

# Finding Joy

more  
*Confessions*

of an irritable  
mother



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k a r e n   h o s s i n k



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## Endorsements

If you ever feel like being a mother is the best and the worst of all possible jobs, this is the devotional for you! In *Finding Joy: More Confessions of an Irritable Mother*, Karen Hossink reminds all of us to stop long enough to listen to God's voice in the middle of frustration, interruptions, household noise, constant questions, and everyday chaos.

This book will let you know you are not alone and will give you renewed hope and courage as you face the daily challenges of being a mom. Don't miss it!

Carol Kent, Speaker and Author

*When I Lay My Isaac Down* (NavPress)

*A New Kind of Normal* (Thomas Nelson)

Karen Hossink, the self-proclaimed "Irritable Mother," walks readers through her personal parenting moments, through which she discovers a deeper relationship with the Lord. God has used Hossink's own children to transform her and reveal Himself to her more fully—now, through this devotional, she passes on insights and personal revelations to the reader. Walk with her to a place of prayerful introspection and deeper faith in Jesus Christ.

Ann Kroeker, Author

*The Contemplative Mom* (Shaw Books)

*Another book releasing in the summer of 2009* (David C. Cook)

God continues to use and transform this “irritable mother” into a joyful servant of our Most High God. Karen Hossink blends real-life situations we all face in frustration as moms, and brings out the biblical correlation so we can see ourselves in relation to God. You will laugh and cry and be filled with uncontained emotion as you read.

Most of all, you will be blessed beyond measure by this true-blue best friend who is willing to spend priceless moments with you. *Finding Joy* is a MUST READ for all moms.

Julie Baker, Founder of TimeOut for Women! and Author  
*TimeOut for Holiness at Home* (Cook Communications)





# Dedication

*To my children, Elizabeth, Joshua and Matthew.  
As I learn to find joy, I pray that you will see Jesus in me every day.  
I love each one of you more than you will ever know.*







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# An Invitation: Come Find Joy with Me

**WE HAD JUST FINISHED EATING DINNER** and were sitting around the table talking when my husband stood up and walked to the other room. When Brian returned to the table, he was carrying The Book of Virtues by William Bennett. Brian sat down, opened up the book and started reading to the kids and me.

The story he read, “The Magic Thread,” was about a boy named Peter who did not like to wait. Peter daydreamed all the time about what he would be and what his life would be like when he grew up. Brian read, “Peter found it hard to enjoy whatever he was doing at the moment, and was always hankering after the next thing. In winter he longed for it to be summer again, and in summer he looked forward to the skating, sledding, and warm fires of winter. At school he would long for the day to be over so that he could go home, and on Sunday nights he would sigh, ‘If only the holidays would come.’”<sup>1</sup>

One day Peter was lying down in the forest when he heard someone calling his name. It was an old woman who gave him a silver ball which contained a magic golden thread. She told him the thread was his life, and if he tugged it just a little bit an hour would pass by like a second. She warned him not to be careless because once the thread had been pulled out, it could not be put back in.

Peter loved his new gift and the next day at school he gave the thread a little tug to move the day along. He liked the results and continued

to tug just a little bit each day. Then he decided to tug a little more to hurry along the day when he would be finished with school all together. Peter pulled more so he would not have to wait so long to marry his sweetheart. He tugged at the thread to get through military service, to pass by difficult times with his baby, and to evade various other hard times. Peter just wanted to escape the hard times so he could enjoy his life in peace.

As I listened to Brian read the story, I thought about how much I could relate to Peter. If I had a ball in my pocket which held a thread I could tug whenever I wanted to speed time along a little, I fear I would pull on it even more frequently than Peter did.



Twelve or so years ago, if someone told me I would one day make the statement I just wrote about wanting to speed time along, I would have laughed and called them crazy. For, you see, twelve years ago I was not yet a mother.

At the time, I had many friends who were mothers and I longed to be like them. I wanted to experience the wonder of pregnancy. I wanted a baby for whom to care. I dreamed about what it would be like to hold and love my very own child. In my imagination, being a mother would be the answer to all my inner longings and would make me completely happy. Being a mother would make me fulfilled, and the idea of wanting to speed any of that time by would have been ludicrous.

Then I became a mother and found reality did not match up with my imagination. Certainly, I loved my babies. Just looking at them was enough to melt my heart. Countless are the joys I experienced — as I watched them smile for the first time, as they learned to sit up and crawl, as they took their first steps and spoke their first words. It is true, those experiences made me happy and I delighted in them.

However, I also went through times which were *not* delightful. I grew impatient with kids who would not listen to me or clean up their

messes. It seemed as though they were constantly fighting with one another over meaningless things and I got tired of listening to their whining and complaining. Although I wanted to do everything “just right,” my children were not afraid to let me know when they did not like what I was doing. At times I felt like a complete failure as a mom. More and more, I was finding myself to be irritable and unpleasant.

I remember when the reality of this situation was really hitting me. Our church was doing a series on John Ortberg’s book, The Life You’ve Always Wanted. One day, as I was feeling particularly frustrated, I walked through the kitchen and saw my copy of the book sitting on the counter. I looked at it and grumbled, “This is *not* the life I’ve always wanted!”

I didn’t understand. Why had I thought mothering was going to make me so happy? Why was mothering so different from what I had imagined it to be? If children are a blessing from the Lord, why was I so frustrated? This motherhood experience was certainly not what I had thought it would be.

God, in His goodness, answered those questions for me. He showed me He is using my children, and my struggles as a mother, to make me into the woman He wants me to be. God is using my trials to refine me, like a silversmith uses fire to refine silver. I wrote about this lesson and the hope God has given me in my book, Confessions of an Irritable Mother.

Still, if I am to be honest with you I must admit even though God gave me tremendous hope with the revelation of how He is using my children, I still struggled with times when I just wanted to get past the moment. I went through numerous times when, if I would have had a silver ball with a magic string in my pocket, I would have reached in and given it a tug just so I could get past the hard times and make it to the day when life would be “better.”

Looking back over my life, I saw a pattern I had created of wishing for the day when my life would be better — when it would be easier or more fulfilling.

\*As a young girl I thought it would be so special to have a boyfriend and I could not wait to be old enough to go out on dates.

\*When I was a young adult and my friends were getting engaged, I thought, *Oh, I can't wait until I'm engaged. Being engaged will make me so happy.*

\*Once engaged, all I could do was think about getting married and how everything would be just perfect once I was a wife.

\*After I became a wife and my friends started having babies, my greatest desire was becoming a mother as well. Yes, then I would have everything I wanted.

However, after my first baby was born, I began to look forward to her sleeping through the night because when I was able to sleep well again, certainly having a baby would be more fun. Then we needed to make it through the colicky time and teething. Before I knew it, there was another baby and I started all over again. Twice. Eventually, I found myself standing in my kitchen complaining this was not the life I'd always wanted after all.

No. I was pretty sure the life I wanted was the life in which all my children are grown and living successful, well-adjusted lives. I pictured them loving Jesus and living their lives completely sold out for Him. I imagined them with families of their own, raising their kids to know the Lord and giving me plenty of opportunities to spoil my grandchildren, just like my parents and in-laws spoiled my children. In my thoughts, this life would also include fun things for my husband and me to do, such as taking trips and going on cruises like our parents are doing now. Yes. This life had plenty of good stuff to which I could look forward! Surely, *this life* would be the one I've always wanted.

I had to wonder, though, if the life I've always wanted is some twenty-plus years down the road, what are the implications for today? Do I just need to trudge through these days until I make it to the day when life is good, when I can be peaceful, and when I can really enjoy life?

These questions lead me to even more questions. Did God make a mistake? When He was planning out my life, did He perhaps overlook some major details and forget to arrange for peace and joy in my life until my husband and I retire? Or maybe He just does not care if I'm enjoying life now, and He is waiting to see how long I can stand the hard times. Could that be it?

Of course not. Those questions are ridiculous. God is good and everything He does is good. He has not made any mistakes. He has not overlooked any details in my life or yours. And He certainly is not sitting in heaven aloofly ignoring our circumstances.

Rather, God has perfectly orchestrated the circumstances in our lives and has placed us here at this moment in time on purpose. God knows what He is doing, and He has the whole situation under control. Over time God kept repeating this theme to me. Through books I read, conferences I attended, sermons I heard, and time I spent reading the Bible on my own, He seemed to be telling me the life I am living right now is the one He wants for me.

I may be a slow learner but eventually I do catch on to things. As a result of God's patient repetition, I finally came to the point when I realized if God made me a mother as part of His perfect plan, I ought to embrace being a mother. And if God is good, and everything He does is good, I knew I could have confidence in the goodness of the life He has given me right now.

While the thought of having days free from my children's whining and complaining is appealing, and the notion of cutting loose some responsibilities is tempting, I realize I do not want to live my life waiting for those days. I do not own tomorrow, or next year, or twenty years from now. God has given me this life today and I do not want to waste it by wishing it away. I want to enjoy today, and experience God today.

But how can I? Is it even possible amidst the craziness of mothering and the daily repetition of homemaking to have joy? How can one pos-

sibly experience God in the middle of a constant mix-up of chaos and frustration? It just doesn't make sense. How can there be any hope in this situation?

My friend, I am here to tell you the joy and the pleasure of God's company are possible. Yes, *they are possible even in the midst of motherhood.*

God began showing Himself to me through interactions I had with my children. I gained a better understanding of how He sees me. Sometimes He would reveal something of His character to me and I would marvel at how wonderful He is. Often God simply used my children to remind me of His love, or to comfort me.

I loved what I was seeing and began recording each incident because I knew one day I would want to write it all down in a book to share with other moms who are in the trenches just like me.

- ✦ Have you ever wished the day would pass a bit more quickly?
- ✦ Have you ever wondered, “*Why do I have to endure days like this one?*”
- ✦ Does the idea of a magic string in a little silver ball sound appealing?
- ✦ Do you sometimes feel as though there is no joy?

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, then you are a mom like me and this book is for you!

I have written these incidents with God in the form of short devotions. In each one, I share the event as it occurred with my children and the way God spoke or revealed Himself to me. Because this book is for you -- not me -- I have ended each entry with “*Your Turn*”: questions for you to ponder, and suggestions for prayer, as you consider how God is present and working in your life.

In some entries I have also included an additional “mom thought” for you to consider. I refer to these ideas as “*Just a Moment,*” and hope they will encourage you in your mothering.



There are twenty-eight devotions in this book; enough for four weeks. At the end of each week, I will be checking in with you to talk a little more about how we can find joy and experience God in the present moment. The ideas I share in these “*Check Points*” may be concepts you have heard before, or they may be totally new to you. Whether old or new, I hope they will serve to help you draw closer to the Lord.

Although I am including four weeks’ worth of devotions, please do not feel you must read one a day for four weeks. I am a mom, too, and I know life does not always allow us to have quiet time every day. While I hope you can find that time each day, I do not want to weigh you down or cause you to think you are behind on your reading, so I have not labeled the entries by the “Day” or the “Week.”

Read them as you are able to and feel free to linger on an entry if you want to spend more time on *Your Turn*..



I am inviting you now to share in my life through the pages of this book. In many ways, my life is just like yours. It can be tiring. Sometimes it’s frustrating. Mostly it’s ordinary. Sound familiar?

My hope is that as we spend this time together, you will grow in your understanding of God’s constant presence — even in the hard times. He has shown me I can have joy every day by living in the present moment and recognizing Him in it. I want to share this discovery with you. I pray you will experience joy as you learn to look for the ways God is speaking to you through the ordinary activities of your everyday life.

Remember...

God is present.

God is loving.

He wants to show Himself to you.

Come now. Let us journey together to find joy!





# A Welcoming Lap

*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them...And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. Mark 10:14 & 16*

IT WAS A CLOUDY, COOL SUMMER AFTERNOON in northern Michigan. I had my three children and niece with me at a lake. Because we were up north and because they are kids, my little charges felt it a necessity to go swimming. I, on the other hand — being a reasonable adult — realized it was just too much on the cool side of summer to actually get wet. Let them swim if they must, but I was content to sit on the beach wrapped up as much as I could be in a towel, trying to ignore the goose bumps surfacing all over my body.

After a fair amount of running, yelling and splashing, Matthew — my youngest child — left the water and approached me. He was feeling the chill of the air on his wet skin and wanted to wrap up in a towel so he could sit on my lap to soak up some of my warmth. I observed the goose bumps rising on his skin, listened to his chattering teeth, considered how cold he must be, and thought, *No way!*

I did not want Matthew to sit on my lap and get me wet, too. He was the one who made the choice to go swimming, not me. Had I not made it clear enough at the start? I was willing to take the kids to the beach, but I was not going to be getting wet! Besides, I did not think I

had any warmth to share. Having Matthew sit on my lap would only serve to make me colder than I was already.

But he stood there and looked at me. Water was dripping from his chin and ear lobes, his little body was shivering, and his eyes spoke ever so softly, “Mommy, can I please sit on your lap?” What could I do? *I had to let him sit on my lap.*

As I opened my arms and welcomed (albeit reluctantly) my cold little boy onto my less-than-warm lap, I thought about how God accepts me. I come to Him broken and needy. I struggle with selfishness, irritability, impatience, and a lack of self-control. As much as I desire to be a reflection of my Lord to the world around me, I know I fail to do it sometimes. And He knows it, too. I come to Him wet and cold, yet He accepts me.

Isn't it wonderful to know we do not have to be acceptable in order to be accepted? God knows who He wants us to be. He who began a good work in us will see it through to completion. God knows the trials through which we need to go in order for us to be mature and complete. He will bring just the right amount of adversity into our lives so we may become holy, even as He is holy. Yes, He has a vision of who we will be when His work in us is finished.

*I so want to be the woman God wants me to be!*


But I am not there yet.

And God knows it.

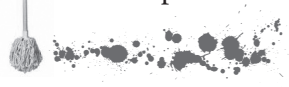
Ever so graciously, God accepts us right where we are. He patiently and perfectly works in our lives so we may become more like Him. Our job is not to become acceptable. Our job is to trust in God and cooperate with His Spirit as He makes us acceptable. I am so glad my transformation is not up to me..



Sitting on the beach with Matthew on my lap, I was keenly aware of God's graciousness to me. And as I did my best to reheat my little boy, I thanked God for accepting me onto His lap in any condition in which I come to Him. I do not need to be dry and warm.



*Your Turn:* Do you believe God accepts you just as you are, or do you sometimes think you need to clean yourself up first before He will love you? If God accepts you as you are and is working to make you into the woman He wants you to be, what would He say to you about how He sees you right now? What would He say about His vision for you? Imagine what His words would be, and write yourself a letter from Him. Then spend time in prayer thanking God for His love. Commit yourself to cooperating with Him as His Spirit works to transform you.







## Can I Have a...?

*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. Psalm 116:1-2*

**MY CHILDREN LOVE ANIMALS.** They always have. Whether it is some exotic species at the zoo, horses in a field we are driving by, or simply squirrels in the back yard, my kids will stop what they are doing and look up immediately whenever someone says, “Look! It’s a...!” They just love God’s furry creatures.

When they were quite small, my kids began wanting a pet, but I had always felt they weren’t ready for one. One day I realized they were outside catching bugs, putting them in containers, naming them, and calling the bugs their pets. Yes. They were resorting to bugs for companions! *Oh*, I thought, *I really need to let them have a pet.*

In time, we were in a pet store and I fell in love with the mice. Call me crazy if you wish, but I really did fall in love! At Christmas time the next year, we added pet mice to our family. My children loved these little critters. They played with them, cleaned their cages and cared for them. And for a while they were satisfied. Eventually, though, their minds began to wander. They began to want more.

This desire was particularly strong in Elizabeth, my oldest child. She began asking for various new pets. A guinea pig. A hermit crab. Perhaps

a lizard. She talked about which cage from the attic she could use, so she could get a new pet without buying a new cage. Sometimes she asked about getting books to study about the animals so as to be more knowledgeable and ready to care for her new pet. I know this behavior all appears very responsible and admirable but, after having just gotten her a mouse, I was hoping she would be content for a while. I was quickly getting tired of this new line of questioning.

One particular day she was asking me how much I thought a hermit crab would cost at the pet store. "Honey, I have no idea," was my reply. Elizabeth stated, "I think they're probably only \$1, since the mice are only \$2, and hermit crabs are smaller than mice." And she asked me again for my opinion. Slightly wary of the conversation, I just said, "I don't know!"

Then my sweet, little, persistent daughter looked at me with her big eyes and asked, "Mom, can I get a hermit crab?"

I looked back at her, a bit exasperated and thought, *Ugh! You wanted a pet and I got you a pet. Now you keep asking me for another pet. And you want me to tell you how much a hermit crab costs. I'm telling you, I don't know! But that isn't good enough for you. And now you want to know if I'll buy you a hermit crab? Girl, you ask too many questions!*

When I finished my internal tirade, it was as if God held a mirror up to my face and asked if I could see any similarities between my daughter and me. Oh, they were there. Besides the blue-green eyes, the brown hair, and the charming smile, I saw a woman who asks an awful lot of questions.

