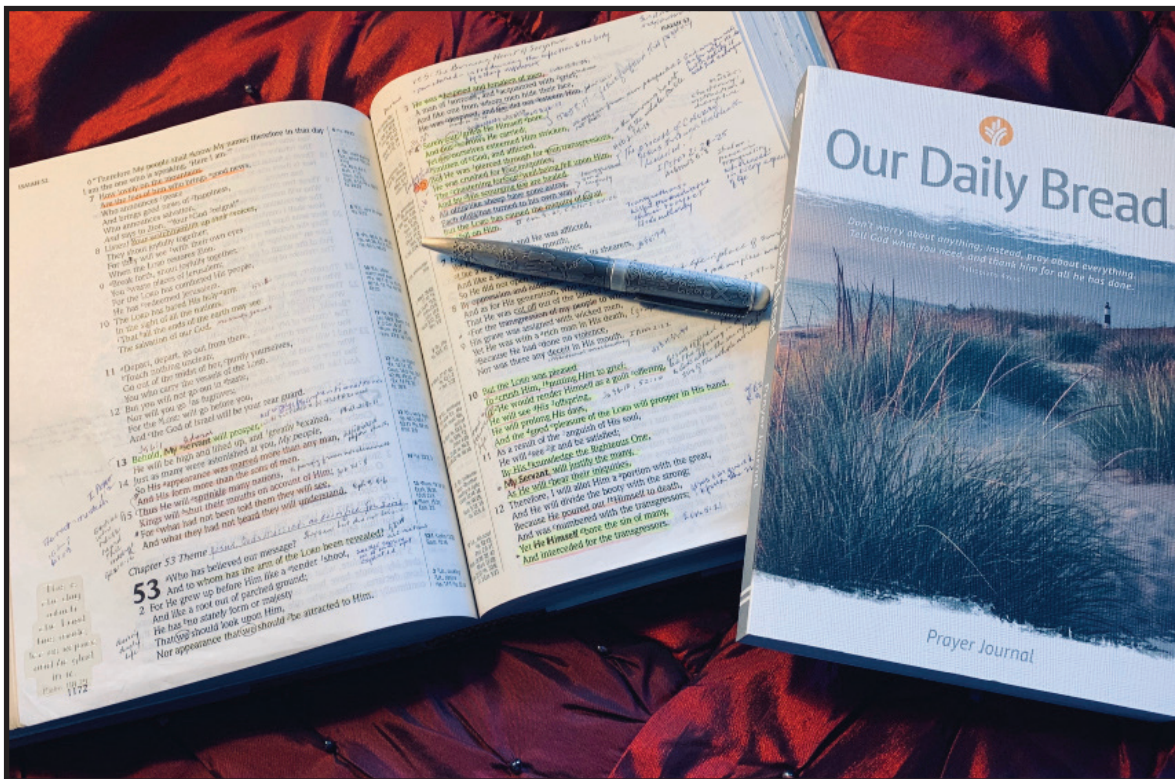


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"Forgiveness is the perfume that the trampled flower cast back upon the foot that crushed it."

— Anonymous

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Colossians 3:16



MEDITATING ON THE WORD OF GOD

By Mel Lawrenz— Brookfield, Wisconsin

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This passage says that there are a variety of ways the word of Christ goes deep enough to dwell. Teaching is paramount, so we need to keep searching like eagles for teachers, authors, and Bible study leaders who explain and apply the word faithfully. “Admonishing with wisdom” suggests a flow of quality conversation among believers about what they are learning from God. “Singing” praise is another powerful way the word of God is carried deeply into our hearts. Singing “with gratitude in [our] hearts to God” is a way that the crusty and hardened exterior of our lives gets cracked open, and seeds drop deeply in, and they begin to live and grow.

Here is the connection between Bible study and worship. Why sing? So the word will dwell richly. Why a variety of sounds (psalms, hymns, spiritual songs)? So the word will knock on every door of our hearts that is the least bit cracked open. Why teach? So that the word will be clearly explained and powerfully applied. Worship is not the span between the start and the end of singing, but this great and varied advance of the word of God on our souls. God takes up as many fronts as he needs to so that we will stop and listen.

