

Lessons from the Blackberry Patch

Several years ago, my husband and I purchased a new home with several acres of land, the majority of it wooded. It was like buying our own private park. Shortly after moving in, we were exploring our property and came across a blackberry bramble. We were very excited about this discovery and couldn't wait for the spiny canes to produce their delicious fruit. Over the years, I have made several observations while picking berries. I'd like to share some of them with you.

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Lesson One

Commitment - Make time for God

Picking blackberries is no easy proposition. Preparations are needed and available time scheduled. There are several other factors involved besides my calendar, one of them being the blackberries themselves! Are they ripe and ready to be picked? The weather is another important variable. Although I enjoy a good thunderstorm and love to watch the lightening rip across the sky, I normally observe this spectacle from the comfort of my dry, safe home. Climbing deep into our woods to pick blackberries is definitely not on my list of enjoyable, or wise, actions. No, not even with an umbrella! Hot and humid weather is uncomfortable, but this is not a good excuse to leave the berry picking to another day. Both of these factors, the ripeness of the berries and the weather, are out of my control and I need to adjust my schedule to fit the conditions.

My relationship with God is very similar. Too often I want to fit God into my schedule when spending time with Him suits me. I allow myself to get too busy with my own pre-occupations and I put my Bible reading off to the side. I postpone volunteering or getting involved with church activities until I have more time to devote to it. The problem for me is that if I don't make the time to do these things, the time will not magically appear. I need to make the commitment to spend time with God and to grow closer to Him, which will necessarily require me to re-assess and re-organize my priorities. If I truly want to be intimate with God, I need to invest time into my relationship with Him. When I married my

husband, I didn't continue to live as a single person by going out with my friends and spending my time as I desired and neither did he. We build our relationship by spending time together, talking, learning about each other and growing closer.

Thankfully, God is not like blackberries. He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow and He will always be there to welcome me with open arms whenever I decide I have the time. I need to be careful though that I do not harden my heart (Hebrews 3:7-13) and wait too long. Not because God has a limited time offer, but because once I fill the holes in my life with something besides God, it gets harder and harder to let those things go. God doesn't change, but I do. The rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30) looked for confirmation from Jesus that he was good enough for eternity, but instead he found his heart exposed and his loyalties challenged. We cannot serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24).

To prevent myself from letting the things of this world fill the places of my mind and soul that are meant for God, I need to seek Him and His kingdom while the timing is right, before it's too late. Matthew 7:7 tells us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened." For me, the best time of the day to commit spending time with God is early in the morning. I get up before everyone else in the house and while I'm drinking my coffee I read my daily Bible reading from my One-Year Bible. This format is very convenient because it combines readings from the Old Testament, the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs each day. It takes about fifteen minutes and I read through the entire Bible every year. By reading my Bible first thing in the morning, God's

words stick with me throughout the day and it becomes easier to keep Him first and foremost in my thoughts. I talk to Him during the day about whatever might be on my mind and try to be still to hear His answers.

I grew up in a very negative family. For them, complaining was as natural as breathing. When I became a Christian, I realized that this was not a very good habit and it compromised my ability to maintain the joy the Bible tells me I'm supposed to have. Whenever I would get upset, I tried to count my blessings and all the reasons I had to be grateful, but it was very difficult to do when I was already in distress. I decided that writing a list of my blessings and then reviewing it when I was down might be more helpful in getting me through those pity party days, so I started a Gratitude journal. Each morning after my Bible reading, I write down the things that I am thankful to God from the previous day. Good health, safety, the weather, or if I had a really rough day and don't think I can find even one thing to be grateful for, then I thank Him for His mercy, grace and forgiveness. Sometimes I turn my requests into a "thank you" trusting God to address the situation and answer prayers. For example, I might write, "thank You Father for comforting me through this difficult time". I may still be grieving when I write that and not feeling much comfort at all, but somehow thanking Him helps me to recognize that He is with me and I will get through the dark days. Since I do not allow myself to write any requests in this journal, it has been very helpful in "re-training" me to see God's hand in my daily life. Instead of focusing on the negative and all the things I don't have or that went wrong, my gratitude journal forces me to recognize all the things I do have and the things that went right. It can be very interesting to flip through the prior

entries and see how I was feeling, what was going on in our lives, and recognize how God was with us through it all.

I love Psalm 5:3, "In the morning, o Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation." It paints such a beautiful picture for me. I see a glorious sunrise full of reds, pinks, and oranges in a cloudless bright blue sky. I see myself sitting on a large rock at the top of a hill overlooking a meadow and breathlessly waiting for His answers. It fills me with hope and joy knowing that He hears me and is able to answer me. With this image in my mind, I pray for my family, friends, co-workers and myself.

To receive God's blessings, we need to prepare ourselves. Growing closer to Him helps us to identify His hand working in our lives because He may not always answer us in the way we want or think He should. By developing our relationship with Him, our hearts begin to recognize His love, not just for us, but for the world and His answers become clearer to us. But first, I must make the commitment and devote time to Him. God does not desire our sacrifices, but a broken and contrite heart (Proverbs 51:16-17). It all begins with me and my choice to make God a priority in my life.

Assessment and Further Thought

What prevents me from spending daily time with God?

What steps can I take to set aside 15-30 minutes each day for prayer or bible reading?

Are there other tools I can use to keep me focused on the Lord each day (prayer journal, note cards, Christian music)?

What aspect of my background might be a stumbling block to spending time with God?

Verses for study and encouragement

Psalm 119:11 I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you

Matthew 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing

Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, please help me to grow closer to You. Show me where I need to adjust my priorities and my schedule to reflect the importance I place on our relationship. Grant me wisdom and discernment in these areas and in deciding when to ask for help from others.

Thank You for Your constant invitation and for the desire and motivation to make changes in this life to prepare me for the eternal life I will have with You. Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Two

Repentance – Sometimes we make mistakes, scars can be physical reminders

When I first started picking blackberries in our woods, I was extremely naïve. I thought I could stroll into the coolness of the forest in a tank top and shorts and leisurely pick all the berries I could fit into my bucket. How foolish I was! I quickly learned that the thorns on blackberry brambles are extremely sharp and can be dangerous. On my first trip into the bramble, I stumbled on a tree root and fell forward into the sharp thorny branches. While the majority of the scratches eventually healed, I still have a small scar where a thorn went deep into my forearm and had to be pulled out with tweezers. It serves as a reminder to me that mistakes have consequences that may affect the rest of my life.

Inevitably when we begin to grow closer to God, He will expose those areas of our life that need reform. This can be difficult and met with great resistance. It can even cause us to reconsider our commitment to spend time and grow closer to God. It is uncomfortable. We don't want to face all the areas where we fall short of God's expectations, and it can seem insurmountable to make all the changes our lives need.

In recent years, I have struggled with my weight. Stress, lack of sleep, and poor eating habits finally caught up to me until one day I realized I was fifty pounds overweight. At first, I was in denial. How could this be? My clothes still fit me! Well, not really. Why didn't anyone tell me? No one wanted to hurt my feelings. But the scale and the measuring tape didn't lie and I finally realized I needed to do something about it. Nothing too drastic, of course, like giving

up bread or pizza or cheeseburgers, I just needed to cut back a little and the pounds would fall right off, right? Again, not really. I did Weight Watcher's, South Beach, Pilates, ran on a treadmill – nothing helped and worse, I continued to gain weight. It was obvious that serious changes needed to be made. The main problem was that I was not consistent. I'd exercise every day for three or four days, then quit for two weeks. I'd eat salad and oatmeal for a week, and then go back to cereal and sandwiches. I had to acknowledge the fact that my way was not working. I would start off full of enthusiasm and vow to be "perfect" in my meal choices, portion sizes and exercise every day. The reality of these choices was difficult to execute and I would quickly revert to my old ways. Not because I didn't really want to lose weight, but because I was trying to change too much all at once. I didn't gain the weight overnight and I certainly wasn't going to lose it overnight. So, I decided to break my task down into smaller pieces. I started by listing all the things I felt I needed to change: smaller portions, less bread, less sugar, more water, more vegetables, more whole grains, consistent exercise and stretching. I chose one thing to make a permanent change – no more sugar in my tea. First, I switched to a non-sugar sweetener. Once I was accustomed to the new taste, I cut the amount of this sweetener in half. Eventually, I weaned myself of needing any sweetener in my tea at all. I'm still struggling with my weight, but I know that setting my goals too high only increases my risk of failure and disappointment which inevitably leads to my defeat. Smaller goals that are attainable and grant me some measure of success and encouragement will help me to make the long term lifestyle changes I need to obtain and maintain a healthy weight for the rest of my life.

Turning from all the bad habits we've allowed ourselves to fall into over the years is much the same. Making a list of all the ways God shows us change in our lives is needed is a first step. This list is between you and God, so being honest is the best way to begin tearing off the chains that keep you from growing closer to Him. Commit the list to prayer and ask God's guidance in choosing the first one to begin eliminating from your life. Try to break this into smaller goals to encourage yourself and help you feel as if you are making progress. When you slip, don't let it keep you down. Ask God's forgiveness and get right back up again.