God, what should I do in this situation?

That woman really hurt me. How am I supposed to forgive her?

When is this trial going to be over?

I'm so confused, Lord. Will you please lead me through this valley?

Why does mothering have to be so hard?


Do You really know what You're doing here?

God, why do I have to go through this situation?

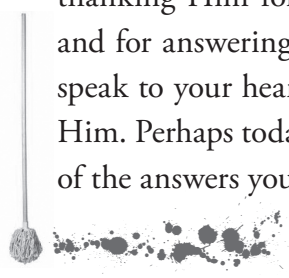


Then I looked at the difference between my response to my daughter's questions, and God's response to mine. God does not get bothered by my questions. When I ask Him things, He never says, ***I don't know!*** He is perfectly willing to listen to me as I share my uncertainties with Him, and He never gets tired of the conversation. Rather, He looks at me and loves me while I am asking. I pondered this picture for a while and thought, *How thankful I am that God doesn't tire of my questions! Even when I ask the same ones over and over again.*

Can you wrap your mind around the wonder of God's patience? Although we may grow weary of our children peppering us with inquiries, He is not like us. He knows the concerns and desires of our hearts. He knows the questions filling our minds. None of it is news to Him, yet over and over again God patiently and lovingly listens to our requests. And, in His perfect time, He will give us His answer.



*Your Turn:* Are there questions you have been asking God repeatedly? Do you think He gets tired of you asking, or that He patiently and lovingly listens? Make a list of the questions burdening you today and present them to God. Spend time in prayer thanking Him for listening to you, for loving you, and for answering in His perfect time. Ask Him to speak to your heart and spend time just listening to Him. Perhaps today is the day He will give you some of the answers you have been seeking.







# Are you ready?

*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1*

WHEN WE FIRST ALLOWED OUR CHILDREN TO HAVE PET MICE, although they each got their “own” mouse, caring for them was a combined effort. There was one cage in a community location and the feeding, watering, and cage cleaning were shared responsibilities. It was a good plan to foster teamwork, and it also served to help the mice survive because if one person forgot to feed them, another was likely to check on them and give them whatever they needed.

Through a series of events, like one of the mice dying and our discovery that the old mice did not want to welcome a new mouse into their cage, we started branching out. Elizabeth got a small cage and got to have her mouse in her room. And now the care for her mouse was entirely *her* responsibility. Feeding, watering, cleaning and all.

Before too long, Joshua wanted to have his mouse in *his* room, too. (I should have foreseen this situation.) My husband and I, however, were not quite convinced Joshua was ready to have it all be his responsibility. Like many eight-year-olds, Joshua was very good at getting excited about an idea and devoting all his time and attention to it — for a few days. But when the newness wore off, he would quickly move on to

another venture and we were afraid this fickleness might occur with his own mouse, too. Sure, we could remind Joshua to take care of the mouse, but we wanted to teach a lesson in responsibility. We wanted to be sure he was ready.

Honestly, sometimes it was difficult to say “No” to this request. At times it seemed as if we had no reasonable grounds not to allow Joshua to take over full care for the mice in his room. He was so excited about them. On other days I could not even remember the last time I had seen him look at the mice, let alone care for them, and I was more confident in my “No.” Wishing for perfect wisdom, my husband and I debated about what to do.


Eventually, we talked more to Joshua about this responsibility. We discussed what it would mean for him to be fully accountable for the care of his mice, and asked if he thought he was ready to do everything which would be required. Joshua said he thought he could do it and when Brian and I were equally convinced, we allowed him to make the move. I am happy to say, he has done quite well.




As we were going through this process of determining whether Joshua was ready to take full responsibility for his own mice, I considered how God works in a similar way. He knows the things we want — the “mice” we desire. For you it may be a job, a ministry opportunity, a role in the community, or even a role in the family. Perhaps it is something you want so desperately you can almost taste it, and you have been praying and asking God to give it to you for quite some time. Maybe you are absolutely sure it is the right thing, and you do not understand why God isn’t saying “Yes.” *I know. I have been there!*

Although I have questioned Him at times, I am confident God is fully aware of what I want and need. He has perfect knowledge about which situations I can handle and what circumstances would be best

for me. I may not always agree with His timing but I believe God — in His infinite wisdom — lovingly holds out on those things until the time is right. And I have never, in retrospect, been able to say God was ever wrong.



*Your Turn:* Is there a “mouse” you have desired for a while, which God has yet to give you? Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time.” Do you believe He knows the perfect time to give you the desires of your heart? If you do believe, are you willing to trust Him? What if God knows this thing you desire would not ultimately be a good thing for you, so He is keeping it from you? Are you still willing to trust Him? Spend time in prayer talking to God about your “mouse.” Ask Him if you need to wait for it, or if He is keeping it from you because He knows what is best. Then *listen*. What is He saying to your heart? Keep listening throughout the day. Perhaps He will speak through other people or circumstances you encounter.







*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Colossians 3:12*

**I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU**, but I have certain rules and expectations for my children for which I make no exceptions. Like hitting. I do not think it is ever okay for my kids to hit each other, and they know it. They may say, "But she took my cards!" or, "But I told him to move and he didn't move!" I always come back with, "Whatever he did to you does not make it okay for you to hit him. It is never okay to hit." They tell me, "I know," but *I know* they will do it again, anyway.

Then, of course, there is van etiquette. I always tell the kids to walk around the seats on the floor, not to climb over them to get into the back. And the headrests. They like to push the button and take the headrests out while I am driving, which usually results in someone getting intentionally hit over the head or accidentally poked in some other fashion. Over and over again, I have reminded the kids not to climb over the seats and to leave the headrests in place. Yet they continue to do the very things I tell them not to do.

How hard can it possibly be to remember to walk on the floor, to not jump on the couch, to keep your hands to yourself, and to put your dirty clothes in the laundry basket? I grew up promising myself I

would never, as a mom, let the words, “How many times do I have to tell you...?” proceed from my mouth, but sometimes I just cannot keep them in! My children know what to do, and I do wonder on occasion, *How many times am I going to need to tell them to do, or not do, these things before they finally get it?*

I love how God brings these everyday experiences with my kids around to teach me about Himself. I was recently reading Mark 10:35-45 and was encouraged in my desire to serve. With all my heart, I want to be more like Jesus and on this day He was showing me so clearly that in order to be more like Him, I need to serve. I told Him I want to serve my family, not because I want to be great, but because I want to be like Him. I want to serve the women to whom I speak and for whom I write, not because I want to be great, but because I want to be like Him. It was not a new lesson He was teaching me. I had heard it before, but somehow it was so much clearer on this day. I wrote in my journal:

*Yes, Lord, I want my whole life to be for You and about You. Thank You for being ever so patient with me. Sometimes I am so slow to “get it” but You don’t give up on me. Other times I understand something but then I forget it or simply ignore what I know — and when my kids do that very thing I get upset with them — but You don’t respond the way I do. Lord, please help me respond like You. I don’t want to be like me. I want to be like You!*

I sat and pondered how patient God is with me. Although He has spoken to me many, many times about things like serving, loving, and trusting, I am quite confident He has never uttered, **“How many times am I going to need to talk to Karen about this issue before she finally gets it?”** To my knowledge, He has never thrown up His arms declaring with great frustration, **“She’ll never learn!”** Rather, with patient




persistence, He speaks lovingly to me over and over until I finally understand.

He is such a good Father, and I want to be like Him.

### *Just a Moment:*


I remember a conversation I had with a fellow mom in which we were discussing the fine line between extending grace to our children and letting them get away with doing what they should not be doing. The conclusion we reached is that we need to determine who the lesson is for each time. In other words, do I need to stick to my guns because my child needs to learn this or that lesson, or is God telling me to extend grace to my child because *I* am the one who needs to learn patience?



*Your Turn:* What are the things your kids seem to forget? The things about which you ask them, “How many times do I have to tell you...?” Have you ever thought, “They’ll never learn!”?

OK, then, let us turn the tables. What things has God needed to repeat to you time and again until you finally “get it”? Do you think He has ever been so exasperated with your inability to catch on that He has been ready to give up on you?

If God can extend such grace to you — a “grown-up” — do you think you can also extend grace to your children? Spend time thanking God for His patience toward you, and ask Him to help you respond similarly to your children.





# The Red Shirt

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:33*

MY CHILDREN USED TO ATTEND A SCHOOL which had a dress code. They could wear tan or navy blue pants, and a red, white or blue shirt. It was simple and modest. I liked it.

Most mornings the dress code also made it easy for the kids to get dressed.

Most mornings.

I do remember one exception to the rule.

Joshua wanted blue pants, but only had tan pants in his closet. That was okay because I had just taken the dark clothes out of the dryer. Problem solved.

He also wanted a red shirt, but only had white shirts in his closet. That was not okay. I had just put the red clothes in the washing machine. They would not be ready before it was time for him to leave for school.

In my mind, this shirt business was not a big deal. Joshua had worn white shirts before. He could do it again. I knew he favored red, but this really did not need to be a big deal. However, Joshua's mind does not operate like mine.

He was furious. He was stomping around, spilling cereal, letting everyone know he was not happy about wearing a white shirt. In his anger, he yelled at me about not doing the laundry right. Why did I do the reds late? Couldn't I just go get the red shirt out of the washer and put it by the heater so it would be dry when he needed it? (Honestly... that was his proposed solution.) In the midst of his rage, I did my best to remain calm, reminding myself it would be foolish to join in and start yelling back at him.

Finally, he was ready to state the reason he did not like the white shirt. As I waited with baited breath for his explanation, I imagined he might say something about not wanting to stain the shirt if he spilled his chocolate milk at lunch. You never know, he could be concerned about staying clean! Uh...no. Not this time. I had to control myself from bursting out in laughter when he spoke. *He said he liked the red shirt better because it keeps him warmer.* White shirts are cold, he explained.

I am certain Joshua has not been to any "Color Me Beautiful" classes. I doubt he knows anything about warm and cool colors. I do not believe the red shirt actually keeps him warmer than the white shirt. In an attempt to call his bluff, I reminded him he had a sweater he could take to school and put on if he got chilly. He rejected my suggestion and continued in his grumpy mood.

Mumbling about a cold shirt, kicking things out of his way, and wearing a very sour look on his face, Joshua was not a happy boy. I knew he was blowing this issue out of proportion and finally I said to him, "Joshua, I think you are getting upset about something which really is not worth being upset over." In spite of my profound wisdom, I do not remember what happened next, because my mind was taken to another place by the statement I had just made.



How many times have I, myself, gotten distressed over something which really was not worth the time and emotion? How many times have I stomped around, angry because the red shirt was still in the washer, when there was a perfectly good white shirt hanging in my closet?

I remember being upset when I finished nursing my third baby. My bra was baggy. The small one. I hated this “new” body. I felt unfeminine and unattractive. *God, why did this have to happen? I liked my breasts the way they used to be!*


There have been moments I have wished I could trade my kids in for some who obey the first time, every time, and who always clean up their messes and never fight with each other. *God, I don't know what I am doing with these kids. I don't think I can handle them!*

And how about the times I have admired someone else's nice complexion and complained about my own? *God, I'm 36 years old. Isn't it about time for me to stop getting pimples?*

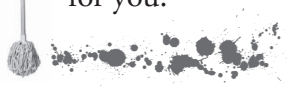
I can imagine His voice now. ***Karen, Karen, you are upset about so many things. There is only one thing that matters. Seek Me.***

Yes, God took that moment of logic I had for Joshua and used it to speak to me. He has given me plenty of white shirts. More than I need, really. Some of them are very practical. Some are well-worn. Some of them are delicate and pretty. One is extravagant. They all fit me perfectly.

I may not have the red shirts I want, but I have all the white shirts I need. I have realized it just does not make sense to get upset about the red ones.



*Your Turn:* Can you see yourself in this scenario? Have you been troubled over something which was not worth the time and emotion? Do you find yourself getting discouraged about the things you don't have, completely missing what God has given you? Read Matthew 6:25-34. If God knows what you need (v.32), are you willing to trust Him? Spend time in prayer giving your concerns to God and asking Him to help you trust Him. Ask Him what His loving heart wants to say to you today, and spend time silently before Him — listening. What is He saying? Thank God for His amazing love and perfect care for you.





# Will You Come Upstairs With Me?

*Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. Proverbs 19:21*

IT WAS A TYPICAL MORNING in the Hossink household. I had gotten up at 6:00 to read my Bible and spend time in prayer. Then I had awoken the kids for school and made sure they got out of bed to come get breakfast. I was eating my breakfast at my computer so I could read and respond to e-mail. Everything was going smoothly.

Just then, Matthew asked if I would go upstairs with him so he could get dressed. My first thought was, *Awww, Matthew. Do I have to? You could have brought your clothes downstairs with you, you know. Why aren't you afraid to go upstairs alone when you want to get one of your toys? Can't you see I am doing something here?* Fortunately, God kept me from verbalizing my thoughts and I agreed to go with Matthew. Though I must admit, I agreed reluctantly. I did not want to be interrupted. However, I realized my stuff was not so important that I had legitimate grounds to say, "No."

Upstairs getting his clothes on, Matthew was moving rather slowly. I stood watching him and started getting impatient. I thought, *This is such a waste of my time, standing here watching this child get dressed, ever so slowly. I could be **doing** something right now!* Then God's Spirit whispered to my heart and it occurred to me, *Yes! I could be praying for*

*Matthew.* So as I stood in his doorway, instead of getting uptight about “wasting” my time, I prayed for my little slow-poke.

Then he went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and asked me to fix his hair, so I did. As I ran my wet hands over his crazy hair, I prayed for his mind. I prayed God would fill it with things which are lovely and pure. I touched his ears and prayed for the things he hears, asking God to help him discern what is true and right.

Standing there looking at my little boy in the mirror, with blue foamy toothpaste dribbling down his chin, I realized there was no more important thing for me to be doing at that moment than to be praying for him.

The e-mails would still be there when he was off to school.

The dishes and cereal were not going to run away. I could take care of them later.

My shower could wait as well.

For now, I was going to pray for my boy. Praying for him was such a good way to spend my time.







*Just a Moment:*

Incidents like this one have led me to a new practice. Now, whenever one of my kids asks me to go upstairs with them, I follow them up and pray for them the whole time. Their request has become a prayer cue for me.

Is there a cue God is laying on your heart to remind you to pray for your kids?



*Your Turn:* Do you ever have plans which are interrupted by your kids, and you feel like your time is being wasted? Read Proverbs 19:21. How can you begin to view such interruptions through the Lord's eyes? Spend time in prayer asking God to refine your spirit, making you willing to follow His lead rather than rigidly sticking to your own agenda. Ask Him to help you see intrusions on your plans as opportunities to flow into His will. Make a plan for how you will respond the next time one of your kids asks, "Mom, will you...?"





*Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Psalm 36:5*

**I LOVE LITTLE SURPRISES**, and I especially like to plant them for my children. Sometimes I go to the card store and buy the 99-cent cards that essentially say, “I love you,” and I put them in the kids’ backpacks along with their snack. Other times I make my own card or note and hide it where I think they will find it. Occasionally I stick a special treat, like a Hershey’s Kiss, in with the rest of their snack — just because.

These tokens of my affection are not really necessary. My children know I love them. I do not think they would be any less sure of it if I did not give them these surprises. So, why bother? Because I like to!

Planting these expressions of my love is fun for me, and the simple act of doing it brings me joy. Greater joy comes though, when my kids tell me they found my note or the treat.

“Mom, thanks for the Kiss!”

“I liked the card you gave me today.”

“I love you, too!”

What really warmed my heart was the day I was in Joshua’s classroom and he showed me the place in his desk where he had taped up each of the notes I had hidden for him in his backpack. He was actually making a collection of my love notes.

I truly cherish and even anticipate these responses. I look forward to them, not because I want to be thanked for what I have done, but because I love to see the joy my children have over these expressions of my love.




Recently I was reminded God delights in giving us good things. He *delights* in it! I considered how much I enjoy planting little love notes and wondered, *How much more does God enjoy planting love notes for me?* The warm sunshine on my face, the sweet sound of birds singing in the morning, the beauty of a sunset, the tender embrace of my child — are these all love notes God has planted for me throughout my day?

Think about a sunset. It is an amazing mix of color and beauty covering the entire sky. When I am at the edge of a large body of water, watching the sun go down and the sky fill with color, for a moment it is as if all is right in the world. But I cannot think of one practical reason for such a gorgeous display. We do not need that beauty to live. It does not nourish our bodies, make us smarter -- or settle the debate between paper versus plastic. So, God, why bother? Could it be God does things like this simply as an expression of His love, power, and creativity? Because it delights Him?


Then I thought, *If I cherish the joyful responses from my children after they have found what I have given them, how much more must God cherish my responses to His love?* I wondered, when God plants a love note for me does He watch me and anticipate the moment when I find it? Does He wait eagerly for me to realize it is a gift from Him? Does it delight His heart to see the joy in my heart, and to hear me say, “Thank You. I love You, too!”?