And then there is meditation—a way of reading Scripture in such a way that it has a chance to get planted. Meditation is a word that the Bible uses to describe a way of holding and pondering God’s truth so that it sinks in. It is wise, pensive concentration.

At the edge of the promised land, Joshua told the people they were going to need real spiritual muscle. Wars lay ahead. Three times at the Jordan River he said: “be strong and courageous,” and then: “Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8).

The Psalms speak about meditating on the word of God, and continuing that meditation through every pulse of life. Psalm 119 describes a committed discipline of taking the word in:

“I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways” (vs. 15).

“Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees” (vs. 23).

“Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders” (vs. 27).

“I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees” (vs. 48).

“May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts” (vs. 78).

“Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long” (vs. 97).

“I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes” (vs. 99).

“My eyes stay open through the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promises” (vs. 148).

Okay, now, be honest. Did you just skim over those verses, or did you ponder them? If you’re like me, then you will find yourself occasionally reading over quotations of Scripture instead of reading through them. How hurried we can be! That’s what Christian meditation is all about—turning hurry into rumination. Slowing from a run into a walk. Tasting and digesting instead of devouring. It’s the only way to build spiritual muscle for the good times and the tough times.

Mel Lawrenz trains an international network of Christian leaders, ministry pioneers, and thought-leaders. He served as senior pastor of Elmbrook Church in Brookfield, Wisconsin for ten years and now serves as Elmbrook’s minister at large, teaching in North America, Asia, Africa, and Latin America.



He has a Ph.D. in the history of Christian thought (Marquette University) and has been on the adjunct faculty of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and Trinity International University.

He has authored 18 books with Zondervan, Baker, Jossey-Bass, Leadership Network, Regal, and others. His latest is *Spiritual Leadership Today: Having Deep Influence in Every Walk of Life* (Zondervan, 2016).

The Brook Network: <https://www.thebrooknetwork.org>

Editor’s Note: When you think of how God’s Word encourages you, please consider sharing your story with us in the fall 2019 issue of City Lights.

Becoming Fearless

By Sandy Holly—Lynchburgh, Virginia



Header/By Marsha McLaren 2018

The Introduction from Fearless 365

It was the third week of December 2017 when I heard something on the television about the Bible’s saying 365 times to “fear not.” I had heard that before, so I dismissed it. A day later I was having coffee with a friend who also mentioned that fact to me. I brushed it off as “cool stuff” and a coincidence. Then I noticed my daily Bible readings all that week had “fear not” in the Scriptures. When Sunday rolled around, and the pastor mentioned that the Bible says “Fear not, have no fear, and do not be afraid” a total of 365 times, God finally had my attention! That day I had a big, old, ugly cry in church pew twelve. I also received my next assignment from God.

Ironically, as I first sat down to write Fearless 365, I was scared. “What do I know about being fearless?” I cried to God. “I don’t know a thing about being fearless. I’m the girl who wrote the book, More Jesus More Joy 365. I know peace, love, and joy; I don’t know fearless.”

God quickly answered my plea for His leading and said, “Yes, you do. Every time you trusted Me with your life, your sadness, your spirit, you were fearless. Come with Me now; I am going to show you the rest. I will show you how to be completely fearless—leaving it all behind.”

So I followed Him quickly, wide-eyed, and ready to learn every last detail from the fearless King. I quickly did as He asked. I read the Bible in six months, exploring, writing, and holding on to every last word. God showed me His awesome and majestic power, and then He showed me how to use it. Through this process, He showed me 365 ways to be fearless and how to live fearlessly.

First, I dug in and got serious, and let the Almighty God give me the lessons of a lifetime. Through my time spent with Him, I learned what fear is and how to become fearless in my everyday life. I learned to roar like a lion because I had the power of God available to me and running through me. I also learned how to deal with the evils that create the things I fear.