These are some common areas of sin and some very general suggestions on how to begin to address them in our lives:

Gossip: Identify when and where you are most tempted to participate in gossip – is it at work? Church? Facebook? Commit to yourself that the next time someone around you begins to gossip you will do your best to change the subject or just get up and walk away. Do not use prayer requests to reveal personal information about others to others – this is a sly way to gossip with a good motive. Limit the amount of time you spend on Facebook daily (use a timer if necessary) to help you cut back and/or eliminate reading and responding to gossip. Better yet, quit Facebook altogether!

Foul Language/Taking Lord's name in vain: Begin by substituting other words for the foul language that has infiltrated your vocabulary: Cheese and Crackers, fiddlesticks, dad-gummed, whatever works for you. Buy a thesaurus and increase

your vocabulary to permanently replace the foul words and their substitutes. Just think how smart you'll be (and sound!).

Poor time management: Make a list of all the things you need to do each day: go to work, care for your children, feed the dog, cook dinner, etc. Estimate how long each item takes or give yourself a time frame to complete each daily task (i.e. dinner is from 5:30-7 including preparation, eating, and cleanup). Identify the time not specifically assigned to a task and use this to accomplish all those items on your procrastination list. Be flexible – don't get discouraged if you don't keep to your schedule. Remember it is a tool to help you, but ultimately, real life and its quirks will get in the way. The important thing to remember is that this will help you identify why you may not be getting as much done as you think you could or should. Maybe you aren't "wasting" time – maybe you are overextended and need to clear some extraneous activities out of your life. If nothing is extraneous, then maybe you need to ask for help and/or delegate tasks to others. Even Moses had helpers!

Sexual Impurity: This can take many forms, anything from: looking at scantily clad individuals in magazines; improper books, movies and music; to the physical act of adultery. Gradually remove yourself from situations where you are tempted. When going out with friends, either suggest a movie that doesn't advocate sexual situations or avoid movies completely and suggest another activity instead. Clean up your reading list and clear out your secular music collection. If you are in a sexual relationship outside of marriage to that partner, determine if this relationship has the

potential to be long term. If so, discuss it with your partner and determine if they are willing to take steps to make a long term commitment. Express to your partner your desire to stay pure from that point forward until marriage. If this is not well received, then you are not unified as a couple and the relationship is on a poor foundation. Seek counseling as a couple to confront and resolve your differences. If this is not successful, end it. Do not compromise in this area.

Poor financial stewardship: Does your checkbook reflect your faith? Do you regularly give to God's kingdom? This doesn't necessarily have to be tithing to a church, but there should be evidence that we are faithful in using the resources God has entrusted to us to bless those He has placed on our hearts. If you are not doing this, why aren't you? Debt enslaves us and prevents us from using the money God gives us in the way He intends. We may also have trust issues and believe that we need to provide for ourselves without trusting God to multiply His blessings as we give to others. Malachi 3:10 encourages us with the following words from the Lord, "'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'" Examine your spending habits and make a list of all the ways you spend money for an entire month. Commit to cutting at least one frivolous item out of your budget each day/week/month. Maybe you decide to pack your lunch three days a week instead of eating out every day. Or you eliminate fancy coffee on your way in to work.

Determine to get out of debt. There are many ways to do this and organizations that can help. God will help as we help ourselves.

True repentance is not just confessing your sin; it is a commitment to remove it from your life. It is impossible to keep God in a box and ask for His help in certain aspects of our lives when we are unwilling to allow Him access to our whole life. He wants all of me, and all of you, and not just our Sundays, but all our days. You're not alone – He will help you every step of the way.

Assessment and Further Thought

According to God, what areas of my life need adjustment?

Which item from the above list should be the first area for change?

Can this item be broken into smaller goals? If so, list them below and a time frame to accomplish each.

Be prepared that those closest to you may feel threatened by the changes you intend to make. How will you address opposition from those you love regarding these permanent adjustments?

Verses for study and encouragement

Jeremiah 6:16 This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Jeremiah 33:3 Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, please forgive me for the way I have allowed myself to drift away from You. Grant me the strength to adjust my life in a way that is pleasing to You and in accordance with your Word. Guide my focus to the areas You consider most important. Show me how to accomplish these goals and grow closer to You. Fill me with Your wisdom in decision making. Help me to respond to opposition in appropriate ways that honor You. Thank You for Your faithfulness. Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Three

Trust – go where God leads, it might be painful and scary, do I trust Him?

As you can imagine, after my first trip to the blackberry patch and the painful scratches acquired there, I was reluctant to go back. I realized that to reach all the berries, I was going to have to put myself at risk by climbing underneath and in-between some of the canes because there was no other way to reach them. There were also several fallen branches and logs that had decomposed over the years. They were covered in leaves and forest undergrowth which made them slippery and difficult to see. I had tripped over one such log on my first trip. I had no idea how many other items could be buried in the area - large stones, debris, even glass were known to be present throughout the forest. Any or all of these objects could be lying in wait to cause me injury. Not to mention the forest animals that may not be too happy about me stealing their tasty treats! Birds, squirrels, ground hogs, snakes, even skunks could have nests or dens nearby and be unaccustomed to dealing with an outsider such as me. Their reliance on the safety of being surrounded by thorns could cause them to be startled by my presence and attack. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a better idea to just buy my berries from the store and let the forest have these. Then I realized that I was filling myself with fear and as a daughter of the King, I should fear no berry!

Making changes in our lives can also be very scary. Many times, we are going where we have never gone before. Many questions may go through your mind: How will those in my

life be affected by my decisions? Will they still accept me? Do I really have the strength to do this?

The first thing to remember is that God is always with you. He will grant you strength when you feel you have none (Habakkuk 3:19), and put words in your mouth that you didn't know were there (Matthew 10:19). In addition to the Lord's presence, it is a good idea to have a frank and honest conversation with someone close to you about the journey you are beginning. Explain your motivations and discuss how this may affect your relationship. The person may be very supportive and even join you! If not, you need to identify the potential for opposition and pray for guidance in how to address the situation in the future.

Secondly, transformation will not and should not be overnight and sudden. Other than smoking, there are very few changes in life that survive when done by "going cold turkey". Small steps allow us to accustom ourselves to new habits and ways of addressing problems so that eventually it becomes second nature and we don't have to stop and think about our response each time we are placed in a questionable situation. Gradual changes are easier for us to adjust to and easier for those around us to absorb.

One of the main factors affecting my ability to lose weight is my family. I am the: grocery shopper, menu planner, chief cook and bottle washer (as my grandma used to say!). Given that, you'd think it would be easy for me to diet since I control every calorie that comes into the house (or not). Unfortunately, this is not the case. I have used excuses like:

"No one in my family will eat kohlrabi. What is it anyway?"

“This person doesn’t like _____.” where the blank can be anything from tomatoes to rice

“Everyone likes my cooking just the way it is”

“I don’t have time to buy and chop fresh vegetables every day”

“Healthy foods are more expensive and we’re on a tight budget”

“I don’t know how to cook healthy” or “I don’t own a wok”

All of the above statements are true, but they are really just covering my fear. The deep dark truth, when I allow myself to think about it, is that I am afraid of trying to lose weight because I am afraid of failure. I have always been an over-achiever. School came easy to me, along with anything else I decided to set my mind on. But losing weight? That seemed to be completely out of my control. I accepted my overweight self. I was comfortable with her. Sure, I wanted to be slim and attractive and fit into my old clothes. I just wasn’t convinced it was something I could really accomplish and since I didn’t know for certain, it was better not to try.

The first step in overcoming fear is to identify it, drag it out of the closet and into the light.

Take a really good look at it. How do I do that, you may ask, especially if it’s hidden deep? I start with a sheet of paper and I write a question to myself, and then write the answer.

Based on the answer, I then write another question until I can narrow it down to the heart of the matter. Picture a funnel. Your first question is at the wide opening and you’re digging down to the narrow end. A typical exchange might go something like this:

Q: Why do I hate my job?

A: Because it's boring

Q: What is so boring about it?

A: It's the same thing day after day and I don't have anything new to learn.

After doing the above exercise, I might decide that there are things I can do on my own to make my job more interesting like re-organizing my files, automating tasks, or offering assistance to others that seem to be overwhelmed. If none of that applies, I can talk to my boss about accepting more responsibility. Hopefully the above illustrates the exercise and how it can be used to better understand emotions and how they can subconsciously affect you.

Once you think you've gotten to the root of the fear, ask yourself, 'what's so scary about it'? And then the really tough question, why do I think God can't defeat this? In the end, that is the root of all fear, a lack of trust in God to take care of us. Fortunately for us, God knows what timid cowardly creatures we are! The Bible has 366 verses on fear; some of my favorites are listed at the end of this chapter. It can be very helpful to memorize a few of them – know them so well that they immediately present themselves when you're scared. God will not ask something of you without providing a way for you to accomplish it. "The Lord your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing," Zephaniah 3:17. The Lord also tells us, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast . . . ? Though she may forget, I will not

forget you! See, I have you engraved on the palms of my hands,” Isaiah 49:15b-16. Sounds pretty permanent to me! Resolving our issues of trust with God is instrumental in beginning our new life and growing closer to Him. Remember, Joshua 1:9 “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

John 16:33

Deuteronomy 31:8

Isaiah 51:7

Psalm 27:1-2

Psalm 30:11-12

Isaiah 46:4

Isaiah 54:10

Exodus 14:13-14

Luke 12:22-23

Assessment and Further Thought

What excuses do I make to cover my fear of change?