I believe God is watching and anticipating. Yes, I think my joyful response does delight His heart. Therefore, as I move through my days I am learning to be on the look-out for the love notes God has placed

along my path. I don't want to miss any of them. And I am finding a growing sense of joy in my own heart as I am beginning to grasp how very much He loves me!



*Your Turn:* Have you noticed the love notes God has laid out for you? What are they? Ask God to help you see the love notes He has put out for you today. When you see them, pause and thank Him for loving you. At the end of the day, why not make a list of all the ways He has shown you His love?







# Check Point #1

## Living in the Present

*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forever more. Psalm 16:11 (ESV)*

**WELCOME** to the first of four Check Points in this book. It is my desire to treat these sections like a conversation with you, an opportunity for me to share with you some of the things God has been teaching me outside the realm of motherhood. I hope you will view this time as the two of us sitting down together, seeking to draw closer to God. Please know I am praying for you!



I was meeting with my mentor, lamenting the morning I had experienced. The boys and I had gone through some typical scuffles in the process of getting ready for school — at a more than typical intensity — and I was tired of it. I shared with Jenni the question I had asked God, “Why does this have to be so hard?”

This question was not a new one to flow from my lips. Ever since I began understanding God is using my children and my struggles as a mother to refine me, I have known even the hard times are for my good.

But sometimes I have wondered, *Why do these struggles with my kids have to be so hard?*

Whenever I have asked this question, I have meant it to be an expression of faith. In other words, in posing the query I have meant to communicate to God I understand the trial is for my good and I know I can trust Him. At the same time, though, I was weary from the hardship and I just wanted it to be over. While I deeply desired to be refined — to be made holy — I was secretly hoping God would come up with an easier way to bring it about. Impressive faith, I know.

As I was sharing my thoughts with Jenni, I was more or less just looking for an avenue to vent. I was not expecting any great spiritual revelation to come from the occasion. However, I should have remembered God does not waste anything. And I ought to have known Jenni was praying and asking God how to respond to me. Clearly, He was about to speak through her.

Jenni looked at me thoughtfully and asked, “Where do you think God was in the middle of your struggle?”

Where did I think He was?

Why, He was with me, of course. *He always is.*

I told Jenni I knew God was with me in the midst of my struggle. But I needed to have more than head-knowledge of God’s presence, and He was about to use Jenni to walk me down that path.

For the rest of our time together that day, Jenni and I talked about living in the present moment. Instead of focusing all my thoughts on the future and what I trust God is doing to prepare me for it, Jenni encouraged me to recognize how God is with me in the present moment. She was not telling me to ignore the fact God is using the struggles of the present to refine me for the future. Rather, she was asking me to be aware of God’s presence *in the midst of the struggle.*

In the days and weeks following my conversation with Jenni, I was amazed by how often God kept bringing it back into my mind. It surfaced in email correspondences with other moms, in a sermon at church,



in conversations, and even in my own random thoughts. God seems to be very big on repeating important things to me, so the frequency with which He was bringing this topic to me caused me to sit up and take notice. And as I took notice, I made two discoveries.

My initial discovery was regarding my focus during difficult moments with my children. As I continued to ponder Jenni's question, I became aware of my tendency to focus on the hard times rather than on God. I was in the habit of looking at my situation, allowing myself to become overwhelmed by it, and asking Him, "God, why does this have to be so hard?" I was looking at the fire, instead of the Refiner.

I realized living in the present moment was going to require a shift of focus, so I asked God to help adjust my view. Now, instead of asking why things are so hard, I have begun thanking God for being with me during the hard times. I have prayed for the ability to see my children through His eyes. When I am nearing my wits' end, I have been thanking Him for loving my children, and asking Him to love them through me. I have become increasingly aware of God's presence with me in every moment and now my eyes have been trained upon Him, rather than upon my circumstance.

And the strangest thing has happened.

God has shown me that by living in the present moment and recognizing His presence with me, I can have joy — even in the midst of the struggle.



Joy. This is my second — and most delightful — discovery.



I had already realized I could have hope in mothering because God is using my trials to refine me, just like a silversmith uses fire to refine silver. And hope is such a good thing. The Bible says we hope for that

which we do not yet possess (Romans 8:24-25) and I realized this hope God has given me is for my future. I can endure the trials of my present, understanding God is using them for my future.

But God showed me, just as I can have hope for the future, He will also give me joy in the present. Psalm 16:11 says, “in your presence there is fullness of joy.” I have found that statement to be absolutely true as I have learned to recognize God’s company with me in every moment. Regardless of whether my circumstance fills me with it, or drains me of it, *I find joy in the presence of God.*



Now I want to ask you the same thing Jenni asked me: Where do you think God is in the middle of your struggles?

I know the answer. He is with you, my friend. Whether you feel Him, or not, God is there. As we continue on this journey together, let me encourage you to look for Him in every moment, and to talk with Him about everything.





# I'm Needy

*Yet I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God.  
You are my help and my deliverer; O LORD, do not delay.  
Psalm 70:5*

MY MENTOR SHARED A BOOK WITH ME, The Satisfied Heart, by Ruth Meyers. One entry in the book was about our neediness being the thing which qualifies us for God's love. I was greatly encouraged by what I read and continued to ponder it throughout the day. At the end of the day, when the kids were in bed, I sat down to record my thoughts in my journal.

*O, I love how You reveal Yourself to me. Didn't You just speak to me about my neediness today, and how the fact that I need is what qualifies me for Your love? And I agreed with You. This is where I want to be and I'm so thankful You meet my needs.*

*Then, tonight, my kids were so needy.*

*Mom, can I have a drink?*

*Mom, will you help me with this?*

*Mom, my stomach is growling. Can I have something to eat?*

*Mom, what do I do here?*

*Mom, can I have...?*

*And I was getting tired of it. I wanted to go downstairs and not answer one more request.*

*Then You caused me to think of You - and my neediness. I remembered it is my need which puts me in a position to experience Your love. You love me to depend on You and bring my needs to You, and You never tire of hearing from me.*

*You are so awesome and I am glad for what You have shown me. I am glad You show me that You never fall short. You are perfect love, and I praise You!*


Immediately after I had written I did not want to answer one more request, Elizabeth (whom I had thought was asleep) called, "Mom?" I got up from my chair and went to see what she *needed*. She asked me if I would sing her one more song.

I was laughing, because that is what I do when God is being so blatantly obvious about teaching me something. Under normal circumstances, I would have reminded my daughter I already sang to her once and kissed her goodnight. I would have told her now it was her job to stay in bed and go to sleep. But this time I said, "Of course, I will." With my own neediness and God's faithfulness fresh on my mind, I was able to fulfill my daughter's wish. As I sang, rather than being upset over another request, I was truly joyful. I was thanking God because He joyfully and lovingly meets my needs. All of them!

*Just a Moment:*


When I am starting to get overwhelmed by “Mom, can I have...?” “Mom, will you...?” “Mom, I need...” I try to remember to stop short of blowing my top and thank God for lovingly meeting all of my needs. This reality check does great things for my perspective on life.

Perhaps you can try this tactic the next time your children seem to be overflowing with neediness.



*Your Turn:* Do you sometimes get tired of meeting your kids' needs? Have you ever had the thought of changing your name to something other than "Mom"? (I have!) How does it make you feel to realize it is your very neediness which qualifies you for God's love? He loves you to be dependent upon Him.

As you think about your neediness — not just physical things, but emotional and spiritual, too — write them down. Note how God has met each one. Thank Him for meeting your every need, and ask Him to give you joy in meeting the needs of your children.





# I Just Want to be With You

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? Psalm 42:1-2*

**IT WAS AN ORDINARY AFTERNOON**, and I was doing ordinary things, when God put an extraordinary desire in my heart.

Matthew had come into the house with his head hanging low. He had gotten into trouble and he knew discipline was to follow. We talked about the situation for a moment and I told him to go take a time out. While Matthew does not typically skip and whistle on his way to the couch for time out, he does usually go. But not on this day.

Instead, he stood at my feet crying, his arms raised up toward me. With some combination of crying and yelling, Matthew said over and over, “I just want to be with you! I just want to be with you!” The desperation in his voice rather took me by surprise.

He had just been outside playing and having a good time with his friends. It would make sense to me if he begged to go back out and play. I understood he was not wild about being sent to the couch for time out, but why the intensity of desire to be with me? Surely I am not as interesting as other kids, bugs or bikes are. But Matthew kept repeating, “I just want to be with you!”



As I observed my little boy that afternoon, the desperation in his voice made me wish to have the same kind of longing for God. I wished to have a hunger in my heart which cries out to God, “I just want to be with You!”

O, for my greatest desire to be His presence. I want to come to the point in my life when nothing here on earth is as alluring to me as the presence of God. It seems crazy but sometimes I desire the stuff of earth so much, I lose sight of God. Sometimes I forget how amazing it is to be with Him.

On occasion I have been places where the presence of God is undeniable. While attending various women’s conferences, Christian concerts, and Sunday morning worship services, I have known without a doubt the Spirit of God was among us. Those moments were glorious, and I wished they would never end. I would like to think I had a little taste of heaven.


It is easy to long for God in those circumstances, but I know He is just as present in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life. God is with me and He is powerful when I am doing laundry. He is present when I am strolling down the aisles of the grocery store, and when I am picking my kids up at school. Even when I am scrubbing the bath tub and cleaning the toilet, God is close to me and I can enjoy His presence.




Before I sent him off to the couch, I bent down to pick up Matthew. He was comforted in my embrace. Standing there with my little boy’s arms wrapped tightly around my neck, I thought about having such an intense desire for God. I longed to yearn for Him desperately. As I held



Matthew and thanked God for giving him to me, I marveled at the lesson He had just taught me. Then I thanked Him that He loves for me to *just want to be with Him*.



Your Turn: Do you have an overwhelming desire to be in God's presence? Can you imagine yourself as a child calling out to Him, "I just want to be with You!" Read Psalm 42:1-2 and visualize a thirsty deer panting for water. Is that picture an accurate depiction of your desire for God? If so, spend quiet time simply resting in and enjoying His presence right now. If not, pray and ask Him to build that desire in you. Write down Psalm 42:1-2 on a piece of paper and carry it in your pocket today. *He wants you to desire Him desperately and I believe He will answer your sincere prayer.*







# No Trade Backs

*For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. Psalm 139:13-14*

**HAVE YOU EVER HAD ONE OF THOSE DAYS** when there is so much to do, you just do not know how you are going to get it all done? Then the day ends and you move into the evening only to find so much more “stuff” which needs to be accomplished. Have you been there? If you are a mom, I know your answer is, *Yes*.

I was having one of those days recently. The daytime had been stressful and the evening was just plain full. Joshua needed to read for twenty minutes for school. Matthew had homework to do. I needed to bake cookies for Elizabeth to take into school the next day. Though I do not remember for certain, I will bet it was also a “bath night.”

In a perfect world this list of things to do could be accomplished quite easily, I suppose. Three jobs. Three people. No problem.

But my world is not perfect.

My world looks more like this:

Joshua did not want to read. He would rather play with his mice, or watch his bugs, or get his stuffed animals out and spread them all over the living room. Anything but reading! So he fussed and complained

and I tried to figure out how I could sit and read with him (to be sure he really was reading, and not just sitting on the couch) and still get those cookies made.

Matthew has a tendency to get off task with just about everything. Although I had set his homework in front of him, with a sharpened pencil, in a clutter-free and quiet area, Matthew managed to get distracted by other things. On several occasions I tried to redirect his attention to the task at hand. I wondered if I was simply going to have to stand watch as Matthew did his work, and bake the cookies later.

Then Elizabeth approached me with her charming smile and asked, “Mama, when are you going to bake those cookies?”



With Joshua sitting on the couch — book opened, and Matthew sitting at the table adding nines — for the moment, I went into the kitchen to get the cookie ingredients out of the cupboard.

Right on cue, Joshua started complaining about his book. He said he did not want to read this particular book.

It was boring.

He did not like it.

He was rushed to pick a book from the library so he just grabbed this one without really gauging his interest in it.

He was sure there was a better book out there somewhere and he wanted to trade it back.

I told Joshua I was sorry he was disappointed with the book he had, but since we could not go to the library at the moment, he could not return it. “Sorry, kiddo,” I said. “You are stuck with that one for now.”

At the same time Joshua was complaining about wanting to trade back his book, I was tempted to confess I might want to do a trade back, too. I could not help but think sometimes I might like to exchange my kids. Maybe I could trade them in for the models that do everything


you ask of them the first time. I would like one who never complains, rather obeys joyfully. Perhaps I could trade them in for a version which always throws trash in the trash can and never leaves shoes or socks laying around. Or, what about the ones who clear the table without being asked? Yeah, wouldn't that be nice?

As I bit my tongue to keep from voicing my thoughts, I also started reminding myself of what I know to be True. God loves my kids. He has created them and has a purpose for them. When God was knitting my babies together in my womb, He was forming their personalities, interests, talents — even their quirks — perfectly. He made me their mom on purpose and He has good things in mind for us. I could not trade my kids in for better ones, because God has already created the best situation right here. Though there are moments and days when that Truth seems evasive, I know God is in control and I just need to trust Him.

### *Just a Moment:*

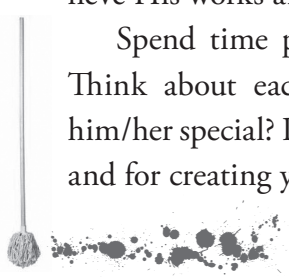
Write a simple note to each of your children saying, "Honey, I love you because..." If your child is too young to read, just hug them and tell them what you wrote.

I have done this activity before and left the note with a small piece of chocolate somewhere in my children's bedrooms for them to find. Without exception, each of my kids kissed me, hugged me and thanked me for their treats. Honestly, the pleasure was all mine!



*Your Turn:* Okay, be honest. Have you ever thought it would be nice to trade your kids in for “better” models? Though you know it is impossible to do, have you ever just wished you could swap out your kids for some others who seem “perfect” to you?

Let’s examine the Truth. Do you believe God knew what He was doing when He created your children? Read Psalm 139:13-14, inserting your children’s names at the appropriate places. Do you believe His works are wonderful?



Spend time praying for each of your children. Think about each one individually. What makes him/her special? Praise God for His wonderful works and for creating your child perfectly.





# What's for Dinner?

*Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! Isaiah 30:18*

IF IT IS SUNDAY, the answer to the question, “What’s for dinner?” is always the same. Sunday dinner at my house consists of frozen pizza — the self-rising kind — one cheese, and one pepperoni. Except for those occasions when one of the yummiest varieties is on sale. And except for the other occasions, when I go to the freezer and realize I forgot to buy pizza at the store the previous Monday.

I remember one Sunday evening when the boys were going outside to play. As I was heading downstairs to get the pizzas out of the freezer, they were asking when to be home for dinner. I was opening my mouth to say, “Be home in half an hour,” when I changed my response to, “Awwww! I forgot to get pizza.” I turned to go back upstairs and muttered, “I’m such a dummy sometimes.” Joshua chimed in, “Just go to Little Caesars and get the Hot & Ready pizza. I like that kind better anyway!” While I appreciated his efforts to cheer me up, I still felt like a dummy. I thought, *C’mon, Karen. You do the same thing every week. How could you forget such a simple thing? What are you going to forget next week? Milk?*

This private berating had ended by the time I got to the bottom of the stairs. When I looked up I saw Matthew standing with his arms

open toward me, and heard the most precious words come out of his mouth. “You’re not a dummy, Mom. You just forgot. Everyone does that sometimes!” Then he smothered me with hugs and kisses.

His words were so simple, and so full of grace. I was angry with myself for a small oversight — already blowing it out of proportion — and Matthew was reminding me it really was not a big deal. *You just forgot. Everyone does that sometimes.* Such wisdom flowing from the mouth of a six-year-old.

God used the words Matthew spoke to remind me of my need to receive and live in His grace every day. He showed me His grace abounds around me all the time.

- ✦ I am covered by the blood of Jesus and by His grace my sins are forgiven.
- ✦ He extends grace to me in the form of patience, as He gently and persistently speaks to me about something until I “get it.”
- ✦ I see God’s grace to me when I find the strength to make it through a situation which seems impossible.
- ✦ His grace comes to me when a friend hugs me and speaks words of life to my weary soul.
- ✦ I see God’s grace when someone recognizes my limitations and offers to help me out.

I have a tendency toward perfectionism and I want to do everything just right. But I am not perfect, and God knows it. He knows I will never get everything right. He knows *I cannot do all things*. And He still has not fired me as wife to Brian and mother to Elizabeth, Joshua and Matthew.

God and I are in this thing together. I am doing my best, but God *is* the best. Every day I am learning a little bit more what it means to trust Him. I am believing, by His grace, He will catch me when I fall and He will supply what I lack. The truth of the matter is I will never be perfect this side of heaven and, because of God’s grace, I do not have to be!