I learned to find my voice and roar. My roars were little at first—much like a baby cub testing her boundaries and her mother. Then I learned to really roar from the gut of my being. I belted out joyful, therapeutic roars against evil—even silent roars that pushed back evil and made the Devil shake and tremble. Yep, me—the joy girl—learned to give a fearless roar and live a fearless life.

Living a fearless life is hard to do when we see fearful and disheartening reports every day in the news. I surely don't need to list them all here. We're all well aware of the evils we see daily. But seeing and hearing about the evils in this world every day creates a fearful nature in us, and that is right where Satan wants us—fearful in our day and filled with dread of the days to come. To understand the tragedies we're seeing weekly and sometimes daily on the news, we have to understand who Satan is. To understand fear, we first have to look at the character of Satan to see how evil operates.

Satan creeps into the weakest parts of our minds; nobody is exempt from his slithering access. For me, this starts with the way I talk to and think about myself. After I've allowed all the horrible things Satan calls me to become my truth, he has made his home. For me, his words become a familiar mix of melancholy and hatred. Then the evil moves from focusing on myself to the way I think about others. I sit in that mindset for a bit, and then it comes out of my mouth in hatred as gossip or slander of another, usually a close friend whom I love. Bam! Satan is in control!

When I realize I've given in to evil, I call it out fast, telling God all about it and confessing my wrongdoings to Him. Then Satan no longer has power and hold over me. I ask God for forgiveness and for Him to change my heart and my mind. He always does! But not everybody has a relationship with God, and that is where Satan's playground begins.

Let's look at those who are committing evil acts in this world, like the multiple mass shootings that make the news. Has the gunman allowed Satan into his hurts, pains, shortcomings, wrongs that have been committed against him, and the things he's done wrong to others? If so, he has given full reign over to Satan's evil power and has allowed Satan to confirm again and again all of the hatred that he's feeling. Life no longer is precious or special because Satan is in control.

No place is exempt for evil to enter after Satan is in control. You want to be upset and angry; good, you should be, but direct your anger at the real source—Satan. The Bible says in Romans 12:9 that we should hate evil but love one another. Don't point the finger at another to claim blame, just love. Put all the blame on Satan. When we truly and deeply love one another, Satan loses power. That is how we win this battle. We can conquer fear with love. We can clearly see Satan is coming after God's people. The truth is that we have free reign to choose good or evil. We have the ability to manifest our life's wounds or to release them to Jesus.

We have free reign to choose Jesus and be released and freed from Satan's hold on us. Evil will always exist in this world, and that is scary, but I don't have to fear it. Whether I'm at a movie theater, a grocery store, a concert, school, or at work, if my life is taken, it was a life well-lived and well-loved because I've known Jesus. And I know who is waiting to accept me in Heaven. This world is not all there is; it will come to an end, but God is eternal and offers eternal life. When we understand that this earthly life is not all there is, we become excited for what will be and fearless for the time we live in it.

Knowing that, here's how He changed my view of fear. I know how the end of the story goes. A day is coming when Jesus will walk the earth in final victory. I know that no evil will exist in the new world. I know that the battle of good versus evil was already won long ago when Jesus chose the cross for us—all of us.

Since I know how the end of the story goes and have accepted the teachings of Jesus, I can remain fearless, knowing God has already gone before me and is fighting my battles. God is working out His plan. God is just and will make things right. He will reward His faithful believers and punish the evil. When we're faced with trials and fear sets in, remember that God is in control; nothing surprises Him. I pray for the families who've lost loved ones due to the evils of the world. We, the believers and followers of Jesus Christ, know that their saved loved ones aren't really lost. They can be found in the waiting arms of Jesus in Heaven where there is finally no more pain and no more suffering.

In this life, God wants to use you and specifically designed you to make a difference in the world. He wants to strengthen you and give you the desires of your heart, but He can't do that if you remain in fear. When the hammer comes down, the gauntlet is thrown, and the rooster crows, He will not say, "I never knew you." I can't wait for you to find your roar! Let's follow the fearless King and turn these pages daily to fear less and become Fearless! Let's Roar!