What scares me the most about changing?

What are some ways I can overcome my fear?

Is there someone in my life that I can rely on to be a support in my “cord of three” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12)? Schedule some time with this person to discuss your goals and enlist their assistance.

Verses for study and encouragement

1 Corinthians 6:20 You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.

Ephesians 5:11 Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them!

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 Two are better than one, . . . , If one falls down, his friend can help him up.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, please forgive me for being afraid and for my lack of trust. Grant me courage to identify and face my fear. Remind me that You are with me always and that You will never abandon me. Help me to recognize all the tools You have provided for me and grant me the knowledge on how to best use them. Please provide someone to be joined in our cord of three to offer me support during this time. Amen.

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Four

Trust – Rely on God to provide, reaping blessings I did not sow

One of the best qualities of the blackberries, to me, is that I did nothing to produce them. I didn't plant them, fertilize them, water them or cultivate them in any way. They are completely free except for my time and labor to pick them and bring them in the house. I don't make any preparations to over-winter the canes or ensure they produce the following year. They simply appear. I don't wonder or worry about them, I know they will grow and be ready for us to enjoy. There are very few things in life that are simply given with virtually no work involved and no strings attached.

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, He had to teach them what it meant to be His children. They needed to learn to trust Him which was not easy for them. After all, God had abandoned them in Egypt for over 400 years! God began by providing food in the form of Manna six out of seven days each week, with a double portion on the sixth day so they could observe the Sabbath on the seventh day. The Israelites did not plant to produce Manna. They did not water or fertilize it to produce a large crop; they couldn't even save it from one day to the next with the exception of the sixth day to the seventh. They didn't ask for Manna itself, in fact, it was so foreign to them that is how it got its name – Manna means “what is it?” Nothing like it had ever been seen before, or to my knowledge, since. God provided Manna every morning outside of the Sabbath for the entire forty years the Israelites wandered in the desert, proving His faithfulness.

There are times when situations in our lives will be out of our control. We can consume ourselves with worry and lose sleep over the circumstances, but in the end there may be nothing we can do except lay it at Jesus' feet and pray. Luke 12:24 asks us, "who among you can add one hour to his life by worrying?" and implores us to trust in Him, to know that we are more important than the flowers of the field and the sparrows. Trust Him to give us good gifts and pray that we recognize them.

This doesn't mean that we should be passive in our existence and completely rely on the Lord to provide for all our needs. In Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, he gives these instructions:

"In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "if a man will not work, he shall not eat."

-2 Thessalonians 3:6-10 NIV

So it becomes confusing, when should I take matters into my own hands and when should I wait on the Lord? There are no hard and fast rules for this one, no guidelines, flowcharts, or decision trees, just your prayers and your willingness to accept whatever His answer may be.

When my husband and I were looking to buy a house, it was a very stressful situation. Our search lasted four years and there are still days when I ask myself if we did the right thing or

not. A quick review of all the events that led us to our house confirms for me that we are where we are supposed to be. At first, we were not very unified in the type of property we wanted or even the location. My husband wanted a more rural property where I was more suburban. He was leaning toward a wooded environment; I wanted property more open and sunny. He liked a ranch style house, I liked colonials. We looked at thousands of properties online, drove by hundreds, toured dozens and finally made an offer, which was rejected. I was devastated, but my husband was relieved. He could see all the work the place needed, where all I saw was the potential the finished product could be . . . someday. I'm the dreamer, he's the practical one. During our research, we came across some negotiating instructions. Simply stated, we were advised to always be prepared to walk away from a deal. If we weren't prepared to walk away, then we had already "lost" and would pay whatever the seller asked. We thoughtfully re-evaluated the property, the work it needed and how much it would all cost. The truth was that we believed our offer was fair for the condition of the property and we were not willing to pay more for it. We did not counter-offer.

Our offer on the second property we found was also rejected. When our offer was accepted on the third property, our current home, we still questioned ourselves every day if we were doing the right thing. There was plenty of drama during our closing process, even to the point that we both believed we would not close. We kept the mindset that it wasn't over until it was over and up to the day before the closing, we were both willing to walk away if the Lord placed a stumbling block in the road.

Throughout the process, we prayed for two things: 1) For the Lord to lead us like sheep because we were blind and stupid and really didn't know where we were supposed to be, and 2) for opened and closed doors. I equated it to refusing to force a square peg into a round hole. We could have forced the issue with either of the first two properties by raising our offers until the sellers accepted, but we didn't. The key was that we both had humble hearts and were willing to accept God's Will for us instead of believing that we knew what was best for us. At the time in each situation it was difficult to believe that there could be a property out there that was better than the one we had made an offer on. We had looked in three different counties and dozens of communities. For me, it seemed impossible. My comfort phrase became, "I can't wait to see the place God has picked out for us, if this place isn't it!" By waiting on God and His timing, the property we purchased was far and away better than any of the others we had made offers on. In fact, I had looked at our property online six months prior to our purchase and it was way out of our price range. The owner had become impatient and dropped the price by nearly 23%, putting it smack dab in the middle of our affordability.

I had a much more difficult time getting through the entire process than my husband did because my trust issues ran much deeper. It was very hard for me to imagine that God was really that concerned about me when there were so many bigger problems in the world. Not that I didn't believe He loved me and cared for me, I just thought I wasn't really that important to Him, He had bigger fish to fry. I know this isn't true every time I look at my

house number, which is the same as my birthdate, and I know that I am exactly where He intended for me to be.

It is important to remember that when we commit to follow God He is our partner and we can rely upon Him. Shortly after my husband and I were married, I committed to the Lord that I would stick to a budget and not spend any money unnecessarily. The very same day, I returned a pair of sneakers my husband had bought me for a Christmas present because they were the wrong size. My mistake was in **returning** them and not **exchanging** them. When I went back to the shoe department to get the correct size, I realized that when my husband bought the shoes they had been on sale for 20% off, now they were not. As I stood in the checkout line, I silently apologized to the Lord for being so careless and breaking my commitment **the very same day I had made it**. I pledged to be more careful in the future. Suddenly, someone in the next line tapped me on the shoulder and asked me if I would like a coupon. I gratefully accepted it. It was for 20% off the entire purchase, no minimum amount, so I was able to purchase the replacement pair with the money I had received from the return and not one penny more which allowed me to keep my commitment. I do not know why this person chose to give me the coupon from all the tens of people waiting to checkout except that God had answered my prayer and forgiven my (almost) broken vow.

Assessment and Further Thought

What areas of my life am I afraid to release to God's control?

Why am I afraid to turn it over to Him?

Can I remember any examples of God's faithfulness to me, times when He provided for me beyond my expectations?

What will convince me that I am important to God? Am I willing to accept His will for me and that His plan is better than mine?

Verses for study and encouragement

Isaiah 46: 3b-4 you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

Psalms 118:6-8 The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.

Psalms 121:1-3 I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord the Maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber.

Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, You know my heart better than I know it myself, please help me to find the root of my trust issues with You and to resolve them. Give me better eyes to see all the ways that You care for me and provide for me on a daily basis. Teach me that I am important to You. Convince me that Your plan for me is better than mine. Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Five

Prepare – Plan Ahead

The day has finally arrived! The blackberries are ripe, I have time in my schedule, the weather hasn't reached disaster levels, and I know there are berries to be picked. So I begin to gather the supplies I'll need for a successful trip to the berry patch. Of course I need a container for the berries. I prefer the cardboard oblong containers that you get when you buy fresh produce. The weight of the berries is more evenly distributed so all the ones on the bottom aren't smashed by the weight of the berries above. If it's a hot day, I fill a large water bottle with ice and then cold water to prevent dehydration. After my first expedition, I have found it very helpful to bring a small set of pruning shears – the type used on rose bushes, and a first aid kit, including tweezers. By far the most important item I can bring with me is bug spray. Mosquitoes and flies are immediately drawn to my perspiration and they continually buzz around my eyes, ears and mouth. Of course they only do that when they are not busy biting me! I place all of these items in a bag with some spare plastic bags, tissues and paper towels. Now that I have my supplies, I also need to prepare physically with protective gear. I wear long pants and sturdy work boots. I cut the feet out of an old pair of thermal socks and I wear those on my arms. I take work gloves with me, but I find it hard to pick the berries with them on, so I keep them for climbing and moving branches only. I roll my hair into a bun and I finally feel that I'm ready to brave the bramble!

Going out into the world each day requires similar planning. Not only do we need to ensure we have all of our necessary items: purse/wallet, keys, cell phone, grocery list, etc. We also need to prepare ourselves for the people we will come into contact with that day. Even if they are people that we are accustomed to and know well, we need to ready ourselves for any new situations or conflicts that may arise during the day and our reactions to them.

Whenever I have a particularly stressful day ahead of me, I spend time in the morning talking it over with God. I let Him know my concerns, my shortcomings and where I really think I need His help. Sometimes the conversation takes place before I even get out of bed. Other times, I discuss with Him while I'm driving with the radio off. If I'm alone, I talk out loud. My main concern is to represent Jesus and my faith well. I don't want to be held up by others as the bad example of a Christian. Remember, someone is always watching us for our reactions; Christian or not, friend or foe. We are Christ's Ambassadors and we must conduct ourselves accordingly.

One of the best ways I remind myself of my responsibility is to pretend that Jesus is sitting right there with me all the time. He is the third person in every conversation. A friend from one of my bible study groups was a labor negotiator. Her job was very stressful because she was the mediator in employment disputes when all other methods had failed. She shared with us that before going into any mediation meeting she would stand outside the door, bow her head and pray, "OK, Jesus, I'm here. I'll just wait outside while You go in first and prepare the way." She was very successful in her resolutions.

Ephesians 6:11-17 lists the “armor of God,” the tools He has given us to arm ourselves against the daily attacks of this world which enable us to survive and hopefully fuel our light to lead others to Him (Matthew 25:1-13). In Ephesians 6:11-12, Paul clarifies exactly who our struggle is against. It isn’t the difficult boss, the bad diagnosis or even the rude driver that cut us off on the highway. Our struggle is against Satan himself and the influence he has on this world. Satan wants us to be discouraged, impatient, wounded and afraid. He is most delighted when we are angry, sullen, vengeful and hurt. Thankfully, God knows our limitations and has provided items to protect us, once we recognize that we need protection! Because our battle is in the spiritual realm, we need protection of a spiritual nature.

Verse 13: “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.” Be encouraged, you have the strength to accomplish all God has set out for you. He is with you and He will never leave you. This is why we need to remove the barriers that prevent us from trusting Him. We need to be wholly committed to Him and the purpose He has established for us. When God told Abram to leave Haran (Gen 12:1-4), he did it! There were no questions, no maps, no end game in sight. Think of it – if God told you to pack up and leave your home today and live in tents for who knows how long, would you do it?

Verse 14-15: “Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and your feet fitted with readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” The belt of truth, God’s Word, is not a flimsy dress belt that

accessorizes your outfit! No, it is the giant Heavy Weight Champion belt with the huge buckle. It's conspicuous! It is blatantly obvious to us and to all who see us. If we infuse ourselves with God's Word, learn it, take it into our minds and hearts, read it every day, God's teachings will be obvious to us when we find ourselves in a difficult situation. If we apply God's word to our lives in these circumstances, it will be evident to all. The breastplate of righteousness protects our vital organs – lungs, liver, kidneys, but mostly our **heart**. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "don't you know that it's what comes out of a man that makes him unclean, not what goes into a man?" Matthew 12:7-11. Our hearts control our motivations which influence what comes out of us: impatience and anger or compassion and mercy. Jesus makes it clear that our hearts must belong to God. The breastplate of righteousness, knowing God's will, helps us to protect our hearts and behave according to His teachings. Our "feet fitted with readiness" enable us to be obedient because we are ready to carry His message to all. By living His teachings and making His influence on our lives obvious, we illustrate how to focus on heavenly things and not the troubles of this world. By not reacting as others do, we call attention to ourselves which may open doors to carry the gospel. "Be prepared to give an answer for the hope that you have," 1 Peter 3:8-17 reinforces Paul's teachings to live God's Word, make it obvious, and be prepared to answer when asked how we can: "forgive **that** way," "keep our cool **that** way," "remain joyous through adversity **that** way." This is our opportunity to point others to the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

In verse 16, Paul instructs us to “take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.” What a vivid picture of the daily spiritual battle we all face. Satan doesn’t toy with us. He is shooting at us with flaming arrows meant to harm, scar or even destroy us. One of my favorite Martin Luther quotes is, “sing a psalm and spite the devil.” Reminding ourselves of God’s strength and our faith in Him to save us helps us to combat and deter these flaming arrows.

Not only do we need to protect our hearts, but also our minds. The helmet of salvation in verse 17 is the perfect tool. Eve was tempted in the garden because she believed that God didn’t want the best for her. We must refresh our minds – transform them – and not conform to the pattern of this world (Romans 12:2). Our focus needs to be on the eternal and God’s perfect, pleasing Will. We know we will have troubles here on earth; we need to develop the ability to know and recognize that they are temporary. These troubles refine us like fine silver from the dross (Proverbs 25:4) and shape us to better serve God and His purposes. God doesn’t waste anything and every experience we have prepares us to fulfill His purpose for us.

Not only do we need to guard ourselves from attacks, but sometimes we need to be ready to defend and protect ourselves. Matthew 4 records Jesus’ testing in the wilderness and each time He is tempted; He responds with God’s Word. It’s important to remember that attacks can sometimes come from areas we least expect.

Our most reliable form of defense comes from our immediate access to our Savior at any time through prayer. He stands ready, willing and able to come to our rescue if we only ask.

One of my favorite hymns is “What a Friend we have in Jesus”. The lyrics, “oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we did not carry everything to God in prayer” comfort me and remind me of what to do when I don’t know what to do! It can be easy to discount the power of prayer because we generally feel the need to **do** something to earn our salvation, but nothing could be further from the truth. Christianity is different from every other religion in this aspect because Jesus reaches down to us and offers us a free gift that we can never earn. We cannot save ourselves. We can never be good enough. We can never take back all of our harsh words, white lies and selfish tendencies. It is only through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that we can be made righteous enough to be accepted by God and our sins forgiven. Accepting His gift is our only hope. Once we accept His gift and profess that we believe He is God and only through His sacrifice are we saved, our sins are separated from us as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12) and remembered no more. When God looks at us, all He sees is Jesus. But in our “works” oriented world, Satan wants us to be skeptical. He tells us that this solution is too easy, that Jesus’ sacrifice was not enough and we need to add to it. It diminishes Jesus’ power and the importance of His love and gift to us. Ephesians 2:8-9 tells us we are saved by grace, a gift of God, and not earned by works so that no man may boast. Satan wants us to doubt. He wants us to feel defeated, worthless, guilty and ashamed. Jesus lifts our chins, wipes away our tears and tells us “all is forgiven, my child – let your heart be troubled no more.”

Think of the thief on the cross next to Jesus. He did no works, he simply believed and Jesus told him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise," Luke 23:39-43. If Jesus made it this easy for us to receive forgiveness and salvation, why would He then make Himself inaccessible to us? Why would we need a priest to intercede on our behalf? Is this logical? No. Jesus is with us always and we can cry out to Him in our time of need, praise Him in our times of joy, and share all of our thoughts, dreams, tears and weaknesses. He knows them all already anyway. By discussing things with Him, we build our trust in Him and increase our reliance on Him. We begin turning to Him first, not last.

If you are sincere in your repentance and desire to grow closer to God, others in your life are going to notice. They will be watching to see if you are sincere. I will warn you, expect to fail. We all fail. Have your apologies ready and humility standing by! Take hope, we can increase our rate of success by preparing ourselves for adversity and immersing ourselves in God's Word.

Assessment and Further Thought

Do you feel prepared to deal with life's daily challenges? If not, why not? What would it take for you to feel prepared?

What areas of your life do you feel most challenged? What is the specific challenge?

Discuss your challenge with your "cord of three" partner from chapter 3 (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12) if you have one and with Jesus. Can the three of you devise a course of action to help you cope with your challenge better? Role play the situation and your reaction if possible.

Prepare your apology now, so that it will spring to your lips when needed. Do not let the devil gain a foothold (Ephesians 4:26) by allowing situations to fester. Remember, an apology is most meaningful when accompanied by true repentance. Practice below.

Verses for study and encouragement

Luke 12:11b-12 - Do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say

Matthew 25:1-13 - The parable of the ten virgins

Job 19:25 – I know that my Redeemer lives and that in the end He will stand upon the earth

Philippians 4:4 – Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Psalms 119:105 - Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, You know the areas of my life where I am stretched and challenged the most. Please prepare me to deal with difficult situations and preserve my witness for You. Help me to infuse myself with Your Word daily and to pray continuously so that I will always be prepared to respond to Satan's flaming arrows in a manner that honors and glorifies You. Forgive me when I fail and enable me to humble myself, apologize and start over again.

Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Six

Obedience – Know when to go – do not procrastinate, it lessens the blessing

Sometimes I know there are big ripe juicy blackberries in the forest just waiting for me. I know I need to get out there and pick them before the animals or time beat me to them. If I wait too long, heat can dry them out or they can grow mushy on the vine. The problem is I just don't *feel* like picking berries! There can be a multitude of reasons why I don't *feel* like it: it's too hot; I'm too tired; there's a great movie on TV or I'd just rather do something else. Honestly, getting all geared up in a long sleeve shirt with my thermal socks on my arms so I can sweat off my bug spray in 100% humidity is usually the last thing I want to do. But then I start thinking about fresh blackberry cobbler and I gradually forget the temporary discomfort. The memory of blackberry syrup for pancakes gets me off the couch and blackberry muffins distract me while I'm suiting up in my protective gear! I can almost taste the fresh blackberry pie as I grab my bucket and head out into the heat and humidity.

God has a purpose for each and every one of us, whether we have accepted Jesus' gift of eternal life or not. Examples of this are throughout the Bible, but some of my favorites are in the book of Daniel. First, let's recall Deuteronomy 31:14-18 where God warned Israel if they were disobedient and did not keep God's covenant, He would abandon them to their wicked ways. After Moses died, Joshua led the people. After Joshua died, Israel had a series of Judges, then Kings who led them. Reading these books can get monotonous because a pattern of disobedience, punishment, repentance and restoration soon emerges. Each time,

the cycle is repeated the people grow further and further from the Lord and their repentance and recommitment was less sincere and more short-lived. There are four stages to this cycle: stage 1-the people commit to the Lord and serve him faithfully; stage 2- gradually the people drift away and begin to worship other gods; stage 3-the Lord removes his protection from them as a result of their wicked behavior and they are overtaken by neighboring nations; stage 4-the people cry out to the Lord and repent, He forgives and restores them. Finally, 2 Chronicles 36:11-20 explains how and why God handed them all over to the Babylonians.

The book of Daniel is among my favorite books of the Bible. I can read it over and over and find a new nugget of strength, encouragement and love each time. It's easy to see why God chose Daniel and his friends to be among the remnant that survived the fall of Jerusalem and were exiled to Babylon. Their faith and complete trust in the Lord was an example to the entire nation of Babylon many times. Chapter 4 is different from the others in that it isn't God's chosen who are suffering and need rescue, this time it's King Nebuchadnezzar himself. God warns Nebuchadnezzar in a dream and after the miracles that take place in the first three chapters you'd think Nebuchadnezzar would listen! Unfortunately, his pride was his downfall. The story illustrates how God is completely in control, whether we believe in Him and submit our lives to Him or not. God has a purpose for us all.

If you've never read the book of Jonah, take a few minutes to do so. It is four short chapters that give deep insights to our human nature and God's sovereignty. God's purpose for Jonah

was fulfilled, but it took three days in the belly of a whale to convince him God's way was best.

There are times in life when we know what we should do, but we delay. We put it off because the situation or task is unpleasant. We tell ourselves that if we do nothing, it may resolve itself. Or that it's really not our problem in the first place and if we don't do it, someone else will. Maybe we think we're overstepping our bounds and poking our nose in where it shouldn't be, and it's just better to let things play out on their own. Sometimes, as in Jonah's case, we may even be afraid that we will be successful.

We've all been there – a child making poor choices, a friend in over her head, a husband who has different goals and priorities than our own. Do we suffer in silence? Tell ourselves that the cliff rushing toward them won't really hurt that much, and besides it's their choice! Hey, no one ever listens and eventually they are responsible for their own path, so better for them to learn it for themselves the hard way, right? Dear sister, these are the times when we have to prayerfully lay our concerns before the Lord and ask for His wisdom and guidance. We may be spared the confrontation, but I've learned that generally when the Lord places something on my heart and mind, it's because He expects something from me. The longer I delay the more anguish I suffer. I torture myself with thoughts of: "should I tell them? What if this is just my OPINION? If they wanted my advice, they'd ask for it. They'll hate me for saying it" and the classic, "what if I'm wrong?"

The Bible provides guidelines for situations such as these. First, pray about it. Give it over to the Lord and ask Him to show you what, if anything, He wants you to do. If the response still

seems to be telling you that God expects you to handle this and you're like me, you want confirmation, it's ok to be Gideon (Judges 6:36-40) and ask. Being a writer, I like to write down what I want to say to the person and WHY. Is this just a matter of wanting things done MY way? Is this my cautious, skeptical nature getting in the way of someone else's dream? Or do I have very sound reasons and evidence for wanting to intervene? The Bible tells us to correct one another and to speak our corrections *in love*. Can I do that? Or am I too emotionally involved?

Sometimes our area of disobedience is in our own lives. Perhaps it's an area that we are refusing to relinquish control and release to God. I believe this is different than the repentance examination we conducted of ourselves in lesson two. This is where we have identified an area of our life as sinful, but we do not repent of it and we continue the behavior. By disobeying God, we expose ourselves to the consequences of our sin and risk the removal of His protection in our lives. We could also be delaying the fulfillment of His purpose for our life and the blessings He's had planned for us.

For example, I acknowledge that I am overweight. This is caused by my sin of overeating, yet I have not repented of my sin and turned this area of my life over to God. By refusing to relinquish this to Him, I could be exposing myself to health risks caused by being overweight. Back pain, additional strain on my knees and ankles, pre-diabetes and heart disease may all be in my future if I continue on my current path. I am also wasting the monetary resources He has blessed my family with because I need to buy clothes. This is an additional expense I am incurring unnecessarily. I have plenty of clothes, it's just that none of them fit me

anymore. Being overweight also affects others' opinions of me. I may be passed over for promotion or not be considered for a new job because people perceive me as lazy and undisciplined. I am definitely delaying His blessing of feeling confident and comfortable in my own body which may affect my relationship with my husband. If I do not feel comfortable with my appearance, I may avoid sexual contact with my husband which may lead to a myriad of other issues and problems. With so much at stake, why haven't I given this up to God? It's a very good question. Don't I trust that He can overcome it? I trust that God can overcome anything, but I believe I am too weak to succeed. I am not putting my full faith and trust in Him. I am not relying on His strength and love for me. What will it take for me to be obedient and surrender this to God? Sometimes I feel Jonah got off easy with only three days in the belly of the whale.

We need to remember that Jesus' commitment to us began before we were ever conceived, He is certainly not going to desert us when we need him the most. Jesus came to set us free, free from all the forces that enslave us. He stands ready to help whatever our struggle may be. Please understand, dear sister, we cannot be wholly committed to serving Him and fulfilling His purpose for us until we have allowed Him access to our entire life to free us from all our bondage. We must rid ourselves of these things so that we can move forward. Lot's wife disobeyed the angels sent to rescue them from God's wrath when He destroyed Sodom and suffered the consequences (Genesis 19:15-26). Let us all heed God's warnings and obey.

Assessment and Further Thought

What areas of your life are holding back from God? Why do you think you are holding on to them?

List some possible consequences of continued disobedience in this area.

What will it take for you to surrender?

What are your expectations for God's intervention?

Verses for study and encouragement

John 16:33 - "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Isaiah 50:2 – When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? Was my arm too short to deliver you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you? By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, I turn rivers into a desert . . . "

Isaiah 50:9-10 – It is the Sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up. Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of His servant? Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God.

Psalms 62:8 – Trust in Him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, guide me in identifying the areas of my life that I have refused to relinquish to You. Show me the possible consequences of my disobedience and grant me Your strength to finally let go and accept Your healing. Please provide ways for me to rely on You and find support to overcome my waywardness. Enable me to give myself completely to You and Your Will. Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Seven

**Sacrifice - Be willing to do what no one else wants to do, difficulty lasts for a season but
His blessings linger**

For the majority of my berry picking adventures, I have been alone. My husband participated in the process once early on, but honestly I prefer the solitude. Even though the task is difficult, I am comforted by the knowledge that I have provided a service to my family and made use of God's blessings. When I go to pick blackberries, I generally don't tell anyone. I don't ask for volunteers or make a big fuss about the task at hand. Most times I go early in the morning before the heat and the bugs set in. My family only knows I've gone when they see the homemade blackberry syrup on the stove and know that pancakes are in their immediate future!

The book of Ruth is a beautiful story of commitment and redemption, sacrifice and blessings. Ruth was a Moabite who married an Israelite man living in Moab with his family. Her husband's father had died prior to their marriage, so his family consisted of his mother, Naomi, and his brother who also married a Moabite woman. We are not told Ruth's husband's name, but in verse 5 of chapter 1, both he and his brother die. Naomi is left destitute with no husband or son to provide for her. Being in a strange country, she decides to return to her family in Bethlehem. She praises her daughters-in-law for their treatment of her, thanks them for their commitment and urges them to return to their own families to seek a future for themselves, releasing them from their obligation to her. One agrees to

return to her own people, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi and she renounces her family, country and gods to remain with Naomi.

There is so much that we are not told in the book of Ruth. We are not given information on Ruth's family or Ruth and Naomi's relationship prior to the deaths of her sons. We're not even told how or why Naomi's sons died. We are left to speculate and draw our own conclusions as to Ruth's motivation and commitment to Naomi. Perhaps it was the thought of Naomi making such a long trip alone. Maybe Ruth had an undying love for her husband and knew that he would have wanted her to care for his mother. Did Ruth feel that Naomi needed her more than her own family? Or had she witnessed something in Naomi's family that was different from the way her own people, the Moabites lived? Something that appealed to her so much that she was willing to sacrifice stability among the known world of her own country, for the risks involved in moving to a new country. Whatever her reasons, Ruth would not be swayed. Her commitment to Naomi required her to embark on a long journey to a strange place where no one knew her. She had no guarantees that she would be accepted among them. After all, Naomi was returning home to friends and family and a place familiar to her. What if Naomi's people rejected Ruth? Naomi refers to herself as being "too old to have a husband", what would happen to Ruth when Naomi died? Ruth seems to consider none of this. Her only concern is her life-long commitment to Naomi.

The disciples made similar commitments to Jesus. The books of Matthew, Mark and Luke all record Peter's comments to Jesus that the disciples had "left everything to follow you" (Matthew 19:27, Mark 10:28; Luke 18:28). Think of it, they had left their parents, their

livelihoods, even wives and children to travel the countryside with a man that many claimed was out of his mind. They turned their backs on those who were relying on them for financial support. They made their decisions suddenly, immediately when Jesus called them. They didn't return to kiss their children goodbye. They didn't make a plan to provide for their family during their absence, they didn't even know how long they would be gone! They completely relinquished their reputations, positions and everyone they loved.

When I first became a Christian, I was afraid to pray for Jesus to take all of me. I didn't want to surrender to Him completely because I was terrified of what He would ask of me. I didn't want to be a missionary in Africa. I could not bear to see the suffering of the children, their hunger and illnesses. I was overcome with grief at the evil men do to each other and I was certain I wouldn't last a day before I would march out to right the wrongs I had witnessed. Somehow I convinced myself that this was what Jesus wanted from me and with a heavy heart I began preparing to accept His assignment. I attended classes on becoming a missionary and involved myself in missions' groups. I slowly let go of material things and developed a plan to completely remove physical and financial attachments to my possessions. My husband and I had just started dating and I already knew that I loved him more than anyone, but I also believed that he was too good for me and the Lord would never allow me to have such a blessing. I committed to Jesus that I would not do anything to further the relationship, so He could begin drawing Tim away to his own future plan. Every time I prayed this way, the phone rang and it would be Tim calling. Then my grandfather became ill.

As a child, I spent a great deal of time with my grandparents. I travelled with them and spent weekends, vacations and day-to-day activities with them. I even lived with them for roughly six years of my life. I would not be the person I am today without their love and commitment to raising me. They were the constants in my life when everything else was changing. I did not have a good home life. My parents married young and were not ready for the commitment of family life when I was born. There was no consistency between them and we lived all over the city. My parents divorced when I was eight. I attended six grade schools, two Junior high schools and two Senior high schools before I graduated, so I had little chance to form friendships and bonds with others. Through it all, my grandparents were always there to provide stability in the midst of uncertainty and to comfort the scared little girl that I was most of the time.

My grandparents were a “matched set”, perfect bookends that complemented each other. Neither was good without the other. My grandfather did the driving and handled the financial area of their lives. My grandmother did the cooking and cleaning and basically made the house a home. Each of them in their own way taught me to be respectful, honest, trustworthy, dependable and consistent. Their home was an oasis to me, a place where the world made sense and the universe behaved in a uniform manner. I knew their expectations of me and did my best to live up to them. I learned that “boring” was good.

When my grandfather became ill with multiple myeloma cancer, I was devastated, but I knew I had to be strong for my grandmother. Their children, my mom and uncle, both had their own issues and were unable to care for their parents. So, the responsibility fell to me.

In my mind, there was never a question as to whether I would be the one to help. They never asked me, I volunteered. Yes, there were times when I was tired and just didn't think I could make it through one more day. I often felt I couldn't spend another lunch hour feeding my grandfather broth while he was in hospice because he couldn't move his arms and wouldn't eat for anyone else but me. I was overwhelmed trying to plan my days and continue working a full time job while providing dinner and companionship to my grandmother every night. I needed to make sure she had groceries, her bills were paid and her laundry done, but also keep up my own household simultaneously. Tim was a tremendous help to me during this time. It still brings tears to my eyes every time I remember coming home on a Saturday evening after spending the day at hospice with my grandfather to find that Tim had cut my lawn, without me asking or even hinting that it needed to be done. If I hadn't already been in love with him, that would have done it for certain.

When my grandfather passed in early September, the commitment to my grandmother did not end. It seemed most logical for me to sell my house and move in with her, but before any serious preparations could be made my grandmother entered a nursing home due to complications from COPD and died six months later.

Even though the events took place over a decade ago, there isn't a day that goes by that I don't miss them. They never got to see my wedding, or our new house, or any of the joys Tim and I have experienced together. Tim and my grandfather met a few times, but never got to know each other well. It is one of the great sorrows of my life because I know they

would have liked each other and gotten along very well. Tim and my grandfather are so similar that sometimes it's scary. One particular habit they share is whistling. My grandfather whistled frequently and the first time I heard Tim whistle, I got goosebumps. Tim proposed while my grandmother was in the nursing home and we married a few weeks after she passed.

When I look back on that period of my life, I see things that I was too close to see at the time. I was preparing to become a missionary and relinquish all of my physical possessions and everyone I loved. I had committed myself to serving Jesus wherever and however He needed me and I accepted the fact that I might not return home again. Jesus spared me that assignment and instead granted me the task of caring for those I loved. He rewarded me with the blessing of my life, my wonderful husband.

Altogether, eighteen months passed from when my grandfather became seriously ill to when my grandmother passed away. It was a very difficult time in my life. It was hard work. It was stressful. There were days when I felt I was going to lose my mind with grief. I cried more tears than I knew I had in me. But I would never give up those experiences. I grew closer to my grandparents than I ever could have without a crisis of this nature. I knew them as an adult and understood the importance of the principles they had taught me of consistency, stability, and commitment and how to apply them. I learned to rely on Jesus as no other event could have taught me. I made it through the fire of refinement and came out the other side a better person having been stripped of my selfish tendencies, my professional ambition and impatient attitudes.

Dear sister, do not shrink from the hard tasks. Do the things that no one else wants to do. Be the person who washes the dishes after Thanksgiving dinner to give the hostess (if it isn't you) a chance to relax. Be the one to take out the trash, clean up the mud, run the errands. Volunteer for the behind the scenes work of nursery duty, envelope stuffer or floor sweeper. Those who are last will be made first (Matthew 20:16). Do not fear what Jesus may ask of you. Do not refuse to sacrifice to Him what is His, what He rightfully purchased through His sacrifice on the cross for you. You are not your own, you have been bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20a) and although we are not promised rewards here, rest assured that your treasure will be stored for you in heaven (Matthew 6:19-21).

Assessment and Further Thought

What sacrifice are you afraid Jesus will ask of you?

How will you prepare to accept this assignment?

Is there someone right now that needs your help?

Do you already know what task Jesus has for you? Have you been resisting this assignment?

Why?

Verses for study and encouragement

James 4:17 -“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins”

Luke 9:23-25 – ²³ Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. ²⁵ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?

Matthew 6:19-21 - ¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Luke chapter 12

Deuteronomy chapter 28 – blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, enable me to take the leap of faith necessary to serve You wholeheartedly.

Grant me Your wisdom and discernment. Lead me like a sheep and prepare me for the task

You have assigned to me. Give me better eyes to see the blessings and purposefulness of

the assignment. Help me to recognize the lessons You have for me and allow me to learn

them the first time. Help me to become the woman You intend me to be. Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Eight

Patience – Know when ripe, don't pick too early, Large crop every other year wait for His timing

Some days I just wake up wanting pancakes. And in late July after the strawberries and blueberries are long gone, my mouth starts watering for fresh blackberries. Depending on the weather, the blackberries might not be ready yet. If we've had a cool dry summer, they may need another week or so. I can pick them early, but the flavor won't be as sweet. They may be too seedy or not fit to eat at all. There's also the cyclical nature of how the blackberries themselves reproduce. You see, blackberries grow on canes and the first year a cane sprouts from the ground, it produces very few blackberries because it's spending its energy on growth and maturity. Even though our bramble has been there for years, the canes go through a period of growth and renewal. During this time, the amount of berries produced will not be as high as the year following. So even though I may have a craving for fresh syrup and jam, there just may not be enough berries to fill all my sweets-centered dreams.

Abram and Sarai were promised a son, an heir to the great wealth the Lord had given to them. God had also promised that He would build a great nation from Abram and his descendants and the entire world would be blessed through him. But Sarai was old, well past the age of child-bearing, and to their human understanding God's promise seemed impossible. Sarai even blames God for needing to solve this problem for Him in Genesis 16:2 when she says, "The Lord has kept me from having children." So Sarai devised a plan to help

God keep his promise to Abram. She tells Abram to sleep with her servant girl, Hagar, so they can build a family through her. After Hagar conceives, the real trouble begins and the effects of this decision are still felt within the Middle East today.

There are similar poor choices made throughout the Bible, decisions made without consulting the Lord. Genesis 19:30-38 tells the tale of Lot's daughters who had the mistaken belief that the only way to preserve their family line was through incest with their father.

The Israelites made a treaty with the Gibeonites because they did not consult the Lord (Joshua 9:14) in direct violation of God's command to them in Deuteronomy 7:1-6.

Each situation was not entered into with the intent of direct disobedience to God; however, they illustrate the influence of pride in our lives. Sarai assumed she needed to solve God's problem of an unfulfilled promise. She believed her solution was something God had not considered. God needed her help to solve the dilemma. Lot's daughters saw the problem of the extinguishment of their father's line and instead of trusting in the Lord to provide husbands for them, they did what was best in their own eyes believing they found a solution unknown to God. The Israelites examined the Gibeonites' evidence and felt they were qualified to make the decision to enter into a treaty. They did not need God's advice; they could handle their own affairs.

In all of these instances, there are consequences to the poor decision made. Ishmael's descendants became nations that lived in hostility toward all the tribes related to them (Genesis 25:18), and Lot's daughters' sons became the nations of Moab and the Ammonites.

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt your prayers were unanswered and all of your tears were unnoticed by God? Has His silence pushed you to the brink of despair? To us, immediate resolution is needed and the lack of God's intervention can seem to be an invitation for us to rush in and save the day. Psalm 46:10 implores us to "be still, and know that I am God." As we grow closer to Him and learn His Word, we will begin to recognize His voice (John 10:27) and it becomes easier to discern where God wants us to get involved and where He wants us to wait. I've heard that God is never late, but He seldom misses opportunities to be early! It is in these periods of waiting that God works miracles. The hardest thing for me to remember is that the tough situation I may find myself in isn't always about me. God may want me to delay action while He works in the minds and hearts of others. God knows that I am anxiously waiting in the wings as the dutiful understudy ready to hit the spotlight. But the situation may be focused on someone else, someone who needs to call out to Him in their distress. If I rush in too early, they may not know He sent me. They may not recognize that God provided me as an answer to their prayer if my intervention comes before they have a chance to submit their request. God may need to bring another crisis in the person's life and put roadblocks in my way to prevent my interference. Saul/Paul had been suffering from blindness for three days after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus when God sends Ananias to cure him (Acts 10-19). Saul/Paul fasted during that time while Jesus worked on his heart and in his mind. Maybe that's how long it took Paul to cry out to Jesus that he needed Him. Ananias arrives just in time to assure Paul his prayers have been answered and he is forgiven.

Another area where I need to frequently rein in my enthusiasm is volunteering. As a child in class, my hand was the first to shoot up in response to a question. As an adult, not much has changed. When the church expresses a need, I am immediately looking for the sign-up sheet. As you can imagine, my eagerness to help has caused me to overcommit. I have frequently had to disappoint others by admitting I am overextended. The cure for me finally came when I realized that by committing to help in an area that I was later unable to fulfill, I had actually robbed someone else of the blessing to get involved. Someone who may have been more talented in the area needed and would have lived up to the commitment.

Dear sister, God does not need our help. This does not mean that He does not have work for us to do, but it is in His timing and not ours. Those of us who have been forgiven much are eager to show Him our gratitude. Sometimes waiting for the call can be the hardest part.

Assessment and Further Thought

Are there instances in your life where your pride gets in the way of waiting for the Lord?

Do you feel compelled to help God solve a difficult problem in your life?

Why do you think your solution is better than God's?

Do you most relate to the eager understudy or the reluctant advisor? Are there ways you can incorporate aspects of both to become a patient, but enthusiastic helper?

Verses for study and encouragement

Psalm 130:5-6 - I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I

wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Ephesians 4:15 - Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church

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

Galatians 6:1-2 - Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, please help me to wait for You and Your timing before rushing in with my own solutions. Save me from pride that deceives me into thinking that You need my help to devise an answer to a problem. Prevent me from intervening too soon. Remind me to seek You and Your counsel before I intrude in a situation and possibly make matters worse. Help me to curb my good intentions until I have sought and receive Your direction. Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Nine

Gratitude – Blessings aren't missing sometimes we need to adjust our perspective. Don't judge a berry (blessing) by its size (smallest can be the sweetest).

When I get to the bramble, it can seem as if there aren't many berries to be picked. As I look around the tops of the canes, only a few may be visible immediately. By changing my perspective, dozens of berries are revealed hanging below the leaves. Sometimes I sit on the ground, carefully, and pick the berries from underneath. Even then, I frequently need to turn at 45 degree angles to shift my survey of the area. I have a tendency to focus on the largest berries, assuming that they are the best. They can be very juicy and flavorful, but they may also contain more seeds. The smaller berries may not appear to be as tasty, but in reality they are usually much sweeter than their larger cousins. It's important for me to remember not to "judge" the berry only by its appearance, and to learn to be grateful for each one and its individual characteristics.

The story of Joseph is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. I am outraged with Jacob when he discovers he was tricked into marrying Leah after working seven years for Rachel. I ache with Rachel in her barrenness, and I rejoice at the long awaited birth of her first son, Joseph. I dote over him with Jacob and I understand his attachment to the boy after Rachel's death. I ponder the meaning of Joseph's dreams and question Jacob's judgment in sending Joseph after his brothers alone, a decision I'm certain he regrets every day that he is separated from his beloved son.

Joseph's older brothers are jealous of their father's favoritism of Joseph. Jacob did not recognize the danger he placed his son in by showering him with special gifts and attentiveness. The resentment grew so strong among them they even contemplated murder! In the end, their greed superseded their envy and they sell Joseph into

slavery. When Joseph eventually winds up a servant in an Egyptian household, what is his attitude? Is he sullen, lazy or uncooperative? Does he attempt to escape? Does he pull the “don’t you know who I am” card and offer bribes to anyone willing to carry a message to his father promising a reward for his safe return? Honestly, if my dad were Jacob, a wealthy shepherd who doted on me day and night, I would have been telling everyone I came into contact with that my daddy was rich and he’d pay a LOT of money to get me back! Joseph does none of this. Instead, he devotes himself to the work assigned to him in such a way that he becomes distinguished and trusted by his master. He is given charge of the entire household and over servants who were there before him. Yet, we are not told that any of them resent him for it, leaving us to assume he is humble and treats others with respect.

What motivated Joseph to accept his new circumstance in life? Did he feel he had brought it on himself, talking about his dreams where the sun and moon and stars all bowed down to him? Did God speak to him and reassure him he was not alone? Was he expecting that his father was riding to the rescue and would arrive any day?

Joseph made the best of his predicament and served his master well. When he is falsely accused and thrown in prison, his attitude does not change. The warden also recognizes Joseph as trustworthy, hard-working and fair and gives him a position of authority in the jail. What was Joseph’s secret that allowed him to respond to these unwarranted events with grace and dignity?

Joseph trusted in the Lord. Maybe Jacob related the stories of his own life to Joseph, stories of deception and forgiveness, faithfulness and fraud. Had he heard the tales of working for Laban for fourteen years to earn two wives, when only one was desired? How about the hard work of shepherding flocks, only to have his pay changed time and time again? These unjust treatments were witnessed by God who delivered Jacob when the time was right. Perhaps it was the dreams that God had sent to Joseph, assuring him that he was meant to serve a bigger purpose? The

foretelling of God's promise to him that he would someday be in a position of great authority. Did Joseph understand that God was preparing him for his ultimate purpose? Joseph knew that he was in God's hands and whatever happened to him was somehow according to God's plan. This was enough for him. He trusted God with his future. Joseph's life demonstrates God's sovereignty and His long term plan. Genesis 50:20 is one of the most beautiful verses in the entire Bible, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." Joseph's forgiveness is genuine, his humility is authentic and his submission to God complete. Joseph kept his eyes on God and His purpose and not his own circumstances. Paul reinforces this attitude in Philippians 4:11-12 where he teaches us that contentment comes not from how well our needs and wants are fulfilled, but in understanding that our strength comes from Jesus alone.

Dear sister, Jesus tells us that we will have troubles in this world. Those preachers who exhort a "health and wealth" gospel are not telling you the truth. This place is not our home and happiness here should not be our goal. Consider yourself a slave in Egypt, in God's training grounds for whatever is to come. This is the time that we are tested to see if we can be faithful with a little, and prove ourselves worthy of being trusted with much. Luke 12:42-48 tells us what the Lord expects from us and what our responses should be. Those who are entrusted with much and prove themselves to be good stewards will be rewarded with a larger role to play for God and His kingdom.

There are times when I find myself disappointed that my prayers were not answered in the way I desired. My expectations may be to have the Lord swoop in and solve a problem in one grand gesture, completely eradicating the crisis so we can all move on with our lives in peace and contentment. He of course knows what fickle creatures we are and if all our obstacles were removed, we would soon drift away from Him. The Lord's Prayer asks only for **today's** bread, not for a lifetime's supply. God delivered manna **daily**, not a week or a month in advance. Each day, the

Israelites were reminded of God's faithful provision and they learned reliance on Him. Each month our bills are paid may seem like a small thing when we really want our mortgage completely paid off. Learning to be grateful for His provision for today, for the smaller blessings in life, is the first step to increased trust in Him and the confidence that He is always with us. He doesn't want to just provide for us and then go on His way. He desires the close personal relationship built through our daily dependence on Him.

In Lesson One, I wrote about my Gratitude Journal. The main purpose was to re-train myself to recognize everything in my life as a blessing from the Lord. Yes, there are the big events that we tend to focus our attention and when they are resolved, it is cause for celebration. If we train ourselves to examine every aspect of our life as a gift straight from His hand, we begin to see the bigger picture of the world around us. We learn about God's purposes and how we need to change our thinking and motivations. Viewing the world through an eternal perspective diminishes our own importance and sets us on the road to true humility. Our temporary discomforts become investments in our heavenly future. We develop a heart after God's own.

Dear sister, do not take God's blessings and provisions for granted. Realize that every day you and your family spend healthy, well-fed and safe is a direct result of His protection. His intervention shields you, His love encompasses you. Maybe you haven't gotten to vacation in Disney World, but every day you spend with a roof over your head is a good one. There are many families who have lost homes and livelihoods. If you've ever spent more time in a hospital than at home in a single day, you appreciate sleeping in your own bed and using your own bathroom!