I can still hear Matthew's words echo in my mind. *You're not a dummy, Mom. You just forgot. Everyone does that sometimes.* When it came to getting something on the table that night, Little Caesar's came through for me. But the best part of dinner was the grace God poured out on me through Matthew.

### *Just a Moment:*

It has been a long time since this incident occurred, but I still hear Matthew's words echo through my mind when I have forgotten something simple like frozen pizza. *You're not a dummy, Mom. You just forgot. Everyone does that sometimes.* God continues to pour grace on me through my little boy's words.

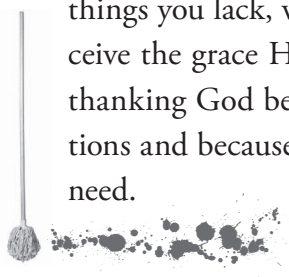
Please let me encourage you to keep your mommy ears open to the ways our Father may speak to you through your children.



*Your Turn:* Are you imperfect, too? Even though you know you aren't perfect, do you sometimes get mad at yourself for the mistakes you make? Do you find it hard to receive grace from other people? from yourself? from God?

Make a list of the ways you fall short of perfection. (I am not giving you license to start a negative list about yourself here. My goal is to help you get a better perspective on grace. So, please, *do not begin tearing yourself down.*) Reviewing the list, make a note next to any of the items you believe will prevent the sun from rising tomorrow. Now note the ways in which God and other people can help you when you fall short.

Okay, if the world is not going to end because you are not perfect, and if God can make up for the things you lack, will you humbly and thankfully receive the grace He offers you? Spend time in prayer thanking God because He understands your limitations and because His grace supplies everything you need.





# One More Thing

*My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Selah*  
*Psalm 62:7-8*

**WHEN IT COMES TO BEDTIME** at our house, we have quite a regular routine. After we read the Bible and pray together as a family, my husband and I say good-night to each of the kids individually. Part of my saying good-night involves singing a song, and sometimes I am amazed at how long my children can drag out choosing which song they want. I remember one night when they truly out-did themselves.

It started with Joshua. I talked with him a bit and then asked him what song he wanted. He said, “Oh, just one more thing. You know those juice machines like they have at school? Are there sirens that go off if someone tries to break into one?” I simply replied I had never heard any. “But remember when we saw the guy at school open it up? How do you think he did that?” I recalled walking through the hall with Joshua when a serviceman was re-filling the machine with juice, and I told Joshua the man probably had a key. I just wanted to sing the song and move on. This “one more thing” was becoming more than one thing. Finally, he let me choose a song to sing, I sang, and kissed him good-night.

Next it was Matthew's turn. I asked, "Do you want a song tonight?" He said, "Yes, but, one thing. Do we have any live plants in the house?" *I had no idea from where that question came!* "Uh, yes," I replied. "There's a flower in the kitchen."

"And the bamboo plant!" Joshua chimed in.

I looked at Joshua as if to say, *Thanks for the input but I really don't need **one more thing** at the moment.*

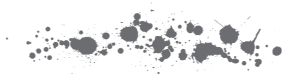
"Right. Now, about a song, Matthew?" He was being very charming, offering lots of kisses as some kind of clue to the song he wanted, but it went right over my head. Eventually, he chose "The Matthew Song," sung to the tune of Chili's baby back ribs commercial, and I said good-night.

Upon entering Elizabeth's room, I could see she had "one more thing," too. She was making some trading cards and had to tell me all about how she was creating her project. She wanted to know, *Did I like it? Did I think she would do a good job? Would this color look right?* She was full of questions. I tried to encourage her by saying I thought she would do well. She is very creative and was putting a lot of effort into her work. Still, I was looking at the clock thinking, *How long is this good-night process going to take tonight?*

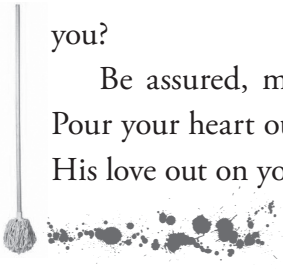
In that moment, God brought a wonderful thought to me. *He never gets tired of my "one more thing."* He never looks at His clock wondering when I am going to stop asking Him things, when I am going to stop wanting Him to be with me, or when I am going to let Him get back to running the universe. In fact, He loves for me to ask Him things — for me to recognize I need Him. He loves to be with me and wants me to want to be with Him. And He is perfectly able to manage the universe while He is also listening to my concerns.

On top of God's perfect attention toward us, I am convinced He also wants to hear everything on our minds. Though I was not entirely interested in discussing the particulars of how a juice machine may or may not be armed with an alarm to discourage thieves, I believe any-

thing we want to share with our Father is important to Him. He wants to hear it all. God never tires of us. His love is perfect and He always wants to hear our “one more thing.”



*Your Turn:* Is there an issue which has been weighing on your heart and mind lately, but you have not brought it before God because you thought He might not be interested? Have you thought you may have met your quota of requests for the month and He does not want to hear “one more thing” from you?



Be assured, my friend, *God is not tired of you.* Pour your heart out to Him and allow Him to pour His love out on you.





*Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. Hosea 2:14*

**I HAD BEEN GONE** for two and a half days. I was at a Women of Faith conference –all by myself — completely enjoying the opportunity to fellowship with God and spend time leisurely, however I wanted. It was a wonderful time of refreshing and after I had been through it, I was truly looking forward to getting home and seeing my family again.

When I arrived home, right away I noticed notes scattered throughout the house. They were in every room. Notes were on the table in the dining room, on the couch in the family room, on the window sill in the hallway, and on the steps going upstairs. I found one on my pillow in my bedroom, and there was even one in the drawer in the bathroom where I keep my make-up and hairbrush. Some of the notes said, “I love you,” and others simply said, “Mom.”

The handwriting on the notes told me it was my daughter who had written them. The quantity of notes and their careful placement throughout the house told me she had missed me and was glad I was coming home. As much as I enjoyed my time away at the women’s conference, I cherished these notes and the love of my daughter even more. It was a sweet homecoming.



Days later, as I was looking at my love notes again, I thought about how much my little girl missed my presence. I realized she was thinking about me an awful lot while I, quite honestly, had my thoughts far away from her. It filled me with joy to consider the time and care she put into creating each of those notes.

Then I wondered, *When I'm away from God, does He put love notes around and call my name because He misses me? Does He consider the path I will be taking through the day and place things along it which are meant to turn my eyes toward Him? Does He spend His time thinking about me, waiting for my return, even though I may not be thinking of Him at all?* Because I am confident of God's perfect love, I believe the answers to those questions are yes, yes, and yes.

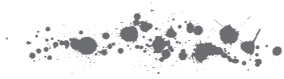
As much as I love the Lord, I know there are times when my attention is not on Him. Sometimes I get preoccupied with worries or details in my life and, forgetting to take them to Him, I spend my days obsessing about how I can resolve my troubles. Other days, I might not take time out to just be with Him, to pray and read my Bible. During times like these when I am not pursuing intimacy with God, I imagine He misses me.

When I am in a busy season, checking off my list of things to do, constantly looking at my watch to see if I have time to do one more chore, perhaps God leaves me notes, too. It could be the little squirrel peering at me through my kitchen window has been placed there by God to cause me to think of Him. Maybe God is reminding me He's watching me. I suppose it is possible He is trying to communicate His desire to not be on the "outside," rather to be with me in fellowship again.

Yes, I believe God does put love notes around for me. It may be the squirrel in the window, a cool breeze on a hot day, the gentle chirping of a bird on the roof, or even an unexplainable ache in my heart which



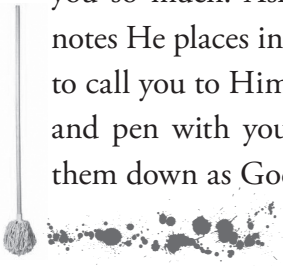
causes me to turn my thoughts toward Him. I am sure of His love for me. It delights my heart to know He is always thinking of me, and to consider the lengths to which He is willing to go to let me know it.



*Your Turn:* Have you ever been away from your family for a length of time? Did they express how much they missed you? How did that make you feel?

Do you believe God misses you when you are not pursuing or spending time with Him? If He does miss you, do you think He might be calling your name and placing notes around to gain your attention? I told you about some of the “notes” He sends to me. What are the notes He sends your way?

Spend time in prayer, thanking God for loving you so much. Ask Him to help you recognize the notes He places in your path, which He wants to use to call you to Himself. Consider carrying a note pad and pen with you through the day so you can jot them down as God reveals them to you.







*I was pushed back and about to fall, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Psalm 118:13-14*

**OKAY, I KNOW YOU ARE GOING TO UNDERSTAND ME** in this situation. You are going to understand me because you are a mom, and I am a mom. So you can relate to how busy I am, right? We moms have a lot to do.

Take care of the kids. Keep the house clean. (Yeah, right.) Do the laundry. Feed the family. Get the groceries. Wash the dishes. If you are married, you have a husband to attend to, as well. Oh, yeah! Don't forget the in-laws are coming over for dinner tonight. So much to do!

On a particularly busy morning, I was trying to get out the door to go to the grocery store. I had asked my husband if there was anything special he needed me to get for him and he told me he wanted some snack things. "Snack things?" I asked. "Like what?" He so helpfully replied, "Just snack things." We proceeded to engage in a conversation about what particular food items would satisfy my husband's snacking desires — you know, the snacks which include the right amounts of protein and good fat, are easy to grab and go, and do not cost a small fortune per ounce. I did want to listen to him and get what he wanted,

but the whole time we were having this conversation, I was keenly aware of the fact I needed to hurry. Brian had tasks to get done that morning, too, and if I was going to be able to go shopping sans kids, I really needed to get going.

Besides the voice I heard in my head, telling me to hurry up, I began hearing other voices while Brian and I were trying to have this conversation. They were the voices of my children — the same children who know they are not supposed to interrupt my husband and me when we are talking. But my children did not seem to care about what they already knew. They just wanted to request things from the store, too. They wanted to know if I would read a particular book when I got home. Could we play this or that game? What were we going to have for dinner? When was I going to be home? You get the picture.

Finally, in desperation, I held the palm of my hand out toward my kids, turned my head away from them and boldly proclaimed, “Not listening!” It got silent quickly and I heard a little voice say, “That isn’t very nice.”

I stood in my own silence and knew that little voice was speaking truth. It wasn’t nice for me to shut them out. I was feeling overwhelmed at the moment. I wanted to get out the door and accomplish my tasks. I had so much to do! But pushing my kids away and telling them I was not listening to them was not a nice thing.

As I stood there in the silence, regretting my unkind behavior, another thought came to my mind. *I am sure glad God is never too busy to listen to me.*

Oh, you can be sure God is busy. Right now He is holding the universe together in perfect balance. He is watching seeds get planted and He is making them grow. He is causing the sun to rise over one side of the world and hanging stars over the other. He just brought forth a bunch of birds from their eggs and now He is watching them in their nest.


Countless prayers are being lifted up to heaven and God is listening intently to each one. Somewhere there is a woman crying over a broken marriage, a husband who has lost his job and does not know how he is going to face his family with the news, a teenage girl who has just found out she is pregnant, a young man who wants to go to college but cannot come up with the funds, and a little girl whose heart is broken because her best friend moved away yesterday. Each of these people is crying out to God for help, and He is caring for them.

Then there is me. Here I sit in my little corner of the world, feeling overwhelmed by one household. So I go to God. *Lord, I'm tired and I'm feeling overwhelmed right now. I have so much to do. I need Your strength. Will You give me the grace I need to make it through this day? I need wisdom and patience in dealing with my kids. Lord, will You give me wisdom? Please help me make right choices. Father, I can't do this mothering thing without Your help. I need You, Lord. Please help me!*


In my moment of need, while God is holding the universe together, He does not stiffen His arm in my direction, turn His head away and pronounce, ***Not listening!*** He is never too busy. God is not overwhelmed by running the world. My barrage of little requests does not stress Him out. He can handle it!

Whatever you encounter today, you can face it with the confidence of knowing God is able to handle it. He is attentive to your every word and He will never stop listening. Nothing is too big or too difficult for Him. And just as wonderful is the fact that nothing is too small or too unimportant either.





*Your Turn:* Are you feeling overwhelmed because you have “so much to do”? Do you sometimes feel like you just can’t handle it all? Make a list of all the things burdening you today and then read Psalm 118:13-14. Ask the Lord to be your strength and song. Spend time in prayer, telling God your needs and thanking Him in advance for meeting them. Thank Him because He faithfully cares for you. Remember He never gets tired of you and proclaims, ***Not Listening!*** While you’re at it, why not write down Psalm 118:13-14 on a small piece of paper to carry in your pocket, so you can refer to it throughout the day?





# Check Point #2

## Carrying Scripture

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.  
Psalm 119:105*

**HOW ARE YOU DOING, MY FRIEND?** I pray God is using this book and the devotions in it to draw you to Himself, and to help you learn to recognize Him in the midst of the daily-ness of your life. One of the things I have suggested for you in some of these entries — and which I will continue to recommend — is to carry a particular Bible verse with you in your pocket. It is the act of carrying these scriptures which I would like to discuss with you a bit more in this Check Point.

I first began the habit of carrying Bible verses in my pocket as a memory tool. I picked a verse I wanted to memorize, wrote it down and stuck it in my pocket, and then I took it out throughout the day to commit it to memory. This exercise did help me memorize some verses. However, it has become more than just a memorization tool. I hope you will also find it to be a way to draw near to God all day long.

When I began to understand God is using my children and my struggles as a mother to make me into the woman He wants me to be, I started to become more selective about the verses I choose to carry with me. At times when I sensed God working on a particular aspect of my character, I looked for a verse dealing with that trait and I carried it in

my pocket. Whenever I put my hand in my pocket and felt the paper, I took the verse out and read it to be reminded of what God was doing in my life. God had taken a memory tool and formed it into a shaping tool.

I still pay attention for verses like those mentioned above, and on days when I know my patience is going to be tried or when I sense having peace is going to be a challenge, I will strategically select an appropriate verse to carry with me. However, I have seen God further transform this verse-in-my-pocket behavior. It isn't all about me anymore.

Yes, I keep my eyes open for verses which speak comfort to my oft-weary heart, but more and more I find myself drawn to verses which impress me about God. I read about the greatness of who He is and the awesome things He has done, and I want to take those thoughts with me all day. So I write them down and I put them in my pocket.

My most recent favorite comes from Exodus 15:11. "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" Almost every time I read this particular verse I answer the question by singing the chorus, "There is None Like You." I read a Bible verse then sing a song of praise. I love this progression which draws me nearer to God.

It is this growth in my relationship with my loving heavenly Father which makes me want to encourage you to adopt some form of a verse-in-your-pocket habit





This is how it works for me:

I keep a cube of paper on the shelf near my Bible, so something is always accessible when I find a verse I want to carry. Having come across a verse which speaks to me, I write it down and put the paper in my pocket. When I started this exercise, I needed to put my hand in my pocket to be reminded I had a verse in there. Now I need only brush crumbs off my lap or press the wrinkles out of my pants to remember there is something hidden in my pocket.

Whether I physically place my hand in my pocket or just touch the outside of my pants, whenever I remember I am carrying a Bible verse I take it out of my pocket and read it. I may be reading words to comfort my soul, which call me to become more like Jesus, or which cause me to worship Almighty God. But whatever the different verses may say, the result is always the same — I am drawn nearer to God and I remember His presence in the moment.



As we continue on this journey together to find joy, I hope you will consider giving this habit a try. I mentioned that I will occasionally make suggestions to carry a certain verse, but there is really no need to wait for me. Ask God to show you verses on which He wants you to linger. As you read your Bible, pay attention for verses which seem to jump out at you or which particularly pull you in. Write them down and carry them with you, then watch God fill you with joy as He uses His word to draw you close.





# Why Do You Love Me?

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8*

**ONE YEAR OUR FAMILY** took a spring break trip to Washington, D.C. We had a wonderful time. However, several times during the first couple of days, I was seriously second-guessing whether we should have taken our children on this trip, or not.

Picture kids fussing about an eleven-hour car ride and trying to agree on where to eat lunch. Imagine two young boys running around the subway station platform — in spite of their mother’s continual reminders to walk. Imagine the same two boys getting way too close to the edge of the platform — again, in spite of their mother’s pleas for them to stand back. Consider these boys playing on the escalators, even though their mother told them these stairs are not toys, and even though other patrons are giving them dirty looks. Don’t forget the train ride itself — the bouncing between seats and twirling around the poles.

I was trying to stay calm; to remember they were kids, excited with the newness of their surroundings; to speak kindly and gently to them. I reminded myself they were tired at the end of the day from all our walking, and tried to extend more grace to them because of my knowledge. I prayed a lot, asking God to help me love them and be patient with them.

Still, I was feeling irritable. My children's bounciness and apparent inability to hear my voice was wearing my nerves thin. I began looking at other kids on the subway who were sitting nicely, and grew more upset with my own. More often than I wished, I got uptight with them. At the same time, I was increasingly disappointed with myself and my own attitude.



During the morning of our first two days on vacation, my husband attended a seminar in D.C. I would drive him to the Metro station and drop him off, then go back to the hotel and have breakfast with my mother-in-law and kids. A few hours later we would meet up with Brian when he was finished.

The second day I drove him to the station, I was feeling particularly touchy. We were at a red light and no one was around (It was Sunday morning,) so I turned toward the station. Brian pointed out there was a "No Turn on Red" sign. *Ugh. Guess I missed that one.* At the Metro there are a few different entrances for parking and dropping off and on this day I turned in where it said "Do Not Enter." *Yes, I can read.* Brian casually commented about it. I sighed heavily and made some self-condemning remark. He tried to make light of the situation as he got out of the van and then I drove off.

Turning out of the parking lot (On a green light, thank you!), I thought about my little driving errors and started crying. Then I thought, *What's up with this? Why am I crying over traffic signs? Wait a minute... what day is it? Awww, I'm going to start my period!* Suddenly the weepiness and extreme sensitivity to the stress over the previous two days was making sense. Realizing I didn't have "anything" with me, I decided I ought to stop at the drug store and get what I needed.

I was relieved to at least be able to make this stop by myself — without the kids in tow. But as I pulled into the parking lot, it looked


way too empty. Pulling up to the door I saw a sign indicating the store wouldn't open for another half hour. I sighed and left the parking lot — resigning myself to the fact I would need to take the kids shopping with me later...and shedding a few more tears.

But, alas, as I drove over the hill, I saw a Target store. I thought, *Target has to be open*. So I pulled into the parking lot, with a little bit of hope. Looking up, I whispered, *Thank You*. I got what I needed and as I approached the cashier, she gave me a friendly smile and complimented my hair cut. She said some other things to make me smile and I told her briefly what I had just been through, assuring her these friendly remarks were much needed and appreciated. We chatted briefly, laughed a little, and she sent me on my way with wishes for a nice day. I felt refreshed by the extreme kindness of that dear woman.

As I left the store, I had a huge smile on my face. I felt as though God had just hugged me through the cashier. Moments earlier, I had been in tears, feeling crummy and crabby, and now I was smiling because God had been so sweet to me. I got into the van and I asked Him, *Why? Why are You so kind to me? I have been moody and irritable. I am an emotional mess. Why do You love me?*

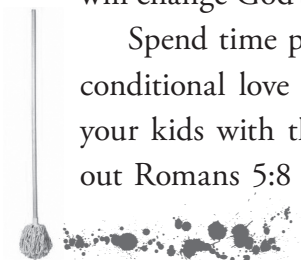
Then I remembered the Truth about God's love. It is unconditional. He does not take cues from me to decide whether or not He is going to love me on any particular day. God does not hold back on His love when I am PMSing, and He does not pour it out more richly when I am following in the footsteps of Mary Poppins.

He loves me unconditionally, simply because He chooses to.



*Your Turn:* Think about a time when you have been unlovely. What were you like? How did you relate with your kids? Your husband? Do you find it hard to believe God was still loving you, even in your unlovely moment?

Jerry Bridges says in Growing Your Faith, “Nothing you ever do will cause [God] to love you any more or any less. He loves you strictly by His grace given to you through Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> Can you wrap your mind around that Truth? Nothing you ever do will change God’s love for you!



Spend time praying, thanking God for His unconditional love and asking Him to help you love your kids with that same kind of love. Then write out Romans 5:8 and carry it in your pocket today.





# Seeing Better in the ER

*But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:5*

**WE WERE JUST GETTING READY** to go see a fireworks display on the Fourth of July when I heard Joshua scream, “Mom! Dad!” I followed the sound of his voice to the bathroom and when I opened the door I was shocked to see blood running down his face and onto his chest. Joshua had hit his head on the edge of the counter and received a gash in his forehead. I called for Brian and within minutes we had Joshua cleaned up and resting comfortably. Initially we did not think Joshua’s wound required medical attention so we bandaged him up and went to see the fireworks.

Though everyone else seemed able to focus on the Fourth of July celebration, I had a difficult time enjoying the evening’s festivities. I was too concerned about Joshua. When he wanted to go run around on the playground, I wouldn’t let him. Each time he reached up to touch his head, I told him to leave it alone. My eyes were constantly wandering to the bandage he wore. I wanted to know, *Was the bandage still sticking? Did he need a new one? Was the wound bleeding again? Did it still hurt?* I had moved into “Mother Bear” mode, and was feeling very protective of my cub.

When the wound on Joshua's head started bleeding again, we decided medical attention was necessary. So, very late at night, we made a trip to the Emergency Room. My husband and I could tell Joshua was quite frightened at the idea of getting stitches and tried to reassure him everything would be okay. I told him about the times I got stitches when I was young. We told him the doctor would be able to give him a special medicine so the needle wouldn't hurt. Still, Joshua was scared and it did not seem any words we had to offer were going to alleviate his fear.

Once in the Emergency Room, Joshua's doctor talked with him about what she would be doing and assured him again he would not feel anything. We turned on the television in an attempt to distract Joshua, but there isn't much on TV which is interesting to a nine-year-old at 1 o'clock in the morning. So, in lieu of numbing his mind, we tried engaging it with other conversation. It was not working. Joshua was quite focused on being scared and my heart was breaking for him.

When it came time to begin the sutures, I held Joshua's hand and sang him some of the songs he likes me to sing at bedtime. I spoke softly to him and prayed for God to give him courage. But the topical anesthetic didn't work. In spite of what we all had told him, Joshua did feel the needle going through his skin. First he winced in pain, and then his eyes filled with big crocodile tears. It took all the strength I could muster to not break down and cry all over him. My little boy was hurting, and his pain made me hurt. He was scared and it broke my heart to see him so sad.

At that moment I was so full of love for Joshua that I completely forgot about the car ride out to my mother-in-law's house the previous day. I did not remember how frustrated I had been with Joshua because of his whining and complaining. The fact I had to reprimand him several times for hitting his brother no longer held a place in my mind. All I could think about was how precious this child is to me, and how very much I love him.






After a second try, with a more powerful numbing medicine and a medical assistant who would “help him stay still,” Joshua was ready for his sutures and the ER doctor completed her work. Moments later, Joshua and I walked out of the hospital holding hands, talking about the story he could tell his children one day — about his first experience in the Emergency Room.

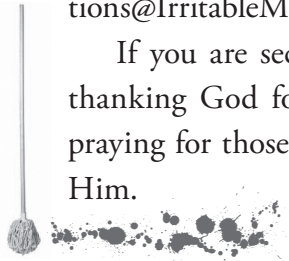
As I thought further about our visit to the ER — about the love which flowed from my heart, causing me to forget Joshua’s offenses from the day before — I realized God had given me a picture of how He looks at me. I have done, and thought, and said countless things which have been offensive to God. But because of the blood Jesus shed when He died on the cross, God no longer remembers my sin. God reminded me that just as Joshua’s pain caused me to forget his wrongdoings, so Jesus’ blood causes God to forget mine.

If we have admitted the fact that we are sinners in need of a Savior, if we believe God sent Jesus to be that Savior for us, and if we have asked Him to forgive us and come into our lives as our leader, then we have been made new, my friend! When God looks at you and me He does not remember all the things we have done to offend Him. He no longer sees us as sinners, rather He sees the righteousness of Jesus covering us and He thinks only about how much He loves us.

I will forever be grateful for the effect Jesus has on the way God sees me!



*Your Turn:* Have you ever received God's gift of salvation, as I have outlined above? I grew up thinking I was a Christian simply because I attended church, not realizing I needed to personally respond to what Jesus did for me on the cross. If you have questions about becoming a Christian, please talk to a friend who you know is a Christian, or someone from a Bible-believing church, or email me at [Questions@IrritableMother.com](mailto:Questions@IrritableMother.com).



If you are secure in your salvation, spend time thanking God for what He has done for you and praying for those around you who do not yet know Him.





# Lavish Gifts

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*  
*1 John 3:1a*

**FOR CHRISTMAS ONE YEAR**, my mother-in-law gave us a family gift. As in, the whole family — her sons, their wives, and all the grandchildren. The gift was a family outing to the Great Wolf Lodge in Traverse City, Michigan, and oh my, did we ever have a great time!

The resort is all about families having fun together, which is exactly what we did. From going down the water slides (really fast!) in inner tubes or floating in the lazy river, to squirting each other with hoses or standing under the 1,000 gallon bucket that dumped water every five minutes, we had a wonderful time together.

Besides the indoor water park, there was one other attraction in which my kids were particularly interested. The arcade. (If I am to be perfectly honest, I must admit I was pretty happy when I found out the arcade included a Dance Dance Revolution, a.k.a. DDR.) Like most arcades my kids enjoy, this was one whose games gave out tickets which were redeemable in the end for prizes.

We scoped out the arcade and right away the kids were talking about which games they wanted to play and what prizes they hoped to

earn. My initial thought was, “How can I divert their attention from this room? Surely, we don’t need to waste our time and money here!” I am usually very stingy when it comes to arcade games. When I do take them somewhere with an arcade, it is common for me to say something like, “I’m going to give you one dollar for tokens, and that’s it.” But something weird happened in me at the Great Wolf Lodge arcade.

As I contemplated being there for an entire weekend, and considered the fact we were there via a gift, I got the idea maybe, just maybe, I could be a little generous with my children. I went over to the machine used to buy tokens and read the sign. It said if you bought \$20 worth of tokens you would receive 12 bonus tokens. Seemed like a good deal to me, but did I really want to spend that much money for arcade games and tickets and (in my opinion) worthless prizes? *That is so not my character!* However, after I thought about it a little more and discussed the idea with my husband, I decided I was going to put a \$20 bill in the machine and get those 92 tokens.

So when Joshua asked if we could go to the arcade I said, “Yes. Let’s go!” and the two of us were on our way. When we arrived and went to get our tokens, Joshua looked surprised as I put the \$20 bill into the machine. The look on his face at that moment was cute, but it was nothing compared to his expression as he watched the machine produce 92 tokens. His eyes were like saucers as he kept looking from me to the tokens, with a very large grin on his face. He was a combination of joy and excitement, with a dash of disbelief. To me, his response was worth every penny I had just spent.

What made it even sweeter was listening to him recount the event to Elizabeth and Matthew later in the evening. The kids were all in bed and Joshua told them, “Mom put in a \$20 bill and tokens just kept coming out. And we get to use them all!” (Yeah, except the 12 bonus tokens. Those were all mine for DDR!) The joy and excitement in his voice filled my heart with delight.


As I further considered Joshua's response to my "lavish" gift and the delight his response brought to my heart, my thoughts turned to God and how He might view our responses to His lavish gifts.

When we are looking at one of our children, marveling over the fact this little person was once just a little tiny cell; when we are stuck in awe at the thought God created them — let alone saw fit to make us their mother; and when we have tears streaming down our cheeks as we thank God for our child's precious life, do you think His heart fills with delight as He says, ***I did this because I love you so much?***

Or, when we look at a glorious sunrise or sunset (Or the Northern Lights — have you ever seen those?) and our hearts flow with praise for God's handiwork and the beauty of His creation, do you think He smiles and says, ***I made that just for you to see?***

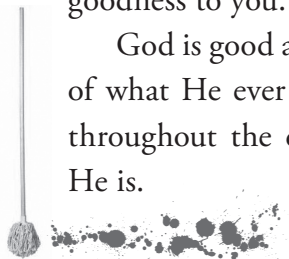
What about the times when things all seem to be going "your way?" You've been stressed about a certain situation but it has all worked out. The kids are unusually well-behaved. Your friend called just to let you know she's been praying for you. Your husband said you deserve a night out and he's made plans to take the kids on an outing without you. Then you, giddy with joy, ask God, "Why are You so good to me?" And He, also with joy, replies, ***It brings Me pleasure to see you joyful.***

The Bible says God desires to lavish His love on us (1 John 3:1), every good gift comes from Him (James 1:17), and He will never stop doing good to us (Jeremiah 32:40). Certainly we all have difficult things in our lives with which we must contend, but as I watched Joshua, filled with joy over my lavish gift, I was reminded and thankful that God delights in doing good to us. How wonderful is that? The Creator of the universe — in the midst of holding the world together in perfect balance — wants to delight your heart!



*Your Turn:* Can you think of a time when your children have been filled with delight because of something extravagant you have given to them? How did it make you feel to see their reaction?

Read 1 John 3:1, James 1:17, Jeremiah 32:40, and Psalm 103. Make a list of the ways God has lavished His love on you, the good gifts He has given to you, and the good He has done to you. Spend time thanking Him for these things and for His goodness to you.



God is good and worthy of our praise, regardless of what He ever gives to us. Spend time now and throughout the day simply praising God for who He is.





# Gimme a Break!

*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. Psalm 23:2-3a*

**MY MOTHER-IN-LAW HAD COME TO TOWN** and took my children to a hotel with an indoor pool for a sleep-over. She has a habit of doing special things like this and the kids always enjoy the time they spend with her there. Often, when we drive past that particular hotel, one of them will see it and call out, “There’s the hotel with the swimming pool where Grandma takes us!” They have made many fond memories with her on these occasions.

Of course, my husband and I enjoy these outings, too. We get extended time alone without having to find a babysitter or being concerned about what time we get home. Once when she took the kids, my husband said to me at 11:00 at night, “Want to go to Denny’s?” I looked at him curiously and asked, “Why?” He simply smiled and said, “Because we can!” So we did.

On this particular evening, as we were pondering what to do, Brian asked me, “What do you want?” *What do I want?* Now there’s a question I had not heard in a while!

My world was usually full of cries and calls full of what my kids wanted from me. Someone stole a toy and the victim wanted me to right the wrong. Another someone was hungry and wanted me to make

lunch. Still a different someone did not like the movie the others had chosen to watch, and wanted me to listen to her complaint.

I thought about my husband's question and told him I just wanted a break. All I wanted was peace and quiet and, since I had it, anything we decided to do would be fine with me. At that moment, as I was enjoying being away from my kids, as I was realizing how much I needed a break from being "Mom," God gave me a wonderful thought.

*God never desires time away from me!*

He never has a moment when He thinks, ***Oh! Wouldn't it be nice if someone took Karen away for just a while so I could be alone with Me and My thoughts? I love her, but sometimes I just need a break. She is so needy and, as much as I treasure her, there is only so much of her asking for help I can handle. Yes, if I could just have one evening away from her every now and then...Wow! I would be a much better God.***

I considered how relieved I was to have a break from my kids, and gave thanks to God because He never feels that way about me.



Before I was a mom, I had no idea it was possible to crave time away from your children. I had no idea it was possible to love people so intensely and, almost as intensely, to need time away from those same individuals. But, as a mom, I have found the paradox to be true. And I believe I *am* a better mom after I have had a break!

Yet God assured me, even though He loves me more deeply than I love my children and even though I come to Him with more needs than they come to me, He never desires time away from me. Instead, He wants me to be with Him. In fact, He wants it so much that Jesus was willing to leave the glory of heaven to come to earth. After living a




perfect, sinless life, He was willing to suffer and be crucified to pay the price for my sin. Jesus was willing to be separated from God. He died and was buried. But He conquered death and was raised to life again. He did all this *so I could be with Him. Amazing!*

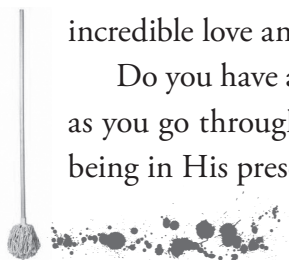
### *Just a Moment:*

Okay, Mom, when was the last time you had a break? I don't mean a five-minute breather (Though they are important, too!) I mean a real break — time away from the family to just be *you*. We need these hours or days of reprieve every now and then and, if you have not gotten away recently, I am encouraging you now to find that time. If you are married, talk to your husband about your need for a break and make a plan. If you are not married, is there a friend or family member around who can help you?

When you do get the time off, be sure to begin it by thanking God that He never wants a break from you!



*Your Turn:* Do you understand the paradox of loving your children intensely and, almost as intensely, needing time away from them? How does it make you feel to know God loves you with an even greater passion, and never wants a break from your presence? Jesus left the glory of heaven so you could be reconciled with God. Spend time thanking Him for His incredible love and sacrifice.



Do you have a favorite praise song? Try singing it as you go through your day today, and enjoy simply being in His presence.



# The Monkey

*She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” Genesis 16:13*

**I SAT ON THE EDGE OF MY BED** with my daughter next to me. Elizabeth was sobbing heavily and through the tears she told me, “But I wanted the monkey!”



The background to her plea is this: Several years ago I decorated the boys’ room to look like a jungle. The walls were painted sky-blue and I found an adorable border which looked like the tree tops — filled with birds, monkeys, snakes, butterflies and plenty of other jungle creatures. I even bought the vertical borders which looked like tree trunks and vines. It was a big job but when I finished, the room looked great. Still, it wasn’t quite finished.

I looked at the windows and decided I wanted to do something with them. My plan was to get thick wooden rods (like tree branches!) to hang above the windows and then to get a snake and a monkey to drape over each “branch.” Surely the room would be complete with this final touch.

Purchasing the snake and the monkey was not a problem. I bought them and hid them in my closet until we could get around to buying, measuring, cutting, staining, and hanging the wooden rods. In the mean time, the kids managed to see the monkey I had not-so-adequately hidden in my closet. Of course they were curious, and I told them what I intended to do with it.

As time passed and I became involved with other projects, my children would occasionally ask if they could play with the monkey. Fully intending to hang that monkey someday, I told them, “No. The monkey is for the boys’ window. Sorry, but it isn’t a toy.”

Then came the big change. We made a decision to move and I realized I never was going to get those rods and hang the animals. I was cleaning out my closet, getting ready to start packing and I called for Matthew. He came into my room and I gave him the monkey. I had just given Joshua the snake and I reasoned, since both of the stuffed animals were going to be for the boys’ room in the first place, they might as well become the boys’ toys.

It was Elizabeth’s discovery of Matthew receiving the monkey which brought her to my room in tears.




Elizabeth had streams running down her cheeks as she sobbed repeatedly, “But I wanted the monkey!” Her words did not sound selfish or greedy. To me, she seemed sincerely disappointed to have not been given the monkey. I could almost see her broken little heart reflected in her tears, and it made me sad to see her so upset.

Wanting to help her gain perspective and soothe the heart ache, I tried reasoning with her. I rubbed her back and said, “Honey, that monkey really isn’t so important. Can you think about all the nice things you do have, instead of this one thing you don’t have?” Somewhere between the beginning and the end of my statement, it was as if the players

in the scene had switched and now God was speaking to me through the very words I was using to try to console my daughter.


I thought of the times I have cried to God about the things I really wanted. One particular instance came to mind and as I considered how much I wanted that thing, the words, “Honey, that monkey really isn’t so important...” echoed in my heart. Looking at my daughter in her sadness and disappointment, I realized my heavenly Father looks at me with the same compassion I now had for her. Even more.

It comforted me to know He truly cares when I am sad, but more than being comforted, I was encouraged to realize He wants me to grow through my disappointments. Just as I wanted Elizabeth to gain perspective on what really matters through this situation, I understood God wants me to know what is important, too. It was as if He were saying to me, *Karen, I know you care about Elizabeth’s sadness. I know you want her to learn and grow through her tears. She will. Do you know, dear one, I have the same desires for you? When I allow disappointment into your life, it isn’t because I have stopped caring for you or because I do not know what you need. My little treasure, I let those things into your life because I love you and because I am growing you into a beautiful woman.*



*Your Turn:* What “monkeys” have you been disappointed about lately? Has it ever crossed your mind that God looks upon your sadness and disappointment with compassion? How do you think He might want you to grow through this situation? Ask Him, and write down what You sense Him saying to you.

Thank God for loving you through your sadness.







*Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Luke 12:6*

**ELIZABETH WAS LYING ON THE COUCH.** Just before dinner she had been overtaken by a tummy ache and resigned herself to being in a horizontal position until the feeling faded. With the passage of time she was feeling better and asked for a piece of toast. Thinking this request was a good sign she was on the road to recovery, I quickly delivered the slice of hope to my daughter.

Moments later, I walked through the living room where Elizabeth was resting on the couch and heard her say, "Can I have a little jelly on this toast?" "Of course," I replied. "Just a minute." You see, the boys were on the porch throwing things at each other and I needed to put an end to their rough-housing before one of them got hurt or broke a window. Then I would get to the jelly.

For several minutes I listened to their banter about who started what, and why it was nobody's fault. They tried to convince me it was okay to throw things because, surely, no one would get hurt and there was no chance of breaking anything. When they finally saw things my way, I went back inside.

As I entered the house I heard the pet bird chirping upstairs and went to see what it needed. He was out of food. Baby birds eat a lot, so I had to mix up some more food downstairs.

Back in the kitchen I saw the pile of dishes and thought, *Ah, yes. I must get started on washing these.* After I fed the bird, I returned to the kitchen once more and began rinsing and stacking the dishes. Somewhere in the midst of the soap suds and clinking glasses I heard a quiet voice ask, “Mom, can I have a little jelly for my toast?”

I turned and looked at Elizabeth lying on the couch with her dry toast and sheepishly said, “Oh, yeah. I forgot.” What had I said to her? *Just a minute.* Uh, it had probably been at least ten minutes. And if she had not spoken up I would have most likely not remembered at all. Feeling sorry for getting caught up in so many other things, I grabbed the jelly and a knife and fulfilled her request. She seemed to understand I was being pulled in several directions and there was not a hint of impatience in her voice. Elizabeth graciously thanked me for helping her and went on to enjoy her “dinner.”

Returning to the kitchen one more time, I thought about how easily I get distracted and forget to do things for my kids. Whether it is a direct request they have made of me or something I just know needs to get done, too often my attention gets diverted elsewhere and I completely overlook the task. On occasion, someone reminds me of the job and I take care of it, and sometimes the mission is never accomplished.

Pondering my own absentmindedness caused me to think, *I'm so glad God never forgets.* He knows my situation and all my desires. Although God is orchestrating everything in the universe, I am always on His mind and He remembers my every need. Even greater than His attention for me is the fact He is able to accomplish what concerns me. When I ask Him to give me guidance in a decision I need to make, or if I ask Him for direction in say, writing a book, He never forgets to fulfill the request.


Sometimes God requires me to wait for His final answer. I may ask Him for something and, in His wisdom, God may say, ***Not just yet, Karen.*** Perhaps I tell Him I need help in a certain situation and He replies, ***I will give it, dear one, in My perfect time.***



Occasionally, I get tired of waiting and I wonder if God has forgotten about my need or request. I might become impatient and start whining to Him. *God, where are You? Don't You remember these things on my heart? I know You have so much to do, but I need You, too. Have You completely forgotten about me?*

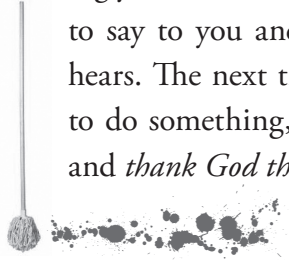
Of course He has not forgotten me, and when I am thinking rationally I can almost hear Him saying, ***My dear little girl, you know I have not forgotten about you. I think of you all the time and not a single one of your needs or requests escapes My mind. Have you forgotten to trust Me? I will meet all your needs in accordance with My will and in My time. I understand the waiting is hard, darling, but trust Me and I will bring it all to pass. I promise, I will not forget.***

And I can honestly say, He never has!



*Your Turn:* Do you get so distracted by the different things vying for your attention that you sometimes forget to do things your children have asked of you? Do you think God sometimes gets so caught up in running the world He forgets what you have asked of Him? Is there a need or request you have been bringing before Him lately about which you are afraid He has forgotten?

If it is true God does not forget about us, what do you think He would say to you right now regarding your concern? Ask Him in prayer what He wants to say to you and write down whatever your heart hears. The next time you realize you have forgotten to do something, why not stop what you are doing and *thank God that He never forgets anything.*







*Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” John 14:23*

**MATTHEW IS THE YOUNGEST** of my three children and what he lacks in age and stature, he makes up for in warmth and charm. I honestly believe God hugs me, kisses me, and tells me He loves me through the arms and mouth of that little boy. It is not uncommon for Matthew to come up behind me and give me a great big hug — for no apparent reason — and to take my face in his hands and repeatedly kiss my lips or cheeks. His hugs are sweet to me, and I often tell him so. However, on more than one occasion it has seemed Matthew was using his affectionate behavior to try to get me to forget about his bad behavior.

One day in particular, Matthew was having a hard time obeying my requests for him to do certain tasks. When I told him he needed to bring his backpack in from the van, he said he would, but he didn't. Later I asked him to show me his homework folder so I could see what assignments he needed to complete, which is when he told me he had not brought his backpack in yet. I asked him to go out and get it and he started to argue with me, saying he did not have any homework and did not want to go get his backpack.

I persisted with the requirement of retrieving the backpack, and Matthew changed his tactic. He walked over to me, hugged me and said, "I just want to hug you." Usually such a move on his part causes me to melt, but on this day I stepped back and said, "Matthew, your hugs are not as sweet to me when you're disobeying."

I realize some who are reading right now might take offense at the words I have just written and may now consider me to be cold and insensitive. I certainly hope that is not the case, but I am willing to take the risk because I think the value of the lesson God taught me is worth the gamble.

Just as soon as I told Matthew his hugs weren't as sweet to me when he was disobeying, my mind went to my relationship with God. I wondered, *How does God feel about my praise and sacrifice when I am being disobedient about something?* I know God loves to hear me sing His praises, and it pleases Him when I give sacrificially from my time or possessions. But how does, "Jesus, I love You. I praise You and thank You because You paid for my sin and redeemed me from the pit," sound to Him when I am simultaneously ignoring the tug in my heart to go and be reconciled to someone who has hurt me? If I am disregarding the conviction God's Spirit has placed upon me, which tells me I am worshipping someone besides the One True God, will my words of commitment to Him bring delight or disgust?

I have been through the experience of ignoring the conviction of the Holy Spirit. It is not a good thing. Rather, it is unsettling and unpleasant. *I think when we are denying Him, God makes us uncomfortable on purpose.* When I realized my disobedience was preventing God from hearing me, when I understood my praise was not sweet to Him because I was not conforming to His will, I knew I needed to change. Just as I wanted Matthew to choose obedience, I realized it was time for me to agree with God and submit to His claim on me.


In my case, I was loving something more than I was loving God. Let's be honest, I was caught in idolatry. When I finally stopped run-

ning from the conviction of the Holy Spirit and confessed my sin, God showed me what to do. I threw away my collection of CDs. As I stood by the garbage can in tears, and deposited the entire stack, I prayed, *God, I'm doing this because I love You **more** than the music. I want to love you more!*

The result of my choice to obey really should not have surprised me, but it did. Once I got over the tears, I was overwhelmed with joy. I knew I had chosen well. My life was pleasing to God because I was following His will. Knowing He would receive my praise because there was now nothing between us brought me tremendous pleasure. *My obedience resulted in my joy.* I did not expect that!



God completed the picture for me one day as Matthew pulled his I-just-want-to-hug-you line when he did not want to obey. I reminded him his hugs are not as sweet to me when he is not obeying and he ran off to do the thing I asked. When he finished the task, Matthew came back to me and we hugged. It was very sweet!

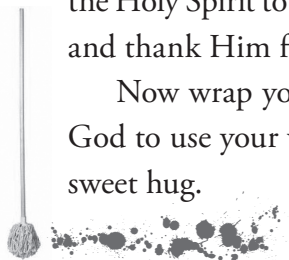


Your Turn: Do your children have tricks they play in an attempt to charm you out of their need to obey? What do they do? Do you ever find yourself behaving in a similar way toward God?

Read John 14:23 and 1 John 5:3. According to these verses, what will we do if we love God? Is there something in your life right now about which God has been speaking to you, yet you have refused to obey? I do not believe anything is worth disrupting our relationship with our heavenly Father. He knows what is best for you. Are you willing to choose obedience today? I promise you, friend, there is great joy and reconciliation in obedience.

Pray to Him, confessing your willful disobedience and asking for forgiveness. Tell Him you love Him and want to do what He wants you to do. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you walk in obedience to God, and thank Him for faithfully forgiving you.

Now wrap your arms around yourself and allow God to use your very own arms to embrace you in a sweet hug.





# Check Point #3

## Hearing God's Voice

*The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic. Psalm 29:4*

**HERE I AM AGAIN** — stepping into the flow of devotions to have another conversation with you. This time I want to talk about God's voice.

In some of these devotions, I have written God's voice — the words I imagine He would say to me. And sometimes in the *Your Turn* section, I have suggested you write down the words you think God would say to you. Now I want to ask, how has that gone for you? Do you find it difficult or easy to hear God's voice? When I prompt you to write what you believe God is saying to your heart, do you hesitate and think, *But I have no idea what His voice sounds like?*

If this assignment — to write God's voice — has been a challenge for you, I hope you will not be discouraged. I believe reading the Bible, particularly passages in which God is speaking, will help you become familiar with the sound of His voice. This familiarity will assist you in writing His voice. I have come across several verses which I trust will encourage you in this learning process. Before I share them with you, I want to talk briefly about why I selected these passages for you to read.

As you read the verses I am suggesting, I hope you will hear love, compassion, hope and encouragement in God's voice. I purposely chose passages in which He was speaking with this tone, and not the ones

in which God spoke with judgment or in anger. Leaving those others out is not my way of implying God's loving, compassionate side is better or more desirable than His righteous judgment. Certainly, God is both perfectly loving and holy at the same time. When He speaks harsh words, He is no less perfect or loving and I want to be sure my censorship of those words is not taken the wrong way.

The reason I limited my choice of passages to those in which His voice is compassionate is because I hope you will train your ear to hear this aspect. I don't know about you, but hearing harsh words of judgment comes quite easily to me. The condemning voice is most often my own — or that of my Enemy, as I get angry with myself over my failures and berate myself for being imperfect. I know without a doubt I do not need practice hearing a harsh voice. Are you with me? The voice I have needed to rehearse is the One which loves me unconditionally.



My mentor once asked me what I thought God would say to me in a particular situation, and how He would look at me. As I considered the greatness of God's love and the extent of His graciousness (And I know I cannot come close to fully comprehending either one of them!) I was overwhelmed with joy by the image which flooded my mind.

I pictured God standing beside me with His arms outstretched toward me. His eyes were kind and His expression was tender. In a calm, gentle voice I could imagine Him saying to me, ***Karen, I am pleased with how you are doing as a mother. I know this situation is difficult for you. I know you are feeling frustrated, but I am not disappointed in you. Dear one, just keep loving these children and keep trusting in Me. I will carry you through these days — I promise. Just trust Me.***

Although believing words like these has taken some time for me, I am learning to hear the voice of the Lover of my soul, rather than the voice of my Enemy. I am so thankful God loves and accepts me, in spite of my imperfection, and that He allows me to hear His tender voice in



my heart. As you read these verses, I pray you will be able to discern God's voice as you never have before. Ask Him to help you hear His love and compassion. Ask Him to make you sensitive to the ways He speaks hope. Pay attention to the encouragement He gives and the promises He makes. Finally, remember that these words from thousands of years ago are spoken by the same God who loves you today.

This list is long, I know, but I believe it will be so good for you to read these words. Please take a few days to go through them. Read them slowly — and several times. Perhaps you can find a quiet place to be alone and read them aloud, so you can actually *hear* God speak. If you cannot get away from your children, read the verses aloud to them. Surely they will benefit from hearing, too!

However you decide to do it, please, take your time as you learn to hear God's voice. *Let Him speak His love to you.*

Joshua 1:1-9

2 Samuel 7: 4-16

Psalms 91:14-16

Isaiah 43:1-13

Isaiah 49:8-26

Isaiah 54 & 55

Isaiah 65:17-25

Jeremiah 31:1-14

Jeremiah 32:37-41

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 25-31

I think spending time reading straight through the Gospels is a great idea, and if you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, finding Jesus' words is easy. I have chosen just a few passages which I find particularly comforting.

Matthew 11:28-30

Mark 6:31

Luke 12:22-34

John 6:35-40

John 10:7-18

John 14:1-4





# Will You Just Trust Me?

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6*

AS MATTHEW IS GETTING OLDER and becoming a better reader, one of the things we like to do is read books aloud together. We often snuggle on the couch and take turns reading. I read one page, and Matthew reads the next. I love reading with expression and encouraging Matthew to do the same. It has been fun watching him grow in this area.

While this scenario may sound pleasant, I can assure you it does not always play out that way. Sometimes reading becomes a battle. It may be because he is a little tired. Perhaps it is because Elizabeth and Joshua are doing something which appears to be more fun. Maybe he simply does not want to do anymore homework. Whatever the reason, sometimes Matthew just does not want to read. We were experiencing one of those moments when God chose to speak to my heart again.



Matthew and I were sitting together in the living room reading The Mouse and the Motorcycle. As I finished reading my page and paused for Matthew to take over, he asked me to keep reading.

“No, Matthew. It’s your turn now. You read this page.”

“But I don’t want to read it. You read it, Mom.”

“Matthew, I read that page. Now you read this one.”

And so it went, only there is no way for me to write in the whining which was in Matthew’s voice as he complained about his reading assignment. I tried explaining it is good for him to practice reading out loud. Just like I have countless times before, I reminded my son how important it is to be a good reader. But no matter how fine of an argument I produced, Matthew said he did not want to read. I think he might have even said reading is *stupid*.

Finally, exasperated, I said to Matthew, “Why can’t you just do what I ask of you without fussing and complaining? Can’t you, just once, realize I know what is good for you? Don’t you know I am looking out for your best interest? Will you just trust me?” I am, after all, the adult. I do know a few things he does not. Clearly, it would be to his advantage to listen and trust me more frequently than he is in the habit of doing. Don’t you agree?




As I was pondering my son’s need to listen to me and trust I know what is best for him, I sensed God speaking to my heart. Though I believed His delivery would be more compassionate than mine was, I wondered if God would ever desire to say the very things to me I was just saying to Matthew.

I sat there on the couch with my son, chastising him for not conforming to my will for him, realizing God might have something to say to me. I suppose it might go something like this: ***Karen, why are you fighting Me on this? My precious child, I know what is best for you and that is why I have allowed this circumstance to come into your life. I want you to practice being patient with this child. Dear one, it is good for you to rehearse being gentle and kind. I am working in***

*you to make you beautiful, My beloved. Won't you please just trust Me?*

I do not remember exactly how we did it, but somehow Matthew and I got through the reading. He read something about Ralph chewing holes through the sheets in a bag of laundry. My part probably had to do with pulling the motorcycle through the holes. Whatever the story line was which we were reading, one thing remains perfectly clear: *God's ways are perfect, and I can trust Him.*



*Your Turn:* Think about a time when you have had an interaction with your child similar to the one I had with Matthew — when you have wished your child would realize you know what is best. What did you say to your child at that time?

Is there an area in your life right now in which you are not trusting God completely? Consider that situation and read these Bible verses: Psalm 28:6-7, Proverbs 3:5-6, Jeremiah 17:7-8. Spend time in prayer, acknowledging the fact God does know what is best for you and you can trust Him with your life. As you pray, ask Him what He wants to say to you. Write down the words you think God may want to speak to your heart and thank Him for His perfect love.







# Never Too Tired

*The LORD will keep you from all harm — he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Psalm 121:7-8*

**IT WAS LATE** — probably past my bedtime. I was in the bathroom getting ready for bed when I heard Joshua starting to cry and cough, and calling for me. I went down the hall to check on him. My hope was a drink of water would be all he needed to remedy his situation, and then I could get back to the business of going to bed myself.

When I entered Joshua's room and asked what was wrong, my hopes were dashed. His throat was hurting and he wanted me to "take care of it." Those were his words exactly. Precious as this child is, when something is wrong — like his throat is hurting — he can become very pitiful and inconsolable. I had a feeling this was not going to be an easy fix, as I had hoped.

The only thing I could do was see what special remedy I might have in the medicine basket, so I returned to the bathroom. Do you remember the nursery rhyme about Old Mother Hubbard and her empty cupboard? I kind of felt like her when I looked at my sore throat supplies — not much there. I found some lozenges and took them to Joshua as an option for soothing his throat. Tired as I was, I did my best sales job but he was not buying. Even though he was uncomfortable Joshua was

able to come up with several reasons why the lozenges just would not do. Defeated, I plodded back to the bathroom to concoct Plan B.

I found one more thing to offer my ailing child. Nighttime cold medicine. I knew it would help him sleep, and the label said it was a pain reliever. The label also said, "Great cherry flavor." Right. Joshua knows this medicine tastes yucky and I knew it would be a hard sell. So, prepared for a battle, I went back once more to offer another option.


When I presented it to him I said, "Joshua, I know this medicine tastes yucky but when I'm not feeling well I take it, and it always helps me sleep and I feel better in the morning. If you take it, I will be sure to have a drink of water with me so you can wash down the yucky taste." At that moment I was so tired and wanted so badly to go to bed, I probably would have given Joshua a spoonful of pancake syrup as a chaser if he would just let me go. Surprisingly, he agreed to the nighttime cold medicine.




It was when I returned to the bathroom to get the medicine and water I became aware and thankful of the fact God is never too tired to care for me. I, on the other hand, complain about being "on call" 24/7. I do not like getting up in the middle of the night to tend to ailing children. I moan about not being able to take a nap because someone keeps waking me up. My thought has often been, *How am I supposed to take care of all of you if I can't even get any sleep myself? This is not fair!*

How thankful I am for God's perfect care. As I stood with heavy eyelids, reading the label and measuring the correct dose of medicine, I prayed and thanked God. I thanked Him for never sleeping or slumbering, but for keeping watch over me 24/7 — without complaint. My heart delighted at the thought He never grows tired of me calling out, "God, I need you!" And I found comfort in knowing He will give me the strength and patience I need to care for my little patients.





*Your Turn:* Do you delight in, or despise, the opportunities to care for sick children at night? Do you sometimes wish everyone would just leave you alone so you could get some decent rest? Read Psalm 121. How does it make you feel to know God is watching over you so intently day and night? Spend time in prayer thanking Him for caring for you and asking Him to give you the strength you need to care for your family.







## 2 Corinthians 12, a la motherhood

*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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 2 Corinthians 12:9*

**MY FAMILY AND I** were at a conference for my husband's work in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. We had arrived late the night before and were rushing to get out the door for breakfast. Amidst the clamor of finding shoes and brushing teeth, Joshua was insisting he would not be participating in the children's activities which had been planned for the morning.

I was not sure if it was because he had not slept well the night before, he was uncomfortable with the new surroundings, or he just disliked the uncertainty of not knowing exactly what he was going to be doing. Whatever the reason, Joshua's bad attitude was in overdrive and I was getting frustrated. I imagined him sticking to his guns about skipping the children's activities and pictured him sitting through the morning meetings with Brian and me. *Yeah, you'll really enjoy the meetings, kiddo. Good choice.*

By the time we made it to the lodge for breakfast (late!) Joshua's attitude started to change. His improved outlook on life may have been prompted by the wonderful selection of sugary cereals which I never

buy, but I didn't care. I was just glad for his new disposition and decision to participate in the children's program. We ate quickly and went over to the meeting house to gather for worship.

When it was time for the kids to go off to their activities, I walked outside with the boys to help them find their leaders. Mind you, the entire time from when Joshua agreed to participate in the children's activities until the present, I was leery of the possibility he could change his mind again at any moment. So it was with mild trepidation that I introduced Joshua to his leader. Fortunately, they seemed to hit it off right away and my fears were put to rest.

Returning to the meeting house, my look of relief must have been obvious because one of the staff members asked if I was okay. I told him quickly about the morning's trials and assured him everything was fine. It was in reflecting on our brief conversation I was reminded of a time God spoke to me about loving Joshua.

When Joshua was a toddler he was absolutely adorable and so very easy to love. He sang songs about God and the people he loves. We would take him into church with us and he danced in the aisles while we sang. Love and joy radiated from my little boy, and loving him in return took absolutely no effort on my part.

I have never been able to pinpoint what happened, but something changed in Joshua. He went from a sweet, lovable toddler to an angry, bitter child. No longer was he dancing or singing songs. In his eyes, I was now *The Meanest Mom in the World*, and he told me so. Every day. Sometimes it was difficult just to be with him and I often prayed, "God, will you please give me my little boy back?"

This pleading with God — wanting my sweet little boy to return — continued for a couple of years. Then one day God revealed to me, *If Joshua never changes, I still need to love him.*

It was with these thoughts fresh in my mind — the morning's struggles and my need to love Joshua, no matter what — I went off to meet with God. (This time alone was a surprise to me. I thought I had to sit

through meetings, too, but was informed spouses had free time. Lucky me!)

God's sovereignty shone through as I sat down with a book I had been reading. The Bible passage for that particular day was 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, and I was delighted to see how God was bringing all the pieces of my morning together.

I read about Paul's desire for God to remove the thorn in his flesh. I do not know what Paul's "thorn" was. Many educated people have different ideas — a physical affliction, a speech problem, an infirmity, even a wicked spirit — but they cannot seem to agree. Knowing the particulars of Paul's ailment is not of great concern to me, because I know two things for sure. Paul didn't like it and he didn't want it. He pleaded with God to take it away. Paul did not ask politely, did not merely suggest, didn't even try to bargain. He pleaded. And not only once or twice, but three times. That sounds like desperation to me.

God heard Paul's pleading and responded with compassion that His grace was sufficient for Paul. God knew something Paul did not know. God knew how big, how powerful His grace is and that Paul needed nothing more than to simply trust in Him. Paul knew enough to believe God, and submitted to trusting Him completely.


Considering Paul's situation reminded me again, I need to trust in God's grace to be Joshua's mother. (I know I need to trust in His grace to be Elizabeth and Matthew's mother, too. However, on this particular day Joshua was at the forefront of my mind.)

God did not make a mistake by giving me a challenging child to rear. He put us together on purpose and all His ways are perfect. I realize being a mother is not going to be easy, but God's grace is sufficient for me and His power is made perfect in my weakness. Thinking about this reality, I re-wrote 2 Corinthian 12:8-10, a la motherhood:


*Many times I have pleaded with the Lord to give me back my sweet little boy. 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 about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in being called the Meanest Mom in the World, in struggling to get through flash cards, in being told I’m an unfair parent, in dealing with a seemingly bipolar, anxiety-driven child. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Sitting on a rocky beach with a gentle breeze blowing around me, I read over the words I had just written. I was convinced God had met with me and spoken to my heart that morning. He had reminded me of His power and perfection, and I felt completely at peace. Truly, I could say, *God’s grace is sufficient for me.*



*Your Turn:* Is there a particular situation in your life which you have repeatedly asked God to change, yet it has remained the same? Is it possible God has purposely allowed this circumstance for your faith to grow, or so you might learn to be more dependent on Him? Though you have prayed about it so much already, spend some time now asking God to give you His perspective on the situation. Finally, based upon what you sense Him saying to you, re-write 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 according to your circumstance, but with His perspective.





# I Don't Know Why

*You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy. Psalm 30:11*

**“GOOD MORNING, JOSHUA.** It’s time to get up for school.”

Kiss cheek.

Kiss forehead.

Tousle hair.

Joshua rolls over and moans, “OK.”

*Abhh, that was easy,* I think, as I leave his room to go wake up Matthew.

Arousing Matthew takes a little more work most days, so I am prepared for the task as I hear Joshua call out, “Mom, have you finished the laundry?”



This scene is the set-up for a melt-down I had one day. It was the beginning of a week when I would be home alone with the kids. I was hopeful we could enjoy our time in spite of the fact Brian was gone, and it seemed to be going well so far. But my response to that one question turned the morning from good to bad in an instant.

I had not finished the laundry. Considering the fact it was only 7:15 in the morning, I did not think it should be a surprise there was still

work to be done. And since Joshua had chosen which clothes he would wear to school the night before, I did not think unfinished laundry should matter anyway. But it did. You see, Joshua had changed his mind and the clothes he now wanted to wear were unavailable, which was cause for him to be very upset.

So he came to the table for breakfast dressed in clothes he didn't like, with an attitude like that of a hungry lion whose dinner has just been snatched away. His disposition was not helped at all by the fact that our cereal choices were very limited. I knew Joshua was not going to be happy with corn flakes so I mustered up all the kindness I could and offered to make him eggs.

No deal.

Joshua was mad about his clothes, mad about the cereal, and scrambled eggs were *not* going to cheer him up on this day. He let me know, in no uncertain terms, he was not happy with me. At one point I actually told him I thought it best if we did not talk to each other for the rest of the morning.

Somehow Joshua managed to choke down a bowl of corn flakes and he moved on to other things. Unfortunately, these "other things" involved provoking his little brother (Unintentionally, of course...). Before I knew it, Matthew was chasing Joshua around outside yelling at him for wearing Matthew's coat.

The coat Joshua was wearing was one which I had put in his closet, because it looked close to Joshua's size. How could I have forgotten Matthew laid claim to a coat which was at least three sizes too large for him? And, having put said coat in Joshua's closet so he thought it was his, how could I now tell him he needed to give it back to Matthew, since he clearly already saw me as responsible for ruining his morning?

I tried to reason with Matthew but he was not willing to listen. Instead, he ran in another direction, crying. *Super*, I thought, *now I have upset him, too. I'm doing a great job this morning. Please pass the "Mother of the Year" award!*



Moments later Joshua came into the house crying. The reason he had gone outside was to catch bugs for his Praying Mantis to eat, and he was not having any success. Joshua was convinced the Praying Mantis was going to starve and die if he did not find something for it to eat before he had to go to school. This fear of his caused him to reason school is bad and he should not have to go. Suddenly he was comparing his new school with his old school (We had just moved.) and told me through tears, he did not like the new school and wanted to move back to our old house.

Unfinished laundry.

Not enough cereal choices.

Angry words.

The wrong coat.

Tears and misunderstanding.

Unsuccessful bug hunts.

Wanting to change schools.

In my own tears, I thought about everything which had transpired in the previous hour and I cried out to God. *Lord, I know You are with me right now. I know You are using my kids to make me grow. But I **don't** know why You think I can handle this situation today. I just do not know why You think I can handle it!*

I felt completely overwhelmed. It seemed like my head was spinning with all the chaos surrounding me, and I did not know what to do to bring a sense of calm and order to my boys (and myself!) before we had to leave for the bus stop.

Then it was as if God told me He knew I could not handle the situation in which I found myself, but it didn't matter. It did not matter if I could not handle it, because *God could*. And a peace I cannot explain came over me.

We got our shoes on and walked to the bus stop — holding hands even! When we arrived, I encouraged all the boys at the stop to help us look for bugs. It was a short and unsuccessful hunt but I told Joshua I

would look again later in the morning. Even though I had made Joshua wear the clothes he didn't like, before he boarded the bus he gave me a hug and a kiss and told me he loves me.

As the bus drove away I saw both of my boys sitting in the back, smiling and waving at me. Their faces shone with love. I saw no trace of the anger each of them had been displaying just twenty minutes prior to this moment. The morning had been completely transformed and I was thrilled. I walked home thanking God for my precious sons and His amazing grace.



*Your Turn:* It still astounds me to think of that morning — and other similar situations — and to consider God's redeeming, transforming power. If you are in an overwhelming situation right now, are you ready to confess your inability to handle it and allow God to lead you through?

Read Psalm 30 *slowly*. Now read it again. Think of times in your life when you have called for help and God has healed you (v.2), when He has spared you from the pit (v. 3), when He has turned your wailing into dancing, and clothed you with joy (v.11). Thank Him for His faithfulness to you in the past. Can you trust Him to be the same today and tomorrow?

Take a few minutes to write down the examples of God's faithfulness in your life. Reflecting on these instances, write out a prayer of commitment for trusting Him with your *today* and *tomorrow*.





# Don't Have Fun

*Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Psalm 127:3-4*

**MY FAMILY WAS VISITING** my mother-in-law for the weekend, which meant we were going to her church. The kids have been to her church many times before, but they always seem to have a certain amount of hesitancy when we go. “Are we going to be in the same room as we were last time?” “I want to be with Joshua. Can we go to the same class?” “What are we going to do in Sunday school?” I do not think my answers, “We’ll see,” “Maybe,” and “I don’t know,” did anything to build their confidence, but I did my best to assure them Grandma’s church would be just as great as ours.

We made our way to the children’s wing and found out the boys would, in fact, be in the same room that morning. With glad hearts, we followed our guide to their classroom.

“We’re combining the grades today in one of the bigger rooms. I think you’ll have a good time,” he told the boys as we walked. As we entered the room and looked around, I knew he was right.

I saw a foosball table, board games, blocks, craft items, balls and a bunch of kids.

Looking at Joshua and Matthew, I also saw wide eyes and big smiles. I bent over to kiss them and said, "Don't have fun!" Both of them looked at me with expressions which clearly said, *What did you say???* *Look at all this stuff, Mom. We have to have fun!* "Okay," I said. "You can have fun." Then I kissed them again and waved good-bye.

As I walked out of the room I chuckled at the boys' response to my ridiculous instructions for them to not have fun. Imagine, putting two boys in a room full of wonderful toys and forbidding them to enjoy themselves. Absurd!

I thought about this situation further, however, and realized I have been guilty of doing that very thing myself. I have been in a room full of toys and have said to myself, "Don't have fun!"

How is that, you ask? Let me explain.

God has placed me in a family of precious children. A room full of wonderful toys, if you will. I have a daughter who loves to play games and read books, make crafts and play with her pet rats. (Yes, she has graduated from mice!) I have a son who enjoys fishing and catching bugs. He likes to climb trees and ride bikes. My other son loves to play army and spy-guy games. Sometimes he likes to just run around and act silly.

Each of them frequently invites me to join them in their childhood pleasures. They see the wonderful things around them and beckon me to have fun with them. Just like they did at their grandma's church, my kids' expressions say to me, *Look at all this stuff, Mom. We have to have fun!* Yet, somehow, I allow the stresses of life to stand in the way and say, "Don't have fun!"

There is laundry to wash and fold.

I have to plan the menu and make my grocery list.

Someone needs to clean this floor, and since it is obvious no one else is going to do it, I guess I have to.

Do you want to eat dinner tonight? Then I need to fix it.

It's bedtime, and I am tired. We will have to play that game tomorrow.

Do any of these excuses sound familiar to you?

As I thought about this situation, and the boys' excitement in church that Sunday, it was as if God said to me, *I have given you these children, Karen, and I want you to have fun with them! I did not give them to you to be a burden. I did not make you a mother to ruin your life. I give good gifts, beloved. Enjoy them. Love them. Have fun with them. I love seeing you treasuring the time you have with your children. It delights My heart. Love Me by loving your children.*

What wonderful thoughts!


I can delight God by enjoying my children.

I can love Him by loving them.

### *Just a Moment:*

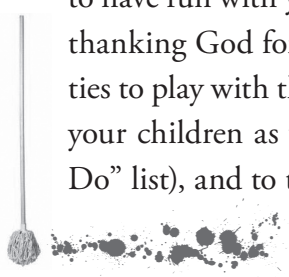
While you are playing with your children you can also be praying for them. Thank God for them; pray for their relationship with Him; pray for His protection over them. Pray for whatever comes to your mind and then tell your children you have just prayed for them.

My kids love it when I tell them I have prayed for them. There is a certain sparkle in their eyes and a bigger smile on their faces when they know I have just gone before God on their behalf. I trust the same will be true for yours.



*Your Turn:* Do you sometimes get so caught up by all the things you “need to do” that you think you do not have time to have fun with your kids? Have you ever considered the possibility that you can delight God’s heart by enjoying time with your children?

What are the things your children enjoy doing with you? Even if you have a long list of “very important” things to do today, can you take time out to have fun with your children? Spend time in prayer thanking God for your children, and for opportunities to play with them. Ask Him to help you focus on your children as you play (not on your waiting “To Do” list), and to truly enjoy your time together.





# Are We There Yet?

*For you, O God, tested us. You refined us like silver.  
Psalm 66:10*

**I AM GUESSING** your kids are exactly like mine when it comes to driving anywhere in the car. No matter how much advanced warning we give them regarding how long the trip is going to last, every four to five minutes they ask, “Are we there yet?” Even on trips we have driven many, many, many times — for which they should just know how long it takes — they continue to ask the eternal questions. *How much longer? Are we there yet?*

We try to make the trips easier on them (and us!) by finding ways to pass the time. I have taught them the Alphabet Game, which I played a lot when I was young. On really long trips we rent a DVD and bring along the computer so they can watch a show. (Elizabeth has informed me she wants a DVD player in our next vehicle. *Yeah, we’ll see.*) Sometimes we tell stories, or “collect” horses by calling out “Mine!” when we see a pasture full of them. No matter what we do, however, at the end of each trip I have an overwhelming desire to pen a note to my parents apologizing for all the times they took me on trips and I repeatedly asked, “Are we there yet?”



I am on a journey now which is much different than any of the trips I took as a child, but which still causes me to ask, “Are we there yet?”

Several years ago God planted a desire in my heart to pursue holiness, to become more like Jesus. He gave me the understanding that my salvation was not His ultimate goal for me, rather it was just the beginning. Having saved me, God wanted to sanctify me. I began to understand God’s Spirit was at work in me and this thing called sanctification was a process which would last my entire lifetime.

God has been quite clear with me about this development. Over and over I have read in a book, seen through a testimony, or heard in a sermon about how God uses circumstances to transform us into Christ-likeness.

Bit by bit.

Moment by moment.

One day at a time.

God has been very clear that He will make this transformation complete in His perfect time. However, although I am well aware it is a process which will last my entire life, I still feel compelled to ask Him, *Are we there yet? When will I be finished with these trials? Is my training over? Am I holy yet? God, are we there?* I am so thankful for God’s patience with me. I am glad He knows just what is needed to make me into the woman He wants me to be, and that His Spirit is working in me to bring it about.

Yet my struggle with the process continues.

I was recently in the van with Matthew, driving to his friend’s house. At the moment I was rather tired and a bit on the irritable side. Sitting silently, aware of my foul mood, I began evaluating myself. I recalled earlier in the day when I had been short with Matthew. He was just being a normal seven-year-old little boy, and I was snapping at him for wanting me to do things. Nothing Matthew had done was particularly bad; I was the one who was out of line.




The result of my self-evaluation was that I sat in the van wondering when I would ever be a woman who reflects Jesus consistently. My heart's desire is to be like Him, but I was discouraged by how frequently I fall short.

In the middle of my thoughts, Matthew broke the silence by asking, "Mom, when will we be there?" Oh — that question again! But this time it didn't evoke frustration in me. This time, fully aware of my need to be refined, I echoed my son's question.

*God, when will I be there?*

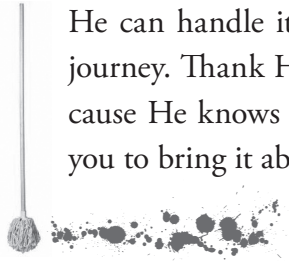
I asked the question and tried to hide my tears from Matthew. As I continued driving, God spoke to my heart. ***This is a process, Karen. I am working in you and I know what I am doing. I love you and I love who you are becoming. Trust Me, dear one. You aren't there yet, but you will be one day. Just love Me. And enjoy the journey.***

I am very aware that I am not yet the woman He wants me to be. However, I also know — and am grateful — I am not the woman I used to be. Although the journey is long and sometimes it is quite hard, I have made a choice to trust my Father who is working in and through me according to His good purposes. Along the way I will seek to love Him and enjoy this life He has given me. And at the end of my life, when He brings me Home, I believe I will hear Him say, ***Now, Karen. Now you're there.***



*Your Turn:* Life can be hard sometimes, can't it? Do you ever wonder when the trials are going to be over? When the refining will be finished? Do you ever want to ask God, *Are we there yet?*

He knows how you are feeling. He sees you and knows your heart. Spend time in prayer, telling God how you are feeling today. Go ahead and be honest; He can handle it. Ask Him to help you enjoy this journey. Thank Him for loving you. Praise Him because He knows what is best and He is working in you to bring it about.





# Just a Trip to the Store

*Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere;  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than  
dwell in the tents of the wicked. Psalm 84:10*

**HALLOWEEN WAS JUST AROUND THE CORNER** and my daughter was busy planning a party with her new friend. They were going to transform our basement with streamers, pictures, balloons, cob webs, skeletons and a healthy dose of imagination, and invite their girlfriends over for snacks, candy, games and a lot of giggling. The girls had been planning their party for several weeks and were in the last stages of setting up when Elizabeth asked me to take her to the store for a few final items.

To be perfectly honest, I did not want to make a trip to the store. I had other plans for the afternoon. We had been out already to get decorations, and now I just wanted to take care of my agenda. But they needed these last things to make the party complete, so I relented and we went to the store.

As we rode together, I listened to Elizabeth chatter on about the silly things her friend was doing on the bus that day. My daughter was giggling and was quite entertained by the telling of her own story. I enjoyed just watching her. When she paused for a breath, I told her about some of the silly things my friends and I did when I was in junior high, riding

the bus home from school. Elizabeth laughed again (I am still not sure whether she was laughing with me or *at* me!) and seemed amused to hear about my life as a pre-teen.

Once we made it into the store, Elizabeth was intent on getting the perfect items to make her party complete. She debated for (what seemed like) hours about which kinds of candy to get, and took her time selecting just the right juices and crackers. Elizabeth checked the prices and studied the labels on the candy packages to be sure we were getting the most candy for the money. She asked me if I thought her friends would rather have fruit punch or berry flavored juice. We talked about the pros and cons of this cracker over that one.

While, on other occasions, I might have gotten quite impatient waiting for Elizabeth to make these decisions, this time I fully enjoyed the process. I sat back and looked at this young lady who used to be my baby girl, wondering where all the time has gone. When she was going back and forth over bags of candy and asking for my opinion, I realized one day soon there is a good chance she will not be interested in my ideas and I ought to cherish this moment. As we were walking to the check-out lanes and Elizabeth smiled at me saying, "Mom, thanks for buying all this stuff for my party," I was so glad I had agreed to bring her to the store and help with her party. In all it was probably only a 45 minute excursion, but it was a precious 45 minutes and I thoroughly enjoyed that time with my daughter.

Days later, as I was thinking about my trip to the store with Elizabeth and how much I enjoyed spending time with her, I considered how God must feel about the time I spend with Him. I wondered if He enjoys watching me make plans for something special and then working to see it through. Just like I was marveling at Elizabeth, I pondered whether God ever looks at me and smiles, thinking, ***My, My...look how she has grown!*** Similarly, while I found delight in Elizabeth amid the ordinary activities of riding in the van and going grocery shopping,

I wondered if God delights in me amid the ordinary activities of my everyday life.

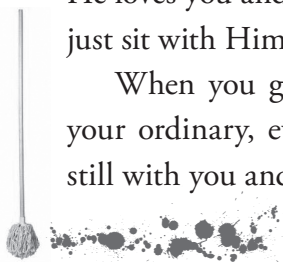
Do you think it is possible He just loves to be with us?

Because you have been with me through this whole book, I trust you know my answer to that question. I am absolutely convinced God looks upon us with a love we will never fully understand on this side of heaven. And He does love to be with us. I believe God treasures the moments when we just sit in His presence and tell Him about our day — both the joys and the sorrows. When we have errands to run, chores to complete, and babies to kiss, I trust it pleases God's heart for us to invite Him into the activity. Surely, I am certain He delights in the time we spend in His Word and in prayer, but I am equally confident He enjoys being present in the everyday moments of our everyday lives.



*Your Turn:* Do you want to try something really crazy today? Honestly, this is hard for me to do sometimes because of my wandering mind, but it is a great exercise. Can you find a quiet place where you will be alone and undistracted for several minutes — maybe even ten — and just sit in the presence of God? You do not have to say anything. *Just be in His presence.* When I do this exercise and my mind starts to wander, I repeat the name of Jesus several times, silently or aloud, until my focus is back on Him. As you sit in His presence, let His love fall on you. Know that He loves you and is delighted you are taking time to just sit with Him.

When you get up and begin to move through your ordinary, everyday activities, remember He is still with you and try to enjoy His presence.



*As I was deciding on the format for this book I found it necessary to cut some of the entries I originally planned to include. But I didn't throw them away. In fact, you may still read them. If you visit my website ([www.IrritableMother.com](http://www.IrritableMother.com)) you will find a box on the homepage where you may enter this code: 1111, followed by your name and email address. I will then send you one devotion per day for five days, for you to read and enjoy at your leisure.*



# Check Point #4

## Tell Yourself the Truth

*Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Psalm 25:4-5*

**THE TIME HAS COME** for this part of our journey together to end. (Though I hope you will revisit this book on occasion and continue to find encouragement within it.) Before we end, however, there is one final discussion I want us to have.

We have already established the fact that life is hard. Our circumstances change from day to day, sometimes moment to moment, and we often do not know what to expect next. It can be easy to focus on our bleak situation and, throwing our hands up in despair, declare we simply cannot take it any longer. Our days are too much to handle and we want out! A little time spent in the Psalms shows us our good friend David was often in that exact frame of mind.

So what are we to do? *How can we keep our circumstances from robbing us of our joy?* In addition to asking myself, “Karen, where do you think God is in the middle of this struggle?” I have learned to tell myself the Truth. Yes, that is Truth — with an uppercase “T.” Truth which does not change, which is reliable, and upon which I can stand.

When I am going through a trial, when I am on the verge of either tears or screaming, when I am at my wits’ end, I am tempted to focus

on my situation and cry out, “God, where are You? Have You completely forgotten about me? Have You stopped caring? Are You so busy with the rest of the world You are no longer concerned with me? God, don’t You love me anymore?” Those questions are ridiculous. But when we focus on our circumstances, that is the road down which we will go.

Have you been there?

I have. And I do not want to travel it again. So I tell myself the Truth.

When the *lowercase “t” truth* is that my situation is troubling, I tell myself the *uppercase “T” Truth*:

- ✦ God is with me.
- ✦ He is fully aware of my circumstance and has allowed it into my life for someone’s ultimate good.
- ✦ He is watching over me and will protect me.
- ✦ God is able to hold the universe together in perfect balance, even while He attends to the little details of my life. Nothing is too difficult for Him.
- ✦ God’s love for me never falters and He will not ever take it away.

The truth of my situation has very little to say when I tell myself the Truth of God.

- ✦ I am weary; *but God is my strength.*
- ✦ I am unsure of how to handle something; *but God is all-knowing.*
- ✦ I am overwhelmed with all I need to do; *but God is able to accomplish what concerns me.*
- ✦ I am sure my kids have not listened to me all day; *but God hears every whisper of my heart.*
- ✦ I am alone and sad; *but God is with me.*
- ✦ I am at the end of my rope; *but God loves me still.*
- ✦ I am...; *but God...*



You get the picture. Do you see how the Truth of God can silence the truth of your situation?

Telling yourself the Truth is one more discipline I hope you will put into practice on your journey toward finding joy. And I believe it *is* a discipline, because it is easier by far to simmer in our woe-is-me attitude as we mope about our circumstance. It is an act of the will to remember who God is, and to remind ourselves what is True about Him.

I believe it is possible, however, for this act of the will to become a matter of the heart — which is where I ultimately want to find myself. As I tell myself the Truth over and over, my prayer is the Truth will make its journey from my head to my heart. I want the Truth of who God is to take up residence in me, so one day I will not even need to tell myself the Truth because it will simply be a part of who I am.

Do you want to join me on this part of the journey? When circumstances try telling you there is no hope, and no joy is to be found, answer them with the Truth.

Remember who God is.

Remind yourself He is more powerful than your situation.

Recall the times He has been faithful and has delivered you in the past.

Reassure yourself He never changes and will be faithful in your present and future.

Resolve to focus on the Truth, not the truth.

As you exercise your will in this way, I am confident you will find yourself experiencing more joy. And by the grace of God, as you pray and make this exercise a habit I believe this act of your will can, indeed, become a matter of your heart.

If you need a little help getting started on this exercise, how about making a list of everything you know to be True about God? Perhaps you can make your own list of I am...but God...and compare the truth with the Truth. Ask God to help you. I know He will be delighted to reveal more of Himself to you!





# Hold Onto Joy

**I BEGAN THIS BOOK** by sharing about the story, “The Magic Thread.” Do you remember Peter? The boy who did not like to wait for anything? An old woman had given him a ball with a magic thread inside, which allowed him to pass by portions of his life by simply pulling the thread. Since I do not want to leave you hanging, I will end by telling you the rest of the story.



Eventually Peter noticed the gray in his mother’s hair, and wondered how she had aged so quickly. Soon after, he saw gray in his own hair and wrinkles where there had been none before. He determined he should be more careful about pulling the thread. Yet he continued to tug at it to get through suffering and hard times, and still troubles kept coming.

One day, as an old man, he was walking through the forest so he could think things over. It was there he met the old woman again — the one who had given him the silver ball when he was a boy. She smiled at Peter and asked him if his life had been good.





“I’m not sure,” Peter said. “Your magic ball is a wonderful thing. I have never had to suffer or wait for anything in my life. And yet it has all passed so quickly. I feel that I have had no time to take in what has happened to me, neither the good things nor the bad. Now there is so little time left. I dare not pull the thread again for it will only bring me to my death. I do not think your gift has brought me luck.”

“How ungrateful you are!” the old woman said. “In what way would you have wished things to be different?”

“Perhaps if you had given me a different ball, one where I could have pushed the thread back in as well as pulling it out. Then I could have relived the things that went badly.”

The old woman laughed. “You ask a great deal! Do you think that God allows us to live our lives twice over? But I can grant you one final wish, you foolish, demanding man.”

“What is that?” Peter asked.

“Choose,” the old woman said. Peter thought hard.

At length he said, “I should like to live my life again as if for the first time, but without your magic ball. Then I will experience the bad things as well as the good without cutting them short, and at least my life will not pass as swiftly and meaninglessly as a daydream.”

“So be it,” said the old woman. “Give me back my ball.”<sup>3</sup>



Peter learned avoiding hardship simply is not worth missing out on life. Given wisdom and the chance to do it over, he chose to live every day — the good and bad ones, the easy and difficult ones. I know “The Magic Thread” is just a made up story but I am so thankful for the lesson it taught me.

When I think back over the entries I wrote for this book, I realize if I had that magic thread in my pocket to tug upon whenever I wanted to skip past a hard time, these pages would be nearly empty. Almost everything I have written here came as the result of a situation which was unpleasant for me. God was present with me through each moment and brought me joy in spite of the trials. But I would have missed it if I had been able to make my life “easier.”

I know I do not want to miss my life. I do not want my days to slip away meaninglessly because I am focusing on getting past them and refusing to *live* them. When I reach the end of my life I want to know I have fully lived each day, fully enjoyed each hour, and fully loved both God and my children in the process. Are you with me?

It is my sincere hope that as you have gone through this book with me, your eyes have been opened. As I have shared with you the ways God has been present and has shown Himself to me in the midst of my ordinary — and even frustrating — circumstances, I hope you have learned to see God in your circumstances, too. And in finding Him there, I pray you have also found joy.

Please continue seeking Him, my friend. He is present and loving you in every moment of every day. God will never leave you. He will never forsake you. His love for you is for all time.

Hold onto Him, and hold onto joy!

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup>William J. Bennett, The Book of Virtues, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p.58.

<sup>2</sup>Jerry Bridges, Growing Your Faith, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), p.25.

<sup>3</sup>William J. Bennett, The Book of Virtues, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p.62-63.