Sandy Holly is passionate about reading, studying, and proclaiming the Word of God. She is the author of *Fearless 365*, *More Jesus More Joy 365*, *Jesus Freak Bible Reading Plan*, and *Jesus Freak: Becoming One in the Utah Desert*. Her company Jesus Freak Apparel, is a proud supporter of Compassion International and Klove Christian Radio. Sandy and her husband James live in the heart of Virginia. <https://jesusfreakapparel.com/>

The Relentless Pursuit of a Loving God

By Teresa Hanly— City Lights Staff Writer from Nibley, Utah

It was the summer of 1978. My husband Kevin and I lived in a mobile home park just off the Interstate 14, on the outskirts of Ft. Collins Colorado. I was a few months pregnant with our first child, so for extra income we managed a rundown, seven room (formerly “seedy”) motel across the highway. A construction crew came to stay for a few weeks while they were building a new Motel 6 down the road. “So much for the extra income!” I whined. They were a tough-looking bunch, and every evening they would come back from a long day of work to rest their bones and drink the night away.

One evening, my husband was sitting on the tailgate of his pickup truck that he parked in front of the office. He had his guitar and was working on a song that our pastor had written years before. One young man on the crew named Matt opened his door and stood outside his room listening to Kevin play. As he moved in a little closer, He spoke up and asked, “Play that song again so I can hear it.” When Kevin looked over at the big strapping Italian construction worker with a cup of whiskey in his hand, he became a bit intimidated, thinking that Matt might be drunk enough to bring things to blows if he got irritated. “I don’t think you’ll like this song very much.” Kevin warned. But Matt insisted. So with some hesitation Kevin thought, “God must be up to something!” Then, under his breath he shot out a prayer for help, and while looking down at the words, he sang:

“You can’t get the Holy Spirit from a bottle
But you can by gettin’ on your knees to pray
Jesus is the answer to your problems, and drinkin’ never drove your blues away
Half way smilin’, always chokin’, pulling on that weed your tokin’
Never really understanding all the thoughts within your mind
In a state of vague confusion, is it real or just illusion?
Headin’ fast for nowhere and life’s leavin’ you behind
No use runnin’ ,no use hidin’, you can’t beat this thing your fightin’
By yourself now, you need help now, and Jesus is the way
Well you got Him you can turn to, and you know He’ll never burn you
So leave your fear now, Leave your beer now, and call on Him today
He’ll receive you, won’t deceive you, stand right by and never leave you
Even though at times through weakness your feet may go astray
But His Spirit will remind you that He gave His life to find you
And that kind of love is hard to turn away”

— David Huntwork. Reprinted with permission.

Kevin looked up at Matt, who now stood right above him, leaning on the tailgate. While expecting to see some hostility in his face, he was surprised by the tears welling up in his eyes. Matt explained, I’m a Christian, but I have fallen away from Him. I’ve been partying, and doing pretty much anything I want, and currently I’m living with a women in Northern CA. God has not been a part of my live right now.” After another hour of conversation he asked, “I would love to join you at your church meeting tomorrow night if it’s okay?” Greatly excited, Kevin and I replied in unison, “We would love to bring you!”

Our hearts were filled with joy the next evening as Matt went forward and re-dedicated his life to the Lord. He spent the remaining three days of his time with us as we talked about the things of the Lord over dinner. Then on Sunday, our last visit together, we had a barbecue in the back of the motel. As our time came to an end, Kevin wrapped it up. “We’ve had an amazing time with you, Matt, and would love to stay in touch. Let me find you some paper so you can write down your name and phone number for me.” As I watched the slip of paper go from Matt’s hand into Kevin’s wallet, suddenly things appeared to me in slow motion for a moment. At the same time the Lord spoke in my mind, “Remember his name.” As I continued to gaze at it, the Lord etched it in my memory like a photograph, the way it was written there. Kevin lost it soon after, but I did not forget him.