I have a vivid memory of having my hair done while my grandfather was ill. It was a rare day when I took three hours to myself. My hairdresser commented that I had not been in for a while and I related the family commitments that had kept me away. When she took me to the shampoo sink, she spent a great deal of time washing my

hair gently and massaging my scalp. There was just something about the process that made me feel her compassion for me. It was as if she wanted me to know how much my sacrifice for others was appreciated. Tears streamed from my eyes down into my ears as I lay back in the sink. It was one of the most tender things anyone has ever done for me. I don't know if she understood how much her simple act of kindness meant to me, but I will never forget it. It was a small thing that meant so much.

There are people in our lives that need our help. We may find ourselves in situations where a responsibility rests completely on us. When my grandfather was in hospice, I couldn't understand why the Lord allowed him to continue suffering for so long. There was no hope of recovery, why didn't the Lord release him from his pain and bring him home? One day when I arrived to feed my grandfather his lunch, one of the nurses commented on my devotion. She told me it was rare to see someone spend so much time with a family member while in hospice. Most people have a difficult time seeing their family members in such decline and they avoid visiting. I replied that I didn't really feel the situation was about me, but about my grandfather and how he needed to know he was not abandoned and forgotten. It was my recognition of a life well-lived and gratitude for the love he had shown me all my life. I wonder sometimes if my care and dedication during the months of my grandfather's stay there influenced any of the staff, if it provided a glimpse into the faithfulness of Jesus Christ that required months to illustrate and would not have been possible over a few days' time.

Sometimes just a smile of encouragement given to a stranger in the grocery store can make someone's day. I remember hearing a story of a man who committed suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. When they examined his apartment afterward, they found a note he'd left saying, "I'm going to walk to the [Golden Gate] bridge. If one person smiles at me on the way, I will not jump." Be the person who smiles. Be the ray of sunshine in someone's life that tells them, "Jesus loves you."

Assessment and Further Thought

Do you tend to focus on the negative aspects of a situation?

How can you re-train yourself to see things with “better eyes” – to recognize the benefits of an event?

Consider a troubling time in your life, past or present. Can you see ways the Lord may have been working in others’ lives and not just your own?

Commit to paying someone a genuine compliment daily. It can be the grocery store clerk’s hairstyle, or a co-worker’s outfit, but it must be sincere.

Verses for study and encouragement

Ruth 2:10-12 - At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?”

Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Psalm 4 - Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer. How long will you people turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods. Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him. Tremble and do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord. Many, Lord, are asking, “Who will bring us prosperity?” Let the light of your face shine on us. Fill my heart with joy when their grain and new wine abound. In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, please help me to see the world and my place in it with better eyes. Help me to recognize Your hand in my daily life and all the blessings that you bestow on me and my family. Show me Your purpose and fill me with gratitude that You have included me. Bring to mind those who need me and show me how best to serve You. Help me to remember that others are watching my behavior and reactions in bad situations and enable me to react in a manner that brings glory to You at all times. Amen

Additional items for prayer

Lesson Ten

Gratitude – Use the berries (His blessings) wisely, do not waste.

Recognize and appreciate all He did to provide for you, Taste and see that He is Good.

I feel like a kid at Christmas! I've just returned from berry picking and I can hardly decide what to make first. Should it be blackberry dumplings? Syrup for pancakes or ice cream is quick and easy to prepare. How about blackberry cobbler? Whatever I decide, the one thing I know is that no berry will go to waste. After my immediate blackberry mania has been satisfied, I begin making preparations to preserve the berries leftover. If I have enough berries and time, I make jam. If there are only a few cups remaining or time is short, I freeze them. After so much expectation and discomfort, I take any steps necessary to ensure a single berry is not squandered. I also take the time to enjoy the deliciousness of what the Lord has provided. The anticipation has made the ultimate fulfillment of successful berry picking so much sweeter. I have a new appreciation for all God provides.

Judges 13-16 relate the events of Samson's life which had great potential, that was not completely fulfilled. Vengeance, greed, betrayal and violence are throughout the story. The Lord used Samson to confront the Philistines through an ill-conceived marriage to an untrustworthy woman. This set the stage for his entire life. The Philistines spent every waking moment trying to destroy Samson. Whenever I read these chapters, I find myself longing to see the good Samson accomplished. The only clue is given in Judges 15:20, "Samson led Israel for twenty years in the days of the Philistines." Although he killed many

Philistines, he did not free Israel from their bondage. With his great strength and God's commission of his life, I've always felt that he could have accomplished so much more.

Waste in our society seems to have become a hobby. When I was growing up, I was taught that waste, **any** waste, was sinful. You cleaned your plate and saved empty containers that could be re-used. Tonight's dinner leftovers were tomorrow's lunch. You didn't wear your good school clothes outside to play in and old clothes were re-purposed for other family members or dolls or even to create new things such as purses, pillow cases, or placemats. Coffee grounds and egg shells were saved to put in the garden. If something broke, you didn't throw it away and buy a new one. You found a way to repair it. I can remember helping my grandfather re-web lawn chairs – who does that nowadays? You found efficient ways to accomplish more in the same amount of time by combining tasks, planning errand trips so there was no back-tracking and writing the grocery list in the order the items were arranged in the store so you didn't waste time going back and forth among the aisles. Oh and our new habits of “just hanging out, wasting time”? Yeah, that would **never** have flown. Unless it was raining or you had a fever of a 104, the TV was off all day. It was only after dinner when it was time to relax and start getting ready for bed that the TV, commonly referred to as “that idiot box,” came on for a few hours. Of course we only had three channels back then and no VCRs or DVDs, so I guess I didn't really feel deprived. There wasn't that much on anyway.

What causes us to waste? Sometimes, it's just a lack of planning. I forget to write something on my list and have to go back for it later. I'm trying something new and I make

mistakes. I get lazy in my old age and just decide that it's more trouble than it's worth to mend an old shirt and I don't think anyone else would want it either. We all have instances where we just don't think something has a further use, or we didn't like our meal and it isn't worth carrying home, or we just need to take a break and lay around for a few hours. It's when this behavior becomes habitual that we need to ask ourselves why and make some changes.

The important thing to remember is that rest and rejuvenation of our body and spirit is not laziness or a waste of time. Our finite bodies require it! So even though the Lord brings people into our path every day that need our help, it doesn't mean He expects us to take on everyone's problems. We have a limited amount of resources and need to prayerfully seek His guidance in the best way to use these resources. We need to prioritize effectively while being realistic about our limitations. Jesus forgives the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane by saying, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:40-41). As I shared earlier, I have had to face this in my own life when overextending myself by impulsively volunteering without considering the time commitment required. Once we determine that our current commitments do not allow for us to accept further responsibility, we need to be firm in our decision. Those whom we have helped in the past may just assume that we will continue to help as before. We need to address this early on to avoid more stress, confusion and hard feelings than necessary.

Why does God provide blackberries in the first place? After all, variety in our diets isn't really necessary to sustain us, God proved this by only providing Manna for the Israelites for

forty years. God does want us to feel joy and pleasure in this life. He provides the beauty of a sunset, the pleasing scent of roses, and the best blessing of all, the emotion of love. Can you imagine a life of suffering each and every day with no hope of relief? There are many Christians around the world who suffer persecution and misery all their lives. While God provides strength and endurance for the tasks He has set out for us, He also knows what fragile creatures we are. He remembers that we are made from dust (Psalm 103:13-14). We are weak and fearful and require His constant reassurances. Since He knows us so well, He also knows that we need encouragement. Sometimes the encouragement needs to be physical and tangible – our loving spouse, an excited pet anxious to see us, or the sincere smile from a stranger. Even the occasional blackberry can be a reminder of His faithfulness and provisions, not just to sustain us in the bare minimum requirement, but abundantly!

Dear sister, Jesus' plans for us are to bless us and prosper us. To enable us to be a light to the rest of the dark and weary world, a beacon to those hurting. I thank you for beginning your journey toward Him. By tearing off your chains of bondage and learning to trust Him and His ways, you commit yourself to serving Him in gratitude and love. You acknowledge His free gift of salvation and experience the joy of knowing your future in eternity is secure with Him, no matter the struggles we may endure here. Train yourself to see the world through a heavenly perspective and remember we are only visitors here.

Assessment and Further Thought

Can you identify areas of your life where you are consistently wasteful? Why do you believe this is the case?

Are there steps you can take to reduce waste in your life?

Do you regularly take time to rest and rejuvenate yourself? If so, share some of your experiences. For example, you and your spouse watch a sunset at least once a week.

What particular blessings the Lord provides do you enjoy the most?

Verses for study and encouragement

Psalm 34:8 - Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Colossians 4:5 – Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Psalm 81:10 - I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.

Ephesians 5:15-17 – Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

Proverbs 6:6-11 - Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest— and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man.

Thought to remember: What if you woke up tomorrow with only the things you thanked God for today?

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, open my eyes to the areas of my life where I am unnecessarily wasteful and show me ways to improve. Help me to develop an “attitude of gratitude” in all aspects of my life and to recognize Your hand and blessings every day. Grant me discernment to determine when I am being lazy and when I am restoring myself. Give me wisdom to decide how to prioritize and use the resources, including my time, in a manner that pleases and glorifies You. Help me to determine my boundaries and gracefully, but firmly, enforce them when needed. Amen

Additional items for prayer