

The
ONE
YEAR®



THE ONE YEAR®

HOME & GARDEN DEVOTIONS

Sandra Byrd



This book is a gem! With warmth and transparency, Sandra Byrd invites you into her life, which will remind you of your own. Her engaging stories entwined with scriptural truth will touch your heart, while her practical tips will motivate you to action. You will smile, you will think, and you will deepen your walk with God through these inspired daily readings.

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The One Year Home and Garden Devotions

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WELCOME!

I live a busy life, just like most people I know. God is the most important person in my life, and yet it seems like he gets so little of my time. I often think of the passage in Deuteronomy 11 that warns us not to fall away, become distracted, and worship other gods or there will be unpleasant consequences. God urges those of us who are parents to teach our children his truths throughout the day—when we are sitting at home or walking along the road, when we wake up and when we lie down. He’s asking us to invite him and his truths into our seemingly mundane routines because those moments are often when he draws near. God, as the perfect parent, illustrates his truth and love through the day-to-day situations we encounter. So many of us yearn to hear from God. He’s there, talking to us throughout the banalities of everyday life, if we just tune our ears to hear.

This devotional is a collection of thoughts and truths that God has impressed on me as I have journeyed with him through daily life in the home. When I let the dog out in the morning, already worrying about what the hours ahead might hold, I may spy a tiny sparrow hopping along the ground. *See how I care for that sparrow?* he asks. *How much more valuable to me are you!* And then I relax into his peace, looking and listening for him throughout the day.

I’d love to hear the stories of how God works in your everyday life too. We’re down on the ground together, planting flowers and pulling weeds. Please contact me at my website, www.sandrabyrd.com, and bless me with the insights God has given you.

*Yoked together,
Sandra*

JANUARY

Scented Linen Water

I don't know what makes clean sheets so comforting, but the first night spent sleeping on them feels like an absolute luxury. You can reproduce that feeling all the time by spritzing linen water on your sheets after turning down the bed. Spray from a few feet above the bed and allow the sheets to dry for a minute or two before you climb in. The spray also works well when ironing clothes or even just to refresh a room.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

4 ounces distilled water

25-30 drops of essential oils of your choice (my favorites are pre-blended "unwind" or "sleep inducing" mixes)

A small, clean bottle with a spray nozzle

DIRECTIONS

Blend all ingredients together, then test the spray on a blanket or towel, or just mist into the air and walk into it as it falls. You may like to add more essential oil if you prefer a stronger scent.

Be sure not to add coloring; I did that once and stained my sheets!

For this month's free printable, go to <http://tyndal.es/homeandgarden>.



January 1

YOU CAN'T DIY

One holds the ladder while another one screws in the lightbulb. One chops the vegetables while another makes the rice. One offers advice on a project she's already finished while her friend listens and picks up tips. One mother shares her completed parenting journey with a woman who has just put her feet upon the path. John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, wrote, "Loneliness is the first thing which God's eye named not good." God has provided us with family, friends, colleagues, and ultimately himself so we need not go through this life on our own.

I love working in my home and garden, and I enjoy watching all of the do-it-yourself shows on TV. I've noticed, though, that rarely is anyone on any of those shows "doing it yourself," as in, alone. There is a team of workers, craftsmen, friends, spouses, and all manner of helpers pitching in to get the job properly done. This is exactly right! Any project, as well as life itself, is not meant to be accomplished on our own. Grief divided, joy shared, and all that.

Whether your goal is to replace the flooring in your front room, put some drapes up in your first apartment, plant an herb garden to experiment with cooking, or just learn how to be a better friend, wife, mother, sister, or worker, you'll find guidance in your everyday life as God meets you—as he always does—right where you are.

A new year has begun, and a fresh start, like fresh sheets, ushers in a sense of renewal and comfort, a sense of being happy at home—even a home under remodeling, renovation, and upgrading. During our lives, we are under continual renovation. Welcome home!



*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him,
so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

ROMANS 15:13



January 2

BARED SOLES

A few years back I bought a small, cheerful plaque and installed it just outside our front door. It teases, “Please, bare your soles!” Although most guests are okay with this request, some (especially short people like me, who lose precious inches in the process) are uncomfortable at first. Bare feet make us feel vulnerable somehow. Humble. But also, perhaps, more intimate with those we then spend time with inside.

The reason behind the policy, of course, is to protect our home from the mud and muck that shoes inevitably pick up during daily life. Streets are dusted with dirt or iced with dirty snow. Sidewalks are pasted with chewed gum, and the car’s carpet is littered with old french fries.

Even if you don’t have a “Shoes off, please” sign, most people have a mat outside their front doors. Very often it says, “Welcome.” Welcome, friends. Welcome, family. Welcome, strangers. It may have a lovely fleur-de-lis design or a sun painted on it, but it is also usually made with stiff bristles or tough rubber for serious cleaning. Considerate guests scrape their shoes against the mat before entering as a sign of respect for the home.

We read in Scripture that Joshua and Moses were commanded to remove their sandals as a gesture of respect in the presence of God. It’s good to realize that God is near and personal, but we sometimes forget to treat him and his house with appropriate reverence. Sunday mornings can be a rush out the door. Before I leave for church, or at least on the way, I try to take a quiet moment for confession and repentance, scraping off the mud and muck of the week. Taking off my shoes before entering the building. Approaching God’s house with humility, respect, and “clean feet.” Not criticizing his family, his decor, or the music once I arrive in his house.

I want my guests to feel welcome, but I want them to respect my home too. How much more should I show respect when God welcomes me into *his* house!



When the LORD saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush. . . . “Do not come any closer,” the LORD warned. “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.”

EXODUS 3:4-5, NLT



January 3

HOUSEHOLD IDOLS

You might be surprised to know that I, a committed Christian of many years, have a household idol. Well, *I* don't say it's an idol, but my husband does. He says that my day goes according to what the idol tells me. If it gives me good news, I'm happy, and if it gives me bad news, I'm grumpy. I tend to visit it several times a day. You might think of it as a Magic 8 Ball for grown-ups.