Nine years later, we're living in California and had six sons by that time. We were involved in a home school co-op and enjoyed being a part of a camping club together with our church. As was our custom on Sunday night, we shared in a potluck dinner. Then during dessert, the teenagers helped the children make S'mores as we sang songs around the campfire, all the while sprinkling in stories and testimonies in between.

Kevin led the worship one night and felt prompted to play the song and tell the story of Matt that was, for us, forever connected to it. When he was finished, I stood up to add,

"The part of this story that intrigues me the most, was how God had etched his name onto my mind like a picture." Then I raised my voice for emphasis and said his full name for the crowd to hear. At the close of the evening while we were cleaning up, the director of our home school co-op came up to me to say, "It's strange but, I have a cousin with the same name who also lives in the same area. I haven't seen him for five years, but in three days I'm going to a family reunion. I heard he plans on attending.

"No Way!" I blurted out, "Are you kidding?" As we talked about him further we both felt that this was indeed the same person. "The last I heard," she went on, "he was not following the Lord".

"Oh Sharon," I declared with increasing excitement. "The timing of this amazes me, and I feel I have held on to his name all these years for this particular time! Would you please share this story with him and add a message from me when you see him?" She agreed. "Let's pray together, for this is no coincidence."

So my message went something like this, "Dear Matt, God has kept you in my memory all these years. He has designed these events just for you. He already knew back then where you would be right now. He wants to reveal to you His unending love and faithfulness. He did not forget your cries for help, though you may have forgotten and may continue to do so. As the "hound of heaven," He relentlessly pursues you still, the one He loves, the one He sees, the one He knows."

After Sharon attended the reunion, I couldn't wait to find out what news she would bring me. When some time had elapsed, I thought to myself, "If it was good news I would have heard from her by now." Then one day, we ran into each other at a market and I asked her with excitement, "I have been waiting to hear! How did the reunion go? Did you get to share my message with Matt? Was he there?" I was quickly deflated by the look on her face and braced myself for her response. "He didn't receive it well, and his life has gone on as it always had before." Well, this was not the surprise "ending" I was looking for. I couldn't see yet that I was caught up hoping for an ending I envisioned, one neatly wrapped and finished off with a bow. My perceptions became skewed. I was thinking myself a heroine, and not a benefactor. The author, and not a player in a part that God graciously gave me.

After years have gone by, I can say I am more awakened to the mystery of His ways, and trust Him to wait for the unfolding of His good plans to be revealed. He is the Author after all. His surprises may not come quickly, but they are certain. A messy adventure, where travelers get their share of bumps and bruises along the way, upon hearts, made softer over time.

To what lengths will God go to demonstrate His love to us in very personal ways? Whatever it takes. And indeed "that kind of love is hard to turn away."

"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."

—Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*



Teresa Hanly and her husband, Kevin, live on a small farm in Nibley Utah and attend Main Street Church in Brigham City. Teresa has been writing stories and poems since she was a young teenager and published a few of them in recent years. She is now a Staff Writer for *City Lights*.

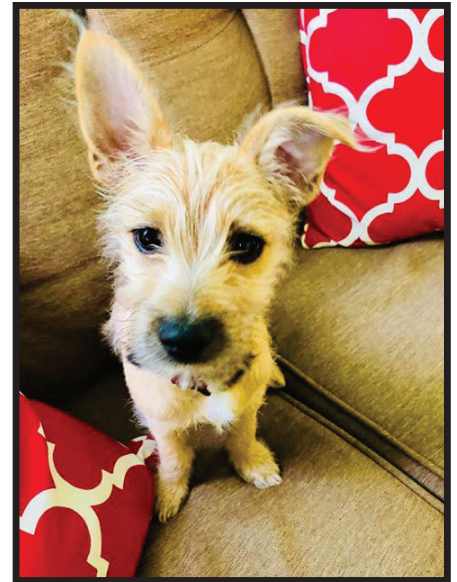
“God can use the words of a teenager, the prayer of a senior citizen, or the candid remark of a child to convict you of the need to make changes in your life.”

—Henry T. Blackaby, *Hearing God’s Voice*

Lessons from Puppy School

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

I think you will appreciate this—I was going to say, “You won’t believe this,” but I know you will, since there are no coincidences with God. Tuesday night, my husband and I went with our son-in-law, Josh, and his son, Ian, and their new puppy, Chewie (Chewbacca) for his second session of Puppy School. It’s such fun to watch the young dogs meeting, greeting and chasing each other around, but it’s also unnerving at times since Chewie is the smallest student, a mixture of Shih Tzu and Yorkshire Terrier.



The Charmer: by Sharmila Felix, 2018

A new Great Dane puppy had joined the class. She has to be twelve or more times taller than Chewie and was so excited about being part of a free-for-all playtime. The Dane’s leaping and loping around with her big feet (and a big smile I’m sure) reminded me of Pixie, a beautiful colt born to my mother’s mare, Cinderella. Pixie was equally enthused with life, but never could be gentled. I wonder if there were colt schools back in the 50s, because she desperately needed one.

Playtime at the Puppy School was brought under control periodically by Liz, an experienced instructor for all things canine. She began with the puppy circle, instructing owners to sit on the floor and hold their puppies on their backs. After a few minutes, each dog was handed around to one or two other owners in preparation for being at ease at the Vet’s office and with other people. Rewarded with calming hands, assuring voices and treats while their paws, teeth and ears were examined ended by being released to socialize and play. The Dane was curious about Chewie, but not aggressive or menacing. Still, I was on guard as any vigilant grandmother is.

During the week, Chewie had mastered sitting and lying down, and he received a lot of praise and treats at home and from Liz that night when he demonstrated his accomplishments. But a new challenge was added on top of those two vital skills. The puppies had to follow their owners without a leash, up and down the room to six different orange cones. At each destination cone, they had to sit on demand, receive a treat, then immediately get up and follow their owners to the next cone. At the end of the course, Liz announced their final time.

I felt confident that Chewie was up to this since he follows Josh everyday during the morning chores, feeding and watering the chickens, birds, and goats. But in the din of this new circumstance with so many distractions, smells and noises, he lost track of Josh’s voice and got sidetracked because of the puppies’ clamoring for his attention. He’d forgotten that his name was Chewie, I think, and that he would receive a special treat from Josh for mastering the skill. Our ultra-social-and-fearless one loves to play.

I didn’t realize that Puppy School would become my object lesson for pulling together insights garnered over the past few weeks in Bible study, reading, and meditation until this morning when I was writing to my friend about it. Only later did I remember what the poet, William Stafford said about his writing process: “If I put down something, that thing will help the next thing come, and I’m off. If I let the process go on, things will occur to me that were not at all in my mind when I started. These things, odd or trivial as they may be, are somehow connected. And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen.” (The Way of Writing)

As I sent off my note to my friend about what happened at Puppy School and the connections I’d been making, I realized I’m in my own School of Learning, being trained first to listen to the voice of Jesus, to treasure what He says and promises, and to follow Him. “For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength.’” Isaiah 30:15

He has a plan, and the best way to train me to stay close to Him, to remember what He's taught me and to heed where He's leading me now, is to practice the Presence of God in the quiet. Cooperating with Him prepares me to follow Him consistently in the din and mayhem of everyday life.

And best of all, the treat He gives me is Himself. He is the Rewarder *and* the Reward for faith. "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him." Hebrews 11:6 NASB

"When God speaks, He does not give new revelation about Himself that contradicts what He has already revealed in Scripture. Rather, God speaks to give application of His Word to the specific circumstances in your life. When God speaks to you, He is not writing a new book of Scripture; rather, He is applying to your life what He has already said in his Word."

—Henry T. Blackaby, *Hearing God's Voice*

Roman Door. Discovered in 2018 — Rome, Italy by Charlotte Brooks



"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears and listens to and heeds My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will eat with him, and he [will eat] with Me."

Revelation 3:20 AMPC