I dance with my idol. Well, not really, but kind of. The hokey pokey. I put my left foot on, I move my left foot back, I put my right foot on, then I lean way forward or back, trying to get my idol to say what I want it to say.

You've guessed, haven't you? It's my scale.

I care about my health, and I know my weight affects that. This is the time of year when most of us think about weight and health. I'd rather be one size smaller next year than one size larger, and I want to be around to enjoy my family and friends for a good long time. To be healthy enough to do every good work that God has prepared for me would be wonderful. I've come to realize, though, that when I spend too much time fretting about my weight, I use up time and energy that might have been available for those good works, and I become vulnerable to self-condemnation, which makes me question my goodness, my beauty, or my abilities.

I still check my scale once in a while, and that's okay. But I'm not letting it guide my day or my mood anymore. Instead, I focus on the eternal tasks and values first, and on the God who tells me I am of great worth to him regardless of my earthly, gravity-bound weight.



For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

1 TIMOTHY 4:8



January 4

MEASURE TWICE, CUT ONCE

I sat in the guest room, alone, carefully taking measurements of my new distressed dresser so that I could precisely fit each drawer with a beautiful black-and-white French toile liner. I had purchased only two rolls, so if I measured incorrectly and came up short, one drawer would be—horrors!—unlined. What would my guests think? What would Martha do? Hubs had just told me that perhaps he himself would become as distressed as the dresser if I spent much more time and money fixing up the room. “It’s only this one room,” I told him. He looked at me skeptically. He’d heard that before.

While I took the measurements of the drawers, I also took measure of myself. Was that a promise I intended to keep—it’s only this one room? Or would I break it? When I said things like that, did I really mean them, or had they become meaningless conversational patter, easily discarded when the stress of the moment had passed?

“If this medical test turns out okay, I really will start exercising every day.”

“If I get this job/raise/bonus, we’ll use the money only to pay off debt. And tithes.”

“Once this room is finished, I’m done.”

“After the holidays, I’m going to eat healthier.”

The best of intentions often leads to the worst of follow-through. We make these “promises” to ourselves, to our loved ones, to the Lord. But when we don’t hold ourselves to the words we say, something breaks. I took a long time to measure the pretty drawer liners because they cost me something. If I cut them too short, I could patch them together, but I could not make them whole again. “Measure twice, cut once,” a seamstress friend once told me. Think things through before promising. Once cut, most things are not easily made whole again.



*Don't trap yourself by making a rash promise to God
and only later counting the cost.*

PROVERBS 20:25, NLT

January 5

ALWAYS IN HOT WATER

Part 1

We were fortunate to buy a house built by a master plumber. He'd installed brushed-nickel fixtures and high-quality toilets. (Honey, please remember to put the seat down.) But the most exciting element to discover was the radiant heat installed throughout the house.

Radiant heat uses a large water heater in the garage to send hot water coursing constantly through yards and yards of copper tubing underneath the flooring. The heat rises and heats the entire room. Best of all? Warm feet when you pad about on a cold winter's morning.

However, there is one catch. There must always be hot water available. If the water heater breaks down, it means not just cold showers, but a freezing house. So we have to make sure that water heater is always kept in running condition. If the water goes lukewarm, it's good for nothing.

Scripture speaks of that too. When we are cold, we realize (even if we don't always admit it) that we need to be warmed somehow. It's been said that agnostics and perhaps many atheists are simply people who have gone cold with disappointment or anger toward God. On-fire believers are called just that because they burn with passion to share the hope that lives within them. Lukewarm, however, is good for little. Washing delicates, maybe. Rinsing out your mouth. But who wants to be spit out? Not me.

Keeping the water in the tank hot requires regular maintenance (attending church), periodic inspections (accountability), and upgrading (study, exhortation) from time to time. It's all worth it, though, because these actions enable us to share warmth with everyone who enters our homes.



I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

REVELATION 3:15-16

January 6
ALWAYS IN HOT WATER
Part 2

So about that wonderful in-floor heating system. I still love it, and I'm glad we have it, but after fifteen years of use, it broke. (It was supposed to last twenty-five years.) We knew the system was expensive, so we prayed like mad that it would be repairable. Several hundred dollars for a fix seemed better than many thousands of dollars for a replacement. And after praying, I had peace about it. I just knew that it was going to be fixable. But it wasn't.

We got the bad news that the whole system needed to be replaced and that it would take a week—and a short-term loan—to do it. Later that evening, while I was waiting for an appointment, I kept praying. *Why didn't you just let it be repairable?* I asked God. *Or at least give us a big chunk of money to pay for it?*

As I sat there, praying and thinking, it came to me that when I pray, most often I ask God to forestall bad things or, if it's too late for that, to provide an immediate fix. But neither of those requests really requires me to have faith that God will work things out for good. He will work for good in whatever circumstance appears on my horizon, whatever trouble I must undergo—and he usually does it in such a clever, creative, superhuman manner that there is no doubt it was God at work.

Hebrews tells us that without faith, we cannot please God. So why would he remove every opportunity we may have to please him by trusting him, to knit our hearts ever more tightly with his? He won't, which means we have plenty of time to build that love and faith while in the midst of the muddle.



Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

HEBREWS 11:6



January 7
LOST DOG

My heart always clutches a little when I spot a poster about a lost dog in our neighborhood. Usually the poster displays a picture of the beloved pet, the pet's name, and a plea to everyone who sees the poster to keep their eyes open for the missing pooch. At the bottom of the poster, the owner's phone number is always included with an appeal to please call if the dog is seen or found.

After driving by such a poster, especially in cold winter, I am more watchful. No, it's not my dog, but I have a dog, and I know what heartache it would cause if she were lost. I wouldn't have a moment of rest till she was found. She's a house dog, you see, and the dark, wet conditions of winter would not be conducive to her well-being. We'd miss her companionship. She'd wonder if we were looking for her. Of course we would be looking for her; we love her. It's easy for me to sympathize with the unknown owner of the lost dog, and so I reach out to help however I can.

Scripture tells us that Jesus came to find the one in one hundred who is lost. It's not that he doesn't care for the other ninety-nine—of course he does—but he knows they are safe and whole and warm. The lost one, though, may be cold, hungry, or frightened. She cannot live long on her own under such conditions. She must be found. Christ has invited us to help him in his work, to help him seek those who belong to him but who are lost. We are not his dogs, of course, but his beloved children. It is a cause for great rejoicing when the beloved is finally found and brought home.



The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

LUKE 19:10





January 8

KEEPING RECEIPTS

One of the coolest gadgets I've bought for my office in a long time is a portable receipt scanner. Sure, you can take pictures with your smartphone and send them to your computer; I've done that. But the scanner has a really clear resolution, and best of all, it allows me to automatically send the receipts to various files on my computer. Otherwise, I'd likely end up with the digital equivalent of the cardboard box full of unsorted papers.

I like to keep receipts for returns, of course, but the main reason I keep them is for tax purposes. As a small-business owner and as the wife of a chaplain, I have a lot of odd tax categories and need to provide this information for my accountant. It brings me peace to know that the documentation is all there to prove my complete compliance with the law. If audited, I'm ready!

I'd love to think that most of us pay our taxes in full because we're good people. But I'm pretty sure it also helps that there is a slight, er, threat of an audit looming. Knowing that we may be called to account keeps us on the straight and narrow in case we are ever tempted to depart from it.

As Christians, we know that we will be asked by our Lord to account for the things we've said and done here on earth. We will be, in a very real sense, audited. How have we spent the resources we've been given? Whom have we loved? Did we seek the good of others or mostly our own? No heavenly scanner will be required; it will all be right at his fingertips. I try to be a good person, and I'll bet you do too. But it still helps keep me on the straight and narrow to remember that one day my accounts will be lovingly scrutinized.



We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:10





January 9

POLISHED AND PERFECT

One rainy day while I was doing a New Year's cleaning out of the garage, I happened upon a stash of toys I'd saved from my kids' childhoods. One favorite—the rock tumbler—beckoned. It was a favorite not only because we'd had fun together fashioning agate key chains and quartz rings but because I, too, had cherished a rock tumbler in my own childhood.

I reached for it, and as I held it in my hands, I recalled the week we'd purchased it as a treat—and a distraction. We'd just learned that our children would have to leave the school they enjoyed, one where they felt safe and I felt they were in a protected environment. Financial pressures caused us to make some hard choices, and the school had to go. *It's not fair*, I told God. *They are safe there.*

But maybe he didn't want my children to be safe, necessarily; rather, he wanted them to be useful, satisfied, and fulfilled. Christlike. I'd looked down at our new rock tumbler. We'd soon throw a bunch of sharp-edged, broken stones into it with some grit and water, then start the motor. The action of those sharp stones bumping up against one another would produce the smooth, polished gems we desired. Till the rocks had been tumbled and scraped, they were rough and common.

Likewise, the Lord wanted my children to be the polished, beautiful, and useful gems he and I both knew they could be. That wouldn't come about without bumping up against some sharp circumstances, though. I am thankful that a trusted hand was turning and guiding the tumbler that would transform my kids into just who God wanted them to be.



Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

JAMES 1:2-4, NLT



January 10

BE THE BACON

My guests were due to arrive in thirty minutes. The last time we got together with these friends, at their house, my husband had bragged on my cooking skills. But the fresh-herb ranch dip I'd just mixed up was not going to make me any new fans. Yes, it had buttermilk and sour cream (full-fat!), along with some snips of parsley, chives, and good old dried onions. But it was still . . . bland. It needed a flavor punch. And something with salt.

My mind returned to a cooking class a friend and I had attended a month or so earlier. "Bacon is the duct tape of the kitchen," the teacher had reassured us. "The recipe rescuer. It can fix anything no matter what has gone wrong."

Bacon! The best of salt and savory seasonings combined. I opened the fridge and pulled out a bag of bacon crumbles and stirred a generous handful into the dip. Ten minutes later, a taste test confirmed creamy victory. The bacon was a complete game changer, bringing out the best in the other seasonings and adding life. The crumbles had, I suppose, saved my bacon and my culinary reputation!

You, my friend, are a bacon crumble in the dip of life. Scripture tells us that Christians are the salt of the earth, here to season with truth and wisdom, to bring out the best in others through grace and affection, to point the way for the spiritually lifeless. Of course, most of the problems we and our family and friends face are much more serious than a failed appetizer. Jobs that disappear and disappoint, difficult children, difficult parents, financial challenges, disillusionment, and health setbacks. These situations can seem overwhelming and, often, beyond repair.

Although we can't solve every problem (or even most problems) on our own or for those we love, we are on intimate terms with the one who can, Jesus Christ. We bring him with us wherever we go, into every situation we ourselves face or those we face hand in hand with a friend. He is the rescuer who can fix anything. He may change our circumstances, or he may give us the grace to persevere through them.



Salt is good for seasoning.

MARK 9:50, NLT



January 11

BLOSSOMS IN WINTER

Witch hazel trees are a hidden delight, although they are nondescript during spring and summer. When every other plant is flaunting blossoms and beautiful foliage, the witch hazel sends out leathery green leaves. Boring. Unremarkable. Not the horticultural eye candy that merits a stop on the city garden tour.

In autumn, things start to look up as those leathery leaves evolve into bright, coppery tongues. They are soon lost, along with every other deciduous tree's offerings, just as the chill sets in. But when the glory of Christmas has passed and we're in for a long, dull slog through mud and ice, the witch hazel proves its worth. In coldest January, it shoots out stunning flowers of red and orange confetti, like spent firecrackers. When all else is dormant, it releases brightness and joy.

Scripture speaks of things that blossom in difficult places—deserts; wildernesses; dry, cold patches of land and of soul. When everything is sunny and flowering, it's easy to overlook a particular plant or bud among the abundance. But when the landscape has gone dull and quiet, that one unusual bloom stands out as a ray of hope pointing toward what is to come.

God has sent kind souls into our lives to be those rays of optimism in dry, cold patches. He's also asked us to be a splash of joy in someone else's dismal day. I think I most appreciate those friends who are there for me when the sun is hidden and the ground is dry. It causes me to wonder, this winter day, to whom can I bring a word, a hug, a blossom of hope as a reminder of the promise of beauty just around the corner?



*The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.*

ISAIAH 35:1-2



January 12

GROWTH CHARTS

We were unloading the last boxes from the moving truck, stacking them all around the garage till they could be brought inside and unpacked. As I set one box on another, some markings on the garage wall caught my eye.

Each mark was a line, perhaps an inch in length, even and steady and clearly drawn against a straight edge. Next to each line was a name and a date. The markings made their way up a vertical line like the markings on a glass bulb thermometer. I smiled because I recognized them. They were growth marks.

The previous homeowners had recorded their children's heights over the years, and I saw how each child had grown from a wee sprite to a fully grown adult—a towering, six-foot adult in one case! Seeing this brought a pleasant wave of nostalgia. My grandmother had such a wall on her porch, marking the growth of each of her grandkids.

We all grow physically, so steadily and silently that, unless someone takes time to mark that growth, it happens almost without notice. Over the years when I'd looked at my grandmother's wall, I'd been surprised—and pleased—to see how I'd grown several feet, inch by inch.

Once we're adults, we no longer mark our physical growth, as we mostly stop growing (except in girth, but that's another story!). As Christians, though, we continue to grow, especially in grace toward ourselves and others and in knowledge of the Lord, whom we come to better understand and love. We might not mark our progress on the garage wall, but you can be sure that others will notice it. Although it's happening silently, with the Spirit's power it's happening steadily. Can you see it? Do you sense it? Look back a few years and compare. Your growth shows in the things you do and say, and in the way people turn to you for comfort and answers. You grow, girl!



Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

January 13

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

I bemoaned to a friend the other day that once an idea pops into my head, I have to write it down or I will forget it. My modern-day version of Post-it notes is to send myself a text and not delete it till I've done whatever I've reminded myself to do.

The Lord exhorts us many times in Scripture to remember what's important. We're to remember that he's coming soon and that he forgives us when we repent, so we must forgive others when they repent. The Israelites were to celebrate the Passover as a reminder that God had freed them from slavery. Christians are to celebrate the Lord's Supper as a reminder that Christ has freed us from sin through his death and resurrection.

The book of Numbers records the Lord's instruction that the people of Israel wear tassels on the hems of their clothing to remind them to obey him and be holy. When the Israelites walked, the tassels would rustle against their legs, a physical nudge. They'd see those tassels on other people, and it would bring his commands to mind.

Most Christians don't wear tassels today, but we have modern-day tools at hand that can remind us to be obedient to God. Wherever I go, I must admit, I bring my smartphone. While some decry our dependence on our phones, it is true that they can help us remember God's Word. There are Bible-memory apps to help me memorize verses and Scripture-of-the-day apps to exhort and encourage. I can listen to an audio Bible while I do housework. I'm so glad that God provides the means for us to do what he asks. The methods have changed, but the command to remember his instructions has not.



The LORD said to Moses, "Give the following instructions to the people of Israel: Throughout the generations to come you must make tassels for the hems of your clothing and attach them with a blue cord. When you see the tassels, you will remember and obey all the commands of the LORD instead of following your own desires and defiling yourselves, as you are prone to do."

NUMBERS 15:37-39, NLT

January 14

PIONEER WOMEN

We received a bread maker for Christmas, a shiny, muscular machine that promised warm loaves, chewy pizza crusts, and the smell of home-baked bread wafting through the kitchen any day at all. Paging through the booklet of recipes, I came upon one for sourdough bread and decided to start there. We'd first need sourdough starter, though—the pioneer woman's self-renewing equivalent of a modern-day packet of yeast.

The starter is a mother batch of sourdough from which you draw the natural leavening and which, in proper conditions and with some additions, regenerates itself continuously. Getting a bit of starter from friends or family is one way to start your own, but you can also create a starter from nothing but warm water, flour, and circulating air. Given the right conditions, yeast spores, which are all around us, will settle right in and begin to ferment.

Scripture talks about yeast too. Often, though, yeast is not portrayed positively; many times it represents sin. Like starter, sin grows when unchecked, and the potential for it is all around us in our everyday lives. If we give it a warm place to settle and land, it's sure to multiply. Soon it begins to take over and work its way into everything we do, or at least the parts of our lives we give it access to.

However, if we stop adding ingredients for it to feed on or remove the conditions that allow it to grow, sin, like the sourdough starter, will die. It's a strange truth of life that most of the things that are bad for us are often mixed up in things that are good for us. We can be thankful that the Spirit helps us discern which is which and then encourages us to remove the conditions in which sin thrives.



Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

1 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8



January 15

DIRTY DISHES

I don't know why, but unloading the dishwasher is one of my least favorite chores. My daughter's, too. She's been known to throw in a fresh detergent cube and start the machine up again just to delay the inevitable. I don't go that far, but sometimes I do walk away and ignore the chore for a while. But if the sink is full of dirty dishes, I'm left with two unpleasant options: unload the dishwasher or wash by hand. Eventually I have to do one or the other if I don't want the mess to expand.

Very often we take joy in our faith, but sometimes the working out of that faith on a practical basis seems more like a task than a calling. When things are falling apart, I often don't feel like offering praise and finding one (seemingly tiny) good thing to be grateful for while my scales are heavily balanced on the side of sorrow. I don't want to worship when I feel like crying, partly because I know worship brings those tears to the forefront. However, if I want to move forward and not let the mess expand, at some point I have to take a step, going through the motions even if I don't feel like it.

Praise is often a sacrifice, but God makes it clear in Scripture that he values our sacrifices, which, by definition, come at a cost. Soul work, like housework, takes discipline. But when I do what is right even when I don't feel like it, I discover that in the mysterious economy of God, praise unlocks my spirit to let the grief out and the sunshine in.

Soon enough, I have pushed through, cleaned up what needed to be cleaned up, and made it through the worst of it. My house is then in order, literally and spiritually. Joy is often the fruit of discipline, not the seed that produces it.



Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

HEBREWS 13:15



January 16

KIBBLES AND BITS

One day when my kids were young, I found them crouched, heads down, over our dog's food bowl. The dog stood a fair distance away from them, seemingly as confused as I was. I looked at her and she looked back; I could almost see her shrug. *Don't ask me, I have no idea what they're doing either.*

Being the calm, collected mom that I am, I shouted, "What in the world are you doing?" One child looked up at me and coolly said, "Eating dog food." Perhaps I was a little dull if that was unclear to me. The other said, "The Bible says that dogs eat what falls from the master's table, so we wondered what food that fell from the dog's bowl tasted like." But the looks on their faces indicated that they knew they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't.

I held back a smile. "What does it taste like?" Noses wrinkled. "Dusty graham crackers." I guessed that even if I hadn't interrupted them, the experiment would have soon been over and they would be rummaging through the pantry for Oreos to cleanse their dusty palates.

So often we wonder what it tastes like, that which is not intended for us. Is it good? Would we like it? Would it live up to our expectations? Sometimes we even act on the impulse and then, when caught, we feel guilty. Even though it may taste good for a moment, if it's not for us, it will always leave a bad taste, a sense that we are doing something we shouldn't. None of us, even a young child, believes that dog food is good for people. Better to turn away from it, toward the sweet, palate-cleansing property of Oreos—and the sweet Word.



*I haven't turned away from your regulations,
for you have taught me well.*

*How sweet your words taste to me;
they are sweeter than honey.*

*Your commandments give me understanding;
no wonder I hate every false way of life.*

PSALM 119:102-104, NLT

January 17

HAPPINESS IN A BOX

I lingered at the display in the big-box store. On special was the HappyLight Energy Lamp, promising relief from winter depression in a mere thirty minutes per day.

Most of us who live in the Northern Hemisphere understand seasonal affective disorder (SAD), the depression that comes with the clotting of winter clouds, the relentless months of darkness, and—at least in my hometown of Seattle—the 24-7 rain that waters our gardens. We laugh when people visit in the summer and pronounce the area an Eden. *Ah, but can you tough out six months of rain every year to pay for the lush growth in Eden?*

What can temper the gloom? The HappyLight lamp says it can help.

Thirty minutes each day, with the lamp box set behind a computer or a book so that you can catch the spectrum light in your peripheral vision, can make a difference for many people. You don't even have to focus on it! Just make sure it's there, you're there, and it's turned on.

Life, too, seems to be separated into periods of sun and periods of unrelenting clouds. When the gloom sets in, it sometimes sets in for months. Most of us can't afford to spend the six dark months in Mexico, nor can we leave a difficult job, a tiresome relative, or a persistent financial problem whenever it appears. We need something to help us right where we are.

Clinical depression needs clinical treatment. But if you're just feeling a bit "down," try some praise or upbeat music in the background. A verse of Scripture printed out and affixed to the bathroom mirror. A comical movie. A midday treat: tomato soup with cheese chunks or a cookie heated in the microwave. These are all in your peripheral "vision," nothing you need to concentrate on, but perhaps they will lift your spirits through a dark day. Soon, spring will arrive, the clouds will part, and things will look bright again. Those rains inevitably bring lush growth in your spirit, too.



*We who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence
as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is
a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.*

HEBREWS 6:18-19

January 18

FORCED BLOOMS

I love browsing the floral department in my grocery store in the wintertime. There are the usual assortments of cacti, cut flowers flown in from the south, and stunning forced-bloom forsythia. The forsythia are noble—long, leggy branches with yellow buds exploding through a skin of thin bark. Eye catching. Almost prideful.

Once while browsing, I began thinking about those forced blooms, considering which of my shrubs I could snip from to produce the same effect. But I quickly realized that while cutting branches from my bushes would provide one week's worth of beauty, it would deprive me of the years of enjoyment that the branch could give me if I left it on the shrub. Once cut and forced to bloom away from its natural environment, the branch slowly dies.

I'd been wrestling with one of my children that week about a personal choice. Nudged to Scripture, I read a familiar passage in Proverbs 22. I'd always taken it to be marching orders to train my kids in the faith, but this time I took a closer look. *The way they should go.* That did not necessarily mean the way I thought they should go.

My children are each uniquely created; they are not copies of me, or of my husband, or of anyone else. They have singular, God-given destinies, works he created in advance for them alone to do. Their schooling or career choices might not be what I'd thought they would be. They might choose different hairstyles or ink their skin. They may worship at a different kind of church or listen to different music. But if I help them to grow in their God-given direction, God will enjoy years—even decades—of them blooming for his glory. God does not want my children to be forced to bloom out of place for the sake of my enjoyment or pride. He wants them to be nurtured to maturity and bloom when and where he'd intended all along.



*Start children off on the way they should go,
and even when they are old they will not turn from it.*

PROVERBS 22:6



January 19

POWER BARS

One morning Hubs dug through the pantry before work.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“An afternoon snack,” he said. “I’m dragging by the middle of the day, and I need to take a snack to work.”

I told him I’d look for something appropriate when I was out shopping. He suggested lots of dark chocolate, which made me smile. I thought a protein bar might be more helpful. But when I got to the store, I found that many of the protein bars were worse, nutritionally, than candy bars. Lots of sugar, lots of trans fats, not enough protein to help him go the distance. Truth is, a candy bar masquerading as a power bar can fool our taste buds, but when it gets down to giving us the energy we need to push past three o’clock in the afternoon, that imposter doesn’t have what it takes. We’ve got to build ourselves up inside in order to tackle challenges on the outside. After a little more searching, I found a handful of snacks that were good for us, as well as easily accessible during a busy day.

It takes a lot of energy to get through each day, whether we work at home, outside the home, or both. We need real sustenance to persevere, to make it through. This is true when it comes to feeding our spirits, too. Rather than relying on “candy bars” to power up my spirit—electronic distractions, empty TV treats, or excessive social media—I can pull on an unlimited supply of true nutrition, available day and night from our Lord. I’m definitely not against candy bars! I’m just learning how to enjoy them without relying on them instead of that which truly empowers.



I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit.

EPHESIANS 3:16, NLT



January 20

COMFORT

It's flu season, and I did not get a shot. Bad decision.

I've quarantined myself; I'm not seeing anyone except for my family and one faithful friend who has not been put off by my illness or even my potential contagion. Each day she stops by and makes sure I have what I need. Although I hate being sick, it's so nice to be cared for.

Sometimes, sickies young and old are tucked into a comfy bed or on the best couch in the house with a fuzzy blanket and a squished pillow. We get to pick what to watch on TV, or read some favorite books, or nap. My friend whipped up the only thing I wanted to eat: tomato soup with melted cheese. She also left hot chocolate in a pan on the stove, ready to be heated and sprinkled with tiny marshmallows.

Sometimes life's afflictions are simple and common, like a bout with the flu. Sometimes they are so difficult we're uncertain how, or if, we'll make our way through. We can't always change our circumstances; sometimes we just have to walk through them. But some things help—soothing rituals, calm friends, rest (wanted or not) that relieves and recharges. Best of all are our loved ones, whether family, or friends, or even pets. In his mercy, God, the author of all good things, sends others our way, knowing that when the rain falls, a shared umbrella can help. When the sun comes out again, we are to hold on to that umbrella and be watchful for a friend to invite underneath when it begins to rain in *her* world.

Every call or text received, pot of soup made, or hug offered reminds us that love will pull us through.



All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-5, NLT



January 21

MRS. BEASLEY AND JESUS

When I was a kid, pretty much all my friends had a stuffed animal or a doll that was special to them, one that was so loved-on that it grew fragile over the years. We took our “love objects” with us wherever we went. When we were sad little things, they stayed right beside us, always listening, helping us to stop feeling bad. When we were worried, their cushy hugginess made us feel like everything was going to be okay. Love objects are faithful, no matter what.

Okay, confession time. My love object’s name was Mrs. Beasley, and I still have her in my closet.

No, I don’t take her out to hug anymore! But she meant a lot to me, and I keep her for nostalgic reasons as well as to help me remember what it was like to be a little girl.

Most of us outgrow our stuffed animals and dolls, but we never outgrow our need to have others to love and to be the recipients of their love in return. We’ll always need someone to feel safe with, to share our deepest secrets with, to take with us when we go to new places and want to feel safe. And when we know Christ, we can have all that and more.

Not only is Jesus always there for us, he’s always strong, and he loves us back, firmly, continuously—unlike our childhood love objects. We never outgrow him. In fact, as we get older, he can grow closer and more important to us than ever. He always listens, reassuring us in a way that an inanimate object never could, letting us know that everything will be okay and that we will never be alone.

Jesus is faithful, no matter what.

As you fall asleep tonight, think about the fact that you are the focus of great love from Jesus, a great love that will never diminish or be outgrown.



Be sure of this: I am with you always.

MATTHEW 28:20, NLT



January 22

CINNAMON ROLLS

One of the best smells in the world is the smell of cinnamon rolls baking in the oven. It's only fair, then, that it should be followed by one of the best tastes in the world: soft, gooey rolls (with butter!). But cinnamon rolls don't just magically appear, even if you buy them at the mall. Someone has to bake them. In my house, that would be me.

After mixing together all the ingredients, including that delightful cinnamon, I have a gloppy ball of speckled, white dough. This dough isn't like cookie dough; it doesn't taste good if you sneak a taste of it raw (I've tried). I have to divide the dough into pieces, then roll them out, brush them with cinnamon sugar and butter, roll them up, and let them sit on the cookie sheet to rise. And rise. And rise!

If I put the rolls into the oven before they are done rising, my family is treated to a doughy, deflated disk instead of a puffy roll. But if I wait the full time, then after baking . . . *mmm!*

I think this is what life is like. There are many good things ahead for each of us. God has promised a future and a hope. But each event in our lives, each privilege, each good time will come at just the right moment. Sometimes we have to wait for it. Look forward to it. Plan ahead for it. But don't force it too soon, unless you like dough disks instead of the tasty puffs you'll get if you wait upon his timing.



God blesses you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied.

LUKE 6:21, NLT



January 23

TREADING WATER

Sometimes in the winter I stop by the YMCA near my house and use the pool to exercise. One day while waiting for the free swim, I watched some of the upper-division students. It brought back happy memories of the lessons of my youth.

One of the final tests, I recalled, was to jump into the water fully dressed to see how we would survive a highly stressful long-term stay in the deep. We were instructed to remove our backpacks, kick off our shoes and let them sink to the bottom, and strip off almost all our clothes. The pants we held onto, tying off each leg and blowing into them to create a flotation device, which we then wrapped around our necks. Then we turned onto our backs and calmly floated till we were “rescued.”

The students who remained weighted down or who paddled furiously or tried to swim, no matter how skilled they were, soon ran out of energy. Tired and heavily burdened by their wet clothing, they risked sinking to the bottom of the pool just like those waterlogged shoes.

Often we women take on the problems and burdens of everyone around us—our friends, our kids, our loved ones—on top of all of our own burdens, till we feel like we’re drowning.

In hard times, especially those that seem like they might include a long-term stay in the deep, our tendency is to *do* something. Anything! In fact, it’s kind of an insult to be told you’re treading water or floating through life while everyone around you seems to be kicking or swimming.

Relax. Turn onto your back and look, face up, for help. The Lord loves you. He not only holds the world in his hand, but he holds you: your life, your troubles, your worries. Next time you find yourself in the deep, release everything that burdens you, and let it sink. Slow down. Float. Wait for his rescue, because it will surely come.



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

MATTHEW 11:28



January 24

MINISTRY OF A MESS

There was a pile of toys on the floor—I'd stepped on several building blocks and let out a loud cry of pain. Someone had taken a five-hundred-count box of tissues and pulled them out, one by one. Apparently no one had let the dog out. The shoes were reproducing themselves in the corner. Why is it that dirty clothes seem to generate spontaneously?

We'd had Bible study here the night before, and I hadn't gotten to the dishes yet. My home office was stacked with files and books that looked like multiple Leaning Towers of Pisa.

I like a clean house, I really do. I like my office tidy too. But as it has been said many times by many people, there are only so many hours in a day. I had to make some choices—which were more important? Comforting a child who'd been bullied or throwing away the rotting lettuce in my refrigerator? Taking a call from a friend whose mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer or balancing the checkbook? Some rare days I'm caught up, but mostly, I'm not. And that's okay.

A messy desk is a sign of a productive mind. A kitchen with dirty dishes is being used. Toys all over the room mean kids are playing. Books splayed about on every surface prove we're reading and learning. A hug from my kid means that she believes she's going to recover.

Scripture tells us that a barn in disarray means that there are working animals present; things are happening there. Without the oxen, nothing gets done. At the end of the day, or the week, or our lives, no one will remember how clean (or not) our houses were, but they'll remember and feel, deep down, how we loved and cared for them there.



*Without oxen a stable stays clean,
but you need a strong ox for a large harvest.*

PROVERBS 14:4, NLT



January 25

MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL

My daughter had a friend who, I thought, had bladder issues. Every time she arrived at our house, she would immediately ask to use the bathroom. Of course we always said okay, and soon she no longer asked. She just headed into the powder room upon arrival, and nearly every hour on the hour thereafter.

One day she asked to use the upstairs bathroom. “Of course,” I said, and after she headed up the stairs, I looked wonderingly at my daughter.

“She’s addicted to mirrors,” she whispered to me. “She doesn’t think she’s pretty.”

There was currently no mirror in the powder room, which was being painted. So the friend had gone upstairs for her hourly hair check. “She’s beautiful,” I whispered back.

“She doesn’t think so,” my daughter answered.

So many girls, so many women, myself included, let their sense of self-worth be dictated by how pretty they think others perceive them to be. We can hardly help it—“ideals” of beauty are thrown at us everywhere, even in church, where heads in pews naturally turn toward the pretty and well dressed.

Just before that young lady came over the next time, we scrawled, with an erasable marker, on the mirror in each bathroom, “You are altogether beautiful.” We plucked that passage from Song of Songs 4:7: “You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you.” She got a kick out of it and laughed, but I think it sank in. My daughter said it did. As for me, well, I didn’t remove the phrase from the mirror in *my* bathroom. I struggle too. Each morning, that message brings a smile and a lightened step.



You are precious to me. You are honored, and I love you.

ISAIAH 43:4, NLT





January 26

AS SEEN ON TV!

Here's what I always wanted as a kid: sea monkeys. The comic books I bought promised that if only I would send in one dollar, they'd send me a packet of sea monkeys, complete with father, mother, and little monkeys—all wearing crowns! Now that I'm grown, I'm attracted to products that promise me an instant lawn, perfectly green, within weeks. Or products that promise to take pounds off of my frame without changing my diet or exercise habits. Want something to make your old beater look better than a new car? I can point you to an ad.

The truth is, we're blessed to live in an era in which there are so many products to entertain, assist, and encourage us. The trick is to find which ones genuinely work and which ones only want to part you from your money without giving you the hoped-for results. Usually I buy products from sources that offer a money-back guarantee. I can test them out for myself, prove them, use them, and then pass along the good news to my friends.

Likewise, many claims are made in the name of the Bible or the name of the Lord. Some of them sound, frankly, too good to be true. The way to sort theological truths from misleading errors is to test them yourself. Hold up claims against Scripture—the full counsel of Scripture, as the Bereans were praised for, not just cherry-picked verses—and you'll soon see that truth is proven and lies are exposed. I don't want to count on dropping the pounds effortlessly, and I don't want to pass along false hope to my friends.



The Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

ACTS 17:11



January 27

READ THE DIRECTIONS

I couldn't figure out how the box for such a large piece of furniture could comfortably fit inside the back of our car, but it did! We happily made our way home, envisioning the television and books arranged on the new piece, thinking and talking about how it would enhance our lives. Once home, I understood how the box had fit into the car. When it was opened, dozens of pieces fell out, along with a hefty tome labeled "Assembly Instructions."

Now, I'm the person who scrolls all the way through the dozen pages of digital agreements for apps and websites, not reading, just clicking on "I Agree." I was not going to waste an hour reading directions, when putting part AA into part ZZ with screw HH and bolt 253 couldn't be that hard! An hour later, the piece was assembled. Two hours later, it wobbled and nearly collapsed, almost taking the TV with it.

I went back to the instructions. Surprising things can be found when one reads the directions. Humbled, I reassembled the piece of furniture in the proper order, thankful that I had not done any lasting damage.

Surprising things, too, can be found when we read sections of the Bible that we thought we knew. I find myself saying, much too often, "I know the Bible says ____, but I can't remember where." Or, "Memorization is my worst discipline." Or, "I remember it's something like . . ." Unfortunately, too often when I take the time to look up the exact verse, I realize I've forgotten some crucial points. I've learned that I'd better not quote the Sandra Paraphrase, because it's close enough to sound good but far enough off to do some real damage.

Read the instructions, and follow them closely, I tell myself. Structural integrity of the Word, passed on, is much more important than the security of the TV.



Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

2 TIMOTHY 2:15

January 28

ADAM? EVE? SETH? CAIN? ABEL?

We have a running joke in my family involving a family member who can never remember names—especially the kids’ and grandkids’. Instead, he just sits on the sofa and randomly calls out names one after the other, hoping someone will respond. We have learned not to answer, though, because the person he is looking for is usually in trouble of some sort. I will answer, eventually, but only to my own name.

A lot of times we parents think that our children—and their habits, their seeming “success,” their grades, their jobs, their spouses, their manners, even their criminality or their unwise choices—reflect on us. If they are seen as successful, we’re deemed good, effective parents who have done our jobs well. If they are seen as struggling, the silent questioning of where and when we might have done something different begins. Of course, parents have tremendous influence on their children, but God has gifted us with free will, too. My parents are not responsible for my failures, nor can they take credit for my success. This is true with my own grown children too. We are all accountable for ourselves.

Cain and Abel had the same parents. God is the parent of many children, some who may be seen as successful and some who may be seen as failures (though God, of course, looks at the heart and not the outward appearance). When my children struggle, I pray for them and offer counsel, but I don’t own their struggle. When they are victorious, I celebrate with them, but I don’t claim their victory.

To maintain your joy and sanity, remember: in the end, we answer only for ourselves!



Each of us will give a personal account to God.

ROMANS 14:12, NLT



January 29

A LIFE, FRAMED

A few years ago I received a digital photo frame as a gift. I love it! You can load digital photos into the lovely frame, then hang it on a wall or place it on a piece of furniture. All through the day the photos scroll, an ever-changing parade of very personal art. I've taken to loading the previous year's photos at the end of each year, a kind of review, if you will, of the highlights just passed. I enjoy looking back over the year just ended and looking forward to what the new year may hold.

As I look through the photos, I can see how my family has grown, how we've changed, and how we've been renewed or, sometimes, worn down by the circumstances that life has thrown at us during the year. A difficult good-bye is often followed by an unexpected hello. A painful passage through illness is often bookended by events planned to help us first persevere and then celebrate. As I review the previous year's highlights over and over, I realize that I have the opportunity to plan for the events this year will hold—or at least how I'll react to them.

Scrolling through a year in just a few minutes reminds me how fleeting life is. We are born, we grow, and soon we are gone. A seed becomes a shoot, then it flowers, and finally it withers. A house is bought, lived in, and then sold. The cycle of life continues; there truly is nothing new under the sun.

How will we spend this quickly passing life? What memories can I make today, what help can I offer, what blessing can I share that I will want to review? God will review my life with me, when my time comes. And that time is coming, no matter how young and vibrant we feel, before we know it.



*LORD, what are human beings that you care for them,
mere mortals that you think of them?*

*They are like a breath;
their days are like a fleeting shadow.*

PSALM 144:3-4



January 30

MISE EN PLACE

The rain sluiced the kitchen windows, sliding down the panes in gray rivulets. Turning on the oven, I was glad that I did not need to leave the house that day. I planned to spend it listening to music, taking care of a few household tasks, and baking cookies.

First, baking cookies!

I turned the oven on and began taking things out of the pantry. After mixing the dry ingredients, I set them aside and went for the wet. It didn't take me long to figure out something was wrong. I was out of vanilla. Completely. My choices were either to forget about baking and throw away the ingredients I'd already mixed or run out to the store (in that torrent!) to buy vanilla. This was becoming an unpleasant habit. A week earlier I'd had guests over for fondue and, since I had made it from scratch many times, I went ahead and did so without looking at the recipe. But I'd forgotten about cornstarch, which meant we had a giant glop of cheese instead of a smooth, creamy dip.

The French have a baking and cooking concept called *mise en place*, which means setting out all of the important ingredients, premeasured, before beginning. I didn't think I needed that ahead-of-time preparation, and I didn't want to wash extra dishes. But baking and cooking without preparation, even with familiar recipes, can lead to failure. Without an essential ingredient, no dish will be successful.

As I trudged to the car, a verse about preparation ran through my mind. Did I have my *mise en place* ready for sharing my faith? How long had it been since I'd run through the essential components: my life before and after, the saving grace of Christ, the verses that pointed the way? A long time.

I made it home and dried off, and while the cookies baked, I rehearsed my testimony once again. Even beloved recipes need a run-through now and again.



Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

1 PETER 3:15



January 31

ON THE BOTTOM

My husband and I drove to the big-box store in stony silence, not really angry with one another but kind of mad that we were there at all. It was an hour after work. We were both tired, and rather than doing the shopping for the week, it would have been nice to rest, read, watch TV, take a walk, eat a cookie. Anything but errands. It seemed that there was never time to just relax; it was always one chore after another. Duty following duty.

We flashed our membership card, and I wielded the cart while he plucked things off shelves and added them to our growing pile. Chicken, check. Vegetables, check. Five-pound bag of coffee beans to power us through the next set of duties, check.

“Grab the toilet paper.” I nodded toward the plastic-wrapped package of about thirty-six rolls. *That ought to last a month or two*, I thought.

“Where’s that going to fit?” He eyed the cart, already packed full.

“Put it on the bottom,” I instructed.

He started to laugh. “Where else would I put toilet paper?” And then I started to laugh, too, and neither of us cared if those around us stared. It turned the whole evening around.

Life often seems like duty following duty, crisis riding high on the crest of the crisis that just passed, with a few lulls in between to catch our breath. There’s no getting around the storms or the busyness; the fastest way out is straight through, it’s been said. But when you can make the journey with a joke and a smile, the trip is more enjoyable. Look for places to insert humor each and every day. It’s healing. The ride home was filled with chatter—tired chatter, but pleasant, nonetheless.



A cheerful heart is good medicine.

PROVERBS 17:22